

# *A Beginner's Guide to Shape-Note Singing*

## **Hints, stories, advice, and minufiae**

by Lisa Grayson

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*A Beginner's Guide to Shape-Note Singing*  
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# Introduction

If you respond to the pulsing beat, rich harmonies, powerful poetry, or deep spiritual current of a Sacred Harp singing, you are joining generations of Americans who found sustenance and joy in this musical tradition. This booklet was compiled with an eye toward introducing you to the basics of the music, so that you can fully enjoy and participate in singing.

Like many brand-new singers, your author fell in love with Sacred Harp music from the very first song I heard at the University of Chicago in February 1990, even though my nose was buried in the tunebook, and my mind in confusion, all afternoon. I plowed on for months, often clueless, for I was moved by the sound in a way I am still unable to articulate fully. Most of the entries in this booklet are the result of my continuing Sacred Harp self-education, and should be treated as such: a collection of tips and anecdotes by an amateur with no formal musical training.

Please write to me with any comments, and Sacred Harp questions that remain unanswered, so that I can address them in future editions. Meanwhile, realize that you have entered on a marvelous musical journey that will bring

you into the company of some of the finest people anywhere—Sacred Harp singers.

## **Abraham Lincoln, shape-note singer?**

Carl Sandburg wrote in *The American Songbag*: “A famous oblong songbook of the pioneer days in the middle west was the *Missouri Harmony*.... Young Abraham Lincoln and his sweetheart Ann Rutledge sang from this book in the Rutledge tavern in New Salem, Illinois, according to old settlers there.” Miss Rutledge’s sister recalled, \* “They used to sing together. There was one song I didn’t like to hear, and he would sing it to tease me. He would tip back his chair and roar it out at the top of his voice, over and over again, just for fun.”

The song is as follows: “When in death I shall calmly recline/ O, bear my heart to my mistress dear; / Tell her it lived on smiles and wine/ Of brightest hue while it lingered here; /Bid her not shed one tear of sorrow/ To sully a heart so brilliant and bright, /But healing drops of the red grape borrow/To bathe the relic from morn to night.”

\*J.E. Gallagher, *Best Lincoln Stories, Tersely Told*, 1898.

## **A few words about first impressions**

### **Where’s the audience?**

We don’t perform; we sing as an end in itself. Anyone is welcome to just sit and listen, but will be encouraged to borrow a tunebook and sing along. We have no auditions, no rehearsals; if a song doesn’t sound quite right, we shrug it off and move on. All are welcome to join in.

### **Why don’t you applaud?**

Traditional singers, especially in the Southern U.S., regard applause during the singing as if it were applause during a worship service. We usually reserve applause for children and brand-new leaders. Even singers who do not consider the Sacred Harp experience to be a worship service acknowledge that we aren’t performing, so there’s nothing, and no one, to commend. We won’t shush you if you applaud, but please realize it’s not part of our tradition.

### **What’s with the gloom and doom?**

We can’t deny it: Many songs in *The Sacred Harp* tell of “the coffin, earth, and winding sheet,” as the otherwise

sprightly tune “Morning Sun” (page 436) puts it. A majority of the texts are hymn or camp meeting songs, religious in nature; after all, shape-note music took root as a way to teach unlettered Americans how to worship through song.

Some people are initially put off by many of the texts, particularly non-Christians, atheists and agnostics, and those who prefer a spiritual practice light and bright. Please know that some of the most enthusiastic Sacred Harp singers—including a large percentage of people in the Northern U.S.—do not subscribe to the same religious beliefs as the poets who wrote the texts, yet still appreciate their often austere and haunting beauty. Sacred Harp singers do not impose their beliefs on anyone who sings with us.

## **What’s different in this edition?**

Since I first published the *Beginner’s Guide* in 1994, Sacred Harp music has spread around the world, and singers are a more diverse group. Among other things, I have edited the text to reflect that not all singers identify as strictly male or female. Whatever one’s biological or preferred gender, there is a place for everyone in the *Sacred Harp* hollow square.

# Basics of shape-note singing



Fa, sol, la, mi — the four basic notes in our shape-note system.

The music we sing is from *The Sacred Harp*, a hymnal originally published in 1844 in a tradition older still. It is passionate, spirited music that harks back to the days when church music was intended to be sung by the congregation rather than the choir. Any type, quality, and range of voice should find a comfortable and important place within its harmonies. The “sacred harp” is the human voice!

## Where should I sit?

Sacred Harp music is divided into four parts: treble, alto, tenor (or lead), and bass. Depending on inclinations of temperament, timbre, or necessity, higher-octave and lower-octave voices double on both the treble and tenor parts an octave apart.

People with tenor voices in standard choral music will probably be most comfortable singing tenor or treble; baritones may like tenor or bass; basses—well, no problem. Sopranos and countertenors may like the tenor or treble parts (in high register); altos might try that part, although those with a strong low register could also sing tenor or treble in the lower octave.

When in doubt, sing tenor. That’s where the melody is. But feel free to move around to different parts to see what feels comfortable to you.

## The hollow square and song leading

Sacred Harp music is traditionally sung in a “hollow square” with each voice part taking one of the four sides and facing the center. The song leader stands in the center, beating out the rhythm and delighting in the surge of voices and blending of sound from all four sides. (Newcomers are often encouraged to “stand in the middle” to experience the full power and exaltation of the music.) Song leaders face the tenor section to help carry the melody of the song.

Sacred Harp leading is egalitarian. Everyone has a chance to lead the song of his or her choice. Newcomers are welcome, and encouraged, to lead. Don’t worry—just face the tenor section and follow the hand motions of the front row of tenors and you will be fine.

## Shape notes

The music in *The Sacred Harp* is written in standard notation, except that the notes appear in four different shapes (see illustration); therefore the music is also called “shape-note.” Itinerant early American tunesmiths and singing masters used this four-note system to teach sight-reading to people without musical training. Most of us first learned a seven-note “solfege” system: *do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do*. The Sacred Harp uses the old four-note English system: *fa-sol-la-fa-sol-la-mi-fa*.

**With our shape-note system, there’s no need to worry about different keys. The shapes ingeniously indicate where the different pitches are. The interval between, say, any *fa* and the *la* above it is always the same.**

Before singing the words to a Sacred Harp tune, we “sing the notes” by singing the syllables of the shapes to try to learn our parts before tackling the words. People who hear Sacred Harp music for the first time are often baffled when the entire room breaks out into what sounds like gibberish. New singers may be daunted by the shapes, especially on fast songs. Just remember, the person who now confidently sings mile-a-minute *fa-sol-las* had to learn them slowly, too. Jump in and sing *la* if you aren’t sure; you’ll be right 25% of the time! And the shapes that seemed so strange at first will soon help you to sight sing.

Some sections above adapted from Steven Levine’s “A Sacred Harp Guide for Newcomers,” in *Prairie Harmony* (Minnesota Sacred Harp newsletter), Oct.1990.



C major scale, written to show how the shapes appear in whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes.



Intervals between shapes are the same in any key! Here, *fa-las* in A major (treble clef, left) and G minor (bass clef, right). Note triangle *fa* and square *la*.

# Four frequently asked questions about Sacred Harp

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## **Why is everyone singing at the top of their lungs?**

Sure enough, the symbols used to indicate loudness or softness in regular music are conspicuously absent in our shape-note book. And the more experienced singers do sing at a consistent *fortissimo* that can be alarming to people hearing the music for the first time. Singers may exchange knowing looks as a newcomer accidentally caught between two legendarily loud voices beats a quick retreat to a quieter spot. Basically, in Sacred Harp singing, loud is good, and louder is better. And so you might hear singers say “good alto!” after being blasted out of their chairs by the low-timbred ladies.

**This music is for singers, not for listeners. And for amateur, untrained voices at that. We set our chairs in a hollow square; there’s no audience at our singings. We don’t rehearse, or perform; we sing as an end in itself.** For many of us, loud singing provides more catharsis, more instant gratification, more visceral pleasure, than controlled singing. (No wonder many early church leaders considered it sinful, despite the pious poetry of the songs.)

