

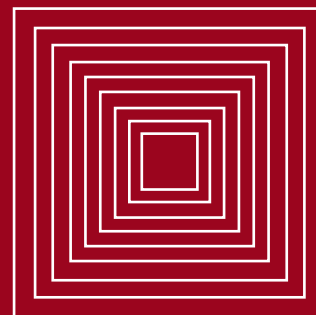
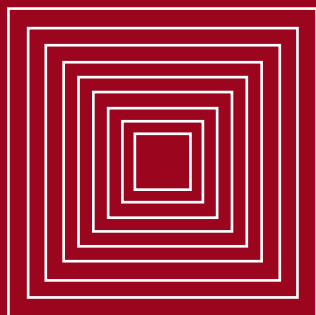


Photo credit: Adrienne Robertson. Northern Shenandoah Valley Double All-Day Singing, June 1, 2024. Grace Episcopal Church, Berryville, Virginia. Used with permission.

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COMPOSITIONS SHAPED BY COMMUNITY

WRITING MUSIC IN THE SACRED HARP TRADITION

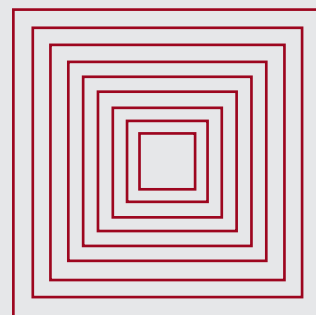
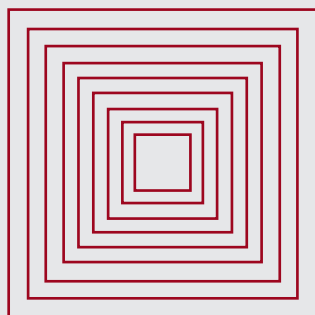
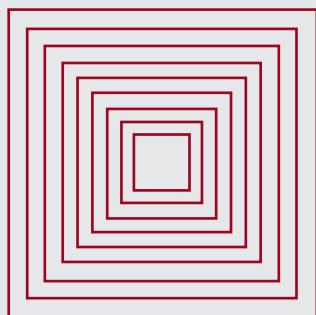
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In many choral traditions, compositions are crafted with the expectation that an experienced group of musicians will give a rehearsed and polished performance for an audience. In the shape-note tradition, however, there are no rehearsals or audiences; rather, the singers, all of whom have varying levels of experience, make music for each other. Sitting in a square and facing one another, they sing song after song, sometimes for hours, without ever revisiting a selection. The goal of the singers, rather than to render a

perfected performance, is to facilitate a fulfilling and enjoyable experience for everyone involved.¹ In this article, we will outline how the community-based nature of shape-note singing affects the contents of contemporary compositions, determines composers' philosophies, and influences singers' engagement with new musical works. This research draws from interviews with three shape-note composers, a review of historical and recent writings about shape-note singing, and the authors' experiences as shape-note singers.



A note about definitions

In this article, we will alternately refer to this practice as “Sacred Harp singing” and “shape-note singing.” Neither term is wholly satisfactory. “Sacred Harp singing” is overly narrow, since the composers discussed here have songs included in tunebooks other than *The Sacred Harp*. “Shape-note singing,” however, is overly broad, since there are ongoing traditions of sacred singing in the United States that used shaped notation yet do not employ the styles or practices associated with Sacred Harp singing.

An Approach to Composition

Composers in the Sacred Harp tradition do not need any specific compositional training; their experiences as shape-note singers provide the foundation for their engagement as composers. Both historically and in modern practice, singers of all backgrounds contribute as tunesmiths, often acquiring their skills through experimentation and informal, community-based learning. All a composer must possess is the interest and desire to contribute as a member of the community.

One of our interview subjects—shape-note singer, scholar, and composer Jesse P. Karlsberg—describes the musical identity of composers as that of being “singers first.”² This sentiment is echoed by Sacred Harp composers P. Dan Brittain and Rachel Wells Hall. The community-centered values of Sacred Harp singers have a direct impact on the composers and the music that they create. This research contributes to a growing body of work on the unique processes employed by composers who write for participatory singing groups. Community singing composer Fiona Evison, for example, describes the technique of “relational composition,” noting that it “value[s] people highly” and “often involves collaboration and co-ownership.”³ Our work focusing on shape-note composers, who share these values, illuminates an approach to composition that empowers community singers and prioritizes their joy.

The Shape-Note Tradition

Shape-note singing is a participatory form of music making in which there are no artist-audience distinc-

tions.⁴ The primary musical objective of this activity is to engage and interact with other singers. Sacred Harp singing exists as a spatial and immersive art form. The vibrations in the air create a physical presence that feels different depending on one’s location in the singing space. Each individual seeks to contribute to a heightened musical and social experience for all the participants. Shape-note singers do not practice for months to render a musical performance perfectly for an audience. They sing only for themselves and for each other. In shape-note singing, individual singers take turns picking and leading a song for the group to sing. In this way, each member has the agency to contribute to the musical choices, as opposed to one conductor making all the literature decisions.

