

2003

The sacred harp in a choral setting

Teresa P. Baker
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Baker, Teresa P, "The sacred harp in a choral setting" (2003). *Master's Theses*. 2520.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.4am6-zz6w>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/2520

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

THE SACRED HARP IN A CHORAL SETTING

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Music and Dance

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Teresa P. Baker

December 2003

UMI Number: 1418749

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 1418749

Copyright 2004 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2003

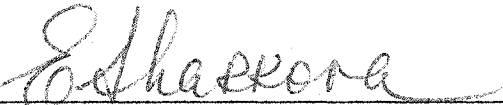
Teresa P. Baker

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED


APPROVED FOR THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND DANCE



Dr. Charlene Archibeque

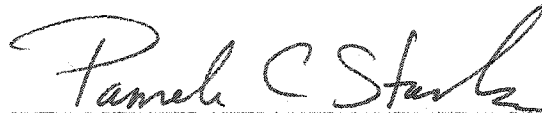


Prof. Elena Sharkova



Dr. William Meredith

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY



ABSTRACT

THE SACRED HARP IN A CHORAL SETTING

By Teresa P. Baker

This document discusses choral performance practices for music from the nineteenth-century shape-note tune book *The Sacred Harp* and for modern arrangements derived from *The Sacred Harp*. Conclusions are drawn from previous research including historical accounts, the instructional prefatory material in *The Sacred Harp* and related tune books, current *Sacred Harp* practices, and practical observations by the author.

Following an account of the historical background and significance of *The Sacred Harp*, the document covers the following choral performance topics: part assignments, vocal technique, tempo, rhythm, pitch and intonation, ornamentation, modification of original music, writing an arrangement, and implementing appropriate *Sacred Harp* performance practices in performing published arrangements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Charlene Archibeque, Prof. Elena Sharkova, and Dr. William Meredith, my professors at San Jose State, for their help in completing this document. Dr. Meredith's comments and suggestions were especially insightful and I wish to thank him for the time he spent editing and rereading my paper.

I also wish to thank my dear family and friends. My husband Haven continually supported and encouraged me throughout the research and writing process. Other family members and friends made numerous sacrifices and allowances without which I could not have completed this project. I am particularly indebted to my parents, my in-laws, and my friends Kristin Bennett, Cindy Congdon, Pasha Grant, Lori Hansen, and April Zimmerman who tended my little boy Emerson so I could write for extended blocks of time.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1–Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2–Background of <i>The Sacred Harp</i>	6
Chapter 3–Performance Practices of <i>The Sacred Harp</i>	29
Chapter 4–Applications and Arrangements.....	61
Chapter 5–Summary and Conclusions.....	73
Suggested Materials for Further Study.....	78
Selected Bibliography.....	81

Chapter 1

Introduction

Music from the nineteenth-century tune book *The Sacred Harp* is still sung today in much the same way it was when B. F. White and E. J. King published the book in 1844. Most other books in the same genre have faded from use, but *The Sacred Harp* remains at the heart of a living tradition. The Southern States, especially Georgia and Alabama, remain the strongholds of the tradition in which dedicated *Sacred Harp* singers gather regularly for all-day “singings.” In a harmonic idiom that hearkens back to Colonial times, the singers render the religious songs in their oblong tune book with uncommon fervor. They do not attempt to create the cultured sound of a trained choir but instead sing out their parts unabashedly in harsh whole-heartedness.

Sacred Harp music is written for the singer, not the casual listener. Indeed, it is best understood and appreciated when sung among a group of devoted *Sacred Harp* singers. Author Buell Cobb writes: “it is the act of participating that constitutes the true appeal of this music.”¹ To seasoned singers, participation means more than vocalizing pitches and words. It requires a respect and love for the messages conveyed. These include praise for the glory of God and Jesus Christ, hope in the joy of heavenly life, sorrow at death and parting, and warnings to the unrepentant sinner. Many *Sacred Harp* adherents regard “singings” as a kind of non-denominational Christian worship service in music. Those who become involved in *Sacred Harp* singing often become loving, loyal

¹Buell E. Cobb, Jr., *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 3.

supporters of the music and its tradition. Respected teacher and *Sacred Harp* leader “Uncle Tom” Denson warned a singing school class at its first meeting, “If some of you don’t like this music, all I’ve got to say to you is you’d better get out. If you stay here it’s going to get a-hold of you and you *can’t* get away.”²

In the last few decades, *The Sacred Harp* tradition, long disregarded or forgotten by the outside musical world, has achieved renewed public and scholarly attention. This tradition and its music continue to intrigue new participants, audiences, and professional musicians, including modern choral directors and arrangers.

Statement of the Problem

The songs in *The Sacred Harp* are meant to be sung in a participatory setting, not a performance setting, yet trained choirs often wish to perform some of these works. What performance practices can the trained choir apply to approximate a traditional *Sacred Harp* sound? Choirs more commonly sing twentieth-century arrangements of music from *The Sacred Harp*. While it is not necessary, or even desirable, for all arrangements to closely resemble the songs as found in *The Sacred Harp*, choirs who wish to perform this music in a more authentic manner will benefit from choosing arrangements that maintain some of the qualities and characteristics of the original. Thus, it is important to understand basic performance practices and how they might be applied in modern performances of both original and arranged versions of *Sacred Harp* music.

²George Pullen Jackson, *The Story of the Sacred Harp, 1844-1944* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1944), 36.

Purpose of Study

This study is intended to be a concise aid to choral musicians who wish to select and perform music from *The Sacred Harp* in a choral setting or who wish to render arrangements of these songs in a more authentic manner. Also, if a director chooses not to try to recreate a more authentic performance, he/she may do so knowingly and not out of ignorance.

Delimitations

This study focuses primarily on the choral performance of music in, and derived from, *The Sacred Harp*. Numerous other shape-note books share a common heritage, style, and even repertory of songs, but *The Sacred Harp* is the most commonly used in current practice, is the most widely available, and has generated the largest body of research and comment.

Related Literature

George Pullen Jackson laid the foundation for study in *The Sacred Harp* genre with a series of articles and books from the early to mid-twentieth century on early American religious folksong. His works were among the first to accept and promote rural Southern songs as a unique and viable tradition worthy of serious study and perpetuation. As general interest in folksong increased, so did academic approaches to *The Sacred Harp*. Standard references from the 1970s include Dorothy Horn's *Sing to Me of Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books*

and Buell Cobb's *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*.³ Richard Stanislaw also completed his dissertation, "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools, in 1976."⁴ Other articles and books of more recent date continue to revisit issues introduced by earlier scholars, and some books not written exclusively about *The Sacred Harp*, like books about frontier revivals, provide valuable information on the origins of songs and performance practices. Nineteenth-century descriptions of shape-note performance practices, shape-note tune book introductions, recordings of *Sacred Harp* gatherings, observation of current singing sessions, and materials distributed by *Sacred Harp* singers also add to the body of information about *The Sacred Harp* tradition.

Need for Study

Many studies of *The Sacred Harp* focus on the history of the book, the sources of its melodies, its harmonic style, and/or its relation to other shape-note books, but few deal chiefly with choral performance practices. Stanislaw's 1976 dissertation on shape-note choral performance practice is very helpful, but quite lengthy. Also, most books addressing choral performance practice do so in the context of a traditional *Sacred Harp* "singing," not in a modern choral performance setting. Thus, a concise guide for the modern choral director regarding the performance possibilities of music in and derived from *The Sacred Harp* is in order.

³Dorothy D. Horn, *Sing to Me of Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1970); Buell E. Cobb, Jr, *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

⁴Richard J. Stanislaw, "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools" (D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976).

Procedure

This guide opens with an introduction to the history and origins of *The Sacred Harp* and its style, followed by a summary of research and opinions on the performance practices of *Sacred Harp* music. The next section suggests ways to apply these performance practices to the modern choral performance. It also addresses the use of arrangements of *Sacred Harp* music, using for its prime example Alice Parker's arrangement of "Hark I Hear the Harps Eternal." The appendix contains an annotated list of suggested books, recordings, and websites recommended for further study.

Chapter 2

Background of *The Sacred Harp*

The Sacred Harp is only one of many collections of hymns and spiritual folksongs that flourished in parts of America from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. When *The Sacred Harp* was published in 1844, shape-note tune books had evolved and migrated, and their use was part of an established rural practice in the South and West. The unique notational system and harmonic idiom of the tune books gradually fell from favor, however, and were almost completely supplanted by more modern systems and sounds by the first part of the twentieth century. Most shape-note tune books became relics of the past, but *The Sacred Harp* endured at the center of a vigorous Southern tradition.

Today, music from *The Sacred Harp* enjoys increasingly widespread acceptance among scholars and singers alike. As choral musicians begin to tap into *The Sacred Harp* repertory, they should understand its background and development in order to appreciate its unique place in American music and to better understand various performance practices.

The roots of *The Sacred Harp* stretch back to colonial America, where the cry for musical reform and a desire for independence and individual expression combined to create a uniquely American music. Music at this time was primarily associated with churches. It usually consisted of congregational psalms and hymns sung *a cappella*. This was due in part to the lingering Calvinistic idea that church music should be sung

unaccompanied, as well as a lack of resources for keyboard instruments or more elaborate musical settings.⁵

By the early eighteenth century, the quality of congregational hymn singing had fallen to a degree that alarmed the more educated clergy. They complained that a lack of note-reading, vocal training, hymn books, harmony, regular timing, and instrumental accompaniment had contributed to singing that offended the ear, detracted from worship, and failed to spiritually educate and uplift church members.⁶

Congregations tended to sing a limited number of tunes, often somewhere between five and ten, and tempos were extremely slow.⁷ Richard Stanislaw writes:

The continued use of these ten or so well-known tunes, along with the tendency to vary from congregation to congregation the way in which they were sung, resulted in a combination of tiresomeness and disunity.⁸

Reformers particularly opposed the “lining out” of psalms. In this practice a deacon, often the only person in the congregation with a hymn book, set the pitch and sang the psalm, line by line, echoed by the congregation. Hymn books contained only printed texts that were sung to well-known tunes, and the preacher sometimes elected to change or embellish a tune as he saw fit. Individual members of the congregation commonly embellished tunes to their own tastes with little regard for the preacher’s example or for

⁵Buell E. Cobb, Jr, *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 57-58.

⁶Ibid.

⁷George Hood, *A History of Music in New England, with Biographical Sketches of Reformers and Psalmists* (1846; reprint, with a new introduction by Johannes Riedel, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), 52.

⁸Richard J. Stanislaw, “Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools” (D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976), 16-17.

the embellishments of their neighbors.⁹ Jeoffry Chanticleer observed another disadvantage to “lining out” the hymn in a 1724 letter to a weekly newspaper:

The same Person who sets the Tune, and guides the Congregation in Singing, commonly reads the Psalm, which is a Task so few are capable of performing well, that in Singing two or three Staves, the Congregation falls from a cheerful Pitch to downright *Grumbling*, and then some to relieve themselves mount an Eighth above the rest, others perhaps a Fourth or Fifth, by which Means the Singing appears to be rather a confused Noise, made up of *Reading*, *Squeaking* and *Grumbling*, than a decent and orderly Part of God’s Worship.¹⁰

These practices had become thoroughly engrained in most congregations and change required a proactive approach.

Reformers thus promoted the idea of singing “by note” instead of “by rote.” At the foremost of this movement was the Reverend Thomas Symmes, who in his 1720 treatise, *The Reasonableness of Regular Singing, or Singing by Note*, recommended that singing schools be established to teach the common parishioner to read and sing psalms and hymns. He supported this idea by noting the favorable state of music in other countries that maintained singing schools and the degenerate state, similar to America, in those countries that did not.¹¹

In 1721 two other leading reformers published the first American tune books. The Reverend John Tufts published *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes in a plaine [sic] and Easy Method*, and the Reverend Thomas Walter published *The Grounds*

⁹H. Wiley Hitchcock with Kyle Gann, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2000), 5.

¹⁰Jeoffry Chanticleer, *The New-England Courant*, February 1724, 17-24; quoted in Richard J. Stanislaw, “Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools” (D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976), 18.

¹¹Hood, 90-104. The entire treatise is reprinted on these pages.

*and Rules of Musick [sic] Explained, or An Introduction to the Art of Singing by Note.*¹²

Tufts used letters instead of note heads while Walter used square and diamond-shaped note heads, but both books included a set of musical instructions for the singers' education, including an explanation of the book's particular system of notation followed by a collection of textless English psalm tunes.¹³ Tufts and Walter used a Scottish system of solmization that had been popular in the British Isles from at least the seventeenth century. This system used the syllables "fa," "sol," and "la" for the first six notes of the scale with a "mi" for the leading tone. Thus, an octave scale was sung fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa. Walter's system of notation proved to be more popular than Tuft's, but both books, along with the *Bay Psalm Book*, provided materials for the first singing schools that began springing up around the colonies.¹⁴

The New England singing schools established a pattern of organization and instruction that was followed, at least in rural singing schools, through the nineteenth century. Itinerant singing masters, most of them self-taught musicians, traveled to various communities and offered two- to four-week courses in musical instruction. Students came to the designated instruction area, often a local church or school, to learn the rudiments of reading and singing music. They learned to sing one part at a time, first with syllables, then with words. Singing schools provided social as well as musical

¹²John Tufts, Rev., *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes in a plaine & Easy Method with a collection of tunes in three parts* (Boston, 1721); Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained, or An Introduction to the Art of Singing by Note* (Boston: J. Franklin, 1721).

¹³Cobb, *A Tradition*, 58-59.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 59-60.

opportunities. The schools were a community event, and young men and women especially enjoyed the opportunity to come together in an approved evening activity.¹⁵ At the final session of the school, students performed either a “singing lecture” or, if a preacher’s sermon were included, a “singing assembly,” to demonstrate their new or improved abilities to the community.¹⁶ The concert was sung in three- or four-part harmony. Men and boys sang the tenor or “air” (the melody), the bass, and if written, the counter, or alto. Women sang the treble and sometimes the counter. Men and women often doubled the tenor and treble parts in their respective octaves, creating a distinctive harmony.¹⁷

The emergence of American singing schools also spawned the first school of American composers. These composers worked in a variety of fields and trades, but many became respected composers, compilers, and/or teachers of vocal music, at least for a time. James Lyon was one of the first of these composers. His tune book *Urania*, published in Philadelphia in 1761, contained many English psalms and hymns common to the time as well as six of Lyon’s own compositions. It is interesting to note that Lyon’s book also was the first American publication to include English “fuging psalm tunes,” a form particularly relished by the early New England composers.¹⁸

¹⁵Daniel Kingman, *American Music: A Panorama* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 115-116.

