A Shape-Note Singing Lesson

SUBJECTS
- Music
- History

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The purpose of *Smithsonian in Your Classroom* is to help teachers bring to their students the educational power of museums and other community resources. It draws on the Smithsonian’s exhibitions and programs—from art to zoology—to create classroom-ready materials for grades 3–8.

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*A Shape-Note Singing Lesson* addresses the following standards:

National Standards for Arts Education (Music Content Standards)
- Singing alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
- Reading and notating music
- Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts
- Understanding music in relation to history and culture

National Standard for History
- Regional folklore and culture contributions that helped to form our national heritage

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Music in cover image used by kind permission of Hugh McGraw of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company.
The shape-note method of singing from written music first appeared in a book called *The Easy Instructor*, printed in 1801. It used four syllables for the seven notes of the scale and gave each syllable a distinctive note head: a triangle for *fa*, an oval for *sol*, a rectangle for *la*, and a diamond for *mi*. Before the Civil War, southern publishers sold hundreds of thousands of shape-note songbooks, the most enduring of which was *The Sacred Harp*, first printed in 1844. Revised editions are still used today in pockets of the South where “Sacred Harp singings” are an unbroken tradition, and by people across the country who have come to the tradition in the last couple of decades.

The new singers observe the practices of southern Sacred Harp groups. The four parts—tenor, bass, alto, and treble—face each other to form a “hollow square.” Each singer has a chance to “lead a lesson” by standing in the center of the square, selecting a song or set of songs, and beating the tempo with up-and-down strokes of the arm. The singings are sometimes all-day affairs, with a break for a big potluck meal called “dinner on the grounds.”

The term “lesson” is a vestige of the singing schools. Some singings begin with an actual lesson, an introduction to the shapes and a first opportunity to join one’s voice to the antique harmonies of the songs. We intend this issue of *Smithsonian in Your Classroom* as something like that. The appeal of the music cannot be fully understood without singing it, and learning to sing it is still as good a way as any to begin associating the sight of a note with its sound. If your students are able to follow the steps of the lesson plan—led by you or a music teacher at your school—they will be the latest inheritors of a long history that they will help keep alive.

There are dozens of shape-note recordings in print. Some of the earliest were made by Folkways Records, which the Smithsonian acquired in 1987. To supplement the issue, Smithsonian Folkways has put sound clips of three songs on a Web site: www.si.edu/folkways/sacredharp.htm.
Sacred Harp songs were never accompanied by harps. The reference may have been to the harp of David, the psalmist, or to the human voice as an instrument. The singing is a cappella, and the emphasis seems always on the music produced by the singers. Each song is rehearsed by a singing of the syllables, which can be as passionate as the rendition of the text.

Most of the peculiar characteristics of the music date back to the New England composers. The melody is carried by the tenors rather than the upper voices, and the singers sometimes double the parts: a few tenors might join in on the highest line, but sing it an octave lower; sopranos might sing the tenor line an octave higher. William Billings prescribed this “conjunction of masculine and feminine voices” as a means of giving extra body to the sound.

But in the South the music became, in many ways, southern. By 1815, the shape-note locus had shifted to Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. The composers there favored a widely spaced harmony, with intervals of fourths and fifths rather than thirds, which one singer likens to “a picket fence with a few of the boards missing.”

Some of the early southern works were based on tunes from the camp-meeting revivals that began in Kentucky and Tennessee around 1800. The revival movement was in reaction to nearly everything we associate with eighteenth-century rationalism, and the reaction was extreme. In her 1832 travel book *Domestic Manners in America*, Frances Trollope, mother of the English novelist Anthony Trollope, described a firelit camp meeting as Nathaniel Hawthorne might have described an assembly of the possessed.

“About a hundred persons came forward, uttering howlings and groans so terrible that I shall never cease to shudder when I recall them,” she recalled with a shudder. “They appeared to drag each other forward, and on the word being given ‘Let us pray,’ they all fell on their knees; but this posture was soon changed for others that permitted greater scope for the movements of their limbs; and they were all soon lying on the ground in an indescribable confusion of heads and legs.”

This new kind of worship, boiling up from the hearts of the people, was accompanied by the people’s own music—familiar dance and ballad tunes turned into hymns. The shape-note standard “Wondrous Love,” for instance, derived from the ballad “Captain Kidd.” In the original, the pirate recounts his crimes and depredations:
I murdered William More  
As I sailed, as I sailed.

The adaptation kept only the framework of melody and meter:

What wondrous love is this!  
Oh, my soul! Oh, my soul!

