

CDSS Sings—Sacred Harp and Community

by Sharon McKinley

You like to sing, but don't like the idea of auditioning for a chorus. You can't sight-read. You just love to raise your voice with others in song. A friend invites you to a Sacred Harp singing. What's that, you wonder. You show up, pick a voice part, and sit down in a group arranged around a hollow square. Someone gets up to lead, and you're swept away in a wall of joyful sound. You join your friend in the middle of the square as they lead a song. After a few hours, there's a break for a potluck meal, followed by more singing. You're hooked.

I can say that I was hooked just that easily. But hooked on hymn singing? Really? Well, yes, because this is a very special kind of hymn singing. Sacred Harp, while having the word sacred right in its name, is a community activity indulged in by an incredibly eclectic variety of people. Its roots are still deep in some Southern churches, but elsewhere, it's an open community event, and is enjoyed by many for the musical experience and that sense of community.

Shape-note notation was an early nineteenth century system meant to facilitate sight-singing of both sacred and secular music. Dozens of hymnbooks were among the works produced using shape-note notation. One of the best known of these is *The Sacred Harp*, first published in 1844, which is still in use and being updated today. The harp is the human voice; there is no easier way to make music.

Yes, the texts are unabashedly religious (it's a hymnbook, after all), and many are downright morbid to modern sensibilities. The songs ask questions: And am I born to die ("Idumea")? Will God forever cast us off ("Mear")? It also answers them: And I'll sing Hallelujah ("Hallelujah"); I'm bound for the promised land ("Promised Land"). Life was much more matter-of-fact back then. We live, we die, and we sing about it. There's salvation on the other side. And there's no need to believe any of it in order to participate. I can't quite explain it. You'll just have to try it.

When I first heard Sacred Harp music on the radio by chance in the 1990s, I thought "I've got to do that!" Why? I'm not sure I could have told you, but many hymns feature stark, open chords and a modal feel. The singing style is a bit raw. I just fell in love with the sound. I found a local group, sponsored by

the Baltimore Folk Music Society and run by BFMS stalwarts Joanne DeVoe and Tom Padwa, with Mary Kay Friday who came up monthly from DC. After a while I became a regular. Although I no longer participate often, I still have a passion for it. The best thing about shape-note singing is that anyone (and I mean ANYONE) can participate. Many groups provide loaner books, and every song is taught using the shapes. If you can't follow the music, you follow your neighbor. I can sight-read, and although that's not helpful when you're trying to read shapes, it helped me learn quickly. But those who can't read a note just follow the others, and make glorious music together.

I heartily recommend Sacred Harp to anyone who loves to sing. It's a great way to meet people and participate in non-concert choral music. Many groups meet monthly on a weekend. Some communities offer all-day or weekend singings or conventions, for example the Folklore Society of Greater Washington's two-day Potomac River Convention. Even MORE food there. Come join that mighty wall of sound, and the community that goes with it.

Sharon McKinley has been singing in choruses since she was 6. She is involved with several folk and dance communities in the Baltimore-DC area, and enjoys sharing her love of music and dance with everyone. Sharon joined the CDSS Governing Board in 2014.

For more information on Sacred Harp and local groups, go to <http://fasola.org>. You also can find background information on Sacred Harp, including samples of audio and printed music, in this Wikipedia article, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_Harp.

To see video and photographs of the 2010 Potomac River Convention, go to <https://www.flickr.com/photos/maryann/4529520146/in/photostream/>.

For other articles about Sacred Harp and shape-note singing that have appeared in the CDSS News, see "The Shenandoah Harmony" (book review), Spring 2014; "Imagining 'The Last Words of Copernicus'," Winter 2013-2014; and "Come Sound His Praise Abroad"—Sacred Harp Singing Across Europe," Winter 2012-2013.