¹⁶Hitchcock, 8.

¹⁷Cobb, *A Tradition*, 60.

¹⁸Hitchcock, 8-9.

William Billings is the best known of the early American composers. Born in Boston in 1746, his formal schooling likely ended at fourteen when his father died. He took some music lessons from a New South Church choir member but was basically self-taught in theory and composition. Like most early American composers, Billings pursued music outside of his everyday professional career. He worked as a tanner most of his adult life and sometimes took additional jobs (like keeping hogs off the city streets) to make ends meet.¹⁹

In 1770, when Billings was twenty-four, he published his first tune book, *The New-England Psalm-Singer; or, American Chorister, Containing a Number of Psalm-Tunes, Anthems and Canons, in Four and Five Parts*.²⁰ McKay and Crawford explain its significance as follows:

It would be difficult to find another single publication in the history of American music—in the history of western music, for that matter—whose priority in its tradition is more conspicuous than that of Billings's collection. ... Taking *Urania's* half-dozen American-composed tunes, and adding tunes from other American compilations ... it appears that roughly a dozen American-composed psalm tunes were published before 1770. Billings's *New-England Psalm Singer*, with its one hundred twenty-odd original compositions increased that figure tenfold. It was the first published compilation of entirely American music: moreover, it was the first tune book produced by a single American composer.²¹

Billings exhibited traits common in many New England colonists—ingenuity, resourcefulness, self-assurance, and fierce independence. His colorful discourses,

¹⁹Gilbert Chase, *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*, rev. 3rd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 117.

²⁰William Billings, *The New-England Psalm-Singer; or, American Chorister, Containing a Number of Psalm-Tunes, Anthems and Canons, in Four and Five Parts* (Boston, 1770).

²¹David Phares McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth Century Composer* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 54-55.

including the sometimes lengthy prefaces to his tune books, are by turns thoughtful, sarcastic, defiant, exuberant, conversational, humorous, instructive, hyperbolic, patriotic, and philosophical. All of them reveal an indefatigable energy and love of music.

Some of his most oft-quoted statements involve his theories of composition, such as “Nature is the best Dictator,” “I don’t think myself confin’d to any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me,” and “I think it is best for every Composer to be his own Carver.”²² Billings eventually did admit to owning a self-prescribed set of compositional rules, but if inspiration struck he did not feel obliged to follow them. These attitudes later resonated with frontier tunesmiths whose compositions also disregarded European models of harmony, voice leading, and form.²³

The Singing Master’s Assistant, published in 1778, contained revisions of many works from *The New England Psalm Singer* along with new compositions. It was extremely popular and was eventually nicknamed “Billings’s Best!” Billings also published four more collections between 1779 and 1794, but financial difficulties and decreased demand for his music left him nearly penniless at his death in 1800.²⁴

Billings, along with his contemporaries, composed plain tunes, canons, set pieces, anthems, and fusing tunes. Plain tunes were usually homophonic, strophic settings of psalm or hymn texts. Set pieces and anthems were longer, through-composed songs that often celebrated special or specific occasions in several stanzas of verse. Anthems

²²These quotes, along with the majority of his other well-known quotes, come from the preface to *The New England Psalm-Singer*.

²³Hitchcock, 10-11.

²⁴Chase, 116-120.

offered composers the most varied and complex possibilities. Billings provided some of the best examples of this dramatic genre. Of the forty anthems he composed, some, like “I am the Rose of Sharon” and “Easter Anthem,” were common in nineteenth century tune books.²⁵

Fuging tunes were popular both with American composers and the public. Over a thousand were published between 1770 and 1810, and fuging tunes represent approximately one-quarter of the Yankee tunesmiths’ total output.²⁶ Fuging tunes consist of two sections. The first section is homophonic and ends in a cadence; the second section begins with the contrapuntal entry of parts, each singing the same text and at least similar subjects. A chordal texture usually returns before the final cadence, after which the second section is usually repeated.²⁷ Singers enjoyed the lively tempos and varied textures of the fuging tune, and Daniel Kingman suggests that “the effect of hearing the successive entrances coming from different parts of the U-shaped meeting-house gallery must have thrilled both singers and congregation alike.”²⁸

The music of the Yankee tunesmiths displayed a remarkably homogenous style. Most composers, like Billings, had little or no formal musical training, and in their newly established republic they did not feel beholden to European musical styles or conventions. Hitchcock writes that the harmony used in their works is “the most

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Kingman, 119.

²⁷Chase, 117-119; Hitchcock, 16.

²⁸Kingman, 119.

characteristic feature of their style,” including “open fifths, parallel fifths and octaves, modal inflections, and surprising dissonances.” He concluded that it was “almost a throwback to a much earlier style of European music, long before the development of the highly organized tonal syntax of the century of Handel and Haydn.”²⁹

Although they were without the formal training of their European counterparts, America’s early composers were a highly respected part of the social fabric, and more than one author described the first era of American composition as a “golden age” of interaction between composers and the public. Hitchcock explains:

These journeyman composers had a secure and respected function in Colonial and Federal-era life in general; viewed historically from a point two hundred years later, theirs was a sort of golden age of musical participation in which teachers, composers, singers, and populace in general worked together fruitfully.³⁰

This fruitful collaboration yielded hundreds of tune books, usually anthologies of songs by the compiler and various English and American composers.³¹ Copyright was basically non-existent; the frequency of a tune’s inclusion in various collections often indicated its degree of popularity. For example, Daniel Read’s Christmas fusing tune *Sherburne* “was reprinted (with or without permission) seventy-eight times between 1785, when it first appeared in Read’s *American Singing Book*, and 1810.”³²

Besides Daniel Read, other native composers of the time include Supply Belcher, David Belknap, Amos Bull, Amos Doolittle, Jacob French, Oliver Holden, Samuel

²⁹Hitchcock, 16.

³⁰Hitchcock, 20-21.

³¹By 1810, about 300 tune books had been published. See Kingman, 118.

³²Hitchcock, 14. Justin Morgan’s breed of horses is still famous today.

Holyoke, Jeremiah Ingalls, Steven Jenks, Jacob Kimball, Abraham Maxim, Justin Morgan, Timothy Swan, and Abraham Wood. They sometimes wrote their own texts, but more often they employed extant hymns and other poetic texts, especially those written by Isaac Watts, the Wesleys, Nahum Tate, and John Newton.³³

In a trend that began with Billings, tune books became increasingly secularized. Although they continued to feature psalms, hymns, and other religious songs, they also contained songs with non-religious texts. The titles of some of the tune books, like Jeremiah Ingalls' *The Christian Harmony; or, Songsters Companion*,³⁴ reflect an attempt to serve in both religious and secular contexts. Singing schools were themselves secular institutions, and Cobb comments that “[with] the emergence of the singing school, American music took on an increasingly secular quality.”³⁵

Like Tufts and Walter, composers and compilers sometimes experimented with different systems of notation. They explained these systems in the obligatory tune book prefaces, which provided basic musical information and instruction for students. *The Easy Instructor*, published in 1801 by two singing school teachers, William Smith and William Little, introduced a system that retained the traditional five-line staff, but used four differently-shaped note heads to represent the four solmization syllables fa, sol, la, and mi. Other tune books adopted Smith and Little's system, which became known as four-shape notation.

³³Hitchcock, p. 19.

³⁴Chase, 121.

³⁵Cobb, *A Tradition*, 59.

The conditions that had fostered the first “school” of American composers began to change at the turn of the century. Wealth accumulated in the larger Eastern cities, and the more aristocratic citizenry began to adopt European standards of cultural refinement.³⁶ Reformers like Lowell Mason found the “unlearned” style of American composition crude and distasteful; others complained that the lively tunes of Billings and his sort lacked the solemnity and reverence required of sacred music. The fugal tune was found guilty on both these counts and became a particular object of scorn and derision by the reformers.³⁷

As a result, music by the early American composers gradually fell from favor in the churches, replaced by or modeled on European selections. Some singing school teachers like Andrew Law championed the “better music.” Those that did not experienced a decline in business and esteem. The shape-note system of the *Easy Instructor* also came under attack by reformers and became associated with eighteenth-century Yankee compositions written in what became known as “dispersed harmony.” Allen P. Britton commented on the division between those who employed or rejected shape-note notation:

As time went on [into the nineteenth century], the divergence between those who continued to sing music in ‘dispersed’ harmony and those who were won over by the reformers to music in ‘correct’ style was sharpened on a basis of the shape notation itself. For those who perpetuated the American musical style of the eighteenth century took the shape notes to their hearts, while the educated men of

³⁶Hitchcock, 21.

³⁷Richard Crawford “‘Ancient Music’ and the Europeanizing of American Psalmody, 1800-1810,” in *A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*, ed. Richard Crawford, R. Allen Lott, and Carol J. Oja (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 225; Chase, 123.

good taste who would have nothing to do with such music would have nothing to do with shape notes either.³⁸

Thus, musical reform linked Yankee singing schools and shape-note notation and pushed singing schools and their music from urban to rural settings where reform had not yet reached.

Shape-note tune books followed the singing schools to the south and west, retaining many of their predecessors' attributes. Of these oblong books, Kingman observed:

These books clearly revealed their ancestry-in their shape and appearance; in their prefatory introductions to the "Rudiments of Music"; in their continued use of the four solmization syllables (fa, sol, la, mi); in their hymns in three and four parts, with the melody buried in the middle of the texture in the tenor voice; and in their sprinkling of more ambitious anthems and fusing tunes.³⁹

The tune books also began including a new genre of song, one that current scholars identify as "spiritual folk song." This term, first coined by George Pullen Jackson, tends to encompass a large and varied body of music. Hitchcock defines them as "religious songs set to folk melodies."⁴⁰ In the period when singing schools and shape-note books were transitioning from urban to rural settings, John Wyeth published two tune books: *Repository of Sacred Music* (1810) and *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second* (1813).

³⁸Allen P. Britton, "Theoretical Introductions in American Tune-Books" (Ph. D. diss., University of Michigan, 1949), 151; quoted in Richard J. Stanislaw, "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools" (D. M. A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976), 11.

³⁹Kingman, 133-134.

⁴⁰Hitchcock, 107.

The latter, with tunes in two, three, and four parts, served as a model for the Southern tune books that followed, and it was the first to include spiritual folk songs.⁴¹

Jackson divided spiritual folksongs into three main categories: religious ballads, hymns, and spiritual songs.⁴² Religious ballads relate a story in narrative fashion over several or more verses. Folk hymns set a religious text, usually by Isaac Watts or John Wesley, to an anonymous or folk tune, while spiritual songs include those songs frequently sung at revivals or camp meetings.⁴³

Camp meetings originated in Kentucky in 1801 and quickly spread to all areas of the frontier. Music played a central role in these meetings.⁴⁴ Cobb writes: “Though different in atmosphere and method, the camp meeting ran a parallel course with the singing school in its influence on the *Sacred Harp*.”⁴⁵ Jackson explains the conditions that engendered the emergence of spiritual songs:

At the camp meetings it was not a question of inducing every one to sing, but of letting everyone sing, of letting them sing songs which were so simple that they became not a hindrance to general participation but an irresistible temptation to join in.⁴⁶

⁴¹Ibid., 111.

⁴²George Pullen Jackson, *Spiritual Folk-Songs of Early America* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1937), 5.

⁴³ Hitchcock, 107.

⁴⁴John Bealle, *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 35.

⁴⁵Buell Cobb, “The *Sacred Harp* of the South: A Study of Origins, Practices, and Present Implications,” *Louisiana Studies* 7 (1968): 112.

⁴⁶Jackson, *Spiritual Folk Songs*, 7.

These simple songs were easy to remember and newcomers could learn them almost immediately.

Spiritual songs relied on text repetitions, verse-chorus structures, and folk melodies to create easy-to-learn songs. One verse-chorus spiritual in the *Sacred Harp*, “The Morning Trumpet” by B. F. White, provides a good example of text repetition and simplification. The italicized sections indicate the same or similar words to the same melody:

O when shall I see Jesus,
And reign with him above,
*And shall hear the trumpet sound
In that morning.*

And from the flowing fountain,
Drink everlasting love,
*And shall hear the trumpet sound
In that morning.*

Chorus: Shout, O glory!
For I shall mount above the skies,
*When I hear the trumpet sound
In that morning.*⁴⁷

Other spiritual songs were even simpler, with only a few word changes in each verse. Jackson surmised that some of the old folk hymns were simply “sung to pieces.”⁴⁸

The preacher John F. Watson disliked the simple, repetitive, chorus-like camp meeting songs and in his 1819 tract, *Methodist Error*, attributed such practices to the influence of

⁴⁷White, B. F. and E. J. King., *The Sacred Harp*, 3rd ed., (1859; reprint, with a historical introduction by George Pullen Jackson, Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1968), #85. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸George Pullen Jackson, *Down-East Spirituals and Others* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1943), 5.

the blacks, who at camp meetings would “get together and sing for hours ... short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with repetition choruses.”⁴⁹ After about 1815, almost all Southern shape-note tune books included all types of spiritual folksongs.

Ananias Davisson’s *Kentucky Harmony* of 1816 was one of the most successful and influential of the Southern tune books. Many of the songs to which Davisson claimed authorship were likely drawn from folksongs and traditional ballads, but this was rather common. Gilbert Chase commented: “The shape-note compilers were craftsmen rather than creators. When they arranged a preexisting tune, they felt entitled to claim it as their own.”⁵⁰ Chase cautions against assigning all such songs folksong status, however. In the preface to his tune book *Union Harmony* (1837), William Caldwell admitted to gleaning many of his tunes from the body of unwritten music then in use in the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches. Chase notes that this “confirms a body of ‘unwritten music’—that is music transmitted by oral tradition,” but does not reveal the sources of this music, which “could have come from a variety of printed sources: broadsides, ballad operas, periodicals, [and] any number of popular song collections or tune books.”⁵¹

It is important to note that though music in *Kentucky Harmony* was written in four parts, most other tune books were predominantly three-part compositions with the melody in the tenor voice. Whether in three or four parts, however, the music had a

⁴⁹Hitchcock, 110.

⁵⁰Chase, 171-172.

