

# Frequently Asked Questions\*

*What is Sacred Harp singing?*

Sacred Harp singing is a community musical and social event, emphasizing participation, not performance, where people sing songs from a tunebook called *The Sacred Harp*.

*Is it all right for me to try to sing along? And do you have books available?*

Yes! We encourage everyone to follow along and to sing. Books are available — to borrow during the session or to purchase.

*What is The Sacred Harp? Is it a hymnal?*

*The Sacred Harp* is an oblong tunebook first published in 1844 by B.F. White and E. J. King. The book was printed in Philadelphia, but White and King lived in western Georgia, as did many other composers represented in the book.

Although many of the poems are hymns, the *Sacred Harp* has rarely been used at religious services. In the 19th c., hymnbooks and tunebooks were often separate. Hymnbooks were organized by subject matter, and contained complete poems; they might or might not contain music, but the focus was on the words. Tunebooks contained musical compositions called tunes, known by titles (e.g. SHERBURNE OR RESTORATION). A given tune could be used to sing any hymn or psalm text of the same “meter” or poetic pattern. A tunebook might have one or more verses of a suggested text printed with the music, but it rarely contained all the verses of a poem.

*Why is it called Sacred Harp? Are the songs accompanied by harps?*

The titles of tunebooks often refer to musical instruments; stringed instruments being prominent because they are mentioned in the scriptures, and because they are associated with David, the royal psalmist. Some present-day singers interpret the term “sacred harp” to refer to the human voice in general, or the vocal cords in particular.

Sacred Harp singing is not accompanied by harps or any other instruments.

*How do I know which line or staff on the page to sing?*

In Sacred Harp, the melody is in the tenor line — the second staff from the bottom, the part just above the bass — and is sung by both men and women. The tenors sit in the center of the room, facing the leader. The bass is the bottom staff, and the bass section is located

to the left of the tenor. The alto line is just above the tenor. Altos, usually women with a lower voice range, sit across from the tenor. Treble — on the top line — typically runs above the tenor in pitch, and is sung by both men and women. The treble section is to the right of the tenor.

*I have difficulty singing the words when the verse is printed below a different part. Isn't there a better way to display the text of the song?*

We understand — and regret the inconvenience. In Sacred Harp singing, each part has to be printed on a separate staff, because it is more independent from the other voice parts than you would find in ordinary congregational hymns. If they were not on separate staves, the parts would cross each other, and you wouldn't know which part was which. If we put all the verses of text under each of the staves, the book would end up being almost as tall as it is wide — and it is already big and heavy enough. The good news is that once you begin to learn the part you're singing, the problem pretty much goes away.

*What are the shapenotes, and why are there only four to cover the octave?*

According to a tradition hundreds of years old — and a couple of hundred years older than the better known do-re-mi system — the scale goes as shown below.



In the English 4-note solmization, the 4 syllables are disposed among the 7 notes of the scale so that there are always whole tones between the notes Fa-sol-la-mi, and there is always a semitone below Fa thus 4 syllables suffice to sing the major scale correctly.



This rule is altered a bit for the minor scale as it gets sung, (we apologize for this complication), so that the 2nd Fa of the minor scale has a semitone above it, not below it.

\* This hand-out content comes from the Sacred Harp singers of Texas, the website <http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/faq/>, and John Bealle's book, *Public Worship Private Faith, Sacred Harp and American Folksong*, 1997, Univ. of GA Press.

*Why do you sing the shapenote version before singing the words?*

The short answer is because that's the traditional way and because we like to. "Singing the notes" helps to orient the singer to the pitches. It "puts the tune in mind." It long ago became traditional to sing the song through first with the notation and then with the words. Singing the notes is the path we take to get to the heart of the song — and somehow makes getting there the richer and the more enjoyable. It's part of our identity as Sacred Harp singers.

*I would like to learn to sing Sacred Harp. What would you suggest?*

If you are interested in participating in a singing school, please let one of the officers of the convention know. Otherwise, the best way to learn is just by doing. Listening to and singing along with recordings can be a great way to learn, and you can purchase recordings here today. Attending other and smaller singing sessions is a good way to learn what and how to do. We'd love to have you join us at our monthly singings.

*Do the recordings available here sound like what I'm hearing now?*

Someone once compared attending a Sacred Harp singing and then later hearing recordings of it to the difference between viewing a mountain range and then looking at a postcard or photograph of the same vista. It's rare for recordings to capture the beauty or totality of the sound you hear live in this setting.

*Why do many of the singers beat time when someone else is leading?*

Since there is no instrumental accompaniment, keeping everyone on track can be challenging. Beating time, with hands or feet, is useful for many singers to help them keep "in sync" with the leader and with the other singers. Keeping time with your hands while singing along also makes for a natural progression to leading a song.

*Should we applaud after a song?*

Traditionally there is no applause after singing songs of praise. Exceptions are when children lead, if we know it will not embarrass them.

*Is it a "sing" or a "singing"?*

The noun "singing" is not in many dictionaries. Despite this, it is the usual term over most of the area where Sacred Harp singing is prevalent, and is preferred by most traditional singers.

*Why do the singers sit in a "hollow square"?*

Since Sacred Harp singing is a participatory activity, and not a performance, the singers arrange their seating so as to focus the sound inward, toward the center of the group, instead of projecting it outward toward an audience. The greatest volume and optimum balance are heard in the very center of the hollow square, where every singer may take his or her turn as leader.

*You don't sing minor songs the way they're printed. Why?*

Observers of Sacred Harp singing have often commented on this. What we're doing is singing the minor songs as if their key signatures had an extra sharp, or were missing the last flat; see the minor scale on the other side displayed as it is sung). We're not sure why we do this, but there's some evidence that shapenote singers were doing it as far back as the 1820s or even earlier. See the Rudiments at the front of our tunebook, paragraph 15 on page 18, for a discussion of this. It's not easy for modern Americans to learn to sing minor music this way and so be prepared to struggle a bit.

*Why don't you sing the accidentals printed in songs like WINDHAM or GREENWICH?*

Most of the time these accidentals are present to provide a raised 7th in minor songs and a raised 4th in major songs: harmonic innovations strongly resisted by shapenote singers. B. F. White himself taught that Sacred Harp music is diatonic (that is, should never have any sharps or flats printed within the music apart from the key signature). He didn't go as far, though, as Ananias Davisson (*Kentucky Harmony* editor), who refused to even print them. One of White's colleagues, in letters to the newspaper he signed himself as "Georgia Boy", ridiculed accidentals as being "artificial" and specifically mentioned GREENWICH #183, PHOEBUS #173, and WINDHAM #38b, as examples where the printed accidentals are ignored. White carefully explained that the harmonic minor scale was without any substantial value. See the separate handout for more extensive quotes from the historical documents. There are a few exceptions to this general rule: non-Sacred Harp type songs like 147t BOYLSTON, for example, though even for these singers try to find alternate notes that don't involve accidentals.

*Why don't more people know about this amazing tradition?*

We're kind of puzzled about that, too. It's been called one of the South's — and now the country's — best-kept secrets. Feel free to spread the word!

*Where can I find out more about Sacred Harp singing?*

The best source is the Internet. Go to <http://fasola.org>