By the way, 18th-century composer William Billings himself was a practitioner of loud singing. Billings even suggested:

*“...if there happens to be a Number of greater Voices in the Concert than your own, they will swallow you up; therefore in such a case, I would recommend to you the resolution (tho’ not the impudence) of a discarded Actor, who after he had been twice hissed off the Stage, mounted again, and with great Assurance he thundered out these words ‘I will be heard.’”*

Keep Billings’s words in mind the next time you find your ears ringing at a Sacred Harp singing.

## **Why are people moving their arms up and down?**

This is one of the most baffling aspects of Sacred Harp singing for newcomers. The hand and arm motions are a traditional way of keeping time. When a person stands in the middle of the square to lead a song, he moves his arm to indicate the tempo to the rest of the class; other singers join in these peculiar-looking movements because it helps them keep the rhythm—and it can be fun. [See page 14.]

Here’s how it works. As Chicago alto Marcia Johnson has said, you can either march to most songs or waltz to them. If a song is written in 4/4 (march) time, the leader beats out **one-two-three-four**. She will bring her arm down for

the first two beats of a measure, then up for the last two beats. In 3/4 (waltz) time, the arm moves and stops halfway down on *one*, down further on *two*, and up on *three*. In all tempos, the hand is at its highest point at the top of a measure, and “jumps over” the measure bar. (See the diagrams on page 14 for more information, including tips on 6/4 and 6/8 time, which have the rhythm of a jig.)

Try beating time with the other singers; watch the leader or the front row of tenors to match your pace. It takes practice, but you’ll find it helps you follow the music.

***I noticed that the most confident, loud, experienced singers tend to sit in the front row at big conventions. But I wish I could sit next to someone who knows what he’s doing! Why don’t the experienced singers sit in the back and help the rest of us?***

Miss Grace Notes, etiquette expert, has an answer to this thorny question. “The front bench of any part,” she wrote in *The Chicago Sacred Harp Newsletter*, “can help the new [song leader] out, helps keep the beat for the entire class, sings out sure and strong, and generally helps to hold a singing together, to make it a memorable experience....they work hard keying songs, beating time, and keeping things on track.”

At large singings, where there are a number of strong singers on each part, the more experienced singers often rotate time on the front bench as a courtesy. They may on occasion invite new singers to sit with them. And of course some strong singers will wind up in the back rows because they come in late, don’t feel like working so hard, or want to help out new singers. But realize that strong voices are needed in the front rows, even at a small singing. The ease of shape-note singing allows inexperienced singers to get by on their own without relying on a strong voice nearby.

***Help! I opened the book to the page the leader called out, and I have no idea what’s going on!***

Don’t despair—most people have this reaction when they go to a singing the first time. Remember the melody (tenor part) is the staff just above the bass. Sit with the tenors and try to follow along. At a break in the singing, find someone who seems to know what he or she is doing and ask questions! We’ll be happy to help you. At home, sing along with Sacred Harp CDs, tapes, or videos. (YouTube has a lot of them.) Do persevere: shape notes have taught generations of Americans to sing without formal training.

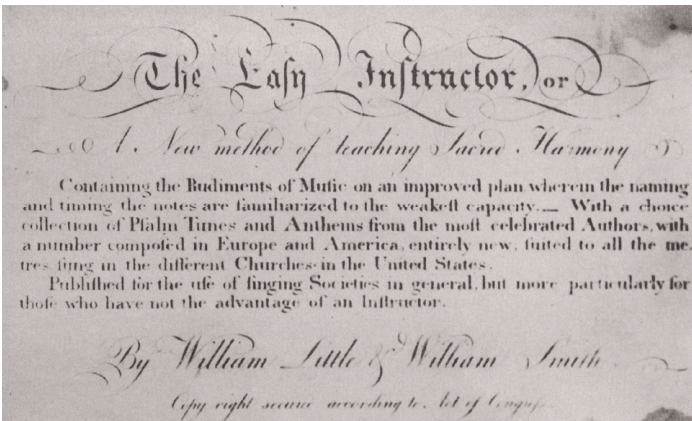


# The story of shape-note music

From New England to the West and South, nearly everyone in early America who learned to read vocal music did so using a system of shaped notes—different shapes for the notes of the scale—that has come to be known as “fasola” music. Our singings today reflect a rich tradition.

## Beginnings

The English used a four-note system centuries ago; a villain in Shakespeare’s 1605 *King Lear* sings “fa, sol, la, mi.” But they did not use noteheads of different shapes. A 1721 Boston music book placed the first letter of the four syllables on the music staff and used dots to indicate duration. But not until around 1800 did William Little and William Smith of Philadelphia introduce the four-shape system as a sight-reading aid in *The Easy Instructor*. It worked so well, others soon adopted it.



Title page, *The Easy Instructor*, 1802, Little and Smith. “Published for the use of singing Societies in general, but more particularly for those who have not the advantage of an Instructor.”

While the four-note system is the original and oldest shape-note system, seven-shape scales (using do-re-mi) were used in late-19th-century gospel music. The seven-shape system once eclipsed the four-note version, but it is our fa-sol-la that prevails today.

## “Why should the devil have all the good music?”

Many shape-note tunes are old folk melodies that made the passage from England, Ireland, Scotland, or Wales. Catchy songs were adapted by religious leaders and songmasters who asked “Why should the devil have all the good music?” They set pious lyrics to sprightly secular folk melodies and transposed pre-1800 revival songs to shape notation.

Familiar tunes, combined with the shaped notation for ease of reading, helped spread shape-note music in early America. Vigorous song accompanied religious revivals, and

tunes such as “Sweet Morning” rang out at camp meetings.

## Refuge in the South

In the early 1800s, ironically soon after the nation won its independence, this American folk music was slowly driven from its first home in New England by people who considered it too raw and coarse, preferring the “refinement” of European music. But shape-note singing took root in the rural South and the lower Midwest, where no such snobbery prevailed; revivals helped spread and preserve the music.

## Singing schools; the preservation of tradition

Before the Civil War, shape-note music was an important part of the social and religious life of rural America. Shape-note singing schools, held by itinerant singing masters in cabins, schools, and churches, taught thousands of families the rudiments of music in energetic *a cappella* three- and four-part harmony that delighted or dismayed all who heard it. According to one historian, young students “also used the singing-school as a place where they could make new friends, exchange notes, flirt, walk home together after lessons, and in general, enjoy themselves.”

After learning the basics of fasola, entire communities would gather for all-day singings. The largest of these frontier gatherings, which might last several days, were called “conventions.” By 1860, conventions sprouted in the South, and dozens of shape-note tunebooks were in print.

As remarkable economic and cultural changes in both North and South after the Civil War eroded much of rural American life, fasola declined to the point of being considered extinct. In 1935, however, scholar George Pullen Jackson revealed that thousands of traditional singers were still flourishing in the southern mountains, holding singing schools, all-day singings, and conventions. They sang from the 1844 *Sacred Harp*.

In recent years, fasola (now often called “Sacred Harp singing” after the surviving tunebook) has enjoyed a revival in its old territories, including New England and the Midwest. Participants sing the old way, facing each other in a hollow square, taking turns leading songs (anyone who wishes to lead may), and enjoying the fervent lyrics—mostly dating from the 18th century—set to primitive, powerful tunes using ancient scales, unusual voicings, and unexpected harmonies. Well-attended conventions are now held annually in the South, New England, California, Chicago, Washington D.C., Minnesota, Ohio, Missouri, Texas, and elsewhere (and not just the United States) as 21st-century singers rediscover part of their musical heritage.

# What's with those shapes?



Major scale: fa sol la fa sol la mi fa



Minor scale: la mi fa sol la fa sol la

“Help! What on earth are you singing?” We hear that pretty often when we “sing the notes” of our Sacred Harp tunes. If you’re a new singer confused by the shapes—whether you read conventionally printed music or not—here are a few tips. Also, see “Basics for new singers,” and “Sight-reading for absolute beginners” in this guide.