⁵¹Chase, 173-174.

characteristic harmonic idiom, one that abounded in parallel fourths, fifths, and octaves. David Brock postulates that this was a “learned compositional style,” derived from the early American compositional style and then “southernized.”⁵²

Other influential shape-note tune books included Davisson’s *Supplement to the Kentucky Harmony* (1820), Allen Carden’s *Missouri Harmony* (1820), William Moore’s *Columbian Harmony* (1825), and John Jackson’s *Knoxville Harmony* (1838). The two most lastingly popular books were William Walker’s *Southern Harmony* (1835) and *The Sacred Harp* (1844) by B. F. White and E. J. King.⁵³

William Walker, or “Singin’ Billy” Walker, compiled *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*, as the story goes, in Spartanburg, South Carolina in collaboration with his brother-in-law Benjamin Franklin White. When he took the manuscript for printing to New Haven, Connecticut, he failed to give credit to White and his name alone appeared on the title page.⁵⁴ Walker’s book was extremely well received and went into five editions before he published his next book, *Christian Harmony*, which used a seven-shape shape-note system. As its title page states, *The Southern Harmony* contained “A Choice Collection of Tunes, Hymns, Psalms, Odes, and Anthems; Selected from the Most Eminent Authors in the United States.” Walker, like Davisson, admitted that some of his compositions were arrangements of pre-existing melodies: “I have composed the parts to

⁵²David A. Brock, “A Foundation for Defining Southern Shape-note Folk Hymnody from 1800 to 1859 as a Learned Compositional Style” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont College, 1996), 44.

⁵³Hitchcock, 111.

⁵⁴George Pullen Jackson, *The Story of the Sacred Harp, 1844-1944* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1944), 17-18.

a great many good airs (which I could not find in any publication, nor in manuscript), and assigned my name as the author.”⁵⁵

Only *The Sacred Harp* by B.F. White and E. J. King rivaled *The Southern Harmony* in popularity and widespread use. After the breach with his brother-in-law over *The Southern Harmony*, B. F. White moved his family to Hamilton, Georgia, where he began work on what would be *The Sacred Harp*. White became a prominent citizen and editor of the county newspaper, *The Organ*, and in 1844 he published *The Sacred Harp* with Elisha J. King.⁵⁶ The title page includes this description of the work:

A collection of Psalm and Hymn Tunes, Odes, and Anthems; Selected from the Most Eminent Authors. Together with Nearly One Hundred Pieces Never Before Published. Suited to Most Metres, and Well Adapted to Churches of Every Denomination, Singing Schools, and Private Societies. With Plain Rules for Learners.⁵⁷

The Sacred Harp is divided into three sections. The first and longest section is titled “Consisting of Pieces Used by Worshipping Assemblies,” the second, “Consisting Principally of Pieces in Singing Schools and Societies,” and the third, “Consisting of Odes and Anthems.” The first two sections feature a variety of songs: early colonial favorites, fusing tunes, anonymous folk hymns, revival spirituals, and of course the new selections by White or King. The shorter third section contains the longer “show pieces,” with several compositions by Billings. White and King included songs from many of the shape-note books and the hymnals of the day, borrowing most heavily from *The Southern*

⁵⁵Chase, 174-175.

⁵⁶Jackson, *Story of the Sacred Harp*, 18-19.

⁵⁷Cobb, *A Tradition*, 68.

Harmony. Cobb suggests: “the *Sacred Harp* is a composite of the American and English sacred melodies which had been popular among the shape-note hymnals over a fifty-year period.”⁵⁸

Twenty-three-year-old Elisha J. King died around the time of the release of the first edition of *The Sacred Harp* and left B.F. White to promote and maintain the work they had created. White often printed his newest shape-note compositions as well as those of others in *The Organ*, in part to test them against public opinion. With the help of a committee, he revised and enlarged *The Sacred Harp* three times before his death in 1879. Despite the new contributions of many other shape-note composers, each of these editions share his “steadying influence.”⁵⁹ Cobb maintains that:

White’s particular genius was for transcribing folk motifs into the three-part idiom of the shape-note hymnal. But perhaps equally important, he passed on his musical theory and style to a generation of young singers who then contributed songs of their own to the book, especially in its later publications.⁶⁰

As the “elected” president of the Southern Musical Convention, which had been organized in Huntersville, Georgia in 1845 (the year after *The Sacred Harp* was published), White also helped ensure the success and longevity of his book by offering it as the sole tune book of the convention.⁶¹

⁵⁸Ibid., 73.

⁵⁹Ibid., 69-70, 87.

⁶⁰Ibid., 72.

⁶¹Bealle, 140-141; Jackson, *The Story of the Sacred Harp*, 19. White served as president from 1845-1867 except for two sessions in which the majority of singers voted to consider books other than the *Sacred Harp* for the convention.

Other musical conventions began around this time, many of which also used *The Sacred Harp*. After the Southern Musical Convention voted to begin using other tune books in 1867, the Chattahoochee Convention, also in Georgia, became the largest convention that promoted and regulated *Sacred Harp* singing. Though the conventions and *Sacred Harp* singing in general suffered during the Civil War, the conventions resumed in full force after the war and continued their singing traditions.⁶²

Conventions were the largest and most visible gatherings of shape-note singers, but they were usually only annual events. Singing activities centered on the community “singings” held more frequently, sometimes once a month, at local churches or community buildings. These were most often daylong events with a break for the mid-day meal, which was referred to as “dinner on the grounds.” Though not as common as they once were, community singings still feature prominently in the current *Sacred Harp* tradition. Automobiles have also made it easier for singers to attend singings in more distant communities.

The Sacred Harp also owes part of its success to the various revisions it sustained after White’s death, including the controversies some of them caused. W. M. Cooper caused the first big stir with the 1902 publication of his revision, usually referred to as the “Cooper revision.” He transposed some songs to lower keys, substituted the first lines of songs for their original tune names, added some gospel songs, and fully added the alto part. The edition was accepted in newer Southern and Western regions of *The Sacred Harp*, but Cooper, from southern Alabama, had not grown up under the tutelage of B. F.

⁶²Cobb, *A Tradition*, 136.

White. Many of the old *Sacred Harp* families felt they “could never sanction such an interloper.”⁶³

However illegitimate they found the book, it nonetheless convinced those who considered themselves heirs to the tradition to act. In 1906 the United *Sacred Harp* Musical Association appointed a revision committee headed by Joe S. James, which in 1911 published the *Original Sacred Harp*, most often referred to as the “James revision.” The book reinserted old songs that had been removed in previous editions and added new compositions. Each song included a scriptural reference and often a tidbit of biographical information, not always completely accurate but usually interesting, about its composer, arranger, the author of the words, or a person well known for leading that particular song. The two competing versions split the *Sacred Harp* community, but they breathed new life into the old tradition.⁶⁴

Seaborn M. and Thomas J. Denson were the main impetus behind the next significant revision, the “Denson revision,” published in 1936. The Denson, based on the James revision, pared down the size of the book and returned to some of the more traditional harmonies and genres of song, including fugging tunes. As singing school instructors and leaders in *The Sacred Harp* community, both “Uncle Seaborn” and “Uncle Tom” taught and influenced thousands of singers as they championed their beloved tradition. Though they died shortly before the book’s release, their families

⁶³Ibid., 90.

⁶⁴Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983), 270. The United *Sacred Harp* Association was formed in Atlanta in 1904.

continued the work they had begun, and the revision became the most widely used in the twentieth century.⁶⁵

Other editions of the Denson revision included the guidance of such staunch *Sacred Harp* advocates as Ruth Denson Edwards and Hugh McGraw. Edwards and McGraw, both dedicated singers, also recognized the value of reaching out and explaining their tradition to those outside *The Sacred Harp* community. Their work among singers, and as advocates for the tradition in other circles, led to more widespread recognition and respect for *Sacred Harp* music and singings.

The Sacred Harp Publishing Company, which Thomas Denson organized in 1933, continues to publish and distribute copies of the most recent edition of the Denson revision of *The Sacred Harp*, as well as a series of recordings and notes from *Sacred Harp* conventions and singings. Cobb noted the predominance of the Denson revision in the early 1970s, and he wondered if the Denson and Cooper traditions might merge at some future date. While this may yet happen, it does not seem eminent in view of the most recent editions of both books.⁶⁶

Apart from the division caused by different revisions, *The Sacred Harp* community functioned almost as an extended family from the time of B.F. White, persevering in its seemingly outmoded practices long after the rest of the musical world had forgotten about them. George Pullen Jackson, a professor of German literature at

⁶⁵Wallace McKenzie, "The Alto Parts in the 'True Dispersed Harmony' of *The Sacred Harp* Revisions," *Musical Quarterly*, no. 73 (1989): 154.

⁶⁶Cobb, *A Tradition*, 114-115, 125-127. The latest Denson revision was published in 1991 and the most recent Cooper edition in 1992.

Vanderbilt University, “discovered” *Sacred Harp* singing in the 1920s. As the first modern researcher of the tradition, he published numerous articles and books over four decades that advocated shape-note music in general and *Sacred Harp* music in particular. Jackson collected and transcribed numerous folksongs, along with descriptions of performance styles and practices, and laid the foundation for all other *Sacred Harp* studies.

Over the years he studied the tradition, Jackson noticed that most of the singers were older, and he feared that the *Sacred Harp* tradition would dwindle and fade away by the turn of the century. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, *The Sacred Harp* has enjoyed a resurgence of interest. Numerous festivals and singings are scheduled throughout the country, not just in the usual Southern strongholds. Cobb also observed that many singers are drawn to *Sacred Harp* music, or return to it, when they are older. If this pattern holds true, the young people who today seem uninterested in the tradition may one day become avid singers.⁶⁷ Part of this interest can be attributed to a general increase in interest in American folksong. The older singers dislike the term “folksong” for their music, but many also realize that this classification invites more public and scholarly attention.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Ibid., 156.

⁶⁸Although *The Sacred Harp* is by far the book most widely recognized and used, other four-shape-note books, like *The Southern Harmony*, *Hesperian Harp*, and *Missouri Harmony* have also enjoyed increased popularity.

Devoted *Sacred Harp* singers still stress participation and invite the uninitiated to join their ranks. People begin to listen to or sing *Sacred Harp* music for various reasons.

Cobb's comments on this subject hold true today:

Newcomers are everywhere found in the midst of the *Sacred Harp* gatherings. They come to appraise, to marvel, and to learn; but perhaps above all, most of them come to enjoy. Some observers discover a storehouse of old music, strange harmonies, behavioral rituals. The interest for some is in the startling success of an unsophisticated system of sight reading by an unsophisticated people; for others, looking more generally, it is in the discovery of a "viable institution" by which generations pass on cultural values and a specialized knowledge with little to-do. Some undoubtedly come to indulge in a kind of cultural nostalgia, to form a link with a pleasing past. Some are attracted by the community demonstration of love and goodwill, the enjoyment of company and good food, or by a recreation that challenges and fulfills. Some come to bathe themselves in religious fundamentalism, the simple and fervent spirituality they sense all around. And finally there is the appeal of the deep and rollicking music itself, bearing the participants along in melody and rhythm by waves of sound.⁶⁹

Scholars study the tunes, harmonies, styles, practices, and social aspects of the *Sacred Harp*, and musicians increasingly borrow or arrange *Sacred Harp* tunes for other settings.

In 1944 Jackson listed a number of composers who, at that time, had either arranged *Sacred Harp* songs for choral groups or had included the tunes in their instrumental works. These included Henry Cowell, John Jacob Niles, John Powell, Randall Thompson, and Virgil Thomson.⁷⁰ Composers and arrangers continue to employ *Sacred Harp* songs and harmonies and consider them a valuable resource of musical material. Whether they are seasoned singers, new converts, audience members, or composers, people in the United States and beyond now recognize *The Sacred Harp* tradition and the musical genre it represents as an important part of America's musical heritage.

⁶⁹Cobb, *A Tradition*, 149.

⁷⁰Jackson, *The Story of the Sacred Harp*, 44-45.

Chapter 3

Performance Practices of *The Sacred Harp*

Because *Sacred Harp* singing functions as a viable ongoing tradition, many performance practices can be observed first-hand. Most proponents of the music, both singers and scholars, agree that singing the music with experienced “Sacred Harpers” at a “singing,” or at least attending one, provides the best education in performance practice. However, listening to “authentic” recordings, reading historical accounts of shape-note singing, studying the introductory “Rudiments of Music” sections in the shape-note tune books themselves, and exercising a degree of common sense can also guide the modern choral conductor in combining accurate performance practices with practical choral considerations. To date, Richard J. Stanislaw’s dissertation, “Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools,”⁷¹ remains the most extensive and thorough study of shape-note performance practices. This section will summarize many of his conclusions, as well as those of other scholars who have researched the subject.

Performance practices of four-shape shape-note music, like that found in *The Sacred Harp*, may have, in some ways, evolved over time. Folklorists have even noticed some slight changes in practice since its “discovery” in the 1920s by George Pullen Jackson.⁷² Thus, a study of past practices, as well as scholars can decipher them from the

⁷¹Richard J. Stanislaw, “Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools” (D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976).

⁷²Cobb, *A Tradition*, 49-50.

extant documents, contributes important information to current understanding of possible performance practices.

As discussed in Chapter 2, *The Sacred Harp* was but one of many shape-note tune books of its time. The introductory “Rudiments of Music” section of *The Sacred Harp* and its fellow tune books reveal many details of performance practices. Tune book compilers usually discussed vocal divisions, tempos, vocal production, ornaments, and other aspects of performance practices. The descriptions and language used, however, are not always clear and can sometimes lead to different interpretations. Current practice does not always seem to coincide with some of the compilers’ suggestions, and this too may be taken into account when determining how to approach the performance of a piece of shape-note music. In all, there may be a variety of performance practice options to consider. Ultimately, the individual choral director must make choices based on information about historical performance practice, current practice, the needs of his/her particular choir, and program compatibility when choosing and performing shape-note works.

Part Singing

Music in *The Sacred Harp* and other shape-note tune books generally appeared in three or four-part arrangements. In songs in three parts, the lowest line was designated as the bass part, the middle line as the tenor or “air,” and the top line as the treble. In four-part arrangements, part assignments, beginning with the bottom staff, read in the order: bass, tenor or “air,” alto, counter or second treble, and treble.

The tenor part, sung by the “highest of male voices,”⁷³ almost always carried the melody. It was written in the treble clef and was often doubled at the octave by women. In the preface to his *Christian Harmony*, William Walker explained who might be assigned to the tenor part.

