

Let Every Land Their Tongues Employ: Ritualized Democracy among Shape Note Singers

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Abstract: Shape Note singing, a style of congregational singing, developed an informal institution of local singing groups separate from the churches for which this music was envisioned by its early pioneers. Within these groups, a number of ritual practices developed which I argue emphasized a distinctly Protestant vision of democracy. Among these practices are the traditional arrangement of chairs which faces the singers inward and marks out a square-shaped ritual space in which singers take turns leading the tunes of their choice. Additionally, the shaped note heads with which the music is notated and the practice of “singing the notes” before singing the lyrics lower the barrier of entry and thus invite singers of all skill levels to participate. These practices, though, do much more than make the tradition more accessible. The tradition creates sacred space and carves out a ritual environment in which a stylized form of American democracy is performed. There is a system of elections and parliamentary procedure that ritualizes an idealized vision of Protestant democracy untainted by the divisive influence of politics. The result of the ritualized equality is a powerful sense of fellowship and aesthetic experience for the singers.

Introduction

On a warm Saturday in September, 35 people walk into a church fellowship hall in Simpsonville, South Carolina carrying oblong red books. They are shape note singers preparing for four hours of music making. They sit in folding chairs arranged in a square facing inward and sing a strange sort of music. The first notes are intoned with fa, so, and la, and the hands of the singers move up and down in time. Then lyrics about suffering and death swirl around the formation in a stark fugue. The harmonies are broad and open, enveloping the singers in a wall of sound. By the end, everyone is exhausted but still filled with the tunes that will haunt them until they meet to sing again in a few weeks’ time.

Sacred Harp Singing, also known as shape-note or fasola singing, is one of the United States’ oldest cultural products. Tracing its roots back to the Congregationalist movements of the eighteenth century in New England, shape note singing has continued in an unbroken tradition for around 250 years. As the nineteenth century saw the Second Great Awakening sweep across the United States, shape note singing followed the tent revivals south to Georgia and Alabama, the states with which it is most closely associated today and where the most famous shape note tune book, *The Sacred Harp*, was first published

in 1844. Due to direct attacks from the musical elite of the “better music” movement who saw shape note hymnody as unrefined and inappropriate for church worship and increasing urbanization in the South, the shape note movement fell into obscurity apart from in rural areas of the deep South, Texas, and in some Amish and Mennonite communities where the tradition continued to evolve and serve an important social and spiritual role.

Today, shape note singing continues to persist thanks to an ongoing global revival. However, no revival can leave the original practice unchanged, and the Sacred Harp tradition is no exception. What was once a primarily rural, isolated movement has found acceptance in urban centers among predominantly well-educated and antiquarian-minded individuals who often have as much ethnographic interest as they do musical and spiritual commitment to the tradition. However, due to strong conservative forces, embodied in the oral tradition by the former head of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, Hugh McGraw, many pre-revival features such as “singing the notes,” arranging seats in the “hollow square,” and a system of parliamentary procedure remain intact even among primarily revivalist groups. Fasola uses the hollow square to mark out the ritual space in which singers perform an idealized form of American

democracy underpinned by a complex mythology of shape note singing. The result is a profound sense of *communitas* and aesthetic experience for the singers.

In researching this unique form of religious expression, I attended singings in Savannah, Georgia and in Charleston and Simpsonville, South Carolina, interacting with traditionalist and revivalist gatherings alike. I conducted participant observation as well as a series of six interviews with subjects ranging from a contemporary shape note composer to a Lutheran priest, which covered a wide cross section of the revivalist communities centered in coastal urban areas such as Charleston and Savannah. These two cities are not historic centers of shape note singing; the singers there are generally revivalist in contrast to Simpsonville where there are more traditionalists represented in addition to revivalists.