Shape-note singing carries on the tradition of nineteenth-century tunebooks that were printed using shaped notation, a sight-singing aid that replaces round note heads with four different shapes. These correspond with syllables to indicate specific scale degrees (Figure 1).⁵ The first tunebook to use shaped notation—William Little and William Smith’s *The Easy Instructor, or A New Method of Teaching Sacred Harmony*—was published in Philadelphia in 1801.⁶ The shape-note singing tradition is often referred to as Sacred Harp singing because *The Sacred Harp* is the name of the most popular shape-note tunebook, first published in Georgia in 1844 by Benjamin Franklin White and Elisha James King.⁷ White oversaw multiple revisions of the book during his lifetime in an effort to keep the contents relevant to the singers who used it. After his death in 1879, conflict over the book’s contents resulted in the emergence of competing editions.⁸ What is now called the “Denson” version of *The Sacred Harp* has remained the most popular since the first quarter of the twentieth century, with new editions appearing approximately every thirty years.



Figure 1. Four-shape system

The Denson version's popularity is attributed to the musical conservatism of the book's editors, who rejected modern developments in hymnody. The singers in the Sacred Harp community were generally not interested in the new gospel style that rose in popularity in the 1910s and 1920s. Gospel collections, which were issued annually in slim paperbacks by publishers such as James D. Vaughan and A. J. Showalter, were characterized by a prevalence of the major mode, swinging rhythms, call-and-response, and cheerful texts emphasizing salvation.⁹ While gospel songs appear in the "Cooper" revision of *The Sacred Harp*, which traces its lineage to a 1902 revision issued by W. M. Cooper, the Denson revision has retained the original mid-nineteenth-century composition style, admitting only oc-

casional gospel elements.¹⁰ The shape-note composers interviewed for this article all write in the "dispersed harmony" style favored in the Denson revision. Ideally, each new tune will adhere to the forms and compositional principles established before 1844 yet will also carry unique appeal as a distinctive composition.¹¹

P. Dan Brittain's composition COBB is an example of a plain tune, one of the principal genres of shape-note composition (Figure 2). In a plain tune, the four parts move in relative homorhythm. In a futing tune (Figure 3 on the next page), an opening homophonic passage is followed by a section in which the voices enter one at a time. The futing tune is emblematic of the singing school tradition. Composers also tend to set the same poets who were favored by nineteenth-centu-

1. Rise, rise, my soul, and leave the ground, Stretch all thy thoughts a - broad,

2. Crea - tures with all their end - less race, Thy pow'r and praise pro - claim;

10 And rouse up ev - 'ry tune - ful sound To praise th'e - ter - nal God.

But saints that taste Thy rich - er grace De - light to bless Thy name.

Figure 2. P. Dan Brittain, COBB, 1971.

Text: Isaac Watts 1st 1707, 2nd 1719.

Used with permission of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, Bremen, GA.

1. When we our wea - ried limbs to rest Sat down by__ proud Eu - phra - tes' stream:

2. Our harps that when with joy we sung Were wont their__ tune - ful parts to bear,

6

1. We wept with__ dole - ful__ thoughts op - pressed, And__
2. With si - lent__ strings ne - glect - ed__ hung, On__

8

1. We wept with__ dole - ful__ thoughts op - pressed, And__ Zi - on was our__
2. With si - lent__ strings ne - glect - ed__ hung, On__ wil - low trees that__

11

1. Zi - on was our that mourn - ful__ theme, And__ Zi - on was our__ mourn - ful theme. mourn - ful theme.
wil - low trees that with - ered__ there, On__ wil - low trees that__ with - ered there. with - ered there.

2. Zi - on was our that mourn - ful theme, And__ Zi - on was our__ mourn - ful theme. mourn - ful theme.
wil - low trees that with - ered there, On__ wil - low trees that__ with - ered there. with - ered there.

Figure 3. Judy Hauff, WOOD STREET, 1986.

Text: Tate and Brady, 1696.

Used with permission of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, Bremen, GA.

ry tunesmiths. Texts by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), which dominate *The Sacred Harp*, were chosen by Brittain for all four of his songs that appear in the current revision and by Karlsberg for the composition discussed in this article.

Shape-note tunebooks were created primarily for use in singing schools, and they have long been associated with music pedagogy. For this reason, a group of shape-note singers is still referred to as a “class,” and the leading of a song is still called a “lesson.”¹² In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, traveling singing masters used *The Sacred Harp* and other shape-note books to teach music literacy and singing to rural Protestant congregations.¹³ Singing schools typically occurred during agricultural lulls when there was no farm work to tend to.¹⁴ They ran on average for two weeks at a time, with singing Monday through Friday. Each day would begin at 9:00 a.m., with dinner on the grounds at noon, and conclude around 3:00 p.m.¹⁵ Shape-note singers still use this schedule, along with several other elements from the singing schools, as a model for present-day singing events.

During a “singing”—a term that describes any musical gathering of shape-note devotees—class members sit in a formation known as the hollow square.¹⁶ The songs are mostly in four-part harmony, although occasionally the alto part is missing. The melody is always found in the tenor part—an inheritance from English west gallery music. The tenor and treble parts are both sung in octaves by high and low voices, which produces six-part harmony. Each voice part comprises one side of the square, and singers direct their sound to the center of the square formation. In previous and present practice, shape-note singing unites participants across denominational lines, and many singers today come from non-Christian faith communities or identify as non-religious.¹⁷ Whether or not singers affirm the beliefs represented in the song texts, musical participation and community involvement are top priorities.

