

# THE HARPETH VALLEY

## SACRED HARP

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"and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps." Revelation 14:2

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### THE CURIOUS HISTORY OF SHAPE-NOTES

By Raymond C. Hamrick

One facet of Sacred Harp music that seems to intrigue the newcomer to our midst is the peculiar (to them) shapes that decorate the note-heads. All other familiar signs of standard notation are the same, but the squares, triangles, ovals and diamonds adorning the staff are somewhat puzzling to the musician who cut his teeth on round notes. The attempt to explain just how the shapes promote rapid, accurate sight reading - even in children with no previous training in music - evokes a blank look or an amused shake of the head and sometimes the condescending, "It can't be done." All vastly frustrating to the Sacred Harper who knows that it can be - and is - done.

To understand the "Why," the need for a teaching aid that would be easily applicable to even the least musically trained among us, we must go back to the days of colonial America and consider the conditions prevailing at that time. It is truly said that "necessity is the mother of invention" and necessity certainly existed in the infant days of the Republic. There are many documents which testify to the fact that our Pilgrim father could and did sing in four-part harmony, often accompanied by lute, viol, virginal, or psaltery. The first edition of the Bay Psalm Book (1640), the first book printed in the colonies, contained no music. Its users were referred to Ravenscroft's Psalter for the many tunes to which metrical versions of the psalms could be sung. Also in use was the Sternholde and Hopkins Whole Booke of Psalms (London 1562).

However, later generations, forced to endure privation during the westward surge, with small settlements and a pioneer-type existence, were left little time or opportunity for the cultivation of music. Itinerant preachers traveled from settlement to settlement where they preached and then spent a few days trying to teach the people to sing. The ability to read music became so neglected that the practice of "lining-out" hymns came into being, wherein the congregations were taught to sing religious songs by "rote" rather than by "note". The lining-out was done by a deacon or "reader" who read one or two lines of the psalm and then led the congregation in singing what had been read. Thomas Walter, in his book, The Grounds and Rules of Musick (Boston 1721), made this complaint:



Once the tunes were sung to the rules of musick,  
but are now miserably tortured and twisted . . .  
there are no two churches that sing alike . . .  
somebody or other did compose our tunes and did  
they, think ye?, compose them by rule or by rote?  
If the latter, how came they prick'd down in our  
Psalm books?..... For want of exactitude, I have  
observed in many places one man is upon a note while  
another a note behind, which produces something  
hideous and beyond expression bad.

The Reverend John Tufts spear-headed a movement to establish singing schools with the publication in 1721 of his Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes. This book also contained the first published set of rudiments for teaching, covering such points as tuning the voice, notation, intervals, scales, clefs, and time signatures. This was the first American music textbook and the teaching section was to be picked up by other compilers and used with little change for many years thereafter. Tufts introduced a system of sight-reading based on the placing of the first letter of each syllable on the staff in place of the note; i.e., "F" for fa, "S" for sol, "L" for la, "M" for mi. The length of the note was shown by dots placed to the right of each letter, two dots for a breve, one dot for a semi-breve, and no dot for the quarter. For past centuries, many books in Europe had placed the letter representing the syllable next to each note, but Tufts' idea was to eliminate the note entirely and use only the letter. As an instructional device it was useful and practical when applied to simple music, but even mildly florid tunes showed its obvious limitations. Nevertheless, Tufts' work in behalf of better singing was to have revolutionary consequences. From it developed a most remarkable new social institution, the New England singing school, which was to control the destinies of native American music for well over a hundred years. Thanks to the singing-school movement and the teacher-composers who were its product, the last two decades of the 18th Century were to see a tremendous upsurge of musical creativity, the uniqueness and vitality of which is only now beginning to be realized.

In the year 1802, two New England singing-school teachers, William Little and William Smith, brough forth a book called the Easy Instructor in which the ultimate in simplicity of music-reading was achieved. Their system uses four characteristic notes whose shape at once determines their position on the scale and their relative quantity. After learning the scale intervals thoroughly as related to the shapes, it is then possible to read any part of any tune written in shape-notes with amazing ease and accuracy. The sharps and flats in the signature do not concern the singer. The keynote, "fa" is given by the person doing the pitching and from that point the shapes automatically convey the positions of the half-steps. If the demands of melody require additional half-steps, an accidental is inserted, but in Sacred Harp music these are rare. After ascertaining the tonic, or keynote, of a piece of music, the singer knows instantly from both the shape of the succeeding note, and from its approximate distance from the keynote, just what the degree is, whether it be a third, sixth, fifth, octave, etc. The fact that three of the four shapes are used twice within the octave is no problem inasmuch as, for example, the sixth, "la", is an easily recognizable distance from the keynote than is the "la" representing the third. This is likewise true of "fa" whose triangle shape appears as the first, the keynote, as well as the fourth and the eighth, the octave. Also, the ovals, "sol", which appear as the second and the fifth are easily distinguished. The diamond, "mi", appears only once, as the seventh.