Hollow Square

Upon entering a church fellowship hall for an All Day Singing in the shape note tradition, one will immediately notice the odd arrangement of the chairs. This formation, called the “hollow square” by participants faces all of the seats inward. The four sides are reserved for each respective vocal part, and the center is reserved for official business, mainly for the leaders of each tune when their turn comes to choose what to sing. The hollow square marks out the sacred space, setting the stage for the music and storytelling that takes place within its borders to transcend the “here-and-now” (Bell, “Ritual” xi). Notably, the chairs face inward, rather than in other Christian rituals in which the participants all face the priest or preacher at the front. This arrangement spatially represents the democratic ideals of the singing movement. The singers do not face a clergyman or an audience, but rather they face their fellow singers. The music is designed for the benefit of the singers themselves first. The ritual space serves to “set apart” the music and storytelling “in striking ways and then make those activities distinctive” (Bell 398). A simple song or anecdote takes on increased significance because it occurs in the hollow square. The songs will be recorded for the minutes, entering them into the public record for the event, and the anecdotes from past singings, biographical tidbits on the composers and great singers, and testimonies of spiritual connection with the music, having been

ritually offered to the community, will then come to make up the conversations for future singings across the country, broadening their reach from the individual to potentially the entire community of shape note singers.

So if the hollow square carves out the singing space spatially, what does it carve it out from? What is the here and now according to *The Sacred Harp*? On the whole, the corpus of lyrics depicts a fairly bleak life with the only true escape being ascending to Heaven upon death. Applying J.Z. Smith’s idea that “the temple serves as a focusing lens, marking and revealing Significance,” a basic mythological premise becomes clear (Smith 113). Life is a time of toil and pain, and death is the ultimate release from suffering. Though not a groundbreaking theological claim in the American Protestant world, it functions here not to describe the literal material condition of contemporary singers (who are often middle class), but to contrast with the fellowship and aesthetic beauty idealized by the singing culture. It applies the aesthetic of nineteenth century rural life to accomplish the task of separating the singing from the everyday. The popular tune #282 “I’m Going Home” gets at this distinction quite well. The second verse puts it this way: “I’m glad that I am born to die / from grief and woe my soul shall fly / and I don’t care to stay here long.” So, then, singing in the *fasola* serves as a respite from the violence and pain of the everyday. Singers adopt the perspective of a poor, nineteenth century person represented in the lyrics of the tunes in order to facilitate the change between the here and now and the hollow square.

The stark moral didacticism of the music serves mostly as a reminder of the moral purity of the quasi-mythical early singers. The people I interviewed did not widely adopt the worldview of the music—that is to say they did not always believe death was on the doorstep—but rather they saw the lyrics as more of a “raw, unvarnished look into a different world” (Jones). In this way, they are able to commune with the mythical past and the people who populate it. Thus, singers are able to experience the theology as a way to recenter themselves without ever having to fully buy into it. As Catherine Bell argues, “ritual acts as an opportunity... for seeing what is of value” (Bell 398). *Sacred Harp* singing, then, as alternative to modernity, allows participants to inhabit the purer world of religious community depicted in the

music, all the while being aware that, much as they cannot or do not adopt the full letter of the lyrics, they cannot permanently separate themselves from the apparent moral and spiritual degradation of contemporary life. When I asked about the fixation on themes of death, suffering, and sickness, one informant said that while most singers did not adopt that worldview, “modern people need to hear that threat [of death] every once in a while” (Talsness). Thus, the lyrics work more to evoke older forms of Christianity rather than to directly advocate for that theology. As John Bealle has argued, *The Sacred Harp* has become an “overdetermined cultural symbol, representing America’s ‘musical ancestors,’” and that notion still holds true among some singers who see a connection to older forms of Christianity that contemporary ones lack (5). The evocation of musical and spiritual ancestors serves to ground the music in some essentialized form of tradition. Thus, the importance of the lyrics is not in their literal content, but in their connection to the past. Combined with the stories told by singers in the hollow square, this stylized historical grounding makes up a body of mythology for the tradition.