Shape-note composers emerge from this ecosystem of egalitarian and community-minded music making. When Karlsberg describes composers as “singers first,” he means that their identities and contributions as singers are more important than their identities and contributions as composers. A shape-note composer does not

transition from a singing practice to a compositional practice. Instead, they compose as a service to the singing community of which they are lifelong members. The next section will provide an introduction to three shape-note composers followed by a more detailed explanation of shape-note composition.

Composer Biographies

Jesse P. Karlsberg¹⁸ is the senior digital scholarship strategist at the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship and associated faculty in the Department of Music at Emory University. His initial exposure to shape-note singing came during his undergraduate program at Wesleyan University, during the part of a course titled “Worlds of Music” that was taught by Professor Neely Bruce. Bruce was the director of the choir and would often write his own shape-note compositions and bring them in for the choir to test out and sing. As Karlsberg explains, “Most people love it or hate it [right away], but my love for this music developed gradually.”¹⁹ His primary interest during his undergraduate studies was twentieth-century experimental music and composition. He was initially interested in Sacred Harp singing for some of the same reasons that he liked experimental music. It was a form of group singing, and he was already involved in choir singing, where he discovered he loved to sing with other people.

P. Dan Brittain²⁰ earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in composition and wrote music for shape-note singers as well as for chorus and band. He served as commander and conductor of the U. S. Continental Army Band at Fort Monroe, Virginia. After his retirement from the army, he worked as a college band director, a choirmaster, and, finally, a public school band director before he fully retired. As previously mentioned, four of his songs are included in the current Denson edition of *The Sacred Harp*. Upon his death in 2023, he was memorialized with a two-day singing in Arkansas in April 2024.

Rachel Wells Hall²¹ is an associate professor of mathematics at St. Joseph’s University in Pennsylvania, where her current research focuses on mathematical music theory. She was also a member of the folk trio Simple Gifts. Hall has four original compositions in

the shape-note compilation *The Valley Pocket Harmonist* (2024), and her work on the editorial committees of that volume and *The Shenandoah Harmony* (2012) included arranging songs (which often meant writing all parts other than the tenor) and adding alto lines to three-part songs. This significant compositional work is typical of the shape-note tradition. Composers have worked as “arrangers” of popular and folk melodies since the earliest days, while the addition of alto lines was undertaken by a range of tunesmiths at the turn of the twentieth century.²² Hall has also submitted several compositions for inclusion in the revised Denson edition of *The Sacred Harp*, set to be published in 2025. All three composers are (or were) active singers within the shape-note tradition.

Approaches to Shape-Note Composition

Compositions contributed to *The Sacred Harp* by living composers are imperative ingredients in what is sometimes called a “living tradition.”²³ The singers interact with the composers, who are also singers, on a regular basis. This dynamic prompts singers to connect each composer as an individual with their compositions, which enhances the emotional impact the music has on the community.

Karlsberg began composing shape-note music within his first year of exposure to Sacred Harp singing. Coming from a compositional background, writing shape-note music was a natural form of participation for him. It also allowed him to explore his understanding of the musical form and theory. Karlsberg sought out relationships with living composers who had their songs published in *The Sacred Harp*. He built a special relationship with a patriarch and composer in the tradition, Raymond Hamrick.²⁴ At the beginning of their friendship, Karlsberg and Hamrick communicated via letters and phone. Later, Karlsberg moved from the northeast to Georgia, where Hamrick lived. Karlsberg was inspired by Hamrick’s compositions and was intrigued to discover how Hamrick—who, like so many other shape-note composers, received no formal music education—had learned to write music from others in the tradition. There are important singers and compos-

ers in the community who are formally educated, but most composers have developed their skill through informal mentorships as far back as the book’s first publication in 1844.²⁵ When asked what he valued most about his friendship with Hamrick, Karlsberg said:

Raymond motivated me to write music that was moving to me, music that was singable. He encouraged me to get out of my own way by writing simple, characteristic songs that I just wanted to sing. That’s what it’s all about. My goal became for singers to pick up on the notes by the second time they sing it.²⁶

The value placed on community in the Sacred Harp tradition affects the contents of the compositions themselves. A recurring theme across interviews and the literature was that each vocal part has a melodic nature. “The big thing is to make sure that each part has a melody of its own,” noted Brittain. “That’s one of the differences from traditional harmony.” Every shape-note book begins with a section known as the rudiments that outlines various concepts pertaining to shape-note singing, such as basic music theory, vocal technique, and principles of composition. The rudiments in *The Sacred Harp* read: “*Sacred Harp* music is polyphonic. The tune (melody, air) is carried by the tenor part, but the other parts, ideally, are good melodies on their own, making all parts interesting.”²⁷ Hall discussed this concept and referenced a quote from the rudiments of another shape-note book, *The Hesperian Harp*, which reads:

When your Air [or the tenor] is written, compose your Bass, Treble, &c.; and in doing this you must, if you would reach the hearts of those who can feel music, not only make all the parts of your tune perfectly harmonic, but make each part so good a melody that it will charm even when sung by itself.²⁸

