



HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

An exploration of the practice of Sacred Harp Singing



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BEREA COLLEGE
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Imagine yourself walking into a little white chapel nestled in the heart of a hollow in the deep backwoods somewhere in the Southeastern part of the United States. You enter the sanctuary and see chairs and benches arranged in a peculiar way. As you begin to ask yourself what you've stumbled upon members of the congregation, as well as visiting individuals, begin to filter into the church and take their places in the odd formation of the sanctuary. What you do not realize is that you have walked straight into the middle of a religion practice that is as old as some of the hymns sang in the region known as Sacred Harp Singing. Sacred Harp singing, or shape note singing as it is alternatively called, is a practice that allowed for worship and praise in a multitude of ways, including Camp Meetings and Conventions, individual's lyrical expression of hymns, and body movements which evoke the ultimate sense of connection with God.

In order for one to fully understand what Sacred Harp singing is, the background and history of this practice must be explained. The earliest attempts at shape note singing can be traced back to eleventh century Italy when a monk by the name of Guido d'Arezzo composed a hymn in Latin which was designed to allow individuals to sight read music with little to no difficulty. Each line of the hymn contained the seven scale pitches, ut, ray, me, fa, sol, la, and do.¹ These interval pitches would be sung out at the beginning of each musical phrase to give an idea of the melody and harmonies. After the religious reformations in Europe, the Protestant Church of England wished for more formalized music containing harmony and rhythm. By 1700, this wish had progressed into a reality as singing schools began to become popular in America.² Singing schools existed to teach individuals how to properly sing in a church. Churches needed

¹ *Awake, My Soul. Disc #1.* Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD.

² *Awake, My Soul. Disc #1.* Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD.

musically literate singers in them so the quality of the music would improve from that of the old world style which they left in order to freely practice worship through music in a way which was frowned upon by classically trained musicians in Europe.³ As singing schools became more popular, the teachers of these schools wanted to be able to teach and sing more elaborate pieces of music than just the twelve hymns that they had previously learned. Musicians both trained and untrained alike began to compose and import music. William Billings, a singing school teacher himself, increased the number of American hymns in publication by 10 fold.⁴ Billings only used for of the syllables that were introduced by d'Arezzo – fa, so, la, and me, the four tones which define the musical intervals. A year after Billings' death, the first song book "The Easy Instructor" was published by William Little and William Smith. "The Easy Instructor" was the first song book to use shape notes at text, opening the door for the tradition to flow down from New England where it was first conceived into states such as Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and Texas where it would plant its roots to stay for generations to come⁵

One of the most common ways for individuals to get come together to praise God were formal singings called Camp Meetings. Camp meetings are the equivalent of modern day revivals, however along with song, they focused on fellowship amongst God's people. For the most part, these gatherings were nondenominational⁶ or pan-denominational as no single denomination officially endorsed camp meetings, although certain denominations formed from

³*Awake, My Soul. Disc #1.* Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD

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⁶ Cobb, Buell E. "The Background and Early History." In *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*, 79. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978.

camp meeting roots.⁷ Camp Meetings would go on for days, and would be filled with deep emotional devotions and music was a fundamental part of the gatherings.⁸ Camp meeting hymns were simple and important. The words offered an insight into what the congregation longed to hear. The tunes were simple enough to require no musical training and were an invitation for anyone present to lift their voice and sing the praises of God.⁹ In addition to the music being an essential part to the worship and fellowship at Camp Meetings, a “dinner on the grounds” would also be provided half way through the day. This meal would provide a time for the congregation to mingle within themselves and to speak to each other regarding issues in the community and what blessings they felt they were getting out of the singing that day.¹⁰

Convention were also important parts in the Sacred Harp practice. Conventions were one of the most important ways to network between singers. Several communities would be drawn together for a singing, which would last for multiple days usually.¹¹ Conventions are the reason that Sacred Harp singing thrived, without the networking aspect that conventions bring to the table, the tradition of traveling from singing to singing may not have allowed the Sacred Harp to flourish. The idea of Networking has helped to keep a long line of oral traditions alive in Sacred Harp singing. Oral traditions have allowed Sacred Harp singers to gain an additional family, one outside of the biblical idea that we are all brothers and sisters in the blood of Christ, one through

⁷Bealle, John. "Music Reform on the Urban Frontier." In *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong*, 35. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997.