George Pullen Jackson says of this system that it was accepted instantly, without question, in much the same way that people accept the Bible. So complete was the acceptance that it was not until 1848 that any compiler using the shapes even mentioned the inventors. William Hauser's Hesperian Harp preface states:

The French sing ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la, se. The Italians do, re, me fa, sol, la, si. The English fa, sol, la, mi. But the present race of teachers, American and English, are aping the Italians in the use of do, re mi, etc. And some of them gravely assert that the seven musical sounds cannot be expressed without using seven distinct syllables as do, re, mi, etc. But if this doctrine be true, all songs and hymns sung must be incorrect for our poets have been too far behind in this age of light, or so stupid in the full blaze of it, as not to have woven those almighty syllables into their songs. Nay, I contend that the four old syllables mi, fa, sol, la, are fully adequate to the expression of every musical sound in the scale; and that four shapes, the glorious patent notes of William Little and William Smith are "just the thing."

If we are to believe that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," then Andrew Law, prominent singing school teacher, compiler, and composer, evidently had an instant and wholehearted admiration for shape notes. The 1803 edition of his Art of Singing used the same shapes but with the "la" and "fa" reversed, probably to avoid charges of plagiarism. He went one step further by dispensing entirely with the staff lines, arranging his notes above and below the keynote position so as to give a fair idea of the interval involved. Under these conditions it was absolutely mandatory that the music be sung by the shapes.

Other imitators sprang up, particularly those who favored a seven-shape notation. In the year 1853, Professor Jesse B. Aiken in his Christian Minstrel first used the shapes of his own device that are the same seven shapes used today. In later years, around 1870, the beginnings of the gospel style music began to appear in this notation - but that is another field entirely.

Also brought forth during these early years was a numerical notation system wherein the note-heads were replaced with numbers showing the position of the tone in the scale. This system also appeared with and without staff lines. It enjoyed wide popularity for a time but finally passed into oblivion.

The period surrounding the year 1800 saw also the development of movable music type for printing song books, an innovation that did away with the laborious hand engraving of plates that had previously been necessary. This, coupled with Smith and Little's invention of a music-reading system that simplified music teaching to suit the limited abilities of the masses, created a boom in the printing of tune books. At least 154 individual tune books are known to have been printed by the close of the 18th Century. After 1800, the number increased greatly and it is conservatively estimated that more than a thousand were published during the 19th Century, some of which ran into many editions. A good example is William Walker's Southern Harmony, first published in 1835 using four-shaped notes. It sold over 600,000 copies and this was but one of many.

The compilers of these books were all singing school teachers and many were composers. During the Revolutionary War and for twenty or thirty years thereafter, the music of these composers enjoyed an almost universal acceptance. Their music was as distinctively American as our speech, or political economy, and all other aspects of our culture had become. It represented a combining of cultural legacies from Europe with elements



peculiar to the new land. During the early 1800's this music was gradually displaced in the Northeast by English and Continental music introduced by the many musicians of foreign birth who took over positions as organists and music teachers in the large urban centers and trained vast numbers of pupils to follow in their footsteps. The original American music and its notational system survives today only in the South. Dr. Allen P. Britton, head of the music department of the University of Michigan, puts it this way:

The doom of the tune book, the singing school in which it was used, and the music it represented was compounded by the gradual introduction of music education in the public schools. The first music educators were of foreign birth or indoctrination. In the field of teaching music they showed a desire to discard American methods of proven value in favor of imported philosophies. In the first place, they would have nothing to do with the shape-note system of musical notation then in almost universal use in churches and singing schools. The shape-note system provides the most effective means yet devised to teach music reading. Entirely an American invention, it is intriguing to the learner and it embodies none of the inherent disadvantages of such special notations as the Tonic-sol-fa so popular in England. Yet it was rejected largely because of its identification with the rejected American idiom, and partly, perhaps, on account of its very Americanness--it was not known in Europe.

We find today, in the academic communities, a growing interest in the early American idiom. We are coming into an age of appreciation of things American and the old inherent concept of European superiority in all things cultural is fast fading. We do not anticipate a return to the teaching of shape-note music reading on a grand scale, but it is being taught in many colleges and universities. In the meantime, we who sing in the Sacred Harp are still the guardians and perpetuators of an uniquely American cultural heritage. The growing recognition being extended by music educators, musicologists, musicians, and academic communities merely confirms what we have known all along - that we are on solid ground.

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#### NOTES ON THE UNITED SACRED HARP MUSICAL ASSOCIATION CONVENTION:

As the old colored preacher said, "Not speaking as an authority--which I is--"this was a Great Singing. There were people here from all over the "territory" and they came for the business of singing, which they proceeded to do. It had every reason to be a good singing for here was assembled the cream of the crop of Sacred Harp singers. From all of us in Nashville to all of you who came -- many from a distance and at quite an expense -- we say thank you, Thank You, THANK YOU. We were glad to have you and we hope you will come back again.

There were some mishaps during the convention for which the local committee apologizes. It was our first experience and we'll do better next time.

The temperature in the auditorium at Ellington Center was just right. Half the people were too hot and the other half were too cold. Adding these two extremes you come up with perfection and perfection is pretty hard to come by these days.