[Arrange] the medium female and highest male voices, (and sometimes boys,) on the Tenor, leading air, or Melody, which is the principal part; hence the name Tenor, --as we say, “The tenor of the sermon was on the redemption of man;”— (in singing schools in the country, most of the small girls and boys sing this part;).⁷⁴

The bass, assigned to the “gravest of mens’ voices,”⁷⁵ was always written in the bass clef. Stanislaw asserts that eighteenth- to twentieth-century historical accounts indicate that only men sang the bass part. Cobb, however, mentions that in current practice when the altos sometimes double the bass when they do not have their own part. Tune book compilers did not address this situation, and it seems that such doubling might be done at the choral director’s discretion.⁷⁶ In discussing vocal divisi, Walker and White seem to suggest “the possibility that male bass singers sang in octaves, even if not so notated, if the range went too low or possibly too high.”⁷⁷ Such doubling might assist the modern choral director in accommodating basses with a limited range.

⁷³White and King, 11.

⁷⁴William Walker, *Christian Harmony* (Philadelphia: Cowperwaith, 1866), xiii; quoted in Richard J. Stanislaw, “Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools” (D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976), 166.

⁷⁵White and King, 11.

⁷⁶Stanislaw, 170; Cobb, *A Tradition*, 37; Hitchcock, 113.

⁷⁷Stanislaw, 170.

Shape-note arrangers conceived their works in a linear, contrapuntal fashion. After writing the melody (usually in the tenor), arrangers next fashioned the bass part.⁷⁸ As such it is considered next in importance to the tenor. Even when other parts were omitted, the bass part was always sung.⁷⁹ The treble part, also considered integral to the harmony, was assigned to female voices, which sang an octave above the tenor. Men sometimes doubled the part at the lower octave, but women generally sang in the upper octave despite the often-high tessitura.⁸⁰

The thorniest discussions on part assignments revolve around the designation of the alto, or counter, part, which is notated in the C, G, or F clefs. White and King assigned the “counter” part to the “gravest of female, and boys voices; unless the counter be written on the G or F clef, and if so, take the best and most acute of both male and female, and perform it on the octave pitch.”⁸¹ From these instructions, it seems that White and King intended low-voiced women and/or boys to sing the counter when it was written in the C clef. When the counter appeared in the G or F clef, the men with the highest voices, those whom today we call counter-tenors, were to sing the part, doubled at the octave by the highest female voices.

Most later tune books agree that, when written in the alto clef, the counter is sung in the octave notated by women and/or boys. Billings and other early American

⁷⁸Chase, 179.

⁷⁹Stanislaw, 169.

⁸⁰Not everyone of the time found the high treble strains appealing. One woman who did not like part-singing in general referred to the treble singers as “screaming women.” Stanislaw, 168.

⁸¹White and King, 11.

composers assigned the counter part to men. In part because so few men had the necessary range, the composers, compilers, and singing school teachers who followed began assigning the part to women and boys, sometimes writing the part in the treble or bass clefs.⁸²

When written in the treble clef, the alto part may appear in three different ranges: somewhat lower than the treble part, the same as the treble part, or in a range higher than the treble part. In the first and second instances, the alto should be sung at the octave written. In the third instance, the practice is less clear. White and King's instructions seem to indicate that high-voiced men and women sang the counter. If men sang the counter, they would have read it as they did the tenor part, singing the pitches one octave lower than written. If women doubled this part, they would have sung in the octave written. The preface to William Walker's *Christian Harmony* (1866) supports this practice, but Walker mentions that women and boys in rural districts had begun singing the alto part in the lower octave.⁸³

Other authors, like Ananias Davisson, who avoided using the alto clef because they felt it was confusing, may have visualized the note in the alto clef, then written it at about the same position on the treble clef. If this were the case, the arranger would have intended the part to be sung an octave lower.⁸⁴ Stanislaw makes the point that "singers

⁸²Stanislaw, 171; 178-180.

⁸³McKenzie, 156; Stanislaw, 181.

⁸⁴Stanislaw, 172-174.

were trained to read shapes—not clefs, key signatures, and the like ...”⁸⁵ Thus, if singers who were accustomed to the alto clef were confronted with a part in treble clef that appeared to be written in the same general range as a part in the alto clef, they might automatically sing it in the same octave as the alto clef. When written in the bass clef, the alto part was most likely sung up an octave. This could have served two purposes: 1) It may have been used “as a simple expedient to keep the notes on the staff when the part ran quite low;”⁸⁶ and 2) it may have assisted young boys in becoming acquainted with the bass clef while singing up the octave.⁸⁷ In twentieth century editions, many (but not all) of the alto parts have been rewritten in the treble clef. In current *Sacred Harp* practice, lower-voiced women sing the alto part.

Another debate rests with the inclusion of the alto part. One-quarter of the songs in the 1859 edition of *The Sacred Harp* were arranged in four parts; the rest were in three.⁸⁸ Singers sometimes omitted the alto in the four-part songs, perhaps to avoid the confusion seemingly inherent in the part. The alto is usually the least interesting part, and Stanislaw believes that in general, the “idiom is most comfortably three-voice.”⁸⁹

In his 1902 revision of the *Sacred Harp*, W. M. Cooper added alto parts to the three-part songs, compelling subsequent revisionists to consider doing the same. Not all *Sacred Harp* singers accepted this change initially, but Cobb believes it was a necessary

⁸⁵Ibid., 172.

⁸⁶McKenzie, 156.

⁸⁷Stanislaw, 181.

⁸⁸McKenzie, 155.

⁸⁹Stanislaw, 183.

concession to modernization that helped ensure the continued success of *The Sacred Harp*. Like other scholars, Cobb thought that the addition of the alto part “took some of the austerity of *The Sacred Harp* sound” by adding the third to previously open chords, which “in many cases serves to sweeten the effect, to pad the harmony.”⁹⁰

Wallace McKenzie specifically studied the effect of the added alto parts on the dispersed harmony of *The Sacred Harp* in both the Cooper and Denson revisions. He found that although the alto resulted in some added thirds and fifths, the completed triads alone did not significantly alter the characteristic *Sacred Harp* sound. In adding the alto, arrangers usually left the other parts as written, including the existing parallel octaves, open fourths and fifths, and unprepared second inversions. In some cases, the alto part actually increased the number of parallel octaves and second inversion triads.⁹¹

McKenzie feels that the alto parts were composed with a degree of melodic interest, and that the lines are “endued with a modal melodic quality.”⁹² He further writes:

In some cases the individual melodic impulse transcends the harmonic restrictions and constrained range of a normal alto part by introducing dissonances . . . , by crossing the treble line . . . , and at times by falling in with another line for a few notes in parallel octaves, or unisons.⁹³

He also disagrees with Cobb’s idea that the alto was added as a result of modernization.

He believes that *Sacred Harp* revisers were motivated by an impulse similar to those

“early church poets and composers” who wrote antiphons, tropes, and additional melodic

⁹⁰Cobb, 91-93.

⁹¹McKenzie, 160.

⁹²McKenzie, 168.

⁹³Ibid.

lines for well-established chants. He concludes that the “twentieth-century composers of alto melodies are continuing the ancient Christian tradition of responding creatively to an existing musical canon.”⁹⁴

Even if the added alto does not reorient the music from quartal to tertian harmony, as author Dorothy Horn suggests,⁹⁵ a song written in a four-part arrangement sounds different than it does in a three-part arrangement. The texture is obviously thicker with four parts, and the overall effect is more traditional (classical) as opposed to the spare sound of the tenor melody flanked by two counter-melodies. Even though the alto often carries at least some melodic interest, the part is still the least interesting to sing, and it is not surprising that some singers initially resisted its widespread addition.⁹⁶

Although both modernization and creativity probably influenced the overall installation of the alto part, practicality must have played a role. *Sacred Harp* singers naturally adjust melodies, rhythms, harmonies, and performance practices to suit their ears and their needs. Some women may not have been able to successfully negotiate a high treble part or the tenor sung at the octave, nor may they have been able to sing the tenor, which sometimes crosses below the bass, with the men. Adding the alto part would have relieved not only the singers themselves, but those who might have been sitting next to them as they struggled with notes too high or too low.

⁹⁴Ibid, 171.

⁹⁵Dorothy Horn, *Sing to Me of Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1970), 43.

⁹⁶Cobb, 92-93.

Today's choirs have the option of singing the four-part arrangements of three-part songs or of omitting the alto part and singing in three parts. Directors also enjoy a measure of freedom in assigning and doubling parts. Usually only men sing the bass, but both men and women can double any or all of the other parts. Hugh McGraw suggests that singers sing the part whose range best fits their voice, but *Sacred Harp* singers also occasionally switch to other parts. In this practice they follow Walker's advice that:

learners should not be confined too long to the parts that suit their voices best, but should try occasionally the different parts, as it tends greatly to improve the voice and give them knowledge of the connexion of the parts and of harmony as well as melody.⁹⁷

Having singers switch parts in rehearsal and/or performance proves to be less monotonous for the singers and may result in interesting changes in timbre and overall effect.

Vocal Technique

White and King, along with their fellow tune book compilers, were clearly interested in choral sound and included instructions in choral technique. To achieve better blend and balance, they not only instructed singers to listen to and sometime sing other parts, they also cautioned individuals against singing too loudly: "Each one should sing so soft as not to drown the teacher's voice, and each part so soft as will admit the other parts to be distinctly heard."⁹⁸

⁹⁷Walker, *Southern Harmony*; quoted in Stanislaw, 183.

⁹⁸White and King, 23.

Reformers often complained about the loud, harsh singing in rural communities. Accounts of revival singing almost always commented on its great energy and volume,⁹⁹ and *Sacred Harp* singers today are known for their hearty renditions of the old tunes. Tune book compilers did not necessarily approve of this tendency. White and King lamented: “Yet how hard it is to make some believe soft singing is the most melodious; when, at the same time loud singing is more like the hootings of the midnight bird than refined music.”¹⁰⁰ According to Stanislaw, the basic dynamic guidelines include the following: above all, dynamics should reflect the text; minor songs should be sung softer than major songs; repeated phrases or sections should be sung louder the second time; high notes in a singer’s range should be sung softer than the low notes; when the tenor and bass parts cross, the bass should sing softer and the tenor louder; and fusing sections should start softer and gradually increase in volume.¹⁰¹

The Sacred Harp speaks in general terms about balance, or proportioning parts, but other tune books are more specific. One suggests using three basses and two tenors for each one of the upper part(s), while another recommends three basses and two treble singers for every tenor and counter.¹⁰² The preference for a bass-heavy choral sound reaches back at least to Billings, who assigned three basses to every one singer on the

⁹⁹Kingman, 141.

¹⁰⁰White and King, 24.

¹⁰¹Stanislaw, 312-318.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 187-188.

other parts.¹⁰³ Tune book compilers wrote that tunes in minor keys might be “proportioned with a lighter bass,” but in songs in major keys the bass should be sung “full and strong, but never harsh.”¹⁰⁴ Divisi in a single part occurs occasionally. Compilers called these notes “choosing notes” and directed that twice as many singers should sing the bottom notes as the top notes.¹⁰⁵

Shape-note compilers also aimed for a unified sound from each section that there might “appear to be but one uniform voice.”¹⁰⁶ They tried to describe the desired sound by comparing the tenors and trebles to instruments like a violin or, as in the following excerpt from *The Sacred Harp*, a flute.

When singing in concert the bass should be sounded full, bold, and majestic, but not harsh; the tenor regular, firm, and distinct; the counter clear and plain; and the treble soft and mild, but not faint. The tenor and treble may consider the German flute, the sound of which they may endeavour to imitate, if they wish to improve the voice.¹⁰⁷

As stated in *The Sacred Harp*, “The most essential qualities of good tone are purity, fullness, firmness, and certainty.”¹⁰⁸ Other adjectives, like, “soft,” “smooth,” “round,” “clear,” and “sweet,” were common to many of the other tune books. White and King

¹⁰³Hitchcock, 19. In *The New England Psalm-Singer*, Billings wrote that “in most singing companies I ever heard, the greatest failure was in the Bass,” saying that “in order to have good Music, there must be Three Bass to one of the Upper Parts. So that for instance, suppose a Company of Forty People, Twenty of them should sing the Bass.” Even though Billings often wrote music in four parts, it is clear that in this instance he is assuming a three-part choral division.

¹⁰⁴White and King, 23.

¹⁰⁵White and King, 12.

¹⁰⁶White and King, 24.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 14.

also suggested that the students in singing schools take the teacher's voice as a model, and that he should give examples of correct and incorrect singing as appropriate for their instruction.¹⁰⁹

Some accounts of shape-note singing describe a nasal tone, or marked "twang," in the voices of the singers. White and King may have been attempting to discourage such a style when they wrote that, when singing the words of a song:

great care should be taken that they be properly pronounced, and not torn to pieces between the teeth, nor forced through the nose. Let the mouth be freely opened, but not too wide, the teeth a little asunder, and let the sound come from the lungs, and be entirely formed where they should be only distinguished, viz., on the end of the tongue.¹¹⁰

Stanislaw comments that current shape-note singers:

use a tight nasal tone which is characteristic of country and western vocal style and a hallmark of most untrained voices. Indeed, that tone may be the direct descendent of the vocal technique used by the early nineteenth-century singers. But, it is also possible that the tone-conscious shape-note teachers successfully taught their students to sing with a free tone. At any rate, the tune books testify that they tried.¹¹¹

Thus, despite the nasal tone prevalent in today's *Sacred Harp* singings, open, free vocal production is an acceptable performance option.

The compilers did not directly mention vibrato. Cobb noted that most white singers sing with a straight tone, while the black singers tend to sing with a full vibrato.¹¹² Most recordings feature a straight tone, which makes the open fourths, fifths, and octaves

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 14.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 23.

¹¹¹Stanislaw, 211.

¹¹²Cobb, *A Tradition*, 45.

sound starker, but the modern choir should not feel obligated to eliminate all vibrato, especially if its members are not experienced in adjusting the degree of their vibrato.

