

THE MATTER OF TEMPO IN THE SACRED HARP
-Raymond C. Hamrick

The question of proper tempo in Sacred Harp music has given rise to much discussion, much dissension, and, on my part, much curiosity as to the reasons for the differences in speed in various areas. Mention is made by some writers of the "characteristic trotting motion" of the 4/4 tunes. In an endeavour to discover just how "characteristic" the motion is, I approached the earliest sources of information at my disposal-the prefaces of the tune books of the 18th and 19th century.

The first such was the initial effort of William Billings (Boston 1746-1800). This book was the New England Psalm Singer (1770). Billings went to great lengths to explain the conditions that prevailed in church music of his day so that the reader might more readily sympathise with his desire to make the changes he advocated;

"Double bars in psalm tunes are placed at the end of the lines for the benefit of the sight to direct the performer where to stop, in congregations where they keep up that absurd practise of reading between the lines, which is so destructive to harmony, and is a work of so much time that unless the performers have very good memories they are apt to forget the tune while the line is reading. I defy the greatest advocates for reading between the lines to produce one word of Scripture for it and I will leave it to all judicious people whether it is founded on reason, and certainly where it is founded on neither reason nor religion had better be omitted. The practise of reading the Psalms line by

line was introduced so long ago as when very few people had the knowledge of reading; therefore a reader was substituted for the whole congregation who was called a clerk, but at this time when every man is capable of reading for himself, and when we consider the confusion that is caused in the music by reading the lines, and the destruction it occasions to the sense of the Psalms, I can see no reason for keeping up so absurd a practise. Consider further, that according to the practise in country churches the Psalm is three times repeated. First, the minister reads it audibly alone, secondly, the clerk or deacon line by line, and thirdly it is sung by the congregation; now if we are obliged to repeat the Psalm three times over, why are we not obliged to repeat our prayers as often before they are deemed to be acceptable? I expect this doctrine will meet with some opposition in the country, but let who will concur or differ, I think myself highly honored in having the approbation of the pious and learned Dr. Watts (that great master of divine song) who in his writings has delivered himself of the same opinion."

This, then, was the condition of religious music among the Protestants during that period when the germs of what we know today as Sacred Harp music were incubating. Many years of wrangling and dissatisfaction on the same subject evidently preceded this period as witness the quotation from Isaac Watts, born 1674, died 1748. For those who may have trouble in comprehending the actual conditions described above, there are living examples surviving today. Dr. Vernon Taylor of Southwestern University, in the course of a field trip through the Kentucky mountains for the Southern Appalachian culture survey, recorded a church service among the "Regular" Baptists in Viper, Kentucky at which the song service was almost a replica of the conditions described by Billings as being extant in Boston in

1770. This survival is found elsewhere too as I have a report of much the same musical condition in a church near Hamerville Georgia. This church was constituted in the early 1700's according to my information and the practise of lining hymns is adhered to. The minister reads two lines, the congregation drones through them, he reads two more etc.

This was a general condition in New England in early years and Billings was determined to bring about a change. He promulgated three ideas as being essential to the uplifting of church music. First, he introduced the use of the pitchpipe as a means of correctly keying the music. Next, he advocated the complete abolishment of "lining" Third, he brought forth a complete set of "rules for singing". These, he freely admitted, were not his own but were written for him by "a learned man who preferred to remain anonymous". They were as follows;

"Concerning common time, the first of these moods is called adagio, which is a very slow movement. A semi-breve (full note) in this mood is precisely four seconds.

The second mood or mark is called the largo mood, being half as quick again as in the former so that three minims (half-notes) in this mood are to be performed in the same time as two minims are in the adagio mood, but it is often fixed to psalm tunes in which the crotchet (quarter note) and all other notes in proportion are sung in the time of seconds so as to make no distinction between this and the adagio mood, except in the anthems and other brisk pieces of music.