Though each part is melodic, the other parts are still somewhat subservient to the tenor as the result of having been composed in the aforementioned order: tenor, bass, treble, and finally alto. Brittain outlined this order and explained that writing the bass after the tenor allows

the chords to begin coming together. The subsequent parts must maintain appropriate harmonic structure when combined while still conserving their own melodic integrity. He said that this compositional process was difficult at first, but it “just kind of flow[ed]” once he became more experienced.²⁹ Eighteenth-century composer William Billings described the interaction between melodic parts that creates harmonies, writing:

The first part [tenor] is nothing more than a flight of fancy, the other parts are forced to comply and conform to that, by partaking of the same air, or, at least, as much of it as they can get. [...] therefore, the grand difficulty in composition, is to preserve the air through each part separately, and yet cause them to harmonize with each other at the same time.³⁰

Thus, each part is both its own melody and a component of a harmonic whole. In allowing each voice its own melody, composers break several voice-leading rules that are often present in classical music. Parallel fifths and octaves, voice crossing, and unresolved dissonances are characteristic of the style. “I found out that I had to put aside my formal training,” observed Brittain. “We do a lot of parallels. There are things that you can’t do in classical that you can do in Sacred Harp.”

WOOD STREET is a contemporary composition by Chicago singer Judy Hauff that exhibits a range of typical characteristics (Figure 3). It is one of four compositions by Hauff in the current Denson revision of *The Sacred Harp*; her compositions also appear in other collections (see Appendix at the end of this article). In WOOD STREET, parallel octaves are present between the tenor and bass in m. 3 and the final measure. In mm. 6-7, the alto entrance is in parallel fifths with the tenor, while the alto moves in parallel fifths with the bass in m. 10. The treble part enters in m. 7 with a note that is dissonant with the tenor, and a second dissonance is created in m. 11 when the tenor leaps to an A while the treble moves stepwise to a B^b. While this composition does not include notated voice crossing, voice crossing is heard between the treble and tenor because those parts are sung in octaves by mixed-gen-

der singers. Hauff, incidentally, has no formal training in music and composed her tunes orally, recording herself singing each part and listening back to the parts together until she was satisfied with the harmonies.³¹

The Sacred Harp rudiments explain that:

Sacred Harp harmony does not follow the rules of conventional harmony, which were well established in the 18th century. [William] Billings fiercely declared his independence (‘I don’t think myself confined to any rules of composition laid down by any who went before me’) and he practiced what he preached.³²

The rudiments later define some of the characteristics of conventional harmony, such as homophony, complete triads, and avoidance of parallel motion—none of which typify Sacred Harp compositions. The rudiments state that, “In composing, one should explore the harmonic possibilities and evaluate each case by its sound in its own context. It is best not to be a slave to a preconceived list of concords and discords.”³³

Brittain has three fusing tunes included in the current Denson revision of *The Sacred Harp*. Specifically, his composition titled AKIN is an example of a song in which the voices interact in this way (Figure 4 on the next page). Visually, the contour of each part already appears to be melodic. Each part could be independent, but when the voices come together, several unconventional part-writing elements emerge that are characteristic of the style. The very first chord, for instance, lacks a third, which gives it an open sound. In the third measure, the treble and bass have parallel octaves, while the alto and tenor have parallel fifths. Then, in the fusing part, when all the voices come back together, the tenor and alto have parallel octaves. This is not a part-writing flaw. Rather, these parallels and open chords are integral to the style.

Composers’ Philosophies

The community-based nature of the shape-note tradition affects the contents of works composed within that tradition. Rather than writing with the expectation of a performance for an audience, both Brit-

tain and Hall shared the philosophy that the purpose of their music is to facilitate rewarding participatory experiences for Sacred Harp community members. When asked what he hoped people gained from his music, Brittain answered, “partially fun and partially community. It helps the community.”³⁴ Hall concurred: “The community part of [composing] is really important to me.” This focus on participation and enjoyment is demonstrated in the ways that these composers approach their music-writing. Karlsberg seeks to write “a song I just [want] to sing”—a song that he and other singers will immediately enjoy and that will be rewarding for everyone.³⁵ Hall explained that the compositional rules she has for herself include providing the altos

with a high note and giving the trebles a time to shine. She also discussed one of her compositions in which the bass part was especially melodic. The emphasis was on the singers having an enjoyable experience and each part being valuable.

It is typical for tunesmiths to involve singers in their compositional process. Once a composer has roughed out a new tune, they will bring it to the community to ensure that it sings well and to invite feedback. Brittain relied heavily on experienced singers to guide his development as a composer:

The fun part was that I would write a tune and carry it with me to the next singing and

With - in Thy cir - cling pow'r I stand, On ev - ry side I find Thy hand; A - wake, a - sleep, at home, a - broad, I am sur - round - ed still with God. God.

10

A - wake, a - sleep, at home, a - broad, I am sur - round - ed still with God. God.

wake, a - sleep, at home, a - broad, at home, a - broad, I am sur - round - ed still with God. God.

home, a - broad, at home, a - broad, I am sur - round - ed still with God. God.

at home, a - broad, I am sur - round - ed still with God. God.

Figure 4. P. Dan Brittain, AKIN, 1971.

Text: Isaac Watts, 1719.