## Why we use shape notes

Around 1800, William Little and William Smith of Philadelphia devised a system to help people learn to read music. They figured it was easier to teach singers to understand a single musical key than to insist on their learning the intricacies of key signatures. Regardless of the key a song is written in, the intervals between shapes are the same. (See page 9 for an explanation.)

## What happened to do-re-mi?

You don’t have to be a *Sound of Music* fan to wonder why we use just four shapes instead of seven. Why not, say, a little deer for *do*, a sun for *re*.... Actually, some American tunebooks were written in seven shapes; *The New Harp of Columbia*, for example, is still used by singers in northeast Tennessee. But the four-shape system was easier for most people, and it’s more widely used than the seven-shape method today. The four syllables *fa*, *sol*, *la*, *mi* date back to the 10th century. (See “Why fa-sol-la?” on page 25.)

## So what do I do if I can’t sing the shapes?

To start out with, just sing “la” or even a grunting “uh” when everyone is singing the shapes. Then try mastering one shape at a time. For example, try singing “fa” on each triangular note, and “la” or the unintelligible sound of your choice on the other notes. Start with the slow songs, when you can really grab on to that *fa* for a long time; don’t worry about making mistakes. Then, when you feel more confident, choose a second shape and do the same thing, until you’ve made it through all four shapes. Practice singing along with tapes. Don’t worry about the fast songs; they’ll come to you in time.

## I can’t read regular music. Am I hopeless?


Far from it. In fact, even though the shapes seem weird to you now, you’ll probably find shape-note music much easier to read than conventional notation—no key signatures to worry about. (Your author here had faked her way through “round-note” sight-reading for twenty years before catching on with the shape-note method.)

If you have never even *tried* to read music before, you’re in luck: the shape-note method was designed for people just like you. Generations of Americans, many of them illiterate, learned to sing with shape-note books. Hang in there!

## How long until I know what I’m doing?

Well, that depends. The more you sing, the faster you’ll pick up the shapes. And some vocal parts tend to have easier patterns; basses will learn the tonic notes, *fa* in major-key songs and *la* in minor ones, in no time; altos will soon start to recognize the sequence *fa-sol-la* in major keys. Be patient with yourself; it may take several months before you feel comfortable singing the notes on slower songs. But before you know it, you’ll hear someone sing out the pitch, and you’ll instantly know what your note is. Then, you’ll encounter a new song and—surprise!—the shapes will guide you to sight-read the entire tune.

## Postscript for altos only: About the bass clef

When the alto part is written in the bass clef (  ), sing it an octave above where it’s written. The only reason some of the songs use the bass clef for the alto is to avoid the use of ledger lines (above or below the five-line staff) to keep the printed page as uncluttered as possible. You’ll find the shapes a tremendous help if you’re accustomed to reading only treble-clef parts.

# Anatomy of a Sacred Harp tune

## OLD HUNDRED. L.M.<sup>1</sup>

49<sup>2</sup>

"Sing, O ye heavens... shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest and every tree therein." -- Isa. 44:23.<sup>3</sup>

A Major New Version, 1696.<sup>5</sup>

Psaumes de David, 1551.<sup>6</sup>

1. Name of tune (Old Hundred) followed by the song's meter. *L.M.* stands for *long meter*; four lines, each with four iambic feet. Thus, the first line,

O *come* loud *an*thems *let* us *sing*  
(stressed syllables in *italic*)

The stressed syllables correspond to the accented beats—in this case, the first beat of each measure.

2. Page number.

3. *The Sacred Harp* includes a relevant Bible verse for each tune, selected by the composer when possible.

4. Key in which the song is written. This bears little relation to the key in which the song is actually sung. Sacred Harp singers traditionally key songs without a pitch pipe; a singer with a good ear will sound the notes of the first chord, trying to find a vocal range to make the song both interesting and comfortable. You can find the tonic, or key-note, in the last note of the bass part (*la*=minor, *fa*=major).

Old Hundred is written in A major. The shape-note major scale is

fa sol la fa sol la mi fa  
 ▽ ○ □ ▽ ○ □ ◇ ▽

For those who follow conventional music notation, the A major scale is

A B C# D E F# G# A  
 do re mi fa sol la ti do

The treble singers (top staff), tenor (third) and bass (bottom) all start out on the triangular *fa* (A); the altos (second staff) begin on the round *sol* note (E). The pitch person will sing out *fa* and *sol* to give the starting notes.

5. Poet(s) and year the words were written. Tunesmiths usually borrowed existing verses. They did (and do) not collaborate with "lyricists" à la Rodgers and Hammerstein. Many of the songs in *The Sacred Harp* share the same words, borrowed by different composers long before the days of copyright.

6. Composer and, when known, year the tune was written. Many tunes in *The Sacred Harp* are old folk melodies, unattributed and undatable.

7. Time signature. 2/2 means the song has two beats to a measure; a half note gets one beat. The song leader will bring his hand down on *one*, up on *two*.

8. Treble staff. A high harmony part, sung by people with soprano or high tenor voices in their preferred octaves.

9. Alto staff. Sung by women and others with voices uncomfortable with the highest notes. The alto part is not doubled by voices singing an octave down. If a tune omits the alto part, the altos usually sing the bass part an octave up.

10. Tenor, or lead, staff. In Sacred Harp, the tenors sing the melody. (You may know Old Hundred's melody as the doxology, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow.") People of all genders and vocal ranges sing tenor in their preferred octave(s). Song leaders face the tenor section and traditionally sing the tenor part when they lead, no matter what part they usually sing.

11. Bass staff. For the lowest voices. Written in bass clef. The bass part is not doubled by voices singing an octave up.

Are you stuck with the same part in Sacred Harp that you sing in other music? Do you have no clue where you belong? Is your part too high, too low, too *dull*? In other words. . .

## ***Do you have a vocal identity crisis?***

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This is for singers who come to Sacred Harp with experience singing in choirs, choruses, or other groups, even if it was back when the mighty stegosaurus ruled the plains. If you were an alto back then, maybe you figure you should sing alto in Sacred Harp; other parts likewise. But you might actually be singing the wrong part for your voice and pleasure.

Maybe if we called the tenor part “lead,” as many Southerners do, or even “the melody,” people wouldn’t figure they needed a set of pipes like Pavarotti to sing it—or, for that matter, a beard. Anyone can sing it in their high or low register, or jump from high to low and back again like certain people (such as your author here). Just remember, we sing most tunes at least a step below where they’re written. Sure, you see some singers turning purple and throwing their heads way back on the higher tenor notes, but think about it: if you look and sound like a walrus in distress on the low notes of the bass part, you would probably have a better time singing tenor, and your fellow singers will thank you for it.

We Yankees have a lot of fake basses who rightly belong in the tenor section. You would have more fun over there (the part is more interesting, after all). Somehow, though, a few Northerners have developed this macho bass mystique that the older traditional Southern singers thankfully lack. Now, if you are a true bass, I say God bless you and come sit where I can hear you. If you’re really a baritone, try singing tenor and see if you like it. And if you are on that bench because you think it’s more manly than singing one of the higher parts, where your voice naturally falls—well, get over it. Be your true self even if it takes you over to the treble section, where you can really show vocal courage.

You sopranos may have gravitated toward the treble section when you heard someone mention “high harmony,” or when you heard a beckoning shriek from a certain side of the room. But have you tried singing the tenor part in your usual high register? And guys, maybe you sang tenor in your choral days, or you sing it in a choir now—but if you’re a First Tenor, you should check out the treble part sometime. And if you’re shooting blanks every time the notes go above the staff, it’s off to the bass section with you.

I’d like to address the altos for a moment, for at any singing you can see plenty of newcomers asking to sit in the alto section because they *always* sang alto. Some choral

directors (especially of the high-school variety) banish to alto purgatory anyone who can’t do a passable Renée Fleming imitation on a high A. You may not be a true alto—you might just have a limited vocal range. Even if not, consider the peculiarities of altodom in Sacred Harp before you dismiss the possibility of singing tenor.