The third mood or mark is called the allegro mood, being as quick again as the first so that minims in this mood are sung to the time of seconds. This is a very beautiful movement and if rightly

performed carries great life and spirit with it.

There is another mood sometimes used in psalmody and it is called 2 from 4, each bar containing two crotchets, to be beat one down, one up. And crotchets in this time must be as quick as crotchets in the allegro mood."

Thus the rules for singing as laid down in 1774. Revolutionary to be sure, when compared with established practise but these were revolutionary times and the seed, thus broadcast, sprouted and grew - and opposition was not long in arising. This can best be shown by excerpts from the prefaces of other music books, some that were church music books and others that were used perhaps both in and out of the church. Andrew Law was an ordained minister and a book compiler;

"It will not, perhaps, have escaped the observation of any one of you that very much of the music in vogue is miserable indeed. Hence, the man of piety and principle, of taste and discernment in music, and hence, indeed all who entertain a sense of decency and decorum in devotion are oftentimes offended with that lifeless and insipid, or that frivolous and frolicsome succession and combination of sounds so frequently introduced into churches where all should be serious, animated and devout."

- Art of Singing 1803

"Classical European tunes have been substituted for some of a less perfect character, and the valuable foreign music which is retained, and which the public has not ceased to venerate and admire, is still preserved in this collection, secure from the touch of American innovation"

- Village Harmony-1818

"Young people whose taste is as yet crude and uninformed, almost

universally prefer the rapid and fuguing music of American composuists, to such airs as compose this selection; but as their taste becomes more delicate, their relish more just, and their judgement better informed, music of the former class becomes cloying and insipid, and having passed through the different grades of improvement, the feelings and the ear rest with the greatest delight on tunes like Egypt, Old Ham, Old Hundred, and St. Michaels."

- Samuel Wakefield-Christian's Harp 1837

Not all were in accord with these writers however as witness the voice of Daniel Mansfield, raised in his "American Vocalist" (1849);

"In every part of the United States, even where new music is sung in the public congregation because it is fashionable, let anyone mingle with the devout worshippers of God in their social meetings and he will hear-not the scientific gingling of imported discord, but the simple harmony of old "Turner" "Northfield," "The Union Hymn", or something that moves the heart of good men if it does not tickle the fastidious fancy of iffidels"

So-the schism on tempo is by no means peculiar to our generation. Nor will it die with our generation.....

To return to early days-----

However the feeling against the new concept went, one thing took root and was faithfully reproduced in tune books for the next fifty years with very little change-the musical rudiments. The "Easy Instructor" of Smith and Little (1803), using their newly invented shape note system, had this to say on tempo:

"There are four moods of common time;

1st- C----Has a semi-breve or its quantity in a measure;
sung in the time of four seconds-two beats to the bar-two down, two up.

- 2nd----¢ ----Has same measure note, beat in same manner, only half as quick again. (3Seconds)
- 3rd----) ----Has same measure note, and sung as quick again as the first, two beats to the bar-one down, one up. (2 seconds)
- 4th---- $\frac{2}{4}$ ----has the minim in a measure and beats as the third mood only a third quicker (1 and $\frac{1}{3}$ seconds) "

Andrew Law in his "Art of Singing" (1803) made the following recommendations:

Modes	Length of beat	length of measure
very slow	$1\frac{1}{2}$ seconds	6 seconds
slow	$1\frac{1}{4}$ "	5 "
moderate	1 "	4 "
cheerful	$\frac{7}{8}$ "	$3\frac{1}{2}$ "
lively	$\frac{2}{3}$ "	2 and $\frac{2}{3}$ seconds
quick	$\frac{5}{8}$ "	$2\frac{1}{2}$ "
very quick	$\frac{1}{2}$ "	2 "

It seems that Law subscribed to the idea of "something for everyone".

Allen Carden's widely-used "Missouri Harmony", first published around 1820 and for a quarter century thereafter used the precise rules as quoted above from the "Easy Instructor".