The distribution of the songbooks followed the general movement of the Scots Irish—the Protestants of Northern Ireland—most of whom came first to southeastern Pennsylvania and then settled in the Appalachians. In Sacred Harp singing there are still Celtic traces: tones held like the drone of a bagpipe; leaps between the notes of gapped scales, but with the lilt or the burr flattened into a twang.

After the Civil War, the books passed into the hands of African Americans, who made the music equally their own. As folk music collector Alan Lomax wrote about southern music in general, the isolation of the South fostered the "growth of two separate, hybrid traditions, which were similar enough to permit a back-and-forth movement of songs, but sufficiently different to keep this exchange a stimulating one."

The first collection of African American compositions was *The Colored Sacred Harp*, published in 1934 by Judge Jackson, a farmer and businessman in the wiregrass country of southeastern Alabama. The works are basically in keeping with the New England models, but the parts are sometimes arranged into a call and response, a form brought from Africa, and the singers take great liberties in embellishing the notes, as in older spirituals and newer gospel music.

**Traditions and Conventions**

Sacred Harp singing is a very deliberate tradition. Groups meet at a set time once a month, or as often as once a week, and attend annual regional singing conventions, where they observe businesslike rules of order. A chair presides, calling each member up to lead, and a secretary records the selections of songs. Just before the

*The frontispiece of William Billings’s 1770 songbook *The New-England Psalm-singer* was engraved by another revolutionary figure, Paul Revere.*
break for the meal, there is a “memorial lesson,” a time to honor singers who are ill or have died since the last gathering.

Like a constitution, these formalities preserve a democratic idea. As seen in the inward-facing arrangement of the vocal parts, the gatherings are not performances. They are meant for the singers themselves, and no one is excluded from joining in. At their most generous, the best singers will say that another’s lack of talent does not diminish the experience.

“I’d go a thousand miles to sing this music,” said a veteran from northern Georgia. “I wouldn’t cross the street to hear it.”

Most groups adhere to one of two twentieth-century versions of the 1844 book. The B. F. White Sacred Harp, also known as the Cooper revision, has a wide distribution in the lowland South, from Texas to northern Florida. The Sacred Harp, also known as the Denson revision, has a smaller traditional territory—the upland northern parts of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi—and is a somewhat more traditional book. New editions include new compositions, but the publishers have held firm against modern harmonies.

Another shape-note bastion is mountainous eastern Tennessee, where “Old Harp” groups sing from The New Harp of Columbia, first published in 1867 in Nashville. In this book there are seven shapes for the syllables do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si. Seven-shape singers regard the four-shape method—the repetition of syllables and shapes within an octave—as too complicated rather than too simple. As a Tennessee singing-school teacher put it, “What man gives two of his boys the same name?”

Four-shape singers beg to differ. “It’s easier for the same reason that English is easier to learn than Chinese,” said one. “There are fewer symbols.”

A big difference in the sound of the music has to do with tempo, but this varies among the four-shape groups as well. Musicologists have compared the fastest-singing Sacred Harpers to Bulgarian folk choirs, while less expert listeners have been put in mind of chainsaws revving up. Old Harp and slow Sacred Harp groups seem to take a more solemn approach to the songs. Such matters of style are not in the notation; they are habits that formed as early as the nineteenth century.

Singing from Memory
In the piney low country of southeastern Georgia, fifty miles back from the hotels and golf courses on the booming coast, there is a Cooper-book group made up mostly of an extended

The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers during the recording of a 1993 New World Records album, The Colored Sacred Harp
family named Lee. The singings have been going on so long that none of the Lees can say for sure when they started, and they are a people whose history is always close at hand.

“I live within a mile of my great-great-grandfather’s farm,” said David Lee, a John Deere dealer from the town of Hoboken. “He lived across the creek. I can see the yard lights there on certain nights.”

The group is the only one in that part of the state, and until recently they knew of only one time when there was contact with other singers. In the 1960s, one of Mr. Lee’s uncles went to a Denson-book singing in northern Alabama and brought back a tape recording. The rapid-fire sound was almost unrecognizable to the slow-singing Lees. They continued to think of their own tradition as something singular in all the world, and in some ways it is.

Instead of taking turns leading songs every few minutes, they elect one member to “lead throughout his useful life.” Mr. Lee has led for nearly a decade, and he carries on a practice found nowhere else: he “walks time,” stepping around the square to the tempo of the song. He has a theory that this was an idiosyncrasy of the first singing-school teacher in the area. Because the family belongs to a Primitive Baptist church and observes its prohibitions, he feels some explanation is needed.