The Sacred Harp alto sound is completely different from that of—well, any music *this* alto has ever sung or heard. First, the good news: we rarely go as high as most choral alto parts. Now the bad news: our part is often dull (but you probably knew that already) and you must leave your Marlene Dietrich impersonation at home. Sacred Harp altos do not go for thrilling, sultry, rounded low tones. It’s more like grinding, wailing, ear-shattering low tones. One of the peculiarities of Sacred Harp is its characteristically piercing chest-voice alto (diplomatically called “having an edge to it”); if you sound sultry singing “Stratfield,” honey, you are definitely doing something wrong.

The most important thing to remember is: Sacred Harp should be fun. If you’re uncomfortable singing a part, or bored, or just curious, move around. You can always go back! If you feel that moving to another section would be silly since you’ve just started to learn your part to some of the songs—well, don’t do anything traumatic, but realize that you’re really not doing yourself a favor by staying put. If you know you’re in the right part, great. Even so, try sitting in the tenor section sometime (if you’re usually on one of the other parts) just so you can hear the melodies and how the other parts, including yours, fit them. Then you can slink back to your usual section, wiser.

### ***Why do Northern singers travel South?***

Because that’s where the best pecan pie is. It’s also the heart of our musical tradition. We want to sing with people who have attended singings all their lives, who keep the tunes in their souls in a way those of us who discover the music in adulthood cannot. Sacred Harp is a true American folk art, and we have much to learn from the Southern singers—black and white—the wonderful folk who have kept it alive.



# Intervals: The steps between notes

The word **interval** comes from the Latin *intervallus*: literally, the space between ramparts. In modern English, **interval** has come to mean the space between any two things, whether the space refers to distance, time, or sound.

The music in *The Sacred Harp* is written in standard notation, except that the notes appear in four different shapes (see illustration) — so the music is also called “shape note.” Itinerant early American tunesmiths and singing masters used this four-note system to teach sight reading to people without musical training.

Most of us first learned a seven-note “solfege” system: do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do. *The Sacred Harp* uses the old four-note English system: fa-sol-la-fa-sol-la-mi-fa.

With our shape-note system, there’s no need to worry about different keys. The shapes ingeniously indicate where the different pitches are. The interval between, say, any *fa* and the *la* above it is always the same.



**Intervals between shapes are the same in any key!**  
Here, *fa-las* in A major (treble clef, left) and G minor (bass clef, right). Note triangle *fa* and square *la*.

|           |            |           |           |            |           |           |           |
|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <b>Fa</b> | <b>Sol</b> | <b>La</b> | <b>Fa</b> | <b>Sol</b> | <b>La</b> | <b>Mi</b> | <b>Fa</b> |
| <b>1</b>  | <b>2</b>   | <b>3</b>  | <b>4</b>  | <b>5</b>   | <b>6</b>  | <b>7</b>  | <b>8</b>  |

C major scale, written to show how the shapes appear in different note durations. The colored type shows the musical steps between each note.

## First steps in sight reading for absolute beginners

A guide for (and by) the Musically Challenged, with a special tutorial for bass singers

If you are one of the unwashed millions, like your writer here, who is pretty much clueless when faced with a new piece of music, shape-note or otherwise, do not despair. Here is a strictly amateur method for learning some of the basic intervals (jumps between notes), with a little help from L. Frank Baum, Paul Simon, and the King.

Keep your copy of *The Sacred Harp* handy. (For a theoret-

ical introduction, read pages 17–20 of the rudiments.) Now sing out any note that’s comfortable to you, just like you’re keying your own song. This will be your tonic note, the FA that’s the base of the major scale. (If you want to sound all three tones of the major chord, as if you’re really keying, sing SAY CAN YOU SEE from *The Star Spangled Banner*. That’s FA-LA-SOL-FA. You get the full octave that way!)

|                                  |                                  |                                  |                                  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <p>fa sol la fa sol la mi fa</p> | <p>la mi fa sol la fa sol la</p> | <p>fa sol la fa sol la mi fa</p> | <p>la mi fa sol la fa sol la</p> |
| C major scale, treble staff      | A minor scale, treble staff      | C major scale, bass staff        | A minor scale, bass staff        |

shapes/notes  
in treble clef

interval

steps

What it sounds like

shapes/notes  
in bass clef

(Notes are shown in C major here, and in A minor below, but the intervals between shapes are the same no matter what key you're in.)



Second  
**FA-SOL**

1 whole

ARE YOU sleeping, are you sleeping, Brother John  
RETURN TOSENDER... ADDRESS UNKNOWN  
fa-fa fa sol-sol fa-fa fa-sol



Third  
**FA-LA**

2

OH HEAR THAT LONESOME (*I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry*)  
a-MAZ-ING grace (*melody*)



Fourth  
**FA-FA**

2-1/2

HERE COMES the bride LOVE ME tender  
WE'RE OFF to see the wizard  
SHOULD AULD acquaintance...



Fifth  
**FA-SOL**

3-1/2

TWINKLE, TWINKLE little star WILL GOD forever... (*Mear*)  
WISE MEN say only fools rush in  
(*I Can't Help Falling in Love with You*, Elvis Presley)



**BASSES:** This is a very common interval to start off bass parts of fugues! Check out *Oxford*, *Rose of Sharon*, *Morgan*, *Montgomery*. A lot of other fugues begin on the fifth (SOL) and jump to the FA above it (e.g., *Ninety-Fifth*, *Northfield*. *Exhortation*, *Sherburne*.) That interval is a fourth: HERE COMES the bride. See if this helps you find your first fugue notes.



Sixth  
**FA-LA**

4-1/2

IT CAME upon a midnight clear



Seventh  
**FA-MI**

5-1/2 or  
just 1/2  
down

BALI HAI; or, more commonly, starts on the high FA and dips  
down to the MI and back up again as in (*Are you*) LONESOME  
TONIGHT? (Elvis) or LIE-LA-LIE (refrain from *The Boxer*)



Octave  
**FA-FA**

6

SOME-WHERE over the rainbow



Let's try three common intervals in minor key songs. The tonic note for minor key songs is LA. So pick a pitch and sing it out. (Sing "Hello, darkness, my old..." from *The Sounds of Silence* to sound all three pitches: LA-FA-LA.)



minor Third  
**LA-FA**

1-1/2

Oh, I believe IN YES-terday (Beatles)  
HELLO DARKNESS (*Sounds of Silence*)  
ALAS my love (*Greensleeves*); also, WHAT CHILD is this



minor Third  
**LA-FA**

1-1/2

The interval between the higher LA down to the FA  
is also a minor third: Da-da-da-DAH  
(opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony)



Fourth  
**LA-SOL**

2-1/2

HERE COMES the bride  
SHOULD AULD acquaintance be forgot



Fifth  
**LA-LA**

3-1/2

TWINKLE, TWINKLE or YO-EE-OH, YO-OH  
(from *The Wizard of Oz*) GOD REST YE merry gentlemen  
This is one of the most common intervals in Sacred Harp  
minor key tunes. For example, basses can pick up their fugue  
notes for *Calvary* and *David's Lamentation* from the *Wizard of Oz*.



# Suggestions for song leading

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[From Becky Browne, a St. Louis singer.]

Recently, several new singers have approached me for advice about leading songs. Most have asked me to suggest specific songs that are easy to lead; some have wanted to know how to learn to lead fuguing tunes, which seem at first to be difficult. After drawing my inevitable initial blank, I began to think more carefully about what I look for when choosing a song to lead. Being fairly new to shape-note singing myself, I relate to and understand the concerns of the novice leader. I discussed my impressions with more experienced leaders, and here is what we came up with:

## 1. Attend local singings.

This is the very best place to practice your leading style. Make a point of attending every time—you are learning and need to sing, to observe other leaders, and to practice in an emotionally safe environment.