The first change came in 1835 when William Walker published the "Southern Harmony";

"The first mood is known by a plain "C" and has a semi-breve or its quantity in a measure, sung in the time of four seconds, four beats in a bar, two down and two up.

The second mood is known by a "C" with a bar through it, has the same measure note, sung in the time of three seconds-four beats to the bar, two down and two up.

The third mood is known by a "C" inverted, sometimes with a bar through it, has the same measure as the first two, sung in the time of two seconds-two beats to the bar. This mood is sometimes marked with the figure 4 above 4, thus $\frac{4}{4}$.

The fourth mood is known by the figure 2 over a figure 4, has a minim for a measure note, sung in the time of one second-two beats to the bar, one down and one up."

B.F. White in 1844 published his famous and still-living "Sacred Harp". Here too, occurred another significant change in the rudiments that had held firm for so long.

"The first mood of common time is known by a figure 2 over a figure 2, having a semi-breve or whole note for a measure note or its equivalent in every measure; sung in the time of three seconds to the measure, two beats with the hand, one down, one up.

The second mood is known by a figure 4 over a figure 4 having a minim or half note as the measure note; sung in the time of $2\frac{1}{2}$ seconds to the measure, two beats as in the first mood.

The third mood is known by the figure 2 over a figure 4, having a minim or half note as the measure note; sung in the time of $1\frac{1}{2}$ seconds to the measure and beat as in the other two moods."

It will be noticed that White had reduced the moods of common time from the usual four to three; eliminated the use of the letter "C" from the signature, assigning a numerical signature to each; and slowed down 4/4 music from the previous speed of 2 seconds per measure to $2\frac{1}{2}$ seconds. His contemporary William Hauser, compiler of the "Hesperian Harp" (1848) evidently didn't think he slowed things down enough. In his preface he recommended 4 seconds for 4/4 time; a second mood known by a "C" with a bar through it and

sung in the time of three seconds (with the added remark that this mood was of little worth); 2 seconds for $2/2$ time; and one second for $2/4$ time.

So much for the first 150 years of tune books. The copyright of B.F. White's book expired in 1902 and in 1911 a committee headed by Joe James of Atlanta issued a revision known as "The Original Sacred Harp" because they restored many songs that had been taken out in previous revisions by the Whites. This edition continued the rudiments as expounded by White. Then, in 1935, when a revision committee headed by the Denson's of Alabama issued the new "Denson" revision, the part dealing with tempo had been altered. Mr. Marcus Cagle, a Denson son-in-law and a prominent figure in Sacred Harp circles for over fifty years, credits Tom Denson with being the advocate of a more lively rendition - this for all moods though the change was greatest in $4/4$ music. Since controversy arose, all reference to tempo was omitted, leaving the matter up to the individual leader. I discussed this with Mr. Cagle several years before his death. As he explained it, Tom Denson had a small group of singers who were in the habit of meeting and singing together at various times other than the regular Sunday singings. They leaned towards a more lively rendition than was usual but to quote Mr. Cagle "nothing like as fast as they sing today". The sound of this group had its effect however and tempo gradually picked up in the areas in which the Denson's operated. After the death of Tom Denson the trend continued and as Mr. Cagle phrased it "if Tom Denson could hear how fast they sing now he would be shocked".

As usual, controversy accompanied this period and a deep rift between the "fast" and the "slow" developed. The B.F. White group would

have no part of the fast tempo and had little if any contact with Denson book circles. Users of the Cooper edition seem to have been a patchwork-and still are. Some of their groups sing very slowly and others outdo their Denson brethren in speed. The South Georgia Convention, founded in 1919, and users of the 1911 James edition, were for years fairly close to the B.F. White tempo. This was primarily because South Georgia was covered by singing school teachers from the White book influence out of Atlanta rather than from farther west.

- In that period immediately following the Second World War, several forces were set in motion, forces that were to exert a unifying influence over most of the Southeastern Sacred Harp groups.