“It’s always a forward motion, so that’s why we say it’s not dancing,” he said. “It’s just walking funny.”

In 1994, a singer in Florida found the Lees on the mailing list of the publishers of The B. F. White Sacred Harp, and invited them to a convention in Tallahassee. The invitation was surprise enough—they couldn’t have known there was such a thing as a Sacred Harp convention. When they arrived, they felt like a lost tribe returning. They met people from all over the country who, however differently they sang, were “similar to us in their hearts.” Mr. Lee has since traveled to singings in Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Hanover, New Hampshire. Northern singers have made Hoboken, Georgia, a pilgrimage site.

Some in the town have stopped singing because of changes the visitors have brought, but many more have been attracted to Sacred Harp by the outside attention. In the 1970s, the group was down to a core of fifty members. Big annual meetings now draw as many as five hundred people, about half of them locals.

“I would submit that there were differences from daddy’s time to great-granddaddy’s time,” said Mr. Lee. “A living tradition changes. If it stopped changing, it would be because it died.”

David Lee of Hoboken, Georgia

Two Kinds of Change

The seven-shape tradition, an evolution from the four shapes, is evolving still. Throughout the South, there are seven-shape “new book” conventions at which groups sing thoroughly modern gospel songs with the accompaniment of instruments. Some numbers feature quartets and
solos. Just about all that remains of the old music is the shape notation.

But it’s the archaic Denson Sacred Harp that has become the most popular book nationwide. It’s the one used at urban singings, where there might be foccacia bread and San Pellegrino water at the dinner on the grounds, alongside chicken and dumplings and buttermilk pie made from recipes on a shape-note Web page. Its success is due in large part to the work of Hugh McGraw, chairman of the nonprofit publishing company, who has taught singing schools and organized conventions in twenty-three states. New singers will say, though, that it would have been their preference anyway—the oldest tunes are exactly what attracted them.

“The southern music is like nothing else,” he said. “It ends on open fifths—this wild sound—and somewhere in the back of your head, through all this noise that’s pouring out of you, you hear the missing third, because of harmonic vibrations. It just fills in on its own.”

Parting Hand

And then there are the words. These wild tunes, unsubdued by dynamic markings and sung at full throttle, carry the poetry of great English hymnists like Isaac Watts, John Newton, and Charles Wesley. Some of it trips happily along in verse schemes that are musical without the music:

How painfully pleasing the fond recollection
Of youthful connection and innocent joy.

Some of it offers a comfort that is only commiserative, like an old-time country song:
How tedious and tasteless the hours
When Jesus no longer I see;
Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flow’rs
Have lost all their sweetness to me.

The best of it is as fine as anything in the lan-
guage:

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.

Any resemblance to country music is proba-
ably not coincidental. The Carter Family, the
Louvin Brothers, and a number of other early
artists got their training from singing-school
teachers. The Victor Company’s historic first
recordings of “hillbilly” music, made in 1927 in
Bristol, Tennessee, included a quartet singing
from a shape-note book.

David Winship, education director of Bris-
tol’s Birthplace of Country Music Alliance
Museum, introduces students to poetry through
country lyrics. His work is made easier by all the
metaphors and similes, in which he sees glim-
mers of the psalmic language of eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century hymns.

“With a traditional country tune like
‘Mountain Railway,’ common human experi-
ence is shown symbolically,” he said. “Life is
like a mountain railway / With an engineer
that’s brave, / You must make the run success-
ful / From the cradle to the grave.”

An understanding of that song does not
depend on a familiarity with steep grades and
perilous trestles; a deeper understanding of
Sacred Harp texts, apparently, does not
depend on sect or even faith. At an urban
singing, one is likely to meet mainline and
fundamentalist Protestants, Catholics, Jews,
and a good many who would call themselves
nonbelievers. A Unitarian singer in Washington,
D.C., said that she feels something spiritual in
the act of harmonizing on songs that are
“uniquely meaningful to each person.”

If one earthly theme runs through The
Sacred Harp, it is the joy of fellowship so keen
that there is always an awareness of its obverse,
the heartache of separation. The closing tune at
conventions, “Parting Hand,” sums it up:

Ye mournful souls, lift up your eyes
To glorious mansions in the skies;
O trust his grace—in Canaan’s land
We’ll no more take the parting hand.

“When there are five hundred of you,” said
David Lee, “chances are good that you’ll lose
somebody every year. It’s difficult for me to find
words to say how much I love somebody. I can
say that through the music: Because I love you
so much, I’m really going to be hurt if you’re
not there.”