## 2. Attend as many conventions as you can.

If you can't attend in person, watch videotapes of conventions. Pay attention to what works; the best leaders will stand out. I suspect it might be useful to imitate the best leaders while you watch the tapes. Lead along with them, and see what feels right to you; try the same thing with audiotapes.

**3. Wherever you sing, beat time from your chair,** so you get used to singing and moving your arm at the same time. Unobtrusively point to the parts/sections as they join in a fuguing entrance.

## 4. The less experienced singer will probably feel more comfortable with 4/4 or 2/4 time.

Be sure to choose a song that begins on the first beat of the measure. There are lots of them.

## 5. Don't be afraid of fuguing tunes.

Some of these are very easy to lead. Look for tunes in which the parts/sections enter in order as you turn around the square—bass, tenor, treble, alto—at predictable times. Watch out for songs where the entrances are uneven (i.e., *New Jerusalem*, where the alto entrance is delayed). Remember that you are *not* required to cue each part. Many good leaders in the South and North simply beat time. To be on the safe side, however, you may want to (at least) nod at the basses when they begin the fugue.

**6. Don't feel obligated to sing every note when you're leading,** especially when you're just beginning. You certainly shouldn't feel that you must sing all the shapes. If

your signals are clear and easy to follow, no one will care if you're standing up there, silent, with an enraptured grin on your face.

## 7. Don't feel obligated to sing tenor when you lead.

I'm going to offend tradition with this suggestion. But this is too much to ask of a treble, alto, or bass who is new to shape-note singing, no matter how good a musician he or she is. If you grew up singing tenor in the back seat of Daddy's car on Sunday afternoon drives in the country, fine—sing tenor when you lead. The rest of us, I think, should accept our frailties and sing the parts we know. If you lead well, it probably doesn't matter that you're not singing tenor. Most singers would rather have you call an interesting song and sing alto than call something dull just because you know the tenor line. As your style matures, you may or may not decide to learn the tenor on songs you lead.

## 8. At small local singings, be daring.

Try out the hard ones. Stretch yourself. At conventions, be more conservative. Prepare yourself by having a list of a dozen or so songs you know you can lead without fainting. Don't depend on one or two songs, which could easily be called by the time it's your turn.

## 9. When all else fails, watch the front row tenors and do what they do.

I'm not going to make suggestions about the mechanics of leading—for that, you need to attend a singing school or spend a lot of time observing carefully at conventions. I also don't think I can address what techniques or qualities give a person an exceptional style of leading. I have the feeling that leading, like teaching, is less an art or science than it is a relationship, the way you connect with the music, the singers, and yourself. I'm not going to list songs I think are easy to lead. If you follow these suggestions, you will soon have your own list. The most important thing about selecting songs is exactly the same as the most important thing about life—do what you love. Choose what you love. If you love a song, you will learn it. You will lead it well, and through your love you will enrich the lives of us all.

# Leading your first tunes

Here's a nightmare that may visit new Yankeeland leaders: You call a tune—let's say Primrose, page 47—and you hear a groan from the altos while a few trebles roll their eyes. You get flustered, you have a hard time concentrating while you're standing in the center of the square, and you slink back to your chair afterwards. Some well-meaning singer tells you, "Oh, it's just that a few people are tired of that tune." Well, how were you supposed to know? You heard it for the first time just a few months ago, liked it, figured it wasn't too hard—in fact, it was the perfect choice, or so you thought until your turn came.

Or: After your name is called, you open up the *Sacred Harp* at random to page 518, Heavenly Anthem. Aha, you think, I've never heard this one before! Nobody's going to be sick of this! True enough. But now the basses are scratching their heads, a couple tenors sigh, and someone calls out, "Are you *sure* that's the one you want?"

OK, I made that up. But things like that happened to me (never in the South, by the way). The truth is, plenty of new singers are intimidated, and the problem is with their rude fellow singers, not with them.

You may feel your tune choices are limited by what you know, like, and feel comfortable trying. And no, you need not canvass your group to discern which songs are considered boring, which are too complex, which are neither boring nor complex but somebody hates anyway, and then figure out what you can possibly lead—and hope that someone else doesn't pick that song before it's your turn.

So what *are* you going to lead, anyway?

Songs in 4/4 or 2/4 time are easiest, especially those that start with a note, not with a rest. Best of all are short tunes without a repeat, so if you get really nervous you won't have to stay up there long. Plan on leading just one or two verses.

The first 100 pages of *The Sacred Harp* have some good choices. Pick a song you like! And even though singers traditionally sing the tenor part while leading, if you aren't a tenor just sing the part you know. Lots of experienced singers do.

There's a built-in leading aid few beginners exploit fully: the front bench of the tenor section. If you're nervous, have a word with one of the front tenors before you start your tune. Ask him or her to beat time with you. If you get lost, just keep an eye on this person and let his hand motions

guide you. Even if you don't say anything to the tenors, remember they help the whole singing; follow their lead and things will be easy for you.

Here is a short list of some easy tunes. This is *not* a list of favorites I'm trying to get people to lead more often! It's just a place to start your "middle of the square" experience. Please know you're welcome to stand next to another leader during his or her turn, or to ask someone to lead with you.

*A far-from-comprehensive list, limited by space and the author's brain capacity, of suggested tunes for beginning leaders:*

**2/4 or 4/4; doesn't start with a rest; no repeats:**

28, Aylesbury  
28b, Wells  
30, Love Divine\*  
37b, Liverpool  
38b, Windham  
52b, Charlestown  
56, Columbiana  
70, Gainsville\*  
128, The Promised Land

**2/4 or 4/4, starts with a rest, but pretty easy:**

31b, Webster  
32, Corinth  
32b, Distress  
34b, St. Thomas  
38, Winter  
39b, Sharpsburg  
47, Primrose  
49, Old Hundred\*\*  
52, Albion  
63, Coronation  
111b, To Die No More  
159, Wondrous Love\*\*

**ADVANCED BEGINNERS**

**2/4 or 4/4, has a repeat (some optional), and maybe a rest, but still pretty easy:**

39, Detroit  
42, Clamanda  
60, Day of Worship  
61, Sweet Rivers  
69, Minister's Farewell  
70b, Save, Mighty Lord  
72, The Weary Soul  
72b, Bellevue  
73, Cusseta  
77, The Child of Grace

81, Beach Spring  
82, Bound for Canaan  
83, Vale of Sorrow  
87, Sweet Canaan  
89, The Church's Desolation  
90, Look Out  
101, Bower of Prayer  
102, Fulfillment  
106, Ecstasy  
108b, The Traveler  
111, Journey Home  
114, Saint's Delight  
117, Babylon is Fallen  
121, Florence  
122, All Is Well  
123, The Dying Christian  
123b, Cross of Christ  
126, Babel's Streams  
128, The Promised Land  
148, Jefferson  
479, Chester

**3/2 or 3/4, starts with a rest:**

29b, Tribulation  
31, Ninety-Third Psalm  
45, New Britain\*\*  
47b, Idumea  
49b, Mear  
56b, Villulia  
68b, Ortonville  
138b, Ogletree  
147, Boylston  
163b, China\*  
503, Lloyd

*\*The treble or tenor part of these songs goes pretty high, so try not to lead these until after everyone's had a chance to warm up their vocal cords, but not too late in the day when we're too tired.*

*\*\*Old chestnuts, but good backups in case someone calls your other tunes, since you probably know them already.*



## ... and some final leading suggestions

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### **An old show-business tip**

Leave 'em wanting more... it applies to Sacred Harp leading and not just vaudeville or the Johnny Velcro lounge lizard set. Nothing slows a singing down like an interminable tune. Even if you are leading a song you simply love, remember it's better to leave your fellow singers wishing the song had gone on longer than to have them silently (or not) begging you to stop.

### **So how many verses should I sing?**

Once again the erudite Miss Grace Notes, etiquette maven, has good advice. "Just as the class has a responsibility to follow the leader's choice and direction, *the leader has a responsibility not to induce tedium*," she writes. The combination of too many verses or repeats and a slow beat can be lethal to a singing.