According to White and King, breath control was important in producing a “firm” tone. Their suggestions sound similar to general principles of breath control and phrasing taught in most present-day vocal studios and choral groups. Shape-note compilers also mentioned an ornament they called the “swell,” or what we call today, *messa di voce*. The swell was used on many long notes, particularly on the last note of a song, and in the bass, which sometimes had sections of sustained notes under the faster-moving upper parts.¹¹³

Tempo and Rhythm

Tune book compilers also gave instructions regarding tempo and rhythm. They indicated tempo primarily through meter signatures or what they called “moods of time.” White and King described the seven moods used in the *Sacred Harp*. They included the number of seconds per measure and the basic conducting pattern for each measure, using a “d” for a downward motion and a “u” for an upward motion. The chart below summarizes their instructions.¹¹⁴

	<u>Meter</u>	<u>Seconds per Measure</u>	<u>Conduction Motion</u>
Common:	2/2	3	d, u
	4/4	2 ½	d, u

¹¹³ Stanislaw, 213; White and King, 23.

¹¹⁴ If selecting a song from another shape-note book, consult its mood designations, since they sometimes vary from book to book.

	2/4	1 ½	d, u
Triple:	3/2	3	d, d, u
	3/4	2	d, d, u
Compound:	6/4	2 ½	d, u
	6/8	1 ½	d, u

White and King included Italian tempo words in their “Dictionary of Musical Terms,” but when tempo descriptors appear in the music, they are simple English words like “slow,” “fast,” “lively,” and “brisk.” Even these are rare and occur mainly at points of change in meter or texture, usually in the more difficult and complex pieces. Though not usually marked, the fugal section of a piece was taken at a faster tempo, sometimes with *accelerando*. Shape-note compilers and teachers seem to have followed the specific tempos indicated by the different “moods,” at least initially. Evidence for this lies in the detailed instructions for constructing pendulums outlined in many of the tune books and the acknowledgement that tunes might be sung more slowly while they were being learned, after which time the correct tempo should be observed.¹¹⁵

By the end of the nineteenth century, tune book compilers had been influenced by the idea that the director might choose a suitable tempo for a song based more on its style or the meaning of its words. In the case of *The Sacred Harp*, when the charismatic teacher and reviser Tom Denson began teaching in the early part of the twentieth century, he preferred faster tempos than those traditionally taken by B. F. White. This led to

¹¹⁵White and King, 23.

disagreement and confusion, and in current *Sacred Harp* singings, tempos vary depending on the song leader, and in some cases, on the area of the country.¹¹⁶

Tempos now generally run faster than they did in White's day, but no set standard has emerged. One singer documented a dramatic rise in speed from the 1930s to the 1950s followed by a general slowing of tempos in the next two decades. Cobb thought that popular recordings of moderately paced *Sacred Harp* songs might have contributed to this trend, but singers continue to like brisk tempos.¹¹⁷ Stanislaw suggests some possible reasons for this: "The *Sacred Harp* singers do try to fit as many pieces as possible into a single day. This, along with total familiarity with the repertoire, could explain their quick tempos."¹¹⁸

Rhythmic notation in *The Sacred Harp* is the same as that in traditional notation, but in practice, singers sometimes deviate from the written page. These changes primarily involve lengthening notes, shortening notes, ignoring rests, accenting weak beats, and shifting rhythmic groupings. They usually serve to express the text more sensibly.

Sacred Harp singers refer to the anacrusis as the "gathering note." A gathering note is often lengthened at the beginning of a song and sometimes internally depending on the texture and the text. An exception to this is the anacrusis of a fusing section in a piece. White and King specifically instructed singers not to lengthen this note but rather

¹¹⁶Cobb, *A Tradition*, 49-51.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 50.

¹¹⁸Stanislaw, 236.

to sing it more quickly. Depending on text and tradition, singers sometimes lengthen other notes within the music. Fermatas are added at the end of some phrases or sections.¹¹⁹

Singers dislike “dead spaces or long rests” in their music and often ignore them when written.¹²⁰ Arrangers did not use mixed or frequently changing meters, and the tunes and texts did not always line up exactly with the bar lines. When this happened, an arranger was left with a partial measure, which he often filled with rests. Singers recognize that these rests interrupt the flow of the song and almost automatically skip them. Arrangers sometimes lengthened notes instead of inserting rests on the extra beats, and these too are usually shortened in performance.

The “Rudiments” section of tune books includes a section explaining primary and secondary accents for the various meters. When text accents do not correspond with the metric accents, singers disregard the barlines and sing the text accents, which often shift into other metric groupings for several measures.¹²¹ The choir director may implement these various rhythmic freedoms with a little experience and sensitivity for the text and message of a song. However, the constant, pulsating, toe-tapping beat so characteristic of current practice warns against romantic rubato or excessive rhythmic liberties.¹²²

¹¹⁹Stanislaw, 237-241; White and King, 23.

¹²⁰George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands: the Story of the Fiddle Folk, their Songs, Singings, and “Buckwheat” Notes* (Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964), 125.

¹²¹Stanislaw, 242-243.

¹²²Cobb, 49.

Pitch and Intonation

Pitch and intonation are other important performance practice issues. Many songs have high tessituras and seem to fit the voices more comfortably in a lower key. There is some precedent for adjusting pitch levels, and it may be appropriate in some situations. In the nineteenth century, singing school teachers and choir directors sometimes used a pitching device, usually a pitch pipe or tuning fork, to set the key for a song. Although these usually played an A, C, or E, there is no way of knowing how accurate the devices were or how closely they corresponded with today's established pitches.

Shape-note compilers advocated the use of pitch pipes or tuning forks in varying degrees. White and King mention the use of a pitch pipe in "keying" a tune, but they emphasized the judgment necessary in the person giving the pitch to determine its suitability. They described how to find the "key note," or tonic, in the bass part, which was pitched one octave lower than that played by a pitch pipe, to see if the piece were keyed properly.

If we find, after descending the octave, we can ascend to the highest note in the tenor or treble, and can pronounce them with ease and freedom, the piece may be said to be properly keyed; but if, on the contrary, after descending, we find it difficult to ascend as above, the piece is improperly keyed, and should be set lower.¹²³

One reason it may have been difficult to sing from a written key was that arrangers sometimes chose a key based on its range on the staff instead of its vocal range. The arrangers avoided ledger lines as much as possible, so some songs were probably pitched higher than was comfortable for the average choir.

¹²³White and King, 8.

Still, each song must be considered individually, for by choosing a key more comfortable for the tenor and soprano, one may inadvertently choose a key too low for the bass and alto. *Sacred Harp* singers generally like to sing in higher keys and enjoy the “reach” for the high notes in the tenor and soprano parts, but in practice, “most of the songs with consistently high notes are sung in a key lower by a step and a half.”¹²⁴ Perhaps in response to this, many of the songs published in later twentieth century revisions of *The Sacred Harp* have been rewritten in lower keys. At some *Sacred Harp* singings today, a “keyer” pitches each song and gives the beginning note for each part. This person usually does so without the aid of any pitching device and relies on his/her experience and judgment.

Sacred Harp tuning differs from that to which most Western ears are accustomed today. Much of this stems from the contrapuntal, rather than homophonic, composition of the songs; the gapped and modal scales used; the unwritten harmonic and melodic changes employed in performance; and a different sense of intervals and intervallic relationships. Composers and arrangers conceived their various parts to their settings contrapuntally rather than harmonically. In *The Social Harp* of 1868, John G. McCurry directed would-be composers to write the tenor part first, followed by the bass, and then the treble.¹²⁵ Chase remarks that “... in the fasola tradition composers and arrangers tried

¹²⁴Cobb, *A Tradition*, 52-53.

¹²⁵David A. Brock, “A Foundation for Defining Southern Shape-note Folk Hymnody from 1800 to 1859 as a Learned Compositional Style” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont College, 1996), 84.

to make each voice as independent and as interesting as they knew how. They aimed at true part singing rather than harmonized melody.”¹²⁶

Of this distinct style, Charles Seeger wrote:

It is not in any sense a harmonic style. The tones sung by the various voices upon any given beat are not conceived of as being fundamentally a unit—a chord. Instead, each voice added to the tune is related to it independently of the relation between the tune and the other added voice. Thus pieces may be said to show a definitely contrapuntal style.¹²⁷

Although the rhythm in the majority of *Sacred Harp* songs aligns vertically, like that in a typical homophonic hymn, choral singers should recognize the contrapuntal linear quality of their parts. The director might assist singers in this by asking the various accompanying parts to sing alone, then sing a duet with the tenor.

Shape-note music also frequently employs gapped and modal scales to which the modern ear may not be accustomed. Dorothy Horn found that the majority of songs used gapped scales. She classified the melodies as “pentatonic,” “basically pentatonic,” “or “hexatonic.” Pentatonic scales usually skip the fourth and seventh degrees of the scale in the major scale and the second and sixth degrees in the minor scale, while basically pentatonic and hexatonic scales at times add the missing degree(s). Horn said that classifying the mode of these gapped scales is sometimes difficult.¹²⁸

¹²⁶Chase, 171.

¹²⁷Charles Seeger, “Contrapuntal Style in the Three-Voice Shape-Note Hymns,” *Musical Quarterly* 26: 483; quoted in David A. Brock, “A Foundation for Defining Southern Shape-note Folk Hymnody from 1800 to 1859 as a Learned Compositional Style” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont College, 1996), 84.

¹²⁸Horn, 19-21; Jackson, *The Story of the Sacred Harp*, 31.

Arrangers wrote all songs in either major or minor keys, but Horn found shape-note tunes in Ionian, Aeolian, Mixolydian, and Dorian modes. Their modal character is often more apparent upon listening to them. Horn explains:

Today most musicians, especially theorists, are trained to analyze by ear as well as by eye. Thus many musicians familiar with modal music must have thought, like the author, while reading through a melody... "Why that is Aeolian, not Dorian." The ear recognizes the essential character of the mode despite the missing notes of the scale.¹²⁹

Some songs also sound different than expected in performance because the performers sing pitches different from those that are written. They may add or delete accidentals depending on the situation. The four-shape shape-note system may be partially responsible. Horn writes that "shapes have never been devised for chromatic inflection," and thus "modulations, altered chords, and the harmonic and melodic forms of the minor are impossible."¹³⁰

Shape-note compilers actually printed conventional accidentals from time to time, which they described in their introductions, but generally avoided using them. Compiler Ananias Davisson argued that accidentals didn't make sense with the shape-notes and confused the beginning student. He may have expected the more experienced singers to add them back during performance.¹³¹ Cobb suggests other reasons:

The compilers of these tune books drew no distinctions, indeed recognized none, between the full-scale and the gapped melodies they gathered for their collections. Further, they assumed that all of the tunes belonged to either the major or the minor mode. Thus when they attempted to transcribe a piece of "unwritten

¹²⁹Horn, 22.

¹³⁰Horn, 7-8.

¹³¹Brock, 108-109.

music,” they often erroneously printed a Dorian melody as Aeolian, forcing the sixth to appear a minor rather than a major interval. Happily, the singers have never let notation get in their way in singing. Whenever they perform a song so written, they sing (unknowingly) the major sixth rather than the minor interval.¹³²

The situation described above occurs in many songs written in a minor key. Jackson, Cobb, Horn, and Stanislaw all mention the importance of hearing the music performed as an aid in determining when to raise the sixth degree of the scale. Stanislaw says that “there is seldom one correct version of these tunes” but suggests clues in the music that might indicate a raised sixth degree:

If a tune is encountered in a minor key that has only a few sixth degrees; and if those sixths are harmonically a tritone away from another voice part, or are melodically in a fifth relationship with a cadential supertonic degree, or form a critical upward step from a strong dominant, or are positioned among major chords; the performer must suspect dorian influence, particularly if several of these signs converge. A good rule is to try the dorian sixth. If the result sounds idiomatic, it is, at least, an optional performance choice.¹³³

Most shape-note arrangers preferred natural minor to harmonic minor with its raised seventh scale degree. Compilers even omitted the raised seventh in many of the songs they drew from earlier sources that had originally appeared in harmonic minor. In these earlier songs, adding the raised seventh might be appropriate, but the lowered seventh best suits most songs written in minor keys. Stanislaw states:

For the unique four-shape repertoire the minor subtonic degree is not only likely to be correct, but a raised leading tone is likely to cause harmonic or voice leading difficulties. The composer-compilers harmonized their modal melodies in such a way that even a vocalist trained to alter the subtonic upward would be prevented from doing so.¹³⁴

¹³²Cobb, *A Tradition*, 33.

¹³³Stanislaw, 305-306. For an in depth discussion on this topic read pages 290-306.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 290. For multiple examples of this, refer to pp. 282-290.

Shape-note compilers did occasionally add accidentals. In light of their rare appearance, they should probably be observed.¹³⁵

Another reason for discrepancy in notation may relate to the different intonation used by *Sacred Harp* singers, who do not necessarily tune to the tempered diatonic scale. White and King define three words that refer to fractional intonation: “*Appetone*, between a tone and semitone,” “*Comma*, a small part, as 1-4th, 1-5th, &c. of a tone,” and “*Lima*, the difference between major and minor.” Cobb says this different tuning might be why the singers do not often approve of recordings of their music performed by trained choirs. An elderly singer explained it to him thus: “Their minor chords are not minor. They sing to a metallic key notation—the piano, you see. We sing *vocally* – in tune with *each other*.”¹³⁶

This different intonation is especially noticeable on the third degree of the scale, which often seems to waver somewhere between a major and minor third. Cecil Sharp’s study of British folk music in both Britain and the United States led him to the following conclusion regarding the third degree of the scale in folk music.

It must be understood that the third is not a fixed note in the folk-scale as it is in modern scales. The English folk-singer varies the intonation of this note very considerably. His major third is never so sharp as the corresponding interval in the tempered scale, to which the modern ears are attuned. On the other hand, it is often so flat that it is hardly to be distinguished from the minor third. Frequently, too, it is a “neutral” third, i.e., neither major nor minor, like the interval between the two notes of the cuckoo’s song, when the Spring is waning. Apparently, the folk-singer, not having any settled notions with regard to the pitch of the third

¹³⁵Ibid., 277.