In “Parting Hand,” this Canaan, this land of
no parting, is imagined as a place where “we’ll
shout and sing with one accord.” The imagina-
tion doesn’t have to reach far. It seems very
much like a Sacred Harp singing.
Lesson Plan

KEEPING THE SPIRIT ALIVE
by Leanne Wiberg

I was working on a geological field project in central Texas, mapping the ups and downs of a suspected impact crater, when I stumbled upon my first Sacred Harp singing. Walking along a high limestone ridge, I heard a faint sound, a kind of wail, coming from the river valley below. It was a little spooky. I headed down the slope and followed it to what my topographical map told me was a church. The building, baked bare of all paint, looked more like a disused barn.

Singers of all ages were gathered at a picnic shelter out back, seated at tables arranged in a square. I watched and listened, entranced by the strange harmonies and the zeal of the participants. A man I recognized as the deputy sheriff was standing in the middle of the square, leading the song.

When it ended he called for a break, and the singers got up and rearranged the tables into a long serving buffet. From out of baskets, coolers, and newspaper wrappers came fried chicken and home-grown tomatoes, casseroles and cornbread, peanut butter pie and double chocolate cake. I hung back, but I did take the liberty of picking up one of the songbooks that had been set aside. The shape of the book itself was peculiar—oblong, wider than tall. When I opened it, I saw shape notation for the first time, but before I could give it much study a farmer invited me to get a plate and help myself. Most of the people there, he said, already knew about me. They had seen me off in the hills doing my “rock thang.”

My research had a double impact. The geological map I made helped prove that the high ridge was the central uplift of an impact structure. More important to me personally, I became a shape-note singer and joined a nationwide community. Whenever I go into the field or travel in general, I check to see if there will be a local singing or a convention nearby. I’ve always felt as welcome as an old friend, and so will you if you are able to expand this lesson by taking the class to a singing. There are Sacred Harp groups in nearly every state. A listing is online at www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/harp.html.

OBJECTIVES
Students learn the four shapes used in Sacred Harp singing and “sing the shapes” of “Yankee Doodle.” In a key appropriate to their voices, they sing the melody part of “Chester,” a Revolutionary-era tune by William Billings. If they are old enough and able to do so, they try a two-part version, melody and harmony.

The lesson assumes that the students have learned the values of whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes, together with dotted-note values.

MATERIALS
- Photocopies of pages 11 and 12 for all students
- Poster board or chalkboard showing the mnemonics on page 11
- Optional aid: a pitch pipe or musical instrument for setting the pitch

ACTIVITY
1. Ask students if they’ve seen The Sound of Music. Point out that in the movie the children sing each musical pitch as a syllable (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do). Write the pitches on the board, and then lead the class in singing them, perhaps in the form of the “do, a deer” song.
2. Tell them of the system that uses only four syllables for the seven-note scale and has a different note shape for each syllable. Direct their attention to the poster board or chalkboard on
FA is like a flag.

SOL is round like the sun.

LA is two Ls joined.

MI Diamonds are for "me."

A Shape-Note Scale

FA SOL LA FA SOL LA MI FA

F Major

Traditional

YANKEE DOODLE

FA FA SOL LA FA LA SOL SOL FA FA SOL LA FA MI SOL

Yankee Doodle came to town, A-riding on a pony; He

FA FA SOL LA FA FA MI SOL LA MI FA FA

stuck a feather in his hat And called it macaroni.
F Major  Philip Doddridge, 1755.

**CHESTER. L.M.**

William Billings, 1770.

1. Let the high heav'ns your songs invite,
   These spacious fields of brilliant light,

2. Sun, moon and stars convey Thy praise,
   'Round the whole earth and never stand,

1. Where sun and moon and planets roll,
   And stars that glow from pole to pole.

2. So when Thy truth began its race,
   It touched and glanced on every hand.

1. Let the high heav'ns your songs invite,
   These spacious fields of brilliant light,

2. Sun, moon and stars convey Thy praise,
   'Round the whole earth and never stand,
which you have drawn the four shapes with mnemonics. Ask them to pronounce the note names.

3. Lead them in a very slow singing of a major scale using the shapes. Start by singing fa at any medium-range, comfortable pitch, and then move up the scale with sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa. Try singing back down: fa, mi, la, sol, fa, la, sol, fa.

4. Sing the scale again in a different key. Explain that one of the advantages of the shape-note system is that you can sing without regard to the key signature. Once the pitch is set, you need only pay attention to the intervals, represented by the shapes.