If a song is short—half a page, say, like "Fairfield" on the top of page 29—you can get away with three verses. Just don't drag the tempo. On a fuguing tune, consider omitting the repeat on the notes. And repeat only on the last verse.

## **Tips on beating time**

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
As we mentioned on pages 4 and 5, few things confuse people more at their first singings than the hand motions used to keep time. The song leader has to set the pace and should beat time clearly while standing in the center of the square. Many singers also keep time while seated, and you might want to do so to help follow the music and to prepare yourself for song leading.

When leading, Southerners' movements tend to be restrained; their arms rarely move below the waist. Remember that this is the tradition we seek to emulate and pass on, despite the occasional Northerner who knocks the altos off their chairs with his wild backstroke, seems to be conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, or looks as if he's attempting flagless semaphore. Likewise, when not leading, traditional Southern singers are more likely to beat time only when needed to follow the song or (especially front-bench tenors) to help the leader. Yankees tend to engage in recreational time-beating—nothing wrong with that, as long as a flurry of vigorous tomahawk chops doesn't knock books out of hands or glasses off heads. Leading or sitting, it's both traditional, and easier, to keep your movements simple.

On an old standard like "New Britain" (Amazing Grace) or "Wondrous Love," realize that a number of singers have sung this song repeatedly for years, and while they will be happy to indulge your selection, they will be less than thrilled at having to sing more than two verses.

In general, remember that your song is not only a special opportunity for you, but part of the flow of the day's singing. Help everyone have fun. Be judicious.

### **Repeat performance: how to sing, and signal, repeats**

Good singers watch the leader for clear cues in singing repeats. Look up from your book and watch the leader when you come to a repeat sign (  or  ), or you may find yourself doing a solo or getting lost.


When you're leading, don't just announce the repeat. Signal it with your hand while beating time. If you're repeating, keep beating time *without hesitation*. Any pause may be taken as an indication that you're finished. To stop the song, "stop your time," as traditional singers say; just keep your hand up, again without hesitation. Some singers hold their palm forward, as if giving a "halt" signal to the tenors. Try it and see if it gives you more control.

### **How it's done**

The following comments will assume you know the difference between, say, half and quarter notes, that you know what rests and measures are, and that you can locate time signatures. If not, turn to pages 14–16 of the "Rudiments of Music" in *The Sacred Harp* for a good explanation.

Sacred Harp tunes fall into three categories: *common time* (2/2, 2/4, 4/4 time—tunes you could march to), *triple time* (3/2 and 3/4—tunes you could waltz to), and *compound time* (6/4 and 6/8—tunes you could jig to). Different hand motions let Sacred Harp singers keep the beat in all three types of songs with minimum fuss.

Whatever the time signature, think of the vertical measure bars as signposts at a series of hills to be scaled as you travel through the song. Your hand follows the motion of this travelling. And, as with hill travel, **your hand will be at the highest point at the top of each measure.**

First, look at the time signature for the tune; for example, turn to "Liverpool" on the bottom of page 37. It's written in 4/4 time, meaning that there are four notes to the measure, and a quarter note (  ) gets one beat.

# Tips on beating time, continued

## The basic motion: common-time tunes

In most 4/4 songs, in each measure your hand will come down on the first two quarter notes (or their equivalent), then back up on the second two, so it's back at the highest point—the top of the hill—at the next measure bar. 2/2 time uses a similar motion, but is slower.

Let's travel through Liverpool, a 4/4 tune.

HAND MOTIONS

1-2 3 4 1-2 3-4 1 2 3-4 1 2 3 4

## One-two-three, one-two-three: triple time

You can beat time to tunes written in 3/2 or 3/4 more easily than you probably think. Remember that you're trying to capture the waltz rhythm of *one-two-three*, *one-two-three*, with the accent on the first note of the measure.

Turn to "Villulia" on the bottom of page 56.

HAND MOTIONS

1-2 3 1 2-3 1-2 3 1 2-3 1-2 1-2 3

This is a 3/4 tune—three notes to a measure; a quarter-note gets one beat. Your hand stops partway down on the first beat, further down on the second, and back up to the top on the third. In this case, the tune starts out with a half-note (equal to two quarter-notes, or the first two beats), followed by two eighth-notes (equal to one quarter-note; the last, third, beat). Your hand comes down at the top of the first measure, down further halfway through that first half-note, then back up on the two eighth-notes.

## Compound time

Many Sacred Harp tunes in 6/4 or 6/8 time show Irish or Scottish roots, with sprightly melodies that could easily be played on a penny whistle or fiddle. Beating time for these songs is simple—they get two beats, just like 4/4 tunes!

For an example, turn to "Sweet Prospect" on page 65.

HAND MOTIONS

1-2 3 4 5 6 1-2 3 4-5 6 1-2-3 4-5-6

The notes are divided into two sets of three quarter-notes: **one-two-three/four-five-six**; your hand comes down on the first set, then up on the second. Don't divide the tune into three sets of two notes; it will be choppy and all wrong.

## Variations: beating "in four"

Occasionally a leader will announce "I want to beat this in four" before a 4/4 tune. This means *every* quarter note gets a separate arm motion; the song will be slower than if it were beaten in the usual two. The resultant hand motion is L-shaped: down (1), left (2), right (3), up (4).

## When a tune starts with a rest

Many new leaders—and not a few experienced ones—get confused when the song has a rest at the beginning. The problem is that the leader has to signal that the song is starting—but it's not starting at the top of the measure (or hill, to revert back to our analogy). Instead it's starting midway (on the slope or in the valley). For example, "Old Hundred" on page 49:

O come, loud an-thems let us sing, Loud thanks to

There are two ways to convey the rest.

(Traditional, approved) Method 1: Start with your hand at the top, bring it down while staying silent during the rest, then bring it back up as you sing the first note.

(Irregular but commonly used) Method 2: Start with your hand at the bottom. Your first hand motion is up, to mark the first note.

In both methods, your hand will be raised—on top of the musical hill—when you get to the beginning of second measure, and you will be ready to continue through the remainder of the song.

# Why fa-sol-la?

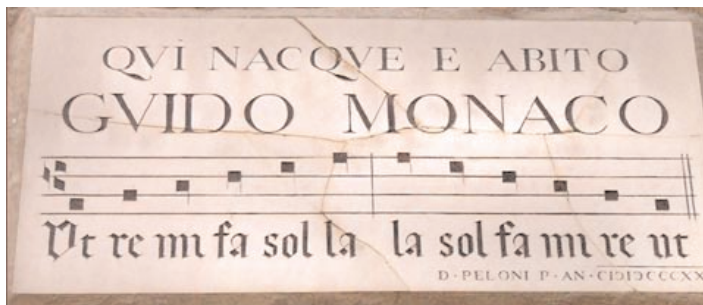
by Sam Hinton and Lisa Grayson

Guido d'Arezzo was a Benedictine monk who taught music in France and Italy in the eleventh century. He noticed that his fellow monks had difficulty memorizing the chants that were at the heart of their worship service, and he devised teaching systems that are still applied in all types of Western music today, including shape-note singing.



In Guido's time, music theory called for a scale consisting of overlapping six-tone sequences known as *hexachords*. Guido thought that, as a teaching aid, syllables could be applied to the six tones, and he took the syllables from the *Hymn to St. John* (the tune of which may have been his own composition.)

The beginning tone in each of the first six lines of this hymn was one scale-step above the preceding one, and Guido simply used the Latin word or syllable on each of these tones as his scale-designating syllables. The Latin words went like this: *UT queant laxis / REsonare fibris. / MIra gestorum. / FAMuli tuorum. / SOLve polluti, / LABii reatum, / Sancte Ioannes.* ("That with relaxed voices they servants may sing the wonders of thy deeds Cleanse the sin from their polluted lips, O Holy John.") So the syllables for the hexachord became UT, RE, MI, FA, SOL, and LA.



A plaque honoring Guido in his hometown of Arezzo shows both his six-syllable system (note "fa sol la") and his four-line musical staff.