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get Hugh McGraw and Buford McGraw and Buell Cobb and one or two of the others and they would sing it for me and then offer suggestions. And so I kind of had some really good tutoring right at the beginning. ... Having [experienced singers] look at all my songs and say don't do this, do this. It was a quick way of learning.

If singers do not enjoy any element of a song, the composer will be quick to revise it. Hall recalled an occasion on which she brought some compositions to her local group: "I could hear that some of the chords were hard to tune, so I changed them." She discussed how some classical composers (particularly those working in high-art contexts) may be encouraged to write difficult parts that sound virtuosic, and she noted the contrast in shape-note composition: it is essential to consider whether something will be done well rather than sound virtuosic.³⁶ (This is also a typical concern for composers in the educational sphere.) This allows everyone, regardless of experience, to participate. The melodic nature of each individual part is reflective of the value placed on the community members' enjoyment and experience.

Karlsberg explained that his ultimate purpose is to contribute memorable songs to the tradition. Every song in *The Sacred Harp* is a vehicle for some of the most meaningful experiences that the singers have.³⁷ Singing these songs is a spiritual encounter for many participants. Specific songs are associated with friends, family, and other loved ones. Every member in the community attaches special meanings and associations to certain songs, which accumulate continuously. Karlsberg shared a story about his song NATIONAL BLESSINGS, which is published in the Cooper edition of *The Sacred Harp* (Figure 5 on the next page).³⁸ Karlsberg composed this tune as a setting for a 1707 Isaac Watts text beginning "Lord, what a heav'n of saving grace," and he titled the composition A GLIMPSE OF THEE after the concluding phrase of the refrain. The editors of the Cooper edition changed the text and title. It is common in the shape-note tradition for a beloved text to be paired with many different tunes and for a tune to appear with different texts across collections.

Aubrey Barfield (1937–2019), a North Florida singer active in the regional Sacred Harp community, led NATIONAL BLESSINGS at all-day events on a regular basis.³⁹ The song was also sung at his funeral. Karlsberg did not know Barfield well and never saw him after NATIONAL BLESSINGS was added to the Cooper book, but he found out through mutual friends that his own music had found a special place in the heart of a fellow participant in the community.

The composers' comments reminded the authors of our research in the area of musical leadership in shape-note singing.⁴⁰ The resounding theme in that study was that leadership is a collaborative effort between the person in the center of the square and the singers, and that the goal is for members of the community to enjoy the music and to have a fulfilling experience. The composers seem to have this same outlook. Among other things, they do not merely write for the community but encourage the community to write as well. Brittain talked about how he would be happy to have only one of his songs in the next revision if it would mean that other composers' work would have a chance to be included. As he put it, "the more people we have writing, the better the community is."⁴¹ The exhortation for community members to compose has been a part of shape-note tradition for a long time. In the rudiments of *The Hesperian Harp*, the author writes, "and now, dear reader, male or female, let me urge you to try your hand at composing tunes; be not afraid to try, though every numbskull about you should laugh at your attempts."⁴² *The Sacred Harp* preface emphasizes that continuing to include new and present composers in each updated revision since 1844 is "the main reason [the book] has lasted so long and will continue to survive."⁴³

Singers' Engagement

Composers write with the understanding that the community has some liberty with the use of their compositions. There are notable discrepancies between communities in terms of musical interpretation. Brittain himself noted that in Georgia the tempos tend to be much slower than in Alabama, where he said they sing "a mile a minute,"⁴⁴ and the authors have certain-

1. Great God of na-tions now to thee, Our hymn of grat-i-tude we raise,____

2. Thy name we bless, Al-might-y God, For all the kind-ness thou hast shown.____

____ With hum-ble heart and bend-ing knee, We of-fer thee our song of praise.

____ To this fair land the Pil-grims trod, This land we fond-ly call our own.

Great God pre-serve us in thy fear; Great God pre-serve us in thy fear; In dan-gers still our

Great God pre-serve us in thy fear; Great God pre-serve us in thy fear; In dan-gers still our

Great God pre-serve us in thy fear; In dan-gers still our guar-dian be:____

Great God pre-serve us in thy fear; In dan-gers still our guar-dian be:____

guar-dian be: O spread thy truth's bright pre-cepts here; Let all the peo-ple wor-ship thee.

guar-dian be: O spread thy truth's bright pre-cepts here; Let all the peo-ple wor-ship thee.

O spread thy truth's bright pre-cepts here; Let all the peo-ple wor-ship thee.

O spread thy truth's bright pre-cepts here; Let all the peo-ple wor-ship thee.

Figure 5. Jesse Pearlman Karlsberg, NATIONAL BLESSINGS, 2009.

Text: A. A. Woodhull, 1831.

Used with permission of Jesse P. Karlsberg and the Sacred Harp Book Company.

WRITING MUSIC IN THE SACRED HARP TRADITION

ly seen a wide variety of interpretations of Brittain's own songs. One of Brittain's compositions, NOVAKOSKI, receives particularly wide-ranging treatment due to revisions made in the editorial process and Brittain's own intervention (Figure 6). When Brittain first composed NOVAKOSKI, which is a fugging tune, he included a meter change from $\frac{2}{2}$ to $\frac{4}{4}$, indicating that the fugging section was to be performed at a faster tempo. Later, he removed the meter change and set the entire song in $\frac{2}{2}$, thereby suggesting that it should be sung slowly. When NOVAKOSKI was published, however, the revision committee changed the meter to $\frac{4}{4}$. At Camp Fasola Europe in 2012, Brittain discussed this revision history with a group of students and led them in singing NOVAKOSKI

with the tempo change. He was happy with the result and announced that he would welcome performances both with and without a faster fugging section.⁴⁵ Today, singers sometimes briefly note this history when they lead NOVAKOSKI, and they discuss non-notated interpretive practices outside of formal singing contexts.