⁸Bealle, John. "Music Reform on the Urban Frontier." In *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong*, 36. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997.

⁹ IBID

¹⁰ *Awake, My Soul. Disc #1*. Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD.

¹¹ Cobb, Buell E. "The Conventions." In *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*, 129. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978.

song in which identifies as a family not formed from blood ties, but from the many overlapping experiences which they have had in their travels to conventions. The bonds of Sacred Harp singing are said to be closer than those formed by human blood because they are so actively practiced and acknowledged between singers¹². Without Convention and Camp Meeting, the sense of fellowship between singers would not exist, possibly causing the tradition that is Sacred Harp singing to have ceased to exist as well.

Sacred harp singing received its name from the instrumentation that is used during its praise songs – The human voice and the voice alone. Many sacred harp singers believe that the voice, “the sacred harp”, is the ultimate instrument for worship as it was provided to human beings by the lord himself.¹³ There is no need for any other instrumentation besides the four parts of harmony vocals, tenor, alto, bass, and treble and a percussive sound provided by the feet of the singers tapping along in rhythm, who are positioned in an arrangement known as the Hollow Square. The Hollow Square is the holiest place during a singing, as it is said that God himself is present in the middle of the square.¹⁴ In addition to this rhythm, the song leader, an individual who stands in the middle of the Hollow Square and beats out time using their right arm. Not only is this a way of keeping everyone on beat, the moving of the hands in this fashion is also asking for the blessings of God to be upon the singers.¹⁵ Sacred Harp singing is not a performance, but

¹² Miller, Kiri. "Texted Events And Eventful Texts." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 137 Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

¹³ *Awake, My Soul. Disc #1*. Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD.

¹⁴ **IBID**

¹⁵ Miller, Kiri. "Travels To The Center Of The Square." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 56. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

an act of worship to the Lord.¹⁶ Pieces are selected by a rotation of leaders in to express a sense of community and equality amongst the singers, allowing that no one is better than anyone else and that all are welcome.¹⁷ Each song conveyed a religious message which was often chosen to connect with an event in the life of the leader of the song. For example, one can find messages of uncertainty, anxiety, and isolation in life while traveling through this world on their way to the afterlife. Lyrics such as “I am a stranger here below” or “Death is the gate to endless joy, and yet we dread to enter there” present ideas in the Christian faith that here take on greater meanings depending on the song leaders connection to the lyrics based on the events which are taking place in their lives¹⁸. These are also messages in the text that individuals in the audience may be going through in their lives as well, once they hear them they can immediately relate to situations of sorrow, joy, or journeys.¹⁹ One example of songs relating to life can be seen in “Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism”. In 2001, the Midwest Convention of Sacred Harp singer was held. During this convention, Jerilyn Schumacher, a local singer, led the hymn “Morning Sun”. The lyrics of this hymn are somewhat melancholy as they speak of death; “Your sparkling eyes and blooming cheeks, must wither like the blasted rose; The coffin, earth, and winding sheet, Will soon your active limbs enclose.”²⁰ No one in the audience made a comment of her song choice, but several of the audience members knew that Schumacher was sick and dying of cancer, this song was a representation of her life soon coming to an end.

¹⁶ Steel, David Warren, and Richard H. Hulan. "Introduction." In *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*, Xi. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

¹⁷ *Awake, My Soul. Disc #1*. Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD.

¹⁸ Miller, Kiri. "Texted Events And Eventful Texts." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 109. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

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However, you do not have to be a Christian in order to be able to relate to this style of singing but for those who are of the Christian faith, the choice of song could be interpreted as a testimony of personal faith in The Lord, especially during times of trial, crises, or confirmations of faith.²¹ It has allowed singers to adopt texts as metaphors to sing as a group of pilgrims on their way to their final home.²² Sacred Harp singing is a form of worship for those who participate in it, it allows singers to give their testimonies in an extremely personal way to God and to those who are around.