¹³⁶Cobb, *A Tradition*, 47.

note of the scale, varies it according to the character of the phrases in which it occurs.¹³⁷

The absence of the third in many tonic chords, especially the final chords, increases major-minor ambiguity in many of the songs. When the third is present in the tonic, the chord is often in the second inversion, which in a major triad “has a subtle downward weight which may possibly relate to the neutral third.”¹³⁸

The sixth and seventh degrees of the scale, notably those associated with the different modes, may also have variable intonation, a tendency that baffled early folklorists who tried to transcribe the tunes. For example, on the rare occasions when the seventh degree of the minor scale was raised, the composer may have intended singers to perform a pitch midway between the minor and major seventh.¹³⁹

Stanislaw suggests some general performance guidelines for using fractional intonation:

Today’s performer must make the effort to be flexible about tuning—to relax with a pitch that may be a neutral third midway between the notes of an interval of a fifth or to sing a submediant degree that is neither aeolian nor dorian, one that is a distance slightly more than a perfect fourth and not yet an augmented fourth from its surrounding harmonies. The performer must accept second inversion chords that tune in their own special stability, must sing accidentals that are not printed and omit some that are, and must compromise with the uncertainties of modality by not demanding diatonic absolutes.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Song, Some Conclusions*, (London: Novello, 1907), 71; quoted in Buell E. Cobb Jr., *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 46.

¹³⁸Stanislaw, 311.

¹³⁹George Pullen Jackson, *White and Negro Spirituals* (Locust Valley, New York: J. J. Augustin, 1943), (1943), 238; Stanislaw, 309.

¹⁴⁰Stanislaw, 312.

It seems appropriate to mention one other aspect of the minor and perhaps minor-sounding modal songs in *The Sacred Harp* and its fellow tune books. In a chapter titled “Some Hearers Don’t Like It. Why?,” Jackson says the music is sometimes criticized as being “all minor.”¹⁴¹ While this is not true, approximately two of five songs are Aeolian or Dorian, an unusually high percentage compared to that found in current congregational music. In addition, to the modern ear, the neutral third in some songs may sound more minor than major.¹⁴²

Though modern listeners associate minor-sounding music with sadness and often with slow tempos, shape-note singers do not. Choral directors may wish to emphasize this point with their choirs. In the author’s experience, the members of some trained choirs tend to sing the minor-sounding songs in *The Sacred Harp* more slowly with a doleful expression even when the words call for joy and rejoicing. If singers understand something of the history and tradition of the music, they are more likely to perform minor-sounding songs with the energy and vitality they require.

Ornaments

Experienced shape-note singers not only adjust the scale in which they sing, they also frequently ornament their part, a practice probably continued from the nineteenth century. Embellishments such as trills, filled intervals, appoggiaturas, portamento, and displaced notes are added, not as mere decoration, but to heighten the effect of the text.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹Jackson, *The Story of the Sacred Harp*, 29.

¹⁴²Cobb, *A Tradition*, 35.

Walker explained, “The most important ornament in singing is strict decorum, with a heart deeply impressed with the great truth we utter while singing the lines, aiming at the glory of God and the edification of one another.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, it is more important for the modern choral director to first help choir members understand, and possibly express, the religious devotion inherent in the music before they attempt to add ornaments.

This idea, along with the attempt to simplify the music for beginners, may have been one of the reasons tune book compilers rarely added any of the “graces” to their music but instead implied that ornaments might be added later once one had experience.

White and King wrote that ornaments should not

be attempted by any one until he can perform the tune well by plain notes, (as they add nothing to the time.) Indeed no one can add much to the beauty of a piece by using what are generally termed graces, unless they are in a manner natural to their voice.¹⁴⁵

Still, White and King referred to “necessary embellishments,” and from descriptions both past and present, it would seem that improvised ornamentation was integral to a performance. Positive and negative accounts of nineteenth century singing sometimes describe ornamentation in enough detail to infer some of the more common decorative

¹⁴³Stanislaw, 328.

¹⁴⁴William Walker, *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion, Containing a Choice Selection of Tunes, Hymns, Psalms, Odes, and Anthems Selected From the Most Eminent Authors in the United States and Well Adapted to Christian Churches of Every Denomination, Singing Schools, and Private Societies*, 3rd ed., (1854; reprint, Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), xxix.

¹⁴⁵White and King, 23.

practices. Observations of today's singings reflect current practice and offer clues to past practices.¹⁴⁶

Tune books do at least mention trills and appoggiaturas (grace notes) in their introductions and these appear occasionally in the music. The songs also sometimes include figures that appear to be written-in ornamentation. Most tune books, including *The Sacred Harp*, show a trill beginning on the written note alternating with its upper neighbor. Trills most often occur on the penultimate note of cadences where the line is descending to the tonic, but they sometimes heighten the effect of the text. Grace notes or trill-like turns may also be written in at cadences (suggesting the use of a trill) or used as word painting devices. Following are a few of Stanislaw's guidelines for performing trills and turns:¹⁴⁷

Trills should be avoided at parallel fifths and octaves. Cadential trills were common and can be added when not marked. When there is any decorative hint in the melodic figure or when a printed grace note is present, a trill might be inserted at that point, although the figure itself may be sufficient. A trill can be experimented with at any place where the text uses "turn," "roll," "fly," or other such words which might have suggested a trill to the nineteenth-century singer. In addition, any line with repeated notes can be decorated with neighboring tones or a turn.¹⁴⁸

Stanislaw writes that "[it] is the insertion of many and varied extra notes between pitches that most characterizes four-shape printed ornaments."¹⁴⁹ These include appoggiaturas

¹⁴⁶Ibid.; George Pullen Jackson transcribed the ornamentation he observed at singings and recorded a wide variety of decorative practices. His book *White and Negro Spirituals* includes a chart comparing different ornamented versions of the songs "Pisgah" and "Amazing Grace."

¹⁴⁷Stanislaw, 229-331.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 335.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 335-336.

and filled intervals. White and King defined appoggiaturas, or grace notes, as “small extra notes added and set before or after regular notes, to guide the voice more gracefully into the sound of the succeeding note.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, an appoggiatura is any small printed note in the music and encompasses notes that today might be called appoggiaturas, *Schleifers*, *échappées*, neighboring tones, or leaps to or from an untreated dissonance.

A grace note belongs either to the note it precedes or the note it follows and may function as a traditional appoggiatura with the accent on the grace note or the main note. At cadences, many appoggiaturas belong to the notes that precede them and function as *échappées*. Appoggiaturas most often fill the intervals between notes, usually a third, and take half the rhythmic value of the note to which they are attached. Thus, if a half note is followed by a grace note, both are sung as quarter notes. Many appoggiaturas and filled intervals were also written in full-sized notes in some songs and offer examples of ways in which to perform the various grace notes. Grace notes may also suggest portamento, or what singing teachers often call scooping, sliding, or gliding between notes.¹⁵¹

Cobb noticed that black *Sacred Harp* singers often ornament songs differently from white singers:

In departing from the music, individual singers of the black *Sacred Harp* groups create new harmonies and sometimes blue notes. Although the tunes are performed with a staccato effect, other songs are more fluid, and individual singers may lavish a central note with a cluster of grace notes. One specific effect fostered by the black singers in southern Alabama is that of adding an upper neighbor tone between repeated tones at cadence points.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰White and King, 10.

¹⁵¹Stanislaw, 336-354.

¹⁵²Cobb, *A Tradition*, 43.

Still other idiomatic techniques and ornaments are perhaps best learned from recordings by actual *Sacred Harp* singers or by attending live singings of experienced Southern singers.

Other Performance Issues and Options

Evidence suggests “four-shape singers used a technique of solo and tutti like the baroque *concertino* and *ripieno*.”¹⁵³ The word “Chorus” in the music may sometimes indicate that the preceding passage could be sung by solo voices while the chorus was sung by all voices. Thinner textures may have indicated solos or solo parts, and fusing sections particularly may have been sung with one voice per part. Sections marked “piano,” “pia,” or “soft” may indicate solos, while sections marked “forte,” or “loud” may indicate the full chorus. Call-and-response camp meeting songs in particular are candidates for solo/tutti usage. *Sacred Harp* singers do not use solo/tutti contrasts in their singings today, but since it was likely practiced to some degree in the nineteenth century, it is a performance option.¹⁵⁴

White and King, like other tune book compilers, instructed singers to learn the songs with the four solfege syllables before adding the words. Nineteenth-century singers commonly performed each song with syllables before they proceeded with the texted verses. Current *Sacred Harp* singers usually do the same. The modern choir may find this an interesting possibility for rehearsal and performance. The author has found

¹⁵³Stanislaw, 188.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 188-195.

the aural effect of the four syllables particularly impressive in the contrapuntal sections of fugal tunes.¹⁵⁵

Though music from *The Sacred Harp* was generally sung *a capella*, instruments were occasionally used. Beginning with Billings, a bass viol sometimes reinforced the bass part, mainly in church settings.¹⁵⁶ Some singing school teachers also carried a portable instrument, like a violin or flute, which they sometimes used to support or play an unsung part. This is not seen in current practice, but it might be helpful in certain choral situations.

Like nineteenth-century singing schools, present-day singers sit together by part, often on benches that form a hollow square in the center of which stands the director. This configuration may work well in the choral rehearsal. Placing singers in sections around the performance hall in concert may enhance the audience's experience, giving them a sense of the sound in the center of a *Sacred Harp* square. Even when not singing in the round, it seems best to stand the choir in sections rather than in mixed parts.

Examples of Performance Practices Heard on a Recording

Alan Lomax has recorded *Sacred Harp* singing at different *Sacred Harp* gatherings in the South. The compact disc *White Spirituals from the Sacred Harp: The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention* features selections from his recording of a 1959 all-day singing. According to Steven Sabol, it captures a folk-derived *Sacred Harp* singing

¹⁵⁵White and King, 11; Hamm, 270.

¹⁵⁶Kingman, 115.

style that has become less common as the tradition has become less insular.¹⁵⁷ The untrained voices sing loudly with a straight tone that sounds almost like shouting in the more energetic passages. The soprano and alto parts have a bright, nasal quality while the tenors and basses have a more full, chesty sound. In this recording, a particularly reedy alto must have been close to the microphone and his/her voice is prominent in all of the songs. The wide Southern vowels and thick “r”s add color to the sound and the octave-doubled parts create a thick, sonorous texture.

White Spirituals from the Sacred Harp offers selected music and commentary from the all-day Alabama singing. Almost half of the twenty songs are fusing tunes, evidence of the singers’ preference for them. The songs include several colonial favorites, like Daniel Read’s “Sherburne” and William Billings’ “David’s Lamentation, as well as twentieth-century favorites, like “Soar Away” by A. M. Cagle and “Traveling On” by S. M. Denson and J. S. James. Of the four spoken sections, two are prayers, one is the brief “Memorial Service” for those *Sacred Harp* singers who have passed away since their last meeting, and one is an excerpt of comments a woman made before leading a song. The simple, sincere expressions of these people reveal a genuine reverence and love for their religion, their music, and *The Sacred Harp* tradition that binds them together.

The songs recorded on this CD exhibit some general *Sacred Harp* performance practices. For example, at the beginning of most songs, a tenor first sings the “key note,” followed by everyone else sounding their first syllable. The singers also execute each

¹⁵⁷ Steven L. Sabol, *Sacred Harp & Shape-Note Music Resources*, rev. ed. (Fort Worth, Texas: Hymn Society, 1994), 10.

song on solfege syllables before singing the texts.¹⁵⁸ There is little dynamic contrast within or even between different songs, except that the best-known and best-loved songs are sung louder. The low, steady thumping of beat-tapping feet marks the faster selections. Even the slow songs, like “Wondrous Love,” maintain a steady beat. Exceptions to this are the dramatic tempo changes from the slow homophonic sections to the fugal sections in “Soar Away” and “Greewich” and in the held notes and slight pauses between phrases in “Baptismal Anthem” and “The Morning Trumpet.” Another obvious idiomatic trait is the frequent gliding or sliding between notes in all the parts. In slower songs it creates an effect reminiscent of a record player whose speed is altered during play, thus changing all the pitches higher or lower.

Other performance practices include modal changes, ornamentation, and slight alterations not indicated in the music. “David’s Lamentation” provides a good example of unwritten modal alteration. The song is written in what appears to be A natural minor, but the singers sometimes slightly raise the sixth degree of the scale. This alteration is most obvious when the basses alone sing the phrase, “And as he went, he wept and said.” In this case the altered sixth sits somewhere between its minor and major boundaries. “New Harmony” provides ample opportunities to hear the common upward scoop between repeated notes, and in “Milford” some of the singers perform what might be best described as a “whoop” on certain high notes. In some songs, an arching phrase is emphasized or a rhythm modified. In “Hallelujah” the three quarter notes written in the second half of most measures is sung more like a sixteenth, dotted quarter, quarter note

¹⁵⁸ The exception to this is the song for the Memorial Service, which is not traditionally preceded by solmization.

figure. These and other details are the kind best learned from a recording or a live singing session.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present day choir director should consider various performance practices when including *Sacred Harp* music in his/her rehearsal and concert repertory. Like the old-time singing instructor, today's choral director has the liberty and responsibility to choose and teach performance details according to the ability level and aptitude of the singers involved and his/her performance goals. As the tune book compilers admonished repeatedly, the meaning of the text should guide many of these decisions. A convincing performance will only be achieved with at least some understanding and appreciation for the religious devotion that continues as part of the living legacy of *The Sacred Harp*.

Chapter 4

Applications and Arrangements

In performing literature from *The Sacred Harp* and other shape-note books, the modern day choir has a variety of options or possibilities open to it, some of which were mentioned in the previous section. With a little adaptation, *Sacred Harp* literature can be appropriate for almost any choir, even if the choir is not composed of mixed voices and/or does not sing in four parts.

Beginning unison and two-part choirs

Beginning elementary and children's choirs usually sing unison and two-part music. Many *Sacred Harp* melodies sound beautiful alone, and while some are scalar, others feature larger skips and wider ranges. Even if not so arranged, some of the melodies also work as rounds.

Because the four-shape-note idiom emphasizes melodic interest in all of the parts, a beginning choir might more easily learn a second part. The soprano and bass parts usually provide the most melodic interest after the tenor and can serve as complimentary countermelodies in a two-part texture. A treble choir would obviously sing the melody, which usually resides in the tenor part, and the bass part an octave higher, but a beginning boys' or mens' chorus might choose to sing any of the parts in their original ranges, transpose them up or down an octave, or double any of them at the octave.

Three and four-part choirs

Mixed, treble, and mens' choirs can also choose different parts and octave configurations to suit their needs. For example, the junior high mixed or mens' chorus often includes boys with unchanged, changed, and changing voices. Some boys' voices lower somewhat gradually, while others change abruptly and seem inconsistent in their degree of change from day to day. The director might place those with unchanged voices on the soprano or alto part, or on the tenor part at the octave. If a boys' voice began changing, he could sing the part he had learned at the lower octave or switch to another part. Some of those with changing voices would find the tenor the easiest to sing, since it is the melody, while others might feel more comfortable an octave below the sopranos. Other boys, whose voices dropped dramatically, would find it easier to sing the bass part with their counterparts whose voices had already changed more completely.