The work of revising committees constitutes a core means by which the community has a direct impact on compositions. In addition to composing songs, Hall has worked as a reviser. In this capacity, she wrote about twenty alto parts, arranged songs that were originally just tenor lines, chose different lyrics for tunes, and changed the titles of several songs that appear in *The Shenandoah Harmony*, even though she is not always cred-

1. Come, we that love the Lord, And let our joys be known; Join in a song with sweet ac-cord, Join in a song with

1. Come, we that love the Lord, And let our joys be known; Join in a song with

1. Come, we that love the Lord, And let our joys be known; Join in a song with sweet ac-cord, And thus sur-

1. Come, we that love the Lord, And let our joys be known; Join in a song with sweet ac-cord, Join in a song with

12

And thus sur-round the throne, And thus sur-round the throne.

sweet ac-cord, And thus sur-round the throne. And thus sur-round the throne.

round the throne, And thus sur-round the throne.

sweet ac-cord, And thus sur-round the throne, And thus sur-round the throne.

2. Let those refuse to sing
Who never knew our God;
But children of the heav'ny King
May speak their joys abroad.

3. Then let our songs abound,
And ev'ry tear be dry;
We're marching thro'
Immanuel's ground
To fairer worlds on high.

Figure 6. P. Dan Brittain, NOVAKOSKI, 1989.

Text: Isaac Watts, 1707.

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ited for each contribution. As she described the work:

It's totally part of the tradition [that] these songs get just gone over and over and over again by people in different generations and cobbled together. Things get stuck together that were never meant to be together before. People change notes and sometimes they pick completely different poetry for it or change the title or all sorts of things like that. So it's not weird. It's not like we took some Bach and altered it.⁴⁶

She shared an example of one of her favorite songs, DEVOTION, written by Alexander Johnson in 1818. The

tune has undergone many changes, such that it can no longer be identified as the work of a sole composer; instead, it is a product of the community (Figure 7).⁴⁷ Hall hopes future communities would feel that they had her permission to change things in her own compositions. "The beauty of the tradition," she reflected, "is that you can choose. You can take any one of the versions that has existed throughout history or you can change them and make it your own. It's not for sure that the original is the best one."

Revision committees ultimately decide which new compositions enter the repertoire and which do not. Currently, a committee of nine active singers is revising the Denson edition of *The Sacred Harp*, with the expect-

Alto part added in 1835

Boxed notes have associated year

1. Sweet is the day of sa-cred rest; No mor-tal cares shall seize my breast; _____

2. Then shall I share a glo-ri-ous part When grace hath well re-fined my heart; _____

3. Then shall I see and hear and know All I de-sired and wished be-low; _____

O may my heart in tune be found Like Da-vid's harp of sol-emn sound. sound.

And fresh sup-plies of joy are shed, Like ho-ly oil, to cheer my head. head.

And ev-'ry pow'r find sweet em-ploy In that e-ter-nal world of joy. joy.

Figure 7. Alexander Johnson, DEVOTION, 1818.

Text: Isaac Watts, 1719.

Historical analysis first published by Rachel Wells Hall.

Used with permission of Rachel Wells Hall and the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, Bremen, GA.

tation that the new book will be unveiled at the United Sacred Harp Musical Association Convention in September 2025. During the revision process, the committee received over 1,100 songs for consideration, most of which seem to have been new compositions.⁴⁸ Every song was sung and recorded at an open singing, and 157 finalist songs were recorded a second time at two all-day singings held in Georgia and the UK during June 2024.⁴⁹ The purpose of the revision singings was both to ensure a fair evaluation, which requires that the songs be sung and heard in their proper context, and to include the larger community of singers in the selection process. It has not yet been announced how many new songs or living composers will be added to *The Sacred Harp*, but it is likely to be a large number. It appears that interest in shape-note composition is at an exceptionally high level.

Conclusion

Shape-note composers continue to gain inspiration and guidance for their work by carefully examining compositions from past generations and evaluating their reception within the community. Their intent is to contribute to the tradition while remaining faithful to the forms and styles that are so highly valued by singers. The greatest reward a shape-note composer can receive is to see their song become meaningful to singers in the community.

The lengthy and intensive process by which the Denison revision of *The Sacred Harp* is currently being updated, which will see little-used songs dropped from the book and new songs added in their place, is centered on maintaining the health and vibrancy of the singing community. The revision committee is dedicated to keeping the songs that have accumulated meaningful and spiritual associations across time. The new compositions that will be incorporated hold a different kind of value for the community: the composers of these songs will be living members of the community, who sing and maintain a familial-like bond with the other participants. The compositions in this tradition facilitate a deep connection between living composers and singers and those of generations past.