Sacred Harp singing is done in a community setting and emphasizes participation in the glorification of God over the idea of the music being performed.²³ The style of singing focuses more on sincerity than the actual technique, giving all the glory to God for providing the voice so that individuals could praise him.²⁴ Physical movement of the singers denote a sincerity while performing the ritual include the rhythmic rocking in one's seat, the stomping of feet, crying, singing at full volume.²⁵ However, some individuals view these "over the top" acts as being an act and provoke offence to singers who really do mean their sincerity to The Lord. It is viewed that a performance of uncontrolled emotion are fake. If you lose your voice during a performance, you are singing too loudly, if you move too much during a song, you will tire out your body and become a distraction for the focus of the singing, which is to be on God.²⁶ Other

²¹ Miller, Kiri. "Texted Events And Eventful Texts." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 109. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

²² Miller, Kiri. "A Venture to The Field" In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 35. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

²³ Miller, Kiri. "Travels To The Center Of The Square." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 186. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

²⁴ IBID

²⁵ Miller, Kiri. "Traveling Culture And The Politics Of Nostalgia." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 187. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

²⁶ IBID

groups believe that if an individual is singing at full force, moving in complete synchronization with the music is the only way to properly praise God during a singing, as there is no effort to control the sound quality.²⁷ Some groups even believe that if one's voice is not strained by the end of the singing, you have not suffered for the lord, meaning that your heart was not in the right place as you sang²⁸ Each singer brings their own values of faith to the singing, some bring their own beliefs of the text sang, while others believe that being one with the music is the only way to participate in Worship.²⁹

“My Christian Friends, in bonds of love, whose hearts in
sweetest union join, Your friendship's like a drawing band, yet we
must take the parting hand, Your comp'ny's sweet, your union
dear; Your words delightful to my ear, Yet when I see that we must
part, You draw like cords around my heart. O could I stay with
friends so kind, How would it cheer my drooping mind! But duty
makes me understand that we must take the parting hand”³⁰

The text which was just presented is song lyrics to one of the most popular closing hymns in Sacred Harp tradition, The Parting Hand. The text of this song is used to conclude singings, as it speaks of parting of ways, the passage of time, the differences between everyday duties and the pleasures of the fellowship which singers experience, and the presence of God Almighty

²⁷ *Awake, My Soul. Disc #1.* Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD.

²⁸ Miller, Kiri. "Texted Events And Eventful Texts." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 134. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

²⁹ Miller, Kiri. "Traveling Culture And The Politics Of Nostalgia." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 196. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

³⁰ Miller, Kiri. "Travels To The Center Of The Square." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 69. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008

amongst the singers in the Hollow Square.³¹ Once the song is over, the singer come to a standstill, close their eyes, and bow their heads in prayer. After the final “amen” is said, there is a shuffle of singers scrambling to collect their belongings and the rearranging of chairs and church pews.³² In just a few seconds, what once was so loud and vivid in the small sanctuary space is no more, all has returned to as it was before the singing occurred in the house of God. There is a lesson to be learned from this mental image. All while this tradition is being preserved by those who participate in it, just as the pews were rearranged to clear the space, a tradition which has brought so many individuals peace, self-expression, and a sense of belonging to a family when they may have not had one of their own could be lost forever. Sacred Harp singing, while frowned upon by those who are classically trained in music because it is too “unruly” and “uncontrolled” to be beautiful, is held precious to others.³³ They are giving themselves to God, in one of the purest forms of praise, using the pure timbral tones of the voice that were given to each by the Creator himself, and that is something I think is beautiful in a way that many other forms of worship and praise do not cover. But don’t take my word for it, allow yourself to find the haunting melody and harmonies of Amazing Grace sung in this fashion. There’s something not of this world in the sound that these groups of people produce, a sound so rich and pure that when sung from the heart makes it clear that there is something to be treasured and held sacred in this tradition. May it continue to provide a link between the mortal realm and the spiritual real, for as long as voices are being lifted with song to the heavens above.

³¹Miller, Kiri. "Travels To The Center Of The Square." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 68. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008

³²Miller, Kiri. "Travels To The Center Of The Square." In *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, 69. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008

³³*Awake, My Soul. Disc #1*. Directed by Matt Hinton. Awake Productions, 2008. DVD.

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Steel, David Warren, and Richard H. Hulan. *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

The Weatherford-Hammond Mountain Collection in Hutchins Library's Special Collections and Archives allowed me to research Shapenote Hymns and how they were used for worship The Lord through Song. Looking at different hymnals and watching different documentaries that were located in the archives gave me a deeper appreciation for a new style of music and a new style of worship through song. Having access to these different materials allowed me to research the subject of Shape note singing on a level that was much deeper than what I could have procured without those resources. I also was able to use the sound archives to look at different examples of Sacred Harp singing, which were influential in keeping the tradition alive as it was passed down through time from one generation to another.