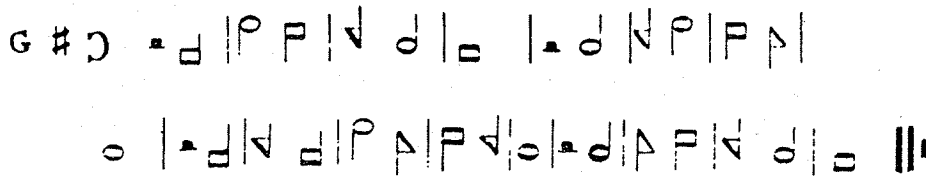


SACRED HARP SINGING

by Larry Polansky



The shape note tradition, having grown directly from the singing school movement and the revolutionary polyphonic music of early American composers like William Billings and Daniel Read, is as much an high art tradition as it is a folk movement. Until recently, it was commonly thought that the "psalmody" of composers like Billings, with its complete disregard for the "rules" of European art music, was a primitive attempt at a sophisticated ideal. However, Billings' music, as well as shape note, does not seek to imitate these European models—rather Billings and his contemporaries invented a uniquely American style with some very important musical characteristics. Harmonically, the music of the psalmodists and of the Sacred Harpists breaks all the rules about parallel motion, functionality, modulation, etc. What the music does deal with is the integrity of the melodic line—in each of the voice parts. There is little thought given to the vertical "movement," though the pure consonances (fourth, fifth and octave) are most frequent, giving the music its characteristically resonant and straightforward sonority. In Sacred Harp singing, each line of the (usually) four parts has its own independent melody. It's interesting to look at the shape note tune "New Britain" (from the *Southern Harmony*), which is more commonly known under the title "Amazing Grace." Sung in the original shape note version, with the "tune" in the alto, it is markedly different than the song which gained so much popularity with the folk revival. The soprano, tenor, and even the bass have completely different, though equally important, tunes—all combining to a total sound that expresses a far different musical and social philosophy than that of the European homophonic tradition. Shape note singing is perhaps the musical expression of democracy—everybody gets the tune, though each a different one, and the resultant is the "common good." It is easy to see how later American Carl Ruggles could so strongly adopt his own musical credo of "The strength of the line."

Not only does everybody get the tune in Sacred Harp, but anybody can sing any of the parts at any octave. Amazingly, they all work! In theory class, you'd be told that this was simple "invertible counterpoint," but that's missing the point. What it does is accommodate both range and taste. If you happen to be a big guy with a low voice, but you want to sing the soprano part, it's fine to sing it in your own octave, and in fact some of the most wonderful sounds in the music come from these kinds of alterations.

Much of the Sacred Harp is of a compositional complexity not usually associated with "folk music," tunes like "Rose of Sharon" and other adaptations of the older fuguig pieces. In these more extended works, one can hear a very advanced polyphonic and contrapuntal language, but one that is surprisingly easy to sing. This

seems to me to be one of the more appealing aspects of shape note music—that even the most compositionally developed works remain facile for both trained singers and amateurs. Also, since any part is available, the less proficient singers can simply pick an easy part and sing it in their own range! The Sacred Harp is a community art tradition, a setting where children and adults may learn and sing extremely beautiful music in a non-competitive, highly enjoyable, even spiritually uplifting context—and in this way it parallels many of the more avant-garde developments of American music in the last 30 years—like free improvisation, much of rock, and even the recent interest in the gamelan musics of Indonesia. Shape note is an unique indigenous musical, educational, and social heritage.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Readings

Jackson, George Pullen; *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*; Dover; 1965. Jackson's work is one of the first and still most authoritative about the Sacred Harp. The early recordings that he made in the 1930s are among the first and most important.

Hamm, Charles; *Music in the New World*; Norton; 1983. This new work has an excellent chapter about shape note, as well as a wealth of background information.

McKay, David and Richard Crawford; *William Billings of Boston* Princeton U. Press; 1975. This is THE book on Billings, and provides a good background for understanding the classical underpinnings of shape note. (Also, it's one of the most enjoyable books you'll ever read).

Walker, William; *The Southern Harmony*; (ed. by Glenn Wilcox); Pro Music Americana; 1966. This is the modern edition of the book that's been around since the 1830s, and has had many incarnations. It's still in use as the shape note tune book in many of the regional meetings. Everybody should have one.

Recordings

Fasola Singing; ASCH Mankind Series; AHM 4151 (Try through Folkways, 43 W.61 St., NYC 10023). Field recording from Mississippi, good introduction.

White Spirituals from The Sacred Harp; New World Records, #245 has the wonderful "I'm A Long Time Travelin'"; and #255 is an album of Billings, Read, Swan, et. al.)

No amount of reading or recorded listening could ever replace the experience of attending a Sacred Harp or other shape note meeting, and I recommend this highly—certainly it has been one of the most fantastic and inspiring events in my musical experience!