Hexachords had to begin on C or G or, by introducing a lowered B (B-flat; our sign for a flat is the lower-case "b") on F. Complete scales, with the seventh and everything, could be obtained by moving from the low G hexachord through the middle C hexachord to the high G hexachord. Thus, the scale runs FA, SOL, LA, FA, SOL, LA, MI, FA.

(Hyphens in the letter names show half-steps.)

|                    |    |    |    |    |     |    |    |     |    |    |    |
|--------------------|----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|
| Letter names       | G  | A  | B- | C  | D   | E- | F  | G   | A  | B- | C  |
| High "G" Hexachord |    |    |    |    |     |    |    | UT  | RE | MI | FA |
| "C" Hexachord      |    |    |    | UT | RE  | MI | FA | SOL | LA |    |    |
| Low "G" Hexachord  | UT | RE | MI | FA | SOL | LA |    |     |    |    |    |

(About 600 years later, the importance of the leading tone, or seventh, was formally recognized, and the syllable SI, from the initials of *Sancte Ioannes*, added, which became "MI" in the *Sacred Harp's* four-syllable system and "TI" in the conventional scale we know from "DO, a Deer." Later still, the unsingable UT was replaced by the more resonant DO.)

Around 1025, Guido d'Arezzo created a musical notation system using a four-line staff (see plaque photo at left), which has evolved into the five-line system used today.



Guido even created a method to teach the musical syllables by pointing to sections of the hand. He assigned pitches to the joints and sections of fingers, then pointed to the spot and had the singers sing that note.\* In the illustration of the "Guidonian Hand" at left, each symbol represents a different pitch.

Guido became famous for his teaching techniques, and demonstrated them to Pope John XIX in 1028.

Incidentally, the lowest UT was identified with a Greek letter as GAMMA-UT. Eventually this came to mean "the whole scale starting with gamma-ut," and that became the word *gamut*, meaning the whole range of anything.

\*Watch and hear Professor William Mahrt demonstrate Guido d'Arezzo's "hand" in action: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RlleweQuq14>

# The true Sacred Harp

Clarke Lee of Hoboken, Georgia, wrote about the true meaning of Sacred Harp singing in a March 1996 letter to Steven Levine of Minneapolis. The following is an edited version, printed with permission.

When you learn all the book has to offer, you still need to go one step farther, you must go beyond the book to truly experience Sacred Harp. To me Sacred Harp is the truest and purest form of religion that I have ever experienced. The Sacred Harp song book has songs, hymns, melodies, and all the wonderful glories of its own self, yet to get to the heart of the matter, I believe we must sing spiritually. I say that Sacred Harp is religion in its purest form because it has no boundaries. There are no set rules that one must go by that are restrictive to the spiritualism of this music. There are no restrictions in this art of love. To really see and understand this, I think one must have come under rules and regimens that don't always let you follow your own heart and mind. Then, when you are in the deepest pits of despair, to be set free in the glory of Sacred Harp. Here, there is no one telling you what you should see, hear, feel, or experience in Sacred Harp, only sharing their own experiences with one another. You have only to follow your own heart and soul and see where the spirit will take you.

It is not restricted in its expression or depth of feeling. It is like unto the Love of God, immeasurable and unbounded. I believe that Sacred Harp is one of the ways that poor dying men and women find true religion and undefiled it is. Not regimented by someone else's interpretation but by the interpretation of each heart as it is lifted up or cast down.

Each heart is given the freedom to fly and soar at its own altitude and is overwhelmed by the experience, hence the need to shed tears of joy, repentance, Love, faith, grief and whatever other reasons there might be. When a song is sung that has special meaning or ties of memory to a heart, it constricts the heart with cords of love, and through this constriction, the heart finds relief by the shedding of tears. The shedding of tears is not always an outward physical emotion. I believe that there are more tears shed in the heart that never see the passing glance of mere mortals, than are seen by nature.

What a wonderful joy to share with one another, the innermost feelings of the heart, and how overwhelming it all is sometimes. It is a great joy to be with others who feel and express their feelings, and share with others the joys and griefs of their own experiences of Sacred Harp, in their own way, without trying to make others see and believe as they do.

Sacred Harp accepts with open arms and hearts all who will come to it and share in its life giving sounds and harmonies. Sacred Harpers are bound together by the Love and Fellowship that are to be found where ever the Children of God are gathered together. Whether the number be great or small it only takes an open and receptive heart to be enjoined in this Love. One doesn't have to have a beautiful voice or monumental knowledge. Although we love to hear beautiful voices joined together in harmony, it is the beauty of loosing themselves in the freedom of the spirit, and letting their hearts rise and soar to regions unknown by others, yet feeling that there are kindred spirits flying with them.

I believe that it is only within one's own heart that the true sacredness of Sacred Harp is found. Where each must worship as they see and feel, without the restrictions that we put on ourselves by the nature of practice or ritual of religion.

## **Sacred Harp conventions in the U.S.: An extremely abbreviated list**

*Sacred Harp singers gather at day- or weekend-long "conventions" throughout the year. Try to attend one as soon as you can. They're free! For a complete and up-to-date listing, including conventions outside the U.S., please check [www.fasola.org](http://www.fasola.org).*

- California State:** 3rd Sunday in January and Sat. before
- Ohio State:** 3rd Sunday in February and Saturday before
- Missouri State and Western Massachusetts:** Both, 2nd Sunday in March and Saturday before
- Georgia State:** 4th Sunday in March and Saturday before
- Potomac River:** 1st Sun. in April and Sat. before (varies)
- State Line/Antioch** (Wooten family, Alabama): 2nd Sunday in April (Antioch); Saturday before (State Line)
- Midwest Convention** (Chicago): Usually the second fifth Sunday and Sat. before, unless that weekend is after the Fourth of July, in which case the convention will be held on Memorial Day weekend.
- Holly Springs, Georgia:** 1st Sun. in June and Sat. before
- Michiana** (Goshen, Indiana): Saturday before the 3rd Sunday in July
- Kalamazoo** (Michigan): 3rd Sunday in July
- National Convention** (Birmingham, Alabama): Thursday, Friday, and Saturday before the 3rd Sunday in June
- United Convention** (site varies): 2nd Sunday in September and the Saturday before
- Minnesota State:** 4th Sunday in September and the Saturday before.
- Alabama State:** 4th Sunday in November and Sat. before.



# Find a singing near you

If you have downloaded this guide directly from the Internet, please note the Web links below for several local Sacred Harp groups. These links are subject to change. Check [www.fasola.org](http://www.fasola.org) to get updated information, or if no listing appears for your area.

## AUSTRALIA

<https://sacredharpastralia.com/>

## CANADA

Montreal:

[www.facebook.com/groups/montrealsacredharpingsers](http://www.facebook.com/groups/montrealsacredharpingsers)

Ottawa: <http://ottawashapenote.org>

Toronto: <http://torontoshapenote.org/wordpress>

Vancouver: [www.fasola.org/groups/vancouver/](http://www.fasola.org/groups/vancouver/)

**GERMANY** General: [www.sacredharp.de](http://www.sacredharp.de)

Berlin: <https://www.sacredharpberlin.de>

Bremen: [www.sacredharpbremen.org](http://www.sacredharpbremen.org)

Frankfurt am Main:

<http://sacredharpfrankfurt.weebly.com/termine.html>

Hamburg: <http://sacredharphamburg.weebly.com/>

Munich/München:

[www.facebook.com/groups/781551348597002/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/781551348597002/)

Nuremberg/ Nürnberg:

[www.facebook.com/groups/397320923953301/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/397320923953301/)

## IRELAND and NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast: [www.facebook.com/groups/belfastsacredharp/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/belfastsacredharp/)

Cork: <http://corksacredharp.com/>

Dublin: [www.facebook.com/groups/sacredharpdublin/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/sacredharpdublin/)

## JAPAN

Tokyo: <https://tokyosacredharp.blogspot.com/> (in Japanese)