One of the great strengths of the Sacred Harp singing community is that all singers are encouraged to con-

tribute as composers. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, there is no expectation of training or special talent. The narrow stylistic confines make composing


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Participants take ownership of the practice by determining what music the community is going to sing and how they are going to sing it.

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accessible to a broad swath of participants, and the use of shaped notes has been further demonstrated to support creative activity.⁵⁰ A related strength is that all singers are encouraged to contribute as music directors, taking their turn in the square to select and lead a song in the way they want to hear it sung.⁵¹ Both of these practices contribute to the highly democratic nature of Sacred Harp singing. Participants take ownership of the practice by determining what music the community is going to sing and how they are going to sing it. Other singing communities can learn from the Sacred Harp community and further democratize their activities by creating or expanding opportunities for participants to compose songs, select repertoire, shape interpretation, and possibly even make significant changes to the compositions of others. Empowering singers in this way increases their investment and solidifies their shared identity as members of a meaningful collective.

As we have demonstrated, shape-note music results from a collaborative effort between the community and the composer. First, the values of shape-note singers—specifically, the values of community and participation—directly impact the contents of the compositions, particularly in that each part is melodic. Second, this value impacts the composers’ outlooks, specifically in that they approach writing music with the community in mind. Finally, this value affects the actual performance of the songs in that the community has liberty to interpret and, in some cases, directly change the songs themselves. In this way, the community-based nature

of shape-note singing affects the contents of the compositions, the composers' philosophies, and the singers' engagement with the works. 

NOTES

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- ³ Fiona Evison, "From Art Music to Heart Music: The Place of the Composer in Community Singing," in *The Oxford Handbook of Community Singing*, ed. Esther M. Morgan-Ellis and Kay Norton (Oxford University Press, 2024), 949-50.
- ⁴ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 28.
- ⁵ Buell Cobb, *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (University of Georgia Press, 1978), 6. Readers may also be interested in: David W. Music, "The Decline of the American Tune Book," *Choral Journal* 58, no. 1 (August 2017): 8-15.
- ⁶ Buell Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, 66.
- ⁷ Stephen Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 68.
- ⁸ Jesse P. Karlsberg, "Joseph Stephen James's *Original Sacred Harp*: Introduction to the Centennial Edition," in *Original Sacred Harp: Centennial Edition*, ed. Jesse P. Karlsberg (Pitt Theological Library, 2015), viii.
- ⁹ James R. Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 52, 67.
- ¹⁰ Jesse P. Karlsberg, "Joseph Stephen James's *Original Sacred Harp*," xii.
- ¹¹ A. Michael V. Stecker, "'If I can Reach the Charming Sound, I'll Tune my Harp Again': The Fasola Tunebook Publication Renaissance," master's thesis (University of Florida, 2019), 193.
- ¹² Anne Heider and R. Stephen Warner, "Bodies in Sync: Interaction Ritual Theory Applied to Sacred Harp Singing," *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2010): 84.
- ¹³ John Bealle, *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong* (University of Georgia Press, 1997), 4.
- ¹⁴ Charles Ellington, *The Sacred Harp Tradition of the South: Its Origin and Evolution* (The Florida State University, 1969), 118.
- ¹⁵ Buell Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, 128.
- ¹⁶ Kiri Miller, *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.
- ¹⁷ George P. Jackson, *The Story of The Sacred Harp, 1844-1944* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), 3.
- ¹⁸ b. 1981
- ¹⁹ Jesse P. Karlsberg, interview.
- ²⁰ 1946-2023
- ²¹ b. 1969
- ²² Rachel Wells Hall, "The Alto Part in Shape Note Tune-books, 1867-1911" (paper, Annual Meeting of the Society for American Music, Minneapolis, MN, March 11, 2023).
- ²³ Laura Clawson, *I Belong to This Band, Hallelujah! Community, Spirituality, and Tradition among Sacred Harp Singers* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 159.
- ²⁴ David Steel and Richard Hulan, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 119-20.
- ²⁵ David Carlton, "To the Land I Am Bound: A Journey into Sacred Harp," *Southern Cultures* 9, no. 2 (2003): 53.
- ²⁶ Jesse P. Karlsberg, interview.
- ²⁷ Benjamin Franklin White and Elisha James King, *The Sacred Harp, 1991 Revision* (Sacred Harp Publishing Company, 1991), 21.
- ²⁸ William Hauser, *The Hesperian Harp* (S.C. Collins, 1874): xviii.
- ²⁹ P. Dan Brittain, interview by Lily Hammond, September 4, 2023.
- ³⁰ David Steel and Richard Hulan, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*, 43.
- ³¹ Judy Hauff, interview by Esther Morgan-Ellis, January 15, 2025.
- ³² Benjamin Franklin White and Elisha James King, *The Sacred Harp*, 21.
- ³³ Ibid., 22.
- ³⁴ P. Dan Brittain, interview.
- ³⁵ Jesse P. Karlsberg, interview.
- ³⁶ Rachel Wells Hall, interview by Lily Hammond, September 3, 2023.
- ³⁷ Kiri Miller, *Traveling Home*, 110.
- ³⁸ Jesse P. Karlsberg, "'A Glimpse of Thee' in *The Sacred Harp: Revised Cooper Edition*," Jesse P. Karlsberg, PhD, February 4, 2013, <https://jpkarlsberg.com>.

- ³⁹ Wilson Marion Cooper, *The Sacred Harp, Cooper Edition*, 2012 (Samson, AL: The Sacred Harp Book Company, 2012).
- ⁴⁰ Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, Abigail C. Cannon, Lily M. Hammond, and Moriah Miller, “Negotiated Leadership in Sacred Harp Singing” (submitted for publication).
- ⁴¹ P. Dan Brittain, interview.
- ⁴² William Hauser, *The Hesperian Harp* (S.C. Collins, 1874), xviii.
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- ⁴⁴ P. Dan Brittain, interview.
- ⁴⁵ Jesse P. Karlsberg, “Sacred Harp, ‘Poland Style,’” *Southern Spaces*, February 27, 2013, <https://southernspaces.org/2013/sacred-harp-poland-style/>
- ⁴⁶ Rachel Wells Hall, interview.
- ⁴⁷ Rachel Wells Hall, “Philadelphia, Birthplace of the Shapes and Center of Shape-Note Publishing” (Sacred Harp Publishing Company, September 1, 2017), <https://originalsacredharp.com>.
- ⁴⁸ Composer names, years, and other identifying information were redacted during the public review process.
- ⁴⁹ David Ivey, et al., “Revision—Music Committee Status Report” (Sacred Harp Publishing Company, October 2024), <http://originalsacredharp.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Revision-Music-Committee-Status-Report-2024-10-05.pdf>
- ⁵⁰ Raymond C. Hamrick, “The Composer’s Debt to Shape-Notes” (Sacred Harp Publishing Company, December 31, 2016), <https://originalsacredharp.com/2016/12/31/the-composers-debt-to-shape-notes/>; George H. Kyme, “An Experiment in Teaching Children to Read Music with Shape Notes,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 8, no. 1 (1960): 8.
- ⁵¹ Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, et al., “Negotiated Leadership in Sacred Harp Singing.”

Appendix: Sources for New Shape-Note Repertoire

All shape-note collections that have been compiled or revised in recent decades include new compositions by members of the singing community. Below is an annotated list of prominent collections, including information on how to procure each tunebook.

Carden, Allen D., ed. *The Missouri Harmony: 2005 Edition*. Second ed. (Missouri Historical Society Press, 2005). Purchase from University of Chicago Press.

When the publication committee responsible for revising *The Missouri Harmony* (1820) put out a call for new compositions, they received fifty-three submissions from tunesmiths in eight U. S. states, Canada, and England. A few dozen tunes by singers P. Dan Brittain, Judy Hauff, Ted Johnson, John Bayer, Dan Gibbons, James Solheim, and others were added to the 2005 revision.

Dakan, Myles Louis, et al., *The Shenandoah Harmony* (The Shenandoah Harmony Publishing Company, 2012). Purchase from The Shenandoah Harmony Publishing Company.

This compilation consists mostly of old songs taken from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tunebooks, but it also contains recent compositions by a wide range of contemporary composers.

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Gordon, Larry, and Anthony G. Barrand, eds. *Northern Harmony*. Fourth ed. (Northern Harmony Publishing Company, 1998). Used copies of this collection can be found online.

The first edition of *Northern Harmony*, which was issued in 1979, collected old tunes by Vermont composers. Later editions added new compositions by active singers. In the current edition, more than one-third of the tunes are new. Contemporary composers are introduced with a biographical sketch.

Hamrick, Raymond C. *The Georgian Harmony*. Second ed. (Raymond C. Hamrick, 2012). Purchase at one of the four annual singings in Georgia that are dedicated to its use.

Raymond C. Hamrick was one of the great twentieth-century shape-note tune writers. This collection brings together several hundred of his compositions, written over the course of the past half-century.

Hunter, Daniel L., et al., *The Valley Pocket Harmonist* (The Shenandoah Harmony Publishing Company, 2024). Purchase from The Shenandoah Harmony Publishing Company.

This collection, subtitled “A Supplement to *The Shenandoah Harmony*,” brings together historical and new compositions/arrangements in approximately equal measure. Central to the collection are thirty-four previously unpublished tunes by Ohio composer John Bayer Jr. (1954-2016).

Walker, William, John Deason, and O. A. Parris, eds. *The Christian Harmony: 2010 Edition* (Christian Harmony Music Company, 2010). Purchase from Christian Harmony Music Company.

The most recent edition of *The Christian Harmony* (1866) does not constitute a thorough revision, but it does include new tunes by singers Lawrence Beveridge, Raymond C. Hamrick, John Plunkett, John Newton Merritt, and Bill Hollingsworth, all of which are located near the back of the book.

White, Benjamin Franklin, and Elisha James King, eds. *The Sacred Harp: 1991 Edition* (Sacred Harp Publishing Company, 1991). Purchase from Sacred Harp Publishing Company.

This is the most used shape-note tunebook. The 1991 revision incorporated new compositions by a range of active singers. The next revision, scheduled for release in September 2025, is expected to contain dozens of new compositions.

White, Benjamin Franklin, and Wilson Marion Cooper, eds. *The Sacred Harp: Revised Cooper Edition* (The Sacred Harp Book Company, 2012). Purchase from The Sacred Harp Book Company.

The most recent Cooper edition of *The Sacred Harp* contains recent compositions by twelve singers.