Mythology in Singing Culture

In turn, this corpus of mythology serves to inform the ritualized democracy that is performed in the hollow square. I divide the contents of the mythology into two basic categories which function in different ways. I call the first category testimony, and it consists of the stories spontaneously told in the hollow square. At a given singing, this is the form of myth with which the singers engage the most. It often takes the form of anecdotes from past singings at which the caller had sung the tune most memorably, but it can also manifest itself in the form of tributes to other singers, personal appeals to the spiritual power of a given tune, or a biographical detail about the composer or lyricist. While the most common form of mythological material and often the most resonant for individual singers, testimony tends to remain localized to one region. It is a sort of spontaneous mythology, not simply small talk. In fact, the stories that are told in between tunes have an extremely important role in structuring the ritual because they color the emotional and spiritual responses to the music. For example, I attended a Sacred Harp funerary ritual known as a Memorial

Lesson. It was held at the regular monthly singing of the Savannah Sacred Harp Singers and honored a founding member of that group who had recently passed away. I and a few others had not known the man, but we as newcomers were given a portrait of a great hero for the cause of shape note singing. His favorite tunes were chosen in advance and led by his close friends and family. The final tune of the Memorial Lesson was offered by the man’s daughter who was not a shape note singer herself. In tears, she described to the singers the immense positive effect they had had on her father’s life and how much joy he had gotten from his time singing with them. She then led #500 “In the Sweet By and By” from the blue book (a variant version of *The Sacred Harp*). As they sang that they “will meet on that beautiful shore,” the power was exceptional. The testimony offered by singers colors the emotions that the singers feel in subsequent songs. These stories are not interjections “between” the ritual, but actually an important part of it. The histories of particular annual singings also fall into this category. During the business meeting of the singing in Simpsonville, the chair gave a brief overview of the history of this particular singing. It began as a part of a Greenville Pioneer Day festival along with other sorts of living history exhibits and a parade before becoming associated with the Church of Greenville, a small predestinarian Baptist group. The purpose of the history was both instructive and invitational. It informed the newer singers of the roots of the group, but it also invited the older singers to recount their tales from the 16 annual singings and thus enter them too into the oral historical record of the group. It is by entering the sacred space, which is to say the Hollow Square, that the stories told transcend the realm of normal social activity and enter the realm of mythology. Again evoking Smith’s “focusing lens,” these stories come to serve as powerful points of connection between communities as they are told and retold at singings across the country and between individual singers.

The second category is what I call the general myth of Sacred Harp, which at its simplest, goes that around the time of the American Revolution, a group of pious people saw the state of congregational music to be in disarray. As a solution, they invented shape notes as a way to decentralize musical skill from the elite, educated musicians of the major churches to something that every believer could master. The

style flourished until the Civil War after which the tradition was only strong enough to endure in the South, where dedicated rural people continued to sing and compose shape note tunes. This version of the story was told to me with little variation by all of my informants, and it illustrates how the community sees in its origin a vision of Protestant democracy that is also embodied by practices such as singing the notes and running singings with bylaws and parliamentary procedure. Because the tradition developed many of its distinctive features in the Early Republican period, the values of the tradition are informed by the patriotic sentiments of the time. For example, #242 “Ode on Science” represents an entangling of early anti-imperialist ideology with the ethos of shape note singing. “The British yoke, the Gallic chain,” and “all haughty tyrants we disdain” are put in opposition to the “young and rising states” whose “sons are set among the stars” by the personified Science. The spiritual project of democracy is here bound up with the explicitly political, demonstrating how tenuous that distinction can be. To this category, I also add the narratives of prominent composers and singers and in particular B.F. White, the original compiler of *The Sacred Harp* as well as the histories of particular singings. For a more recent example, Hugh McGraw, who represented the arm of traditionalism, oversaw the first wave of revival singings, and ensured that traditional performance practices were brought to the new region, has achieved very high regard among singers, revivalist or otherwise. Stories about his appearances at various singings in the past and his favorite tunes have been told in the hollow square at almost every singing I have attended.