In the South Georgia area, several singing schools were held regularly and from these came a fairly large group of young adult singers. These were not "passing fancy" singers but people who by background, both religious and secular, were natural inheritors of the Sacred Harp mantle. Many of them are still active today, some 25 years later. Being young they had a more vigorous approach to the music, and being of a generation that became accustomed to wide travel during the war years they took the initiative in visiting other conventions and actively participating. Friendships sprang up between members of this group and those in the Denson area and in the middle 1950's visiting became even more frequent. As a result, the tempo in South Georgia ^{GAN} became to pick up. In North Georgia it had already reached epic proportions. In the first two or three years of the fifties, a reasonable estimate is that at times some 4/4 fuguing music was led at a rate of one second per measure. This was so destructive of both harmony and poetry that the South Georgia singers were content to liven up their own singing but not to this extent. In 1950 they sang a measure of 4/4 fuguing music at about

2 seconds per measure. This gradually increased until in 1957 it reached 1.5 seconds per measure. This represented the peak and at present the norm is about 1.6 seconds. This group and the Denson people today have a very close and friendly relationship to the extent that much music in the James edition has been taken over into the 1960 and 1966 Denson revisions. At almost any special event to which the Denson singers are invited will be found several of the James people and vice versa.

The B.E.White group, based in Atlanta, have still maintained their separation although tempo is not the factor it once was. Herman Wilkinson, a cousin of the singing family that is the backbone of the White book tribe, is today the leading light in that area. Herman was born, raised, and learned to sing in Alabama. When he moved to Decatur and became an active member of the White group, his attempts to speed up the tempo almost proved disastrous. I have nothing but rumors to go on but it seems to be agreed that he was asked to tone down his efforts. Not wishing to create problems he agreed and slowed down a fair amount. However, his influence has been felt and since 1955 the White book singers are doing a 4/4 measure in about 1.6 to 1.7 seconds. A fair amount of visiting between this group and the South Georgia group has almost brought this up, at times.

In Denson circles the pendulum is swinging back. The decision of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company to make a series of professionally recorded albums seems to have been the catalyst. For this project the 1960 edition of the Denson book was used. When Hugh McGraw, the director, ran through the music prior to recording, he stopped short with the realization that in order to have an excellent sound, tempo must be slowed. This was done and each record made has reaffirmed the correctness of the decision.

Some of the old heads were convinced upon hearing the records and thus began a campaign by respected leaders such as Marcus Cagle, Hugh McGraw, Tom and Bud McGraw and others. Their efforts have borne fruit as shown by my last timing of their tempo in the Fall of 1971. The tempo varied from 1.4 to 1.6, depending on the leader but the 1 second per measure was conspicuously absent. In outlying areas of Alabama I am told, the tempo still reaches this figure but there is hope for the future. Singing school teachers in those areas today are generally people like Hugh McGraw, Elmer Kitchens and others of the moderate group who instill in their pupils their own philosophy of performance.

Add to this the greater unity among the different areas as exemplified by the big state-wide conventions in Alabama, Georgia, and Florida at which groups of singers from all areas come together and quickly arrive at a common and acceptable tempo-usually in the 1.4 to 1.6 range. Little if any dissatisfaction is ever expressed.

Dr. George Pullen Jackson once said in a letter to me, quote-

"There is, as you no doubt realize, much more than tempo that separates this music from all other group singing. Some of the fault lies in the arrangements many of the songs have suffered. But that is a matter that is all but impossible to change. Tempo and dynamics can be changed. They must be changed if the Chinese Wall is ever to be knocked down. There are some rumblings-even in the "fast and furious" circles-of a change. But it will come slowly, if ever. And the change will probably come through the influences of outsiders who can and will join with those insiders who see the light."

From the viewpoint of twelve years later it appears that the "insiders" influence has been the dominant factor. This is as it should be, since folkways, to be folkways, should be the free-flowing expression of the folk.