More advanced choirs also enjoy singing music from *The Sacred Harp*. White and King placed the songs in their book according to their level of difficulty with the easier songs at the beginning of a section and the more difficult songs at the end. Advanced choirs might enjoy the challenge of singing songs from the latter part of the sections, especially some of the anthems in the third section, or reading different parts at different octaves to produce variations of the sonorous *Sacred Harp* sound.

Still, the simplest of songs can prove satisfying to singers and audience. The professional men's ensemble Chanticleer performed the fugal tune "Soar Away" and Billings mini-anthem "David's Lamentation" from *The Sacred Harp* in their 2003 program, *Our American Journey*. At a performance attended by the author, the audience

seemed almost mesmerized by these pieces, and although they were at the beginning the program, audience members were heard commenting on them at intermission.

A few critics have complained that all music from *The Sacred Harp* sounds the same.¹⁵⁹ The harmonic style is fairly consistent throughout the book, but if desired, a director could assemble a varied set of songs by choosing from among the hymn-like songs, revival spirituals, fusing tunes, odes, and anthems, or by selecting songs with different moods, modes, dynamics, etc.

Arrangements

Arrangements of *Sacred Harp* songs provide another source of variety in programming. Many *Sacred Harp* singers and researchers, like Richard J. Stanislaw, insist that *Sacred Harp* music doesn't need arranging in order to be sung by the conventional choir. While this is true, the choral director should not feel bound to perform *Sacred Harp* literature only as written. Shape-note compilers were themselves often arrangers. In today's choral world, arrangements of songs, especially of folk and folk-like music, are very common. Directors can create their own arrangements or turn to published arrangements and still retain much of the essence or flavor of the original.

An individual might arrange a song from the *Sacred Harp* for different reasons. For example, a director may want to adapt a song to better fit the vocal abilities of a choir, to arrange a song for different voicings (e.g. a three-part women's choir), to perform several verses of a song with more variation between verses, to add an

¹⁵⁹Jackson, *The Story of the Sacred Harp*, 28.

arrangement to a set of songs taken directly from *The Sacred Harp*, to use parts of the arrangement to teach different vocal skills, to showcase a choir's strengths, or to flex his/her creative powers.

Some songs lend themselves to arranging more than others. The folk hymns and revival spirituals seem to be the most likely candidates because of their simple, repetitive homophonic settings, but some fusing tunes might also work well. The anthems are already more varied in texture and style and have many of the qualities of an arrangement, although they should be evaluated individually. Also, the texts of some songs suggest more dynamic, textural, etc. changes than others.

Look in more than one edition, and if possible, revision, of *The Sacred Harp* before arranging a song. Certain songs were eliminated, added, or reintroduced with almost every edition, and one of these might be ideal for a director's purposes or taste. The two most accessible revisions, the Cooper and the Denson, contain different literature. The two revisions also harmonize some of the same songs differently, although the majority of the differences lie in the alto part. Most songs, other than anthems, have multiple verses, and different editions may print different verses or different numbers of verses. The most recent editions sometimes include verses that older editions did not.

Other four-shape and seven-shape shape-note books can be a valuable resource as well. *The Hesperian Harp* by William Hauser contains many of the same songs as *The Sacred Harp* but with additional verses. Other shape-note books may also provide material for arrangements that is complimentary to *Sacred Harp* songs. Some tunes and

texts work interchangeably, especially since many songs have the corresponding number of syllables per line. Editions of *The Sacred Harp* include an index that groups songs according to the pattern of syllables per line and helps to identify those tunes and texts that might most successfully be switched.

Songs from *The Sacred Harp* can be arranged in varying degrees of difficulty and complexity, and even simple arrangements prove to be quite effective. Past and present performance practices as well as common arrangement techniques suggest a number of possible options for both simple and complex arrangements. Some of these, including those previously mentioned, are listed below:

Texture(s) and Voicing

- Interesting arrangements often include changes in texture and voicing.

Possibilities include:

- Full choir
- Solos, duets, and small ensembles
- Alternation between solos or small groups and the full chorus (This includes, but is not limited to the call-and-response technique.)
- Unison to 8 part divisi
- Men only/women only (in unison and/or parts)
- Various combinations of different parts (e.g. soprano and tenor only, or women in three parts with men unison)
- Octave doublings of different parts, especially the melody
- Melody placed in different voices

- Obbligato or counter-melody (vocal or instrumental) added to voices (solo to full chorus)
- Voicing and texture are some of the first considerations when outlining an arrangement. Common patterns include:
- Going from simple to complex textures and voicings throughout the arrangement.
 - Basic voicing in the first verse, followed by alternate voicings in subsequent verse(s), with a return to the basic voicing in the final verse or repetition, sometimes with added divisi, obbligato, etc. or increased dynamic level.

Key(s)

- Use the original key or choose a different key to begin the composition. Different keys may better accommodate various voicings or ability levels.
- Write in accidentals to indicate and clarify the use of a modal scale.
- Modulate within the piece. This is commonly done between verses or between verse and chorus.

Tempo

- Choose tempos with care. *Sacred Harp* singing is noted for its lively, constant beat. Changes in tempo would most likely be justified by a desire to emphasize a mood or idea in the text or by a textural change.

- In *Sacred Harp* songs, most written-in changes in tempo occur at the beginnings of sections in the music. The contrapuntal sections of fugging tunes are generally faster, and may accelerate.

Expressive Marks

- Dynamics:
 - Continue to use the text as a guide in assigning dynamics.
 - Avoid excessive dynamic changes, especially within verses.
 - The suggestion above does not include the use of the “swell,” which can be added to long notes and especially to sustained notes in the bass voice.
 - Even though today’s *Sacred Harp* singers render their songs with gusto, remember that compilers advocated softer singing for a more beautiful tone and cautioned against very loud singing. A reminder in the music, such as the words, “not too loudly,” might be helpful in some arrangements.
- Accent marks, fermatas, etc. in appropriate places can add much to an arrangement.
- Descriptive words, such as “firmly,” “with jubilation,” or “sweetly” may help a choir be more expressive. Common musical terms in other languages could also be used, but descriptors in English somehow seem more fitting for these home-grown songs.

Ornamentation

- Trills, turns, grace notes, filled intervals, slides, and other idiomatic flourishes can be judiciously added to an arrangement.

Instruments

- Use an instrument to reinforce a part. Instruments can double one or more parts. The bass seems the most likely candidate, especially since the four-shape-note compilers favored a greater proportion of bass sound.
- Use an instrument to play a choral part that the choir is not singing, or to play a newly composed part.
- Write an accompaniment using a string, wind, or keyboard accompaniment, or a combination of these. This kind of accompaniment allows for more extensive transitions and modulations if desired.

Published arrangements of many *Sacred Harp* songs are also available to the choral director. The most frequently published tunes include "Amazing Grace," "Promised Land," "Wayfaring Stranger," and "Wondrous Love." The title of an arrangement may not correspond to the title of the tune in *The Sacred Harp*. Arrangers usually derive their titles from the first line of the text or from the chorus so it may be helpful to look at the index of first lines in the 1971 or 1991 Denson revision or to consult the Cooper revision, in which more descriptive titles are substituted for the old tune names.

When reviewing published arrangements, it is important to remember that many *Sacred Harp* songs also appear in other folk contexts, and an arranger may not necessarily base his/her arrangement on the version found in *The Sacred Harp*. Often, only generic phrases such as “trad. American,” “American folk-hymn” and the like identify the original source of the music, so the discriminating director must turn to the score for clues.

Arrangements based on *Sacred Harp* songs often retain some of the harmonic qualities of the original. These include a preponderance of open fourths and fifths, octaves, and sometimes octave doublings, as well as the modal flavor present in many of the songs. Arrangers may also place the melody in a voice other than the soprano at least part of the time. In addition, *Sacred Harp* arrangements are usually *a cappella* and feature a steady tempo.

One Shape-note Arrangement in Depth

Alice Parker and Robert Shaw wrote a number of arrangements based on shape-note songs, some of which have become choral favorites. “Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal,” arranged by Alice Parker, is probably the most widely known of these.¹⁶⁰ The shape-note version of the song titled “Invitation” actually comes from *The Olive Leaf* by William Hauser instead of *The Sacred Harp*, but it provides an excellent example of a wonderfully constructed arrangement that maintains distinguishable elements of the shape-note song upon which it is based.

¹⁶⁰ The score can be ordered from Lawson-Gould Music Publishers (#51331), and recordings are available on numerous choral compact discs.

The Olive Leaf by William Hauser was published in 1878 in Wadley, Georgia. Hauser indicated that he found the tune "Invitation" in *Dream Music* by F. R. Warren. In studying the melody, Jackson identified it as a tune in a hexatonic mode that exhibited "unmistakable family relationships, especially in the chorus, to 'Nettleton,'" ¹⁶¹ better known as "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

"Invitation" bears the hallmarks of a revival spiritual. Each verse consists of a short rhymed couplet with the same melody for both lines. The jubilant chorus includes the typical exclamations, "Hallelujah" and "Praise the Lamb," and the verses express a faith in the peace and rest the righteous experience after they cross "the river" to "the mansions of the blest."

Alice Parker's arrangement of "Invitation" begins with a homophonic SATB setting of the first verse with the melody in the soprano part. Soprano and tenor double the melody in the first chorus accompanied by divided alto and bass singing more sustained hallelujahs, with the bass singing in fifths and octaves. In the second verse, the soprano melody glides over the more marcato fourths, fifths, and octaves sung by the tenor and bass parts. Like the first chorus, the second chorus begins with the melody in soprano and tenor, but the tenor melody trails by one beat. Mid-way through the chorus, the melody, still offset by one beat, transfers to the first alto and first bass parts respectively. The accompanimental "hallelujahs" also become more rhythmically active in the second half of the chorus.

¹⁶¹Jackson, *Spiritual Folk Songs*, 95-96.

The baritone, or first bass part sings the melody of the final verse while the bass, alto, and tenor parts hum spare chords that often move in octaves and fourths. An optional soprano solo quietly intones an obbligato line comprised of the chorus melody but beginning a full measure after the verse melody. The third repeat of the chorus sounds the most complex with different parts entering on successive beats: tenor melody first; divided, rhythmic bass singing hallelujahs second; divided, rhythmic alto singing hallelujahs third; and soprano melody last, a full measure after the tenor entrance. Again, the melody transfers from tenor to first bass and soprano to first alto mid-way through the chorus.

In a more majestic restatement, the chorus repeats once more. Soprano and tenor double the melody at the octave, as in the first chorus, while together a divided alto and bass chant "Hallelujah, glory hallelujah!" All parts end solidly with a slowing homophonic statement of the final phrase, "Glory to the great I AM," marking the final note with a crescendo and fermata.

"Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal," exhibits many qualities of a fine choral arrangement. Texture, rhythm, and dynamics flow naturally from simple to complex, or from softer to louder, and build gradually to an exciting finale. Each verse and chorus varies at least slightly from all the others, but none are so different that they break the feeling of continuity. Different voice parts rise to prominence at various times, and the arrangement retains some of the characteristics of its source.

"Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal" resembles its parent composition in several ways. The 3/2 time signature and the driving rhythmic pulse remain the same. It

maintains a gapped modal scale, avoiding the seventh scale degree (e) in all of the parts. Harmonies include many fourths, fifths, and octaves, with fewer thirds and sixths. In some places Parker doubles the melody in the soprano and tenor parts, as was probably done in the performance of "Invitation." The manner in which the melody and some of the harmonies are written suggest added grace note figures. Lastly, the different settings of the verses and chorus uphold the intense religious feelings of the original song.

Application

With the previous discussions in mind, what general aspects of authentic performance practice can be applied to arrangements of songs in the style of *The Sacred Harp*? The meaning of the text and its religious sentiments should serve as the primary guide to a more authentic sound. This includes choosing an appropriate tempo and following natural word accents. Singers should use established principles of beautiful and healthy vocal production, although in light of the tune book compilers' preference for a larger proportion of bass singers, a director might emphasize a full bass sound. Depending on the arrangement it *may* also be appropriate to add the "swell" on some long notes, especially in a sustained bass part, to lengthen the initial anacrusis in a song, to add a trill on the penultimate beat of a final cadence, or to add a few tasteful "appoggiaturas."

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusions

The Sacred Harp is at the center of an ongoing American musical tradition. Its songs continue to resound in the meeting places and hearts of dedicated *Sacred Harp* singers. Although selections span from the eighteenth to the twentieth-century, they generally share the same harmonic compositional style and intense religious feelings. *Sacred Harp* singers express these feelings movingly whenever they assemble to intone the music they cherish.

The unique style of *Sacred Harp* music developed in Colonial America as a result of reform and freedom. Educated men promoted singing schools to improve congregational singing and journeymen-composers like William Billings exercised their independence and creativity in writing music not dictated by European models. Later, as Americans sought to become more “cultured,” another set of reformers decried the music and the shape-note system it had adopted. This pushed Yankee singing schools with their tune books of American compositions into rural and frontier regions. There the schools flourished, and tune book compilers/composers added folk hymns and spirituals to the existing body of Colonial compositions. *The Sacred Harp*, published in 1844, was one of the most successful shape-note tune books and the most lastingly popular.

Compiler and arranger B. F. White continued to promote *The Sacred Harp* throughout his life. He invited public input for his new compositions, involved others in the revisions of his book, and established *The Sacred Harp* as the exclusive tune book for the Southern Musical Convention. By the time of White’s death, *Sacred Harp* singers

had developed a common support network. This sense of community was even able to bridge the Civil War and outlast the shifting musical tastes of the general population. In the early twentieth century, the controversy caused by two competing revisions of *The Sacred Harp* galvanized supporters in both camps and provided books for a new generation of singers.

Continued tune book revisions, annual conventions, regularly scheduled “singings,” and, of course, the irresistible draw of the music itself sustained the *Sacred Harp* tradition as elsewhere its musical style was ridiculed and replaced by more modern sounds. When George Pullen Jackson encountered *Sacred Harp* singing in the 1960s, it had been almost completely forgotten by all outside its circle. Jackson’s research and positive appraisal of shape-note music laid the groundwork further study. His work also introduced *The Sacred Harp* tradition to a broader public audience and encouraged them to discover it for themselves.

