



What is Sacred Harp singing?

Sacred Harp singing, sometimes called shape-note singing or fasola singing, is early American sacred music that is sung a capella. This uniquely American music is a product of the singing school movement that started in 18th century New England. Singing masters traveled from town to town teaching the rudiments of music and selling tunebooks. As European notation (round notes) was adopted in the north, shape note singing spread south and west into the new, developing nation. Sacred Harp singing was preserved in the South in community singings held in rural churches, courthouses, and other community meeting places. It is now enjoying a nationwide revival because of the beauty of the harmonies, the wonderful poetry, and the sheer joy of singing this music.

The music is based on traditional folk tunes and church hymns. You will see poetry texts by such familiar writers as Isaac Watts, John Newton, and Charles Wesley. In the 1800s there were dozens of different oblong shape-note books in circulation including the tunebook we use, *The Sacred Harp, 1991 Edition*. *The Sacred Harp* has been continuously in publication since 1844.

Where should I sit?

The “singing class” is organized into four parts: treble (top staff), alto (second staff), tenor (third staff), and bass (bottom staff). Singers sit according to parts, forming a “hollow square” with each part facing the center.

Both men and women sing treble and tenor, in their own octave, thus producing a six-part effect. The melody is considered to be in the tenor, though the other “harmony” parts sometimes seem to have their own melody as well. Beginning singers may feel more comfortable singing the tenor part at first, but should feel free to move around to the other parts to determine what part best matches your singing range. Experienced singers sit in the front row of each part.

Why do we sing “the notes” or “the shapes”?

Before singing the words, the tradition calls for “singing the notes.” That is, all parts first sing through the tune by singing the shape-notes. The original purpose for this was as a teaching aid.

If you are first tripped up by the shape-notes, don’t worry. If you wish, you may start with singing all the notes on ‘LA’. As you are singing, mentally pinch yourself when you see the square shaped note (LA). Then look for the diamond shaped note (MI); then the triangle shaped note (FA); and then the round shaped note (SOL). Learning them is part of the tradition. However, do not let this detract from the enjoyment of singing these wonderful old tunes. The notes will come in time. Remember that even the very experienced singers miss some notes.

For more information on Sacred Harp singing, see www.fasola.org, or send your question to David@DavidIvey.com. If you would like to be on the Huntsville email list, please send your email address to David@DavidIvey.com.