**POLAND:** <http://sacredharp86.org/home/> (last updated in 2019)

**UK** General: [www.ukshc.org](http://www.ukshc.org)

Brighton: <https://brightonshapenote.weebly.com/>

London: <http://londonsacredharp.org>

Newcastle: <https://newcastlesacredharp.co.uk>

Scotland: <https://shapenotescotland.weebly.com/>

## USA

**Alabama:** See [www.fasola.org/singings/](http://www.fasola.org/singings/)

**Arizona:** (Tucson) [www.tucsonfasola.org/](http://www.tucsonfasola.org/)

**Arkansas:** [www.angelfire.com/ar3/fasola/index.html](http://www.angelfire.com/ar3/fasola/index.html)

**California:**

LA: <https://fasola-la.org>

San Diego: [www.sdfasola.org/](http://www.sdfasola.org/)

SFBay: [www.fasola.org/bayarea/](http://www.fasola.org/bayarea/)

**Colorado:** [www.sacredharpcolorado.org/](http://www.sacredharpcolorado.org/)

**Connecticut:** <https://ynhrs.yale.edu/>

**DC:** <https://dcshapenote.squarespace.com/>

**Georgia:**

Atlanta: [www.atlantasacredharp.org/](http://www.atlantasacredharp.org/)

Savannah: [www.savannahsacredharp.com/](http://www.savannahsacredharp.com/)

**Illinois:**

Chicago, general: <http://chicagosingings.org/>

Central IL: see [www.fasola.org/singings/](http://www.fasola.org/singings/)

**Indiana:**

NW: see [www.fasolamichigan.org](http://www.fasolamichigan.org)

Lafayette/Kokomo: [www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100067948008973&ref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100067948008973&ref=ts)

Bloomington: [www.bloomingtonsacredharp.org](http://www.bloomingtonsacredharp.org)

**Iowa:** [www.sacredharpiowa.org/](http://www.sacredharpiowa.org/)

**Kansas:** (Lawrence) [www.kawshapenote.org/](http://www.kawshapenote.org/)

**Kentucky:** <https://www.facebook.com/ekyshapenote/>

Lexington: [www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/fasola.html](http://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/fasola.html)

Louisville: <https://sites.google.com/site/ohiovalleyshapes2/>

**Maine:** [www.maineshapenotesinging.org/](http://www.maineshapenotesinging.org/)

**Massachusetts:**

Boston: <https://sites.google.com/site/bostonsacredharp>

Western MA: [www.wmshc.org/](http://www.wmshc.org/)

**Michigan:** [www.fasolamichigan.org](http://www.fasolamichigan.org)

**Minnesota:** <http://mnfasola.org/>

**Missouri:**

Columbia: <http://columbiasfasola.missouri.org/>

St. Louis: [www.stlfasola.org/](http://www.stlfasola.org/)

**Montana** (Missoula): <http://missoulafolk.org/>

**Nebraska:** [www.singreadplay.com/omahashapenote.html](http://www.singreadplay.com/omahashapenote.html)

**New England, general:** [www.neconvention.net/](http://www.neconvention.net/)

**New Jersey:** [www.princeton.edu/~gibney/SacredHarp/](http://www.princeton.edu/~gibney/SacredHarp/)

**New York:**

Albany: [www.albanysacredharp.org](http://www.albanysacredharp.org)

NYC/Brooklyn: <http://brooklynysing.vocis.com/>

NYC/Manhattan: <http://nycsacredharp.org> (last updated 2018) and <http://nycsacredharp.org> (last updated 2011)

**North Carolina:** [www.ncshapenote.org](http://www.ncshapenote.org)

**Ohio:** General: <https://ohiosacredharp.ej345.com/>

Dayton: <http://daytonsacredharp.org>

Cincinnati: [www.facebook.com/groups/50456888847](http://www.facebook.com/groups/50456888847)

Columbus: <https://columbussacredharp.org>

**Oregon:**

Eugene: [www.eugenescacredharp.org/](http://www.eugenescacredharp.org/)

Portland: <http://portlandsacredharp.org/>

Salem: [www.salemsacredharp.org/](http://www.salemsacredharp.org/)

**Pennsylvania:** General: <http://pennsylvaniasacredharp.com/>

NE PA: [www.folkloresociety.org/page2.html](http://www.folkloresociety.org/page2.html)

State College: [www.statecollegesacredharp.com/](http://www.statecollegesacredharp.com/)

**Rhode Island:** [www.ri-sacredharp.net/](http://www.ri-sacredharp.net/)

**South Carolina:** <http://iveyt.people.cofc.edu/Shapenote/>

**Tennessee:**

Nashville: <http://sacredharpnashville.org/>

East TN: [www.oldharp.org/](http://www.oldharp.org/)

**Texas:** [www.texasfasola.org/](http://www.texasfasola.org/)

**Utah:** [www.utahsacredharp.org/](http://www.utahsacredharp.org/)

**Vermont:** [www.vtshapenotesingers.com/](http://www.vtshapenotesingers.com/)

**Virginia:**

Charlottesville: <http://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/charlottesvillesacredharp/>

Shen. Valley: <http://shapenotes.homestead.com/files/villadelre/localnews.html>

**Washington:** See <http://pnwshs.org>

**Wisconsin:** [www.wifasola.org](http://www.wifasola.org)

## Further reading and listening

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**Tunebook.** *The Sacred Harp*, The Sacred Harp, 1991 edition (Denson Revision). Available at local singings or online (<https://originalsacredharp.com/ordering-the-sacred-harp/>). One to five books are available for \$25 each, including shipping. For bulk orders and more information, check the website above, or e-mail [ordering@originalsacredharp.com](mailto:ordering@originalsacredharp.com). **The Sacred Harp Publishing Company plans to publish a new edition in 2025.**

**Social media.** There are several active Facebook pages, including Sacred Harp Friends (for general discussions) and local groups (see page 17 links).

**Sacred Harp history.** Buell E. Cobb, Jr.'s gracefully written *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (University of Georgia Press, 1989) is a fine account, although the book obviously doesn't include developments after its publication date. The list price is \$22.95; ISBN 0-8203-2371-3. Order through local independent bookstores or Amazon.

*The Makers of the Sacred Harp*, by David Warren Steel and Richard Hulan (University of Illinois Press, 2010), provides historical context for the music and texts in *The Sacred Harp*, and biographical notes on important musical figures. ISBN: 978-0-252-07760-9. Order through local bookstores, Amazon, or <http://originalsacredharp.com/>.

**DVDs, CDs, tapes, and videos.** A good place to start is "Awake My Soul: The Story of the Sacred Harp," featuring interviews with singers from around the country. This

beautiful 2007 film by Matt and Erica Hinton is available on DVD. To order the film or the CDs, see [www.awake-mysoul.com](http://www.awake-mysoul.com).

New singers can learn a lot from recordings of actual singings. (They're excellent companions on car trips, too.) You can find early 20th-century albums (including the Alan Lomax collection) to contemporary ones. The online guide maintained by Steven Sabol and Warren Steel, [www.fasola.org/resources](http://www.fasola.org/resources), has a great list of recordings. Publishers' direct links include [www.awakemysoul.com](http://www.awakemysoul.com) and [www.alabamafolklife.org](http://www.alabamafolklife.org), among many others.

YouTube is an excellent source for recordings from around the world; two good introductions include [www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1hueU\\_blvU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1hueU_blvU) from AL.com and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaLnG7vfVOc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaLnG7vfVOc), a story by [awake.com](http://www.awake.com) (originally on the Pop Goes the Culture channel) that includes the memorable voiceover comment, "Most of these voices would get booted off of American Idol in a second."

**News and comment:** The Sacred Harp Publishing Company produces an online newsletter; see <http://originalsacredharp.com/>. You can subscribe to electronic discussion groups at <http://www.fasola.org/community/lists/>.

**For an excellent, comprehensive on-line guide** to all things Sacred Harp, check out **[www.fasola.org](http://www.fasola.org)**. History, tips, recordings, arguments—you'll find it here.

## A note from your local singers

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Groups that hand out this guide are free to add their schedules, contacts, and convention details.