5. Sing the shapes of “Yankee Doodle”: fa, fa, sol, la, fa, la, sol, etc. Tell students that at Sacred Harp singings each song is rehearsed this way. The familiarity of “Yankee Doodle” may be a help in the exercise, but shape-singing takes some getting used to. The first few times, the whole enterprise will no doubt collapse into a jumble of fa’s and la’s.

6. Ask students to sit around you to form a square no larger than twelve feet on each side. They should all face inward. Explain that people sit this way at a singing in order to direct the sound toward one central point. This might also be a good time to mention that Sacred Harp music is usually sung in full voice. Encourage them to sing as loudly as they like without yelling or trying to drown out other singers.

7. Call their attention to the two-line version of “Chester” (page 12). Tell them that you are going to sing the shapes of the melody, or “lead,” as it is called in Sacred Harp singing. Ask them to find the first line marked “lead” and to follow the rise and fall of the notes as you sing. The class should sing the melody at least twice before you move to the next step.

8. Slowly recite the first verse of “Chester,” and have the students repeat after you line by line. (It might be helpful to clap out the rhythm of each line.) Sing the verse once, and then have them join you in a singing of it.
9. Tell them that Sacred Harp singers keep the tempo with an up-and-down motion of the forearm, which is illustrated by the photos on page 13. Although “Chester” is in 4/4 time, it is usually sung at a fairly good clip, and the effect is two beats to the measure. The downstroke of the arm comes on the measure’s first beat; the upstroke is on the third beat. Ask students to imitate your motions as they again sing the song. You might try both verses this time.

10. If time and student abilities allow, introduce the harmony (top line) of “Chester.” Sing this part through, and then have the whole class rehearse it several times. Allow interested students to take turns keeping the tempo, or “leading,” in the center of the square.

II. Designate two adjacent sides of the square as the harmony (treble) section and the other two sides as the melody (lead) section. Before the class tries to sing both parts together, you might offer this encouragement: perfect harmony is rarely achieved in Sacred Harp singings; indeed, it is not even a goal. Newcomers find that they stay on their part more consistently than they would if they felt more pressure.

Composers of Billings’s time often gave a title to the tune only, without reference to the words. Many of the titles simply memorialize a place, so that the index of The Sacred Harp, a book of the Deep South, is full of New England town names—“Greenwich,” “Concord,” “Fairfield,” “Worcester.” The best-known song in the shape-note canon, “Amazing Grace,” is called “New Britain” in The Sacred Harp.

The “L.M.” after the title “Chester” is a designation of the text’s poetic structure. It stands for “long meter,” stanzas of four lines in iambic tetrameter. An iamb is a set of two syllables with the accent on the second one. Each line of “Chester” has eight syllables and four iambs: da dum, da dum, da dum, da dum. The tune can accommodate any poem in this meter.

Billings himself wrote a poem that gave “Chester” another incarnation as a patriotic song, which was to some Revolutionary troops what “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was to the Union Army in the Civil War. You might try leading the class on one of its stanzas:

Let tyrants shake their iron rod
And Slav’ry clank her galling chains;
We fear them not, we trust in God,
New England’s God forever reigns.

Howe and Burgoyne and Clinton, too,
With Prescott and Cornwallis join’d,
Together plot our Overthrow,
In one infernal league combined.

The foe comes on with haughty Stride,
Our troops advance with martial noise;
Their Vet’rans flee before our Youth,
And Gen’rals yield to beardless Boys.

Better yet, students might try writing their own lyrics—a school song, perhaps. “Chester” will still be “Chester.”

Leanne Wiberg is an educator in northern Virginia. She developed this lesson plan with Ella Wilcox of MENC—The National Association for Music Education. The graphics are by Miriam A. Kilmer, Rising Dove Fine Arts and Services.
Resources

WEB SITES
There are two comprehensive shape-note sites:
Sacred Harp Singing
www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/harp.html
Fasola Home Page
www.fasola.org

SONGBOOKS


SCHOLARLY BOOKS


SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS
The Grammy-winning Anthology of American Folk Music (order # 40090) includes three Sacred Harp songs. Newsweek called this six-disk set “the secret history of rock and roll.”

The two disk FASOLA: 53 Shape-Note Folk Hymns (order # 4151) is a 1970 recording of a Mississippi Sacred Harp group.

The one disk Old Harp Singers: Hymns, Anthems, Fuging Tunes from Tennessee (order # 2356) is a 1951 recording of a seven-shape group.

To order, call 800-410-9815. For a free Folkways catalog, call 202-287-3251.

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