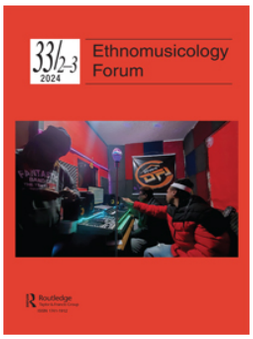

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Negotiated leadership in Sacred Harp singing

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ABSTRACT

In Sacred Harp singing, a leader stands in the midst of a roomful of singers and uses gesture to start the singing, set the tempo, navigate time changes, and cue entrances. Every participant is invited to lead a 'lesson' of one or two songs during a singing. The leader, however, does not have sole authority over the performance. Musical decisions are often made collectively by the leader and the other singers, with the greatest power resting in the front benches of each section, while the course of a singing session is shaped by arrangers and pitchers. The resulting dynamic system functions effectively when singers occupying a range of roles respond sensitively to one another while making music. Decision-making in all quarters is guided by a principle of mutual beneficence: the leader wants to give the class a good experience, and the class wants to give the leader a good experience. A successful lesson is one in which all parties enjoy themselves. This article details the process of negotiated leadership in shape-note singing, drawing on extensive fieldwork in the US Southeast and interviews with expert leaders.

KEYWORDS

Sacred Harp; Christian Harmony; community singing; community music; musical leadership; choral singing

Introduction

In the Sacred Harp singing tradition, musical leadership is best understood as a dynamic system in which the simultaneous actions of singers occupying various positions shape the unfolding of the performance (Bishop 2018; Nijs et al. 2023). The tasks of choosing repertoire, guiding the trajectory of the musical event, and physically directing the singing are distributed among participants (Conley-Holcom 2017: 109). While almost every individual will take a turn entering the 'hollow square' formed by the four voice parts, facing the tenor section, and using gesture to start, pace, and stop a song of their choice, musical decisions are often made collectively by means of a process we have termed 'negotiated leadership'. In this article, we will detail the mechanisms of negotiated leadership in Sacred Harp singing, drawing on extensive participant-observer fieldwork, interviews with experienced singers, and engagement with the secondary literature. Our aim is to untangle the dynamic processes by which musical leadership is enacted by singers occupying a range of roles within the musical performance.

Distributed musical leadership is not specific to Sacred Harp. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated how individual performers in groups of various sizes and structures—

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piano duos, string quartets, conductorless large ensembles, and conducted choirs and orchestras—assume complementary leadership roles and anticipate each other's actions in order to achieve sonic and expressive synchrony (Keller 2008). In her study of musician-led performance in contemporary music ensembles, for example, Maria Puusaari identifies the roles of leader, co-leader, and follower, proceeding to analyse how musicians occupying these roles collaborate in real time to realise a musical score (2021: 44). In each context, the motivations for making music, combined with social and aesthetic values, shape the dynamic system in which leadership roles are negotiated and enacted. As we will demonstrate, the context of Sacred Harp singing prioritises maximal participation and collective enjoyment of the singing experience. This, in combination with leading practices and social norms that have developed within the tradition, has resulted in a unique system of musical leadership.

Sacred Harp singing is already the subject of an extensive body of scholarly research. It first attracted the attention of musicologist George Pullen Jackson, who sought in the 1920s and 1930s to locate a source of American folk heritage in the shape-note singing practices of white Southerners (Jackson 1965 [1933]; Karlsberg 2015a: 128–29).[1] As Jackson observed, *The Sacred Harp* belonged to a vital tradition of nineteenth-century Southern tunebooks that were printed using a shape-note system first employed by Philadelphia publishers William Little and William Smith before 1802 (Bealle 1997: 269; Goff 2002: 21). In this approach, noteheads are printed in four different shapes according to their solemnisation using the syllables *fa*, *sol*, *la*, and *mi* (Figure 1). The four-syllable approach to teaching sightsinging had been dominant since the New England singing schools of the mid-eighteenth century (Cobb 1978: 59), but in the 1840s singing-school teachers and tunebook publishers began to favour a system using seven shapes and seven syllables (Figure 2). Although the conflict over shapes—both their quantity and appearance—was long-lasting and acrimonious, the seven-shape system eventually won general favour and was used for all new books by the final decades of the century (Goff 2002: 24).

The only four-shape book to remain in widespread use following the Civil War was *The Sacred Harp*, a collection first published in Georgia in 1844 (Cobb 1978: 77), and it is on this volume that Jackson and most other scholars have focused their attention. Indeed, the term 'Sacred Harp singing' is often used to denote engagement with a range of shape-note books, a pattern we have chosen to follow here.[2] Largely through the efforts of its lead editor, Benjamin Franklin White, *The Sacred Harp* quickly accrued a following, being adopted by both singing school teachers and major singing conventions (Cobb 1978: 141–42). White oversaw frequent revisions during his lifetime, removing songs that were not embraced by the singing community and adding new compositions that he thought might find favour. After his death, the publication of competing

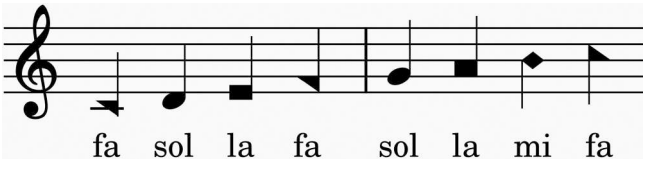

Figure 1. The four-shape system uses four shapes to correspond with four solfege syllables.

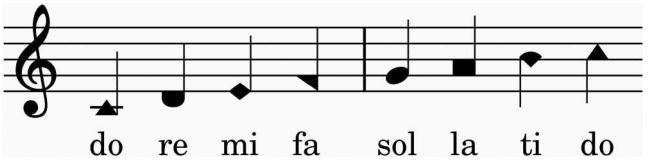

Figure 2. The seven-shape system uses seven shapes to correspond with seven solfege syllables. The shapes here—known as 'Aikin shapes', after their inventor, Jesse Aikin—are the most commonly used (Jackson 1965 [1933]: 337).

revisions, some of which embraced newer gospel styles and some of which adhered strictly to the 'dispersed harmony' style of the original (Kahre 2015: 119; Karlsberg 2017: 99–100), resulted in two lines of revision that carry into the present day (Karlsberg 2015b: vi–vii). These are known colloquially as the Denson book and the Cooper book. Some singers in Georgia also continue to sing out of a revision published in 1911 by James Landrum White, the son of Benjamin Franklin White (Cobb 1978: 109–10).