Aesthetic Democracy and Democratic Aesthetics

The hollow square makes sacred the space and creates an environment of creativity and possibility, and the mythology informs the emotional and spiritual dimension of the music and justifies conservative influence in the tradition. But how does the idealized form of democracy play out? A traditional all-day singing or convention enacts democracy through two main processes: the first strategically dissolves social barriers between singers to emphasize their spiritual equality, and the second establishes a system of parliamentary procedure which both keeps the event organized and formalizes the Protestant ideal of religious democracy.

The maintenance of equality among the singers is accomplished through several techniques that collectively make up a sort of aesthetic democracy at a singing. Control over the choice and sequence of tunes and indeed the rendering of the music is fully decentralized. At the large singings I attended, any participant could sign up to be added to the rotation of callers, but at the monthly singings in Charleston, the group was small enough that the choice of music moved informally around the hollow square. Thus, control over the ritual is left completely to the participants. Further, aesthetic choices in rendering the music are also left to the singers. *The Sacred Harp* itself gives little information about how to perform each individual song. Besides the key, which, though given in the text, is always chosen by the relative pitch of one or two chosen tuners, there is no information on how to sing. The tempo is left to the singers themselves, and I found that this issue was one of the dividers among born and bred singers and revivalist ones. The older singers tended to favor breakneck tempi for fast tunes and crawling ones for slower tunes. The revivalists favored tempi that were less extreme. In fact, this often led to spirited debates in between singing the notes and singing the words. These minor aesthetic choices are statements about the singers themselves, with certain choices made as an attempt at greater authenticity.

Further aiding in the rendering of the music is the shape note system. *The Sacred Harp* uses a four-shape system sometimes referred to as the “fasola” system. It assigns the seven notes of a major scale to four shapes and four syllables associated with each respective shape. Take for example C major. C would be called “fa” and notated with a triangular notehead. D would be “so” with a circular notehead. E would be “la” with a square. Then the system repeats with F, G, and A. Finally, B would be called “mi” and notated with a diamond shaped notehead. Each tune is begun by what is called “singing the notes” in which the tune of the song is sung, but the words are replaced with the syllables associated with the notes of the music. Only after the music has been run through once with the notes can the words be sung. Both of these features of the tradition serve to lower the barrier for entry. The shape notes make reading the music much easier for untrained musicians because they begin to associate the shapes with the intervallic relationships between the notes. One

of my informants, a professional church organist, even expressed that shape notes made it easier for him to sing even though he had two music degrees. He likened singing the notes to wearing a name tag because it gives everyone a chance to participate whether they are familiar with the system or not, “because if even the person that everybody knows has a name tag on that, I don’t feel weird having a name tag on because I’m the new guy” (Stecker). In other words, singing notes as a built-in part of the ritual ensures that everyone can fully participate. While a range of skill levels certainly exists, singing the shapes gives even the complete novice a chance to sing.

The tune book itself also invites singers to participate in the creation of new shape note music. In the beginning of the book, there is a section entitled “Rudiments of Music” in which the fundamentals of music theory are explained, and tips for composition are offered such that a singer could easily transition to becoming a composer. This section emphasizes that the aesthetic democracy runs deeper than simply the singing. It also means that anyone is invited to contribute their own music, and that they should be given the tools to compose whenever possible. Of course, a full education in music theory cannot be offered by a few pages at the beginning of a tune book, but it goes in depth about issues of harmony and counterpoint which separate the aesthetic traditions of the *Sacred Harp* style from other forms of Western choral music. Thus, the creative power is offered freely to everyone who owns a copy of *The Sacred Harp*, such that even the production of new music is decentralized and democratized.

Another important element of the ritualized democracy is the taking of minutes, a classic feature of democratic meetings. The singing conventions and all-day singings, i.e., the well-attended and most institutional singings, follow a system of parliamentary procedure to keep the event moving. This practice also has the effect of temporally marking out when the ritual is occurring, as well as further emphasizing the democratic ideals