The musical world that once rejected the style and notational system of *The Sacred Harp* now views it with increasing admiration and respect. Scholars investigate the histories of tunes and texts, examine the harmonic style, and trace the development of various categories of song in different areas of the country. In the public arena, increasing numbers of curious people attend “singings” and become avid “Sacred Harpers” themselves. Choral musicians have also begun to incorporate more shape-note music into their performance repertory, thus exposing an ever widening audience to the sounds of the *Sacred Harp*.

Choral musicians who discover this rich storehouse of American music may sing songs directly from its pages, adapt them for their choirs, or perform published

arrangements. In so doing, however, they should realize that *Sacred Harp* music is best understood and appreciated by its singers. Choirs cannot recreate the experience of a “singing” for their audiences. That is reserved for *Sacred Harp* participants. Still, by incorporating various performance practices and recognizing the religious motivations of the composers and singers, a choir may better convey the sounds and messages of the music.

Information on Sacred Harp performance practices may be gained by attending live “singings,” listening to recordings either of “singings” or of *Sacred Harp* ensembles, looking at nineteenth-century written accounts, studying shape-note tune book introductions, or reading scholarly works on the subject. These various sources may suggest different or multiple options in performance practices. The choral director must choose which practices he/she will apply to a choral performance.

Most *Sacred Harp* music is written in three or four parts. In current practice, women sing the soprano and alto parts while men sing the tenor and bass parts, with the possibility of octave doubling on the three upper parts. However, there is precedent for alternate part designations, which may benefit some choirs. Later editions of *The Sacred Harp* added alto parts to songs originally written in three-parts, and a choir director might choose between the two versions.

Although tune book introductions promote principles of vocal production more akin to modern ideals of healthy, beautiful singing, today’s *Sacred Harp* singers generally sing loudly and enthusiastically with a tight nasal tone. Tune book introductions also offer guidelines for dynamics, proportioning of vocal parts, and *messa di voce* that current singers do not observe. White and King assigned tempos according

to time signatures, or “moods of time.” Tempos today run faster overall than they did in White’s day and are selected to suit a song’s style or message. Singers occasionally shorten or lengthen notes to express the text more sensibly, but the pulse remains a constant, driving force. *Sacred Harp* singers may also adjust the pitch levels and sing in keys lower than those notated, even though they still enjoy high tessituras.

Many *Sacred Harp* songs are based on gapped or modal scales. Because many of the melodic and harmonic changes these scales imply are not written in the music, it is especially important to carefully study the music and, if possible, hear the way *Sacred Harp* singers render it. Singers also do not necessarily tune to the tempered diatonic scale. The third degree of a scale often seems to waver between a major and minor third. The sixth and seventh degrees of scales also have a higher degree of variability, and again it is important to listen to experienced *Sacred Harp* singers if one wishes to replicate their sound.

Ornamentation is another distinctive *Sacred Harp* practice. Experienced singers may add trills, filled intervals, appoggiaturas, or portamento to the music. Tune book compilers refer to ornaments but stress that singers should learn to sing the plain tune with confidence before attempting any embellishments. Ornaments serve to more fully express the emotions and messages of the text and lack purpose if used otherwise.

Some performance practices are documented while others are suggested or hypothesized. Solmization and seating belong to the first category. At *Sacred Harp* gatherings, singers sit by part in a closed square formation with the leader in the center. They also almost always sing a song once through using four syllable solmization before

singing the verses. Solo/tutti contrast and accompanying instruments may have been implemented in times past, but they are not part of current practice.

Music in *The Sacred Harp* is well suited to many choirs. However, a director may need or want to perform adaptations or arrangements of the songs. Treble, mens' and mixed choirs may sing directly from the book in one to four parts, depending on the voicing of the choir.

Arrangements of songs from *The Sacred Harp* may also prove desirable in choral programming. Directors who arrange this music for their choirs should consult multiple revisions and/or editions of *The Sacred Harp*. Each edition adds or deletes different songs, and revisions may offer different texts or song harmonizations. Other shape-note books may also provide material for arrangements. *Sacred Harp* arrangements could include changes in texture, voicing, key, or tempo. They might also add expressive marks, ornamentation, or accompanying instruments. Many published arrangements are available, but their titles often do not correspond to those in *The Sacred Harp*. Also, arrangements of folksongs may or may not incorporate style elements of shape-note music. "Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal," arranged by Alice Parker, effectively utilizes several aspects of *Sacred Harp* style and performance practices.

The Sacred Harp offers almost any choir an exciting repertory of music from America's past that still thrives in practice today. Its unique sound captures the attention of both singer and audience member. Whether a choir performs music directly from the book or uses an arrangement, applying the performance practices recommended here will create a more authentic and satisfying performance.

Suggested Materials for Further Study

The following list represents recommended resources for more in-depth study of *Sacred Harp* and shape-note music.

BOOKS

- Chase, Gilbert. *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*. Rev. 3rd ed. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. The early chapters of the book provide an excellent background for chapter ten, titled "The Fasola Folk," which recounts the history of nineteenth century shape-note music.
- Cobb, Buell E., Jr. *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978. If a person has time to read only one book about the Sacred Harp tradition this should be the book of choice. It includes a history of the tradition with separate chapters on the revisions and the conventions, general principles of performance practice, including changes in the twentieth century, the author's outlook on the future of the tradition, and a sense of the way in which the *Sacred Harp* singers regard their music.
- Hitchcock, H. Wiley, with Kyle Gann. *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2000. Chapters one and five discuss pertinent historical themes illustrated by musical examples.
- Horn, Dorothy D. *Sing to Me of Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books*. Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1970. Horn's research focuses on the melodic and harmonic structures in *The Sacred Harp*, *The Southern Harmony*, and *The New Harp of Columbia*.
- Jackson, George Pullen. *The Story of the Sacred Harp, 1844-1944*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1944. Jackson wrote this short account of the history and tradition of *The Sacred Harp* in honor of its centennial year. Although some of its material is slightly outdated, it gives a colorful picture of *Sacred Harp* singers and singings. Some editions of *The Sacred Harp* include it in their prefatory material.
- Jackson, George Pullen. *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands: the Story of the Fasola Folk, their Songs, Singings, and "Buckwheat" Notes*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964. Although he later changed his opinions about some of his findings, the writings in this book represent the bulk of Jackson's research on *The Sacred Harp*. His other books contain additional material but are primarily collections and discussions of folk tunes.

DISSERTATIONS

Stanislaw, Richard J. "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools." D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976. This dissertation is the most extensive and thoroughly researched work that addresses the choral performance practice of four-shape shape-note music.

RECORDINGS

Amazing Grace: American Hymns and Spirituals. Robert Shaw Festival Singers of Ohio State University. Robert Shaw. Telarc compact disc 80325. Half of the selections on this CD are based on shape-note songs. They include Shaw and Parker arrangements like "Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal."

The Colored Sacred Harp. Wiregrass Singers. Dewey Williams. New World Records compact disc 0433. On this CD the singers perform songs from *The Colored Sacred Harp*, but this group also sings regularly from the Cooper revision of the Sacred Harp. The recording provides a good example of the different sounds achieved by some groups of black *Sacred Harp* singers.

Rivers of Delight. Word of Mouth Chorus. Larry Gordon. Nonesuch compact disc 71360. The Word of Mouth Chorus, a folk ensemble from New England, attempts to recreate the sound of Southern *Sacred Harp* singings. Although the sound is not truly authentic, the CD features some songs that were adapted for different voicings (i.e. three-part women) or very simply arranged. These might serve as examples of simple but effective adaptations for a choir.

White Spirituals from The Sacred Harp: The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention. Recorded by Alan Lomax. New World Records compact disc 80205. This CD features excerpts from a 1959 all-day singing recorded by folk-musicologist Alan Lomax. Steven Sabol says that the recording "captures the unabashed spirituality of an authentic Southern singing and also records a truly folk-derived singing style that is becoming increasingly difficult to find in contemporary singings."¹⁶²

WEBSITES

fasola.org—This website features introductory information on *The Sacred Harp* and shape-note singing with links to *Sacred Harp* publishing and singing organizations, to websites announcing local and annual singings, to resource lists, to personal websites, and to websites with more in-depth discussions.

mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/ely—Titled "Practical Guides to Sacred Harp Singing," this site

¹⁶²Steven L. Sabol, *Sacred Harp & Shape-Note Music Resources*, rev. ed. (Fort Worth, Texas: Hymn Society, 1994), 10.

explains how to negotiate and lead various musical situations encountered in different types of *Sacred Harp* songs. It also gives instructions for leading at a singing or a convention.

mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/resource-A regularly updated web version of Steven Sabol's work *Sacred Harp & Shape-Note Music Resources*, last published in 1994. It is a comprehensive, annotated list of tune books, recordings, videotapes, books, articles, and newsletters regarding shape-note music, as well as some email addresses and contact information for shape-note organizations.

Selected Bibliography

- Bealle, John. *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997.
- Britton, Allen P. "Theoretical Introductions in American Tune-Books." Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1949, 151. Quoted in Richard J. Stanislaw, "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools," 11. D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976.
- Brock, David A. "A Foundation for Defining Southern Shape-note Folk Hymnody from 1800 to 1859 as a Learned Compositional Style." Ph.D. diss., Claremont College, 1996.
- Bruce, Dickson D., Jr. *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973.
- Chanticleer, Jeffrey. *The New-England Courant*, February 1724, 17-24. Quoted in Richard J. Stanislaw, "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools," 18. D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976.
- Chase, Gilbert. *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*. Rev. 3rd ed. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Cobb, Buell E., Jr. *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978.
- _____. "The Sacred Harp of the South: A Study of Origins, Practices, and Present Implications." *Louisiana Studies* 7 (1968): 107-21.
- Crawford, Richard. "'Ancient Music' and the Europeanizing of American Psalmody, 800-1810." In, *A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*. Ed. Richard Crawford, R. Allen Lott, and Carol J. Oja. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- Epstein, Dena J. "A White Origin to the Black Spiritual? An Invalid Theory and How It Grew." *American Music* 1, no. 2 (1983): 53-59.
- Forcucci, Samuel L. *A Folk Song History of America*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984.
- Gusikof, Lynne. *Guide to Musical America*. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1984.

- Hamm, Charles. *Music in the New World*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983.
- Hitchcock, H. Wiley, with Kyle Gann. *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2000.
- Hood, George. *A History of Music in New England, with Biographical Sketches of Reformers and Psalmists*. 1846. Reprint, with a new introduction by Johannes Riedel, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970.
- Horn, Dorothy D. *Sing to Me of Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books*. Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1970.
- Howard, John Tasker. *Our American Music: A Comprehensive History from 1620 to the Present*. 4th ed. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965.
- Jackson, George Pullen. *Another Sheaf of White Spirituals*. New York: Folklorica, 1981.
- _____. *Down-East Spirituals and Others*. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1943.
- _____. *Spiritual Folk-Songs of Early America*. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1937.
- _____. *The Story of the Sacred Harp, 1844-1944*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1944.
- _____. *White and Negro Spirituals*. Locust Valley, New York: J. J. Augustin, 1943.
- _____. *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands: the Story of the Fasola Folk, their Songs, Singings, and "Buckwheat" Notes*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964.
- Jackson, J. *The Colored Sacred Harp*. Ozark, Alabama: J. Jackson, 1934.
- Kingman, Daniel. *American Music: A Panorama*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1990.
- Lorenz, Ellen Jane. *Glory, Hallelujah! The Story of the Campmeeting Spiritual*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1980.
- McKay, David Phares, and Richard Crawford. *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth Century Composer*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- McKenzie, Wallace. "The Alto Parts in the 'True Dispersed Harmony' of *The Sacred Harp* Revisions." *Musical Quarterly*, no. 73 (1989): 153-71.
- Nettl, Bruno. *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction*. 3rd ed., rev. and exp. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976.

- Sabol, Steven L. *Sacred Harp & Shape-Note Music Resources*. Rev. ed. Fort Worth, Texas: Hymn Society, 1994.
- Scholten, James W. "Lucius Chapin: A New England Singing Master on the Frontier." *Contributions to Music Education* 4, no. 4 (1976): 64-76.
- Seeger, Charles. "Contrapuntal Style in the Three-Voice Shape-Note Hymns," *Musical Quarterly* 26: 483-493. Quoted in David A. Brock, "A Foundation for Defining Southern Shape-note Folk Hymnody from 1800 to 1859 as a Learned Compositional Style," 84. Ph.D. diss., Claremont College, 1996.
- Sharp, Cecil. *English Folk Song, Some Conclusions*. London: Novello, 1907, 71. Quoted in Buell E. Cobb, Jr. *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978.
- Stanislaw, Richard J. *A Checklist of Four-Shape Shape-Note Tune Books*. Brooklyn: The City University of New York, 1978.
- Stanislaw, Richard J. "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools." D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976.
- Stevenson, Robert. *Protestant Church Music in America: A Short Survey of Men and Movements from 1564 to the Present*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966.
- Torrey, Roger Ward. "Andrew Law and the Shape Note Tradition in Early American Music Education." M.A. thesis, San Francisco State College, 1967.
- Walker, William. *Christian Harmony*. Philadelphia: Cowperwaith, 1866, xiii. Quoted in Richard J. Stanislaw, "Choral Performance Practice in the Four-Shape Literature of American Frontier Singing Schools," 166. D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976.
- Walker, William. *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion, Containing a Choice Selection of Tunes, Hymns, Psalms, Odes, and Anthems Selected From the Most Eminent Authors in the United States and Well Adapted to Christian Churches of Every Denomination, Singing Schools, and Private Societies*. 3rd ed. 1854. Reprint, Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987.
- White, B.F. *The B. F. White Sacred Harp Was Revised and Improved By W. M. Cooper and Others. The selections are from the old SACRED HARP, remodeled and revised, together with additions from the most eminent authors, including new music*. Troy, Alabama: Sacred Harp Book Co., Inc., 1949.
- White, B. F. *Original Sacred Harp (Denson Revision): The Best Collection of Sacred*

Songs, Hymns, Odes, and Anthems Ever Offered the Singing Public for General Use, 1966 ed. Cullman, Alabama: Sacred Harp Publishing Company, Inc, 1967.

White, B. F. and E. J. King. *The Sacred Harp*. 3rd ed. 1859. Reprint, with a historical introduction by George Pullen Jackson. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1968.

Wienandt, Elwyn A. and Robert H. Young. *The Anthem in England and America*. New York: The Free Press, 1970.