When Buell Cobb penned his account of Sacred Harp singing in the late 1970s, fifty years after Jackson first brought the practice to the attention of musicologists, he did so with the near certainty that it would soon be extinct. However, a revival in the 1980s saw singers flock to the tradition, and new singing communities developed in New England, Chicago, and eventually throughout the United States (Davis 2016: 13–14). Today, there are communities of singers in more than a dozen countries (Lueck 2017: 5), although the US South remains as a sort of spiritual homeland for what Kiri Miller has termed the 'Sacred Harp diaspora' (2008: 28). The Sacred Harp revival also revitalised the legacy of other songbooks, and singers today engage with a range of shape-note books, some of which were compiled in the nineteenth century and some of which are recent efforts (Morgan-Ellis 2021). In the former category, William Walker's seven-shape volume *The Christian Harmony* (1866) is the most widely used, as suggested by the fact that a modern edition remains in print. In the latter, *The Shenandoah Harmony* (2012) brings together songs from seventy-four older collections, most of which are out of print, and has gained acceptance by singing communities in the US and Europe. Our fieldwork included encounters with both of these volumes, as well as the Denson and White revisions of *The Sacred Harp*. While the contents of these volumes differ in significant ways, they are often used by the same groups of singers following the same patterns of musical participation.

Today, singers around the globe gather at local 'regular' or 'practice' singings, which take place on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis; annual all-day singings (one day) and conventions (two or more days); and weeklong shape-note camps, which take place in the US South and in Europe (Miller 2008: 49). The procedure at any singing will be roughly the same. The seating is typically set up to form a 'hollow square', with basses and trebles to the left and right of the tenors respectively, and altos opposite. Sometimes the physical attributes of a space—a church sanctuary with fixed pews, for example—preclude a hollow square, but in all of the singings we attended there was at least an effort to spatially differentiate the voice parts. The tenor part holds the melody, and for that reason the tenor section is usually two to four times bigger than the other sections. Musicians of all genders sing the tenor part, each singer in their own natural octave, and the same

is true of the treble (Marini 2003: 69). The bass part is sung predominantly by men and the alto by women, although we witnessed men join the altos in the high octave on several occasions. During the singing, each participant will have an opportunity to enter the square, face the tenors, call out a song of their choice by page number, and lead that song by beating time. A lead is termed a 'lesson', in reference to the singing-school tradition, and the group of assembled singers is a 'class'. Songs are always keyed without the aid of a pitch pipe or instrument.

Modern-day leadership practices differ markedly from those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Miller 2008: 61). As Cobb explains, 'being permitted to lead the group was a high privilege' in 1905, and leaders occupied the centre of the square for up to thirty minutes (1978: 142). A significant change came about by the 1930s, at which point it appears that a larger number of leaders were granted time in the square, giving a lesson of four songs each. A prominent singer noted that any deficiencies in leadership were made up for by the 'front bench tenors', who Cobb supposes began to assume greater leadership responsibility 'with hand motions or a subtle patting of the foot under the bench' (143). In 1925, the leadership of the Texas State Sacred Harp Convention noted in the minutes that 'We openly insist and hope that it may be adopted as the policy of this convention to see that none appear upon the floor to conduct our music except those who are competent and well equipped', suggesting that less able leaders were beginning to enter the square (Hardawar 1989: 73). Observing the 1930 Interstate Sacred Harp Convention in Texas, Jackson noted that each leader was permitted three songs. 'Some leaders stood still', he wrote. 'But most of them walked around the open space giving the entrance cues—in the often-sung "fuging" songs—successively to the different sections. The leader's beat was with both arms, for he was seldom encumbered with a book; and his arm movements were simply down and up' (1965 [1933]: 115–16). Jackson also noted that, rather unusually, women were permitted to lead at this singing, although they did not key their own songs (1965 [1933]: 115–16).

While observations like Jackson's appear throughout twentieth and twenty-first century accounts of shape-note singing, no study to date has focused on the peculiarities of musical leadership in this singing community. A close consideration of leadership is necessary to understand the social and musical values of shape-note singers, and it also promises insights pertinent to the study of other collective music-making practices. Musical leadership in shape-note singing is remarkable in its reliance on collaboration for the purpose of mutual beneficence. Leaders and singers alike seek to serve the class and facilitate a rewarding experience for all.

Methodology

Between May and September of 2023, the co-authors of this study assumed the role of participant-observers at nineteen all-day singings and conventions located in the states of Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia (Table 1). We also attended more than a dozen regular singings in Dahlonega, GA and Decatur, GA, and two authors participated in Camp Fasola, a four-day educational programme in Anniston, AL that includes leadership workshops and evening singings. At these events, we evaluated our own experiences as leaders and took careful notes on the mechanisms of musical leadership based on our observations. We also interviewed seven experienced singers to gather

Table 1. This table summarises the singings at which formal observations were made by the research team.

Date	Event	Location	Book used	Number of leaders	Researchers in attendance
June 3	Holly Springs Primitive Baptist Church	Bremen, GA	*The Sacred Harp, 1991 Edition* (SH)	46	ACC
June 3	NSV Shenandoah Harmony All-Day	Berryville, VA	*The Shenandoah Harmony*	minutes not published (approx. 60)	EMME
June 11	Alpharetta June Singing	Alpharetta, GA	SH	15	EMME
June 17	Blue Ridge Primitive Baptist Church	Chatsworth, GA	*The Christian Harmony* (CH)	minutes not published (approx. 20)	EMME, LMH
June 18	Hopewell Primitive Baptist Church	Roopville, GA	SH	39	EMME
June 25	Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church	Fayette, AL	SH	107	ACC
July 1–2	Henagar-Union Convention	Henagar, AL	SH	176	EMME, ACC, LMH
July 3	Independence Day Singing	Wellington, AL	SH	40	EMME, LMH
July 3–7	Camp Fasola	Anniston, AL	SH	102	EMME, LMH
July 8	John C. Campbell Folk School	Brasstown, NC	SH, CH	11	EMME, ACC, LMH, MM
July 25	Lacy Memorial Singing	Ider, AL	SH	72	ACC
Aug. 5–6	Chattahoochee Musical Convention	Whitesburg, AL	SH	37	ACC
Aug. 19	B.M. Smith/Philip Denney Memorial	Armuchee, GA	SH	55	EMME, LMH
Aug. 26–27	Lookout Mountain Convention	Collinsville, AL	SH	69	ACC
Aug. 27	Tickanetley Primitive Baptist Church	Ellijay, GA	CH	18	EMME
Sep. 4	Labor Day Singing	Edwardsville, AL	SH	17	ACC
Sep. 9–10	United Convention	Ider, AL	SH	84	ACC, MM
Sep. 16	Lee Rogers Memorial	Arnoldsville, GA	CH	12	EMME, LMH
Sep. 17	B.F. White Memorial	Decatur, GA	*The Sacred Harp* (1911 J.L. White revision)	10	EMME, ACC
Sep. 24	Poplar Springs Primitive Baptist Church	Bowdon, GA	SH	34	EMME, ACC

additional perspectives on musical leadership. Their insights are referenced throughout this article. While our fieldwork focused on the US Southeast, several authors sang in other parts of the US (Florida, California, Washington, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Connecticut) during the writing and revision of this article, and our observations about the dynamic processes described here have held true in those contexts.

At the outset of this study, the co-authors had diverse levels of experience with shape-note singing. Esther Morgan-Ellis was the most experienced, possessing expertise on the history and practices and having travelled to a few dozen singing events over the preceding decade. She founded the Dahlonega regular singing in the summer of 2022. Abigail Cannon had attended all of the local regular singings as well as two all-day singings and had also studied the history of shape-note singing. Lily Hammond and Moriah Miller had each attended a few regular singings and one all-day but had limited experience and

knowledge. All four co-authors hold or are pursuing degrees in music. While we began with different levels of ability as shape-note leaders, we all improved our skills and gained embodied insights into what constitutes effective and rewarding leadership. This was a critical element of the investigation.

Negotiated leadership in Sacred Harp singing

In Sacred Harp singing, musical leadership is negotiated between the designated leader, who calls the song and sings from the centre of the square, and the other singers, with extra power lying in the front bench (front row) of the tenor section and, to a slightly lesser extent, the front benches of the other sections. However, every singer in the room has a role to play in determining and reinforcing tempo and phrasing, keeping time, and cueing entrances. The experience is collectively shaped as participants negotiate musical decisions in the act of singing. How this negotiation takes place varies widely based on context. The size of the singing, experience level of the singers, and familiarity of the singers with one another are all important. The key variable, however, is the confidence and skill of the designated leader, which will determine how the room responds. Power is rebalanced with each leader based on a rapid assessment of that leader's confidence and nonverbal communication between participants.

As we heard again and again from our interviewees, the goal of leading is to give the class a good experience. Likewise, it is the common desire of singers to give the leader a good experience. This attitude of mutual beneficence is the essential starting place for understanding how leadership is negotiated. It determines every detail of a successful lesson, ranging from the technique employed by the leader to the posture, attention, and musical decisions of front-bench singers to the choice of song. Success is achieved when the leader and class both enjoy themselves; there is no other metric.

Leadership roles

One might think of 'musical leadership' in terms of the various roles often assigned to a conductor in Western art music contexts. In a typical choir, the conductor chooses repertoire, guides interpretation, determines tempos, and uses gesture in performance to dictate elements such as articulation and dynamics (Durrant and Varvarigou 2019: 827). In shape-note singing, there is a porous boundary between the roles of 'conductor' and 'singer'. Singers take turns serving as 'conductor' (not a term used in the shape-note community). Additionally, the conductor sings and the singers conduct (Clawson 2011: 140). These initial observations, however, only hint at the complex mechanisms by which leadership responsibility and power is spread throughout the class.

The designated leader

The principal role is that of the designated leader—the person called to enter the square and lead a song of their choice. While the leader uses gesture to draw singing from the class, it is perilous to imagine that they are assuming the role of a conductor. As Lisa Bennett emphasised, 'We are not conducting, we are leading. And there's a big difference between those two things. … Are you trying to help keep the class together, have the class have a good experience, through the minimal amount of body movement you can do? Or

are you just a performer who wants to be up there and getting a lot of attention for yourself?' (interview 2023). A wide range of leading styles are accepted in the community, so long as they achieve the fundamental goal of fostering enjoyment. 'The only time that a song is led badly', reflected leader and front-bench tenor Shawn Taylor, 'is if the leader introduces confusion. So if they have mixed messages about whether they want to repeat or not, if they have mixed messages about whether they are repeating or going into the next verse, whether they aren't beating in time with their mouth as they're singing. … And then pretty much anything that's not introducing confusion is fine' (interview 2023).

The leader has total control over the selection of the song and is also responsible for setting the tempo and negotiating any time changes. While this can be done through gesture, it is also common for leaders to verbalise their preferences, especially after singing the shapes but before singing the words. We heard leaders request that tempos be increased or decreased throughout our fieldwork, and it is the responsibility of the class to respect the leader's tempo preference, even if it is unusual. The leader will start the singing and keep time using basic gestures with (usually) their right arm while holding the book open with their left. As David Brodeur explained, the most skilled leaders will time their start 'so that there are no awkward pauses of any kind. Someone sounds the notes, the class sounds the chord, and the expert leader rides the energy of that chord by, just at the right time, dropping their hand and getting the music started, while the chord is just ebbing a little bit, not waiting for it to go silent, so that they're kind of stepping into the pool' (interview 2023). Careful timing supports the class's enjoyment of the lesson.

The conducting style typically employed in shape-note singing is related to that in Western art music traditions, but somewhat simpler in appearance. Duple time is indicated with a simple down-up motion, usually from the elbow with a straight wrist and open, flat hand (Marini 2003: 70). To indicate triple time, the leader will employ two down motions, the first stopping at the midpoint, and an up motion. Quadruple time is more common in some populations of singers than others. When used, it is conducted following the same down-left-right-up pattern as in Western art music (Eastburn 2018: 80). However, singers in some traditions and/or communities almost never conduct in quadruple time, instead using a slow duple gesture. When multiple singers are beating time, it sometimes appears as if they are not synchronised. This can be due to lack of skill, but more likely reflects variations in approaches to beat placement, especially in common time songs led in duple. Some singers employ a technique that places beats two and four at the ends of each upward and downward stroke, while others place those beats in the middle of the stroke, as indicated in the Sacred Harp 'Rudiments of Music' (Garst 1991: 16). Leaders never employ a sharp ictus, and while the singing is usually rhythmic and heavily accented, the gestures do not reflect this. As we were repeatedly instructed in leading classes at Camp Fasola, 'Accent with your voice, not your hand'. Indeed, our interlocutors frequently reminded us that front-bench tenors take their tempo by watching the leader's mouth, not their hand.

If there are staggered entrances, such as in a fuging tune, the leader might cue each section. Experienced leaders might also cue high notes, held notes, or any other part that they find interesting, often making eye contact with the front bench in that section (Miller 2004: 486). We witnessed this frequently during our fieldwork and found that these cues make a perceptible difference in the sound. When a renowned

leader at Henagar looked at the altos for their melodic passage at the end of SH 192 Schenectady, for example, they responded with notable vigour. Bennett reminded us, however, that these techniques are entirely optional: 'A more experienced leader might turn and bring in the parts, they might—even when they're not bringing in a part, if there's a special little high note in the trebles or whatever—they might just acknowledge it, give a little nod to the trebles, a little extra hand wave or something like that, and that's really sweet, and it's really lovely, but it's not necessary' (interview 2023). Throughout, the leader is expected to face the tenors (unless cueing an entrance) and sing the tenor part (Heider and Warner 2010: 81–82), although some leaders will sing another part due to inexperience or vocal limitations. When a song comes to an end, the leader might make a concluding gesture or might simply lower their hand and return to their seat.

As Lisa Hardawar noted in her observations of Texas singers, there is 'tremendous variety' in leading style within a single community (1989: 79). While Hardawar confirms the prevalence of the style described above, she elaborates that 'variations range from a very precise, reserved, up and down motion using the hand and the forearm, to a very exaggerated motion, to that which includes the use of the whole body swinging back and forth' (79). Ethnomusicologist and singer Jonathon Smith has observed singers using 'broad flourishes and dramatic, intense motions' as a means of personal expression, sometimes tailoring their gesture to communicate the meaning of the song. At the same time, he acknowledges that a more restrained style prevails in the South, especially among older singers (2022: 251). Upon moving to West Georgia, Nathan Rees found that local singers 'had a real aversion to doing anything that was too extra. … They frowned on really doing anything much at all with your hand except going up and down' (interview 2023). Indeed, we found that some of the most respected and effective leaders employ an extremely subtle technique, sometimes ceasing to beat time altogether and signalling entrances with just a glance. Hardawar reported that Texas singers sometimes refrained from holding the book and led with both arms, having memorised the song (1989: 79–80). We often watched leaders hand their book to a friend on the front bench after singing the shapes but before singing the words, at which point they might lead with both arms or with one held behind the back. Other times the leader will leave the book on their chair when they enter the square (Heider and Warner 2010: 81). Kiri Miller has suggested that 'particular styles of song-leading' constantly accumulate layers of meaning for singers, who come to associate them with individuals, locales, and specific memories (2010: 275), an observation that resonates with connections made between individuals and leading styles in our interviews. Smith has suggested the existence of a 'genealogy of leading movements' that connect singers from one generation to the next. He finds that leading motions are gendered and has demonstrated how singers assert queer identities through choosing to emulate leading style across gender lines (2022: 252).

Leading styles differ not only between individuals but between communities. Hardawar describes a style known as 'walkin' it off', associated with African American singings in lower Alabama, in which 'The leader uses the entire floor space available inside the hollow square while he energetically struts around among the various sections of singers' (1989: 80). This style was also described by Doris Dyen, who called it 'walking the time' and describes the action as 'pacing or marching, always facing the tenor

section, in time to the music' (1977: 162). An ambulatory leadership style, however, is not the unique purview of African American singers: members of the Lee family in Hoboken, Georgia practice a similar style known as 'walking time' (Miller 2004: 492; Smith 2022: 161), described by Kathryn Eastburn as 'a promenade around the edges of the square in which the leader addresses each of the four sections while beating the time with both feet and hands' (2018: 12). Hoboken leaders are also noted for their slow tempos and quadruple time beating (Smith 2022: 161). Although we did not observe any African American singing communities and were only able to visit Hoboken once, after the formal study period had concluded, we did note the vigorous activity with which some leaders move around the square.

Sacred Harp singing presents unique challenges to leaders. In most songs, the leader needs to communicate certain decisions to the singers, including their selection of verses and their incorporation of both written and unwritten repeats. Many of the songs include so-called 'optional' repeats in the second part, and, while there are norms, it is up to the leader to decide whether the repeat is respected on the shapes and/or the words. In a fuging tune with two verses, for example, it would be typical to repeat the fugue only on the second verse, but the leader can decide to repeat it on the shapes and/or both verses, or not to repeat it at all. In a few songs (e.g. SH 542 I'll Seek His Blessings), there is also an accepted tradition of repeating the fugue more than once—a practice strongly associated with well-known and highly respected leaders in the community. A leader always has the option of giving verbal instructions (e.g. 'We'll sing verses 1 and 3, repeat last time on the words only'), but a vocabulary of gestures and movements is also widely employed and understood. To indicate verses, a leader can hold up fingers corresponding to the verse number, usually just before it begins. In a fugue, repeats are indicated by making eye contact with the front bench in the section that enters first and providing them with a clear gesture, possibly combined with movement in their direction. In other songs, repeats are often indicated with a step forward and eye contact with the front bench tenors. A few leaders, especially in upper Alabama, will briefly clap on the beat to indicate that a repeat is about to be taken. The end of a song, or the decision not to take a repeat, can be indicated with a raised hand, palm facing forward.

There are songs with metric disruptions or non-notated performance practices that require extra skill from the leader and extra attention from the singers. SH 543 Thou Art God, for example, contains multiple fermatas (not all of which are respected) and a very unusual *ritardando* indication. It is typical for the leader to mark each note in the *ritardando* passage, which is taken out of time. SH 376 Help Me to Sing looks like an ordinary plain song on the page, but in practice it is led with multiple fermatas, most of which fall on the second of the six beats. A beginner would be advised to steer clear. Many of the odes and anthems include metre and/or tempo changes, as do a few of the plain songs (e.g. SH 448t Consecration) and fuging tunes (e.g. SH 455 Soar Away). A full account of songs that include metric disruptions or non-notated performance practice considerations would constitute a study of its own. Most shape-note songs, however, can be successfully led by a novice using basic motions.

While there is no single correct way to lead, Laura Clawson documented concerns about certain approaches that overtly incorporate secular influence and were perceived as disrespectful by her informants. In particular, she noted objections to 'song leaders

who … "dance" or "gyrate" in the square, often in specifically contra-dance style' (2011: 18). Brodeur concurred: 'The more dancing around, and the more showiness, and the more extraneous motion, the less I'm impressed' (interview 2023). Clawson acknowledges that singers are able to identify 'a particularly bad leader' (2011: 25) but does not provide details on what makes leadership 'bad'. We suggest, following Taylor and our other interlocutors, that bad leading must be defined as any approach that produces an unenjoyable experience. This can result from any action of word or gesture that sows confusion and makes singers feel uncertain. It also results when the leader displays a negative or disrespectful attitude. Will Fitzgerald identified 'people who come in full of pride and arrogance and anger at the class for not doing what they want' as the only 'bad leaders' (interview 2023), although thankfully these are few and far between. Ivy Hauser additionally identified occasions on which 'The leader hasn't done anything to bring the class along with them' emotionally as examples of less enjoyable leads (interview 2023). Across our fieldwork, it became clear that attitude and personal connection were more important to leading than technique. Indeed, Fitzgerald identified the best leader as being someone who 'is very confident but also is coming out of a long relationship with the song they're leading. I'd much rather have someone lead a song they really love. The most transformative moments for me have been when somebody comes in with a delight in the music, a delight in the words, a delight in the class, generally a longstanding experience in the tradition' (interview 2023).

Leaders need to communicate clearly and appropriately with the class not only through gesture but also through speech and general behaviour. 'Have your song ready when it's your turn to lead', advises Kathy Williams, 'and call it out from your seat when you stand' (2017: 24). Clawson describes an occasion on which a leader became inappropriately political in making remarks about his chosen song, noting that the pitcher and class interrupted him and he was later privately reprimanded (2011: 133). Comments on politics are strictly prohibited, while those pertaining to faith need to respect the diverse beliefs of participants. 'Singers have a wide range of belief systems', writes Williams. 'What each individual makes of the music and lyrics is up to that person. Respect that right' (2017: 24). Miller confirms that leaders' remarks should be kept to a minimum, in part because 'any opportunity for preaching, grandstanding, or linking a song to current events might threaten the atmosphere of pluralist tolerance' (2010: 257).

Leaders also guide the class with their singing voices. While it is typical to sing the melody loudly and confidently, some leaders also have a habit of making early entrances for the purpose of confirming what is going to happen next, especially in songs with multiple verses and/or optional repeats. If the class is not sure which verse is to be sung next, or whether a repeat is to be taken, an early entrance will clearly indicate the path through the song. Early entrances are also made at the beginnings of songs and/or phrases that follow rests, in which case they convey a sense of exuberance. Jonathon Smith has described early entrances of this sort as 'a slight anticipation that some Sacred Harp singers have utilized to help maintain the class's momentum—an irregular irruption rather than a calculated affectation' (2022: 93). Only one of our interlocutors, Hauser, self-consciously practices early entrances while leading. She described the timing as 'very systematic', and mentioned that she uses early entrances both for stylistic effect and, in some cases, to signal verses. Early entrances can also be made by a confident

tenor in the class. We witnessed this in Arnoldsville on CH 165 Babylon is Fallen when a front-bench tenor came in one beat early on the final repeat of the refrain to clearly indicate that we were taking the repeat (which, incidentally, is not notated in *The Sacred Harp*, perhaps resulting in some uncertainty). We also heard it in Roopville, when a strong tenor entered one beat early for each verse of SH 289 Greensborough, thereby confirming which verses were to be sung.

While it is the leader's responsibility to make certain musical decisions and guide the singing, the best leaders undertake their task with a spirit of give and take. 'The people that I have really admired for the way that they lead the music', observed Rees, 'have a good balance between really being effective at communicating what they want the class to do but then also being sensitive to what the class wants to do. … It is important for leaders to really understand what the community right there, the class, is going to enjoy the most out of this particular song, and to be adaptive enough to their particular circumstances in this time and place to just pick the song and lead it in a way that is going to bring everything together' (interview 2023). This might mean making adjustments to tempo, fermatas, or even repeats, but the best leaders will set aside personal preferences to a degree and respond to the class.

The pitcher

Some leaders will key their own song by sounding the starting pitch for each voice part, but this is most often done by a designated pitcher, who sits on the front bench of the tenor section. There is usually a different pitcher for each hour-long session of a singing. Pitchers are experienced singers with a high level of familiarity with the book and excellent pitch memory (Quinn and Hamrick 2013). They are also likely to know which leaders prefer to key their own songs and are adept at reading cues from unfamiliar leaders, who might make a gesture requesting a pitch or scan the page in preparation for giving their own. Most songs can be successfully keyed within an interval of about a third, and pitchers will take into account the energy of the class and the time of day when deciding whether to pitch high or low.

While the pitcher does not have an explicit role in leading the song, they are vital in paving the way for the leader's success (Morgan-Ellis 2024). A key that is too high or too low will take away from the singers' enjoyment and probably require that a new pitch be given between the shapes and words. The key can also have a wide-ranging impact on other musical characteristics. Clawson describes a singing in which the pitcher keyed all of the songs unusually low, which ultimately 'produced a muted quality to the singing overall, changing this day of singing from the typical course of a day of Sacred Harp singing, in which some leaders choose fast paces and others slow ones, to one in which there was little range in the tempo of the singing. Songs that leaders intended to go fast were slowed down and songs that they intended to go slow were sped up, so that much of the day's singing was at a steady, moderate pace' (Clawson 2011: 49).

A leader who also has pitching ability must decide whether or not to key their own song. This decision, like all others, should rest on an evaluation of what will facilitate an enjoyable experience for the class. 'If you're asking yourself, would it be a service to the class for me to key this song myself', commented Brodeur, 'then you're on the right track' (interview 2023). A leader might consider keying a 'service' if they are highly confident that they can provide the right pitch for that moment in the singing,

but they might refrain if the designated keyer has been doing a particularly good job during the session.

The front-bench tenors

The tenor front bench is always occupied by strong singers who are prepared to reinforce and/or assist the designated leader. As Lueck notes, the tenor front bench is 'reserved for experienced singers who can help keep the class together', and is regarded as off-limits to new singers (2017: 175). Front-bench tenors have the best view of the leader and the most opportunities to engage through eye contact or gesture, with the result that they take primary responsibility for interpreting and communicating what the leader wants. The front bench singers typically beat time, which helps singers in other sections who do not have a good view of the leader to stay in synch (Clawson 2011: 49; Williams 2017: 24). Singers cycle through the tenor front bench with each session, and it is not typically considered good manners to stay there for an entire singing. It is also not practical, since front-bench singing requires intense focus and engagement and can therefore be exhausting. 'You should be ready to work', remarked Andy Ditzler. 'It's a job. It's not an honorific' (interview 2023). Taylor reflected on front-bench obligations that go beyond gesture and vocalisation: 'There's all the structural stuff, like actually leading, but it's also a very emotional role, in that if you're on the tenor front bench it's your job to reflect the person's emotions back at them, unless they are anxious or timid or whatever, in which case it's your role to exude calmness so that they'll feel more calm. So it's a super emotional position to be in' (interview 2023). The front bench is a desirable singing position with the best view and sound, but it carries significant leadership responsibilities.

Scholarly discussions of the front-bench tenors have tended to focus on their responsibility for assisting developing leaders (Hardawar 1989: 84). Heider and Warner emphasise that 'Guidance for inexperienced singers comes from a certain location—the front bench of the tenor section, whoever that may be—rather than from a certain person', thereby firmly associating this leadership role with a physical position in the singing (2010: 81–82). They carry on to describe the practice of encouraging new singers to try leading 'with the reassurance that all [they have] to do is watch the front-bench tenors, and "they'll show you just what to do"' (83).

Front-bench tenors are explicitly tasked with evaluating the skill level of the leader and responding appropriately. 'The front bench will quickly figure out whether or not you are ready', remarked Brodeur, 'whether or not you actually know what you're doing. And if you don't, they will try to make you look good' (interview 2023). Reflecting on their experience as a front-bench tenor, Taylor listed specific actions that signal an experienced leader, including being prepared with their page number, looking at the pitcher for a key, and confidently preparing the initial gesture. All of these factors influence the 'split-second calculation' that, in Ditzler's words, determines 'how much I'm going to need to push the cart, or how much I'm just going to let them do it and sing back to them' (interview 2023). In describing an unsuccessful lesson, in which the front-bench tenors failed to respond appropriately, Clawson agrees that 'the tenors have significant power to take control; many front-bench tenors at least occasionally set a tempo for a particularly weak leader, but the tenors ought ideally to follow a competent leader' (2011: 49). Evaluating competence, however, can be tricky. One of the authors has had

the experience of having their leadership coopted by the front bench while singing in a part of the United States where they were not known and therefore were not trusted to set the tempo and navigate the time change correctly for a particularly beloved song (SH 448t Consecration).

Front-bench tenors assist all leaders, whether competent or developing, by interpreting and reinforcing their musical intentions. As Taylor described it, 'Basically the front bench objective is to help the leader get what they want and make sure that the lesson goes the way that the leader wants it to' (interview 2023). We watched front-bench tenors lean forward when it was evident that the leader wanted to increase the tempo, as happened while SH 460 Sardis was being sung at Henagar. We also observed the front-bench tenors assist developing leaders in a variety of ways. In some songs (e.g. SH 117 Babylon is Fallen), it is common for inexperienced leaders to reverse the strong and weak beats, starting each measure with an up motion instead of a down. In this case, front-bench singers will lean forward and conduct with exaggerated gesture, often making eye contact with the leader until they get in synch.

Sometimes, the front-bench tenors assume all control. This is not a sign of failure on the part of the leader. As Taylor put it, 'What matters is that the lesson goes the way that the leader wants it to. So to me it doesn't matter how strong or weak they are, or even how confident or timid they are. It just matters that they get what they want out of it, and if what they want out of it is for the front bench to lead it the way they want to lead it, then that's fine, they can just stand there and just sing or just listen' (interview 2023). In an extreme example, witnessed in Armuchee, a large family group entered the square to lead a favourite song. The chair of the singing, seated on the front bench, did not even look at the designated leaders, instead starting the chosen song on their behalf. We observed something similar when an elderly man led at Henagar. In these cases, the leaders were long-standing members of the community, and it was known that they needed strong support, with the result that the front bench took control from the outset. In cases where the skill of the leader is not known in advance, the negotiation can be messier. At Poplar Springs, we watched a leader start SH 35 Saints Bound for Heaven with the strong and weak beats reversed. The class had to stop and start again, at which point the front bench clearly took control.

Bennett emphasised the role of the front bench in facilitating the participation of disabled leaders who might be limited in their capacity to communicate with the class: 'If you communicate really well with the front bench, then they can help you out with the stuff that you maybe can't personally do anymore if you're leading in your mid-80s, or you're 95 years old, or 97, or 99. You may not be able to turn your head or walk around the square or bring in all the parts anymore, but you can still lead. You can lead from your wheelchair' (interview 2023). Once again, the front bench takes responsibility for giving the leader and the class a good experience.

Other strong singers

Singers on the other front benches also assume pronounced leadership roles. Lueck identifies the fact that front-bench singers in all sections 'aid and support those leaders struggling in the centre of the square' as one of the key hallmarks of shape-note singing as practiced in the US (2017: 117). This is especially true in the case of fuging tunes, when the parts enter one at a time. However, singers throughout the space can

participate in leadership. Any singer can beat time and/or cue entrances, whether looking across the square or to singers in adjacent sections (Miller 2004: 486). At Poplar Springs, one of the authors—singing treble—had the experience of engaging directly with a singer in the tenor section throughout SH 454 The Better Land, reciprocally cueing all entrances without any particular acknowledgment of the leader in the square. It is also typical for singers to cue or make eye contact with one another upon encountering favourite phrases of text or music (Heider and Warner 2010: 82), a behaviour that often reflects shared affection for the passage rooted in a history of social and musical interaction.

Any singer can also reinforce musical decisions by means of singing loudly or employing ornamentation, such as the early entrances described above. Individual singers, however, can also undermine group cohesion. Julie Aalders notes that 'the vocal contribution of an individual who stands out amongst the group can at times present a challenge to the others singers in attendance', and it is certainly preferable when the loudest singers are also in synch with the leader (2011: 41). This challenge is unique to a singing community in which there are no enforced norms in terms of vocal production and singers are never criticised for their vocal quality or style (Lueck 2017: 173).

Some shape-note communities entertain additional leadership roles for strong singers. In reporting the practices of Black shape-note singers in southeast Alabama, Dyen described a role for an 'assistant leader … usually a man who is a skilful singer—usually bass or tenor—[who] acts as the leader-behind-the-leader: he helps less-skilled leaders during their stints at song-leading. He remains in his seat, but sings louder than the others in his section, uses an exaggerated arm-gesture to beat time, and often switches parts (from bass to tenor, for example) for a few measures at difficult places in the music to make sure that everyone stays together' (1977: 162). At the 2022 Tickanetley singing, one of the authors witnessed something similar when a strong singer sat alone at the front of the room and switched between tenor and either treble or alto based on whether the tenor section (in this case, a church congregation) needed reinforcement. It is typical at all smaller singings for those who can sing more than one part to evaluate each section and sit where they are needed, and while a singer would seldom change parts without changing sections (e.g. sing alto for a whole song while seated in the middle of the trebles), it is not uncommon for singers to reinforce fugal entrances or other prominent passages in a part other than their own (e.g. sing the alto entrance from the trebles, assuming that the treble entrance is later).

The class as a whole

Sometimes, musical decisions seem to be made collectively, without any particular individual or section taking control. These moments become notable when they are in contradiction to the words or gestures of the designated leader. This seems to be the result of habit and occurs when the class knows a song well and is used to singing it in a certain way. On several occasions in our fieldwork, we observed leaders fail to get what they wanted, not because they weren't clear or because singers intentionally ignored the direction, but because the class naturally lapsed into a familiar routine.

This can happen with tempos, fermatas, repeats, and choice of verses. While leading in Berryville, VA, one of the authors had the experience of verbally requesting all three verses of SH 79 Heck, only to find that half of the class skipped verse two. It is *possible* that this was a commentary on the request to sing three verses at a large singing, in which

context it is polite to keep lessons brief, but it is more likely that the class was simply used to singing only verses one and three. The error was corrected through persistence from the leader and support from a front-bench tenor, who held up fingers indicating the correct verse. While leading SH 48b Kedron in Henagar, one of the authors found that the room wanted to go slower, and also was unsuccessful in holding the fermatas as long as she wanted to. In discussing this with a singer at Camp Fasola, it was observed that the length of fermatas will depend both on local practice and how tired the front-bench tenors are, with the result that the leader has limited control.

Sometimes, singers will refuse to stop while performing a beloved song. A singer in Chatsworth described an occasion to us when a leader tried to stop New Britain (CH 78b), better known as 'Amazing Grace', after only two verses: 'He told us to stop halfway through and we didn't stop!' In Roopville, we witnessed an occasion on which the leader tried to stop SH 84 Amsterdam without taking the final repeat, but the basses forged ahead and the class followed. While leading CH 155 Solemn Call at the 2023 Georgia State Christian Harmony Convention, one of the authors found that the class insisted on repeating the fugue on shapes and also demanded the second verse, both in contradiction to direction. The first was accomplished by the basses collectively repeating their fugue entrance; the second by a treble verbally requesting the second verse after the lesson had ended. Not all leaders accept this sort of co-option. At Poplar Springs, the authors watched an experienced leader verbally reprimand the class when they attempted to sing the second verse of SH 475 A Thankful Heart after she had indicated that she wanted to sing only verse one and then repeat the fugue. Indeed, 'follow the leader' was heard as a refrain throughout our fieldwork.

The class can also unanimously ignore the leader when they make a mistake. In Chatsworth, we witnessed a leader fail to take a required repeat in CH 63b Pardoning Love, instead moving straight into the new metre of the second section. The class simply ignored the leader and took the repeat, with no real disruption to the lesson.

Choosing the right leader, choosing the right song

Before a leader steps into the square and starts their song, two important decisions are made that will impact the success of the lesson. First, the arranging committee (often a single person) needs to select the right leader. At most singings, participants are asked to fill out an arranging card that includes their name, some identifying details (e.g. their home city and state), and an indication of whether or not they want to lead. At small singings where the arranger knows all or most of the participants, this formality is sometimes dispensed with. Multiple factors go into arranging decisions, all of which hinge on the identity of the leaders. 'In its most highly developed form', writes Clawson, 'arranging, as the practice of ordering and calling song leaders is called, reveals the priorities of a community in identifying particularly valued participants by having them lead at desirable or high-status times of day' (2011: 39). She elaborates:

> According to the fairly standard arranging practice, particularly accomplished leaders should be called in the hours before or after lunch, when the class has warmed up, and people who have traveled great distances to attend a singing should likewise be called at 'good' times of the day; the former practice is for the benefit of the class as a whole as good leaders produce good singing, while the latter practice is to recognize the effort

> made by visitors (and thereby benefit the singing by making it more likely visitors will return). (Clawson 2011: 71)

Clawson then describes an occasion on which an arranger 'called three particularly good leaders from Alabama to lead within the first hour of singing—simultaneously violating the imperatives to save both the best leaders and the farthest-travelling visitors for the prime hours of singing' (71). In this way, the arranger not only influences the trajectory of the singing but also shapes relationships between the community hosting the singing and visitors from other geographic regions. Lack of arranging skill can make for a disappointing singing and also offend participants, making it less likely that they will come again (Miller 2008: 61).

A skilled arranger who knows the singers well might be able to predict which song (or type of song) the leader will call, either based on their reputation for always leading a favourite or their skill level. 'Once you get to know a singer', Bennett told us, 'you can kind of tell if they're going to lead a song that is appropriate to the time of day, or if they're just going to sing their usual' (interview 2023). As Miller notes, 'some [leaders] are known to be too inexperienced to lead long, fast, or difficult tunes; some have a reputation for showing off by always choosing a long anthem or a little-known piece; and some have preferences that can be assessed based on age or appearance even if the leader is not well known to the class' (2004: 486). In some cases, the arranger will wait to hear what song the leader calls before announcing who will follow. As Bennett described this approach, 'If they're a really, really canny arranger, then they might do that, so then they can see, oh, okay, she's leading this kind of slow song, so I want to put somebody behind her who is not going to lead the world's fastest song, but maybe somebody who's going to pick up the energy a little bit' (interview 2023). All of these considerations give the arranger control over song choice even though they do not make the selections directly.

At most points in a singing, any leader will do, but some positions in the schedule require an experienced leader with a sense of what type of selection is appropriate. For example, the first song called in a session (the 'call-back' song) needs to be simple and familiar—something that many singers know by memory. This allows for full participation even as singers return to their seats and open their books. Experienced singers can judge what will work as a 'call-back' because they know which songs are commonly sung in that community, and indeed, the call-back is often led by the chair. Another crucial moment follows the memorial lesson, when the leader needs to be capable of choosing a song of appropriate solemnity. 'If you are called to lead immediately before or after the Memorial Lesson', cautions Williams, 'choose a song that fits that mood' (2017: 24). It is also typical to mix experienced and inexperienced leaders, such that the class is not subjected to a string of novice leaders.

At whatever point they are called, the leader needs to choose a song (or pair of songs, in the case of a two-song lesson) that suits the energy of the room, the time of day, and the trajectory of calls in that particular session. 'Be aware of how the singing is flowing', advises Williams, 'with highs and lows throughout the day, when choosing a song to lead' (2017: 24). Miller describes the role of the arranging committee in building a cumulative experience for participants and notes the frustration that singers exhibit when a leader 'disrupts that cumulative experience by talking in the square or choosing a song that does not build on its predecessors' (2010: 274). There are no hard-and-fast rules

concerning repertoire selection. If a number of high-energy songs have just been called, the leader might be successful with either an uptempo song, to sustain the energy, or a slow song, to provide contrast and bring singers down to earth. Likewise, it can be effective to mix modes, but there is no prohibition against calling a large number of major or minor songs in a row. It is generally accepted that difficult songs should not be called very early in the day (Clawson 2011: 65) or near the end of the last session, and that the session immediately following lunch will be the most intense. There can be repercussions for leaders who fail to make appropriate selections. 'Leaders who too often lead anthems, particularly at inappropriate times', writes Clawson, 'may also find themselves called to lead at less-desirable times of day, or only called once in a two-day convention' (77). Leaders might also be sensitive to singers in attendance who are known for leading a certain song and leave that song for them. As Miller notes, 'It is a mild breach of etiquette to lead someone else's song if that person is present and has not yet been called to lead' (2004: 486).

The process of negotiation

As soon as a leader steps into the square, participants (perhaps subconsciously) assess their capacity for musical leadership. At a smaller singing with a predominantly local attendance, where singers mostly know one another, participants already know who is a strong leader and who will need assistance. At many singings, however, a non-verbal process of negotiation between the leader, the front-bench tenors, and the general body of singers determines how leadership responsibility will be distributed among participants. Clawson describes an example of this process in some detail:

> When nineteen-year-old Aaron Wootten led 'Consecration' in the first hour, a series of subtle signals were exchanged between leader and singers, and the class took the slow, intense repeating end section—'Serve with a single heart and eye, and to Thy glory live or die'—an extra time. Though Aaron ultimately signaled this repeat in his role as leader, many of the singers were ready for him to do so both because the quality of the singing called for it and because of the signals that had been passed around the room. Those signals, consisting mostly of eye contact and slight nods, would almost certainly have been invisible to an outsider. (Clawson 2011: 40)

In this passage, Clawson describes some of the non-verbal signals that resulted in the designated leader taking an extra repeat, whether or not that was his original intent. The authors witnessed several instances in which singers insisted on taking a repeat in contradiction with the leader's choice, whether by ignoring direction and continuing to sing or by making a verbal request after the leader had stopped the song (sometimes to the annoyance of the leader).

When Aalders describes the role of the leader as 'more that of a mediator than a true leader per se', she emphasises the significance of these verbal interventions, with a focus on key and tempo (2011: 51). She reports cases in which singers interrupt following the shapes to request that the key or tempo be adjusted, but also acknowledges the significant role for non-verbal negotiation, noting that 'through the course of singing a song, the key or tempo that was initially set is not always the key or tempo finally reached by the conclusion of the song' (52). Aalders ultimately finds that more power lies with the collective than the leader:

> Because of the creative and collaborative relationship between the individual and the group that lies at the foundation of the hollow square, there remains an influence on the part of the group that can not only sway the song leader but can in fact over-ride whatever stylistic decisions the leader has made. … Ultimately the song leader is subject to the collective drive of the group as a whole and thus even those who do not participate in song selection or leading nevertheless participate in the overall trajectory of how the songs are sung. (Aalders 2011: 49–50)

Our contribution is to tease apart the various leadership roles that culminate in the 'collective drive of the group' and to explain the mechanisms of collective decision-making.

Power shifts away from the designated leader when they exhibit characteristics of uncertain leadership, which we observed in two distinct contexts. First, nearly every singing will have relatively new singers in attendance. These individuals might have technical trouble with beating time, not be very familiar with the song they have chosen, or have some difficulty singing the shapes. They are working to develop their skills as singers and leaders. However, we also observed a different type of 'uncertain leadership', that which occurs when a singing is constituted primarily of members of a church community who know the songs but have no ambition to lead them. We observed this specifically at the Christian Harmony singings in Chatsworth and Ellijay, both of which are hosted and primarily attended by situated congregations. At these singings, most leaders called to the front of the sanctuary would request a song but make no attempt to start it or keep time. Instead, a strong singer near the front (not always the same individual) would simply pick a key and start singing the tenor line. Everyone else would join in as they were able.

Conclusion

This study has analysed Sacred Harp singing as a dynamic system in which musical leadership is negotiated between singers in a variety of roles. While we made some observations about leading style, there is a great deal more to say about how leading varies across individuals depending on their region, musical background, and lineage (in terms of both familial and mentoring relationships). One of the authors, for example, recently moved to Massachusetts, where another singer guessed that she was from the South because she keeps her feet planted when she cues the altos—a stylistic nuance well beyond the present study. We observed a range of approaches in terms of preferred tempos, the choice to conduct slow songs in duple versus quadruple metre, the desired level of emotional expression in the square, specific gestural habits, and a great many other details concerning what leaders look and sound like, and it is clear to us that documentation of historical and contemporary variations in leading technique is greatly needed. We encourage other researchers, however, to approach the study of musical leadership in terms of the whole system, not simply the words and actions of one individual.

Across shape-note singing communities, musical decisions are negotiated between the leader, the front-bench singers, and the class, with the single shared objective of facilitating an enjoyable experience. A leader of any ability can be successful with the support of the class, and the quality of a lesson does not rely on the skill of any given individual. Instead, singers adopt a philosophy of mutual beneficence and perform support for the community. Throughout the interviews, our interlocutors reiterated the need for

grace and generosity on the part of both leaders and singers—something we witnessed in practice. Finding joy in the music is both the reason for shape-note singers to congregate and their method for singing together.

Notes

1. Jackson fallaciously argued that these so-called 'white spirituals' were the source from which Negro Spirituals had developed. In his contemporaneous research, John Work III proved that shape-note singing was neither racially homogeneous nor the antecedent of African American sacred singing practices (Karlsberg 2015a: 148–49).
2. While the practice under consideration is sometimes termed 'shape-note singing', this threatens to erase other historical and living shape-note practices that function quite differently. For example, Mennonites regularly sing from the seven-shape collection *Harmonia Sacra* (1832), while Baptists use seven-shape gospel songbooks in and outside of worship (Doster 2010). The conclusions we draw about musical leadership do not apply to these and other shape-note practices outside of the Sacred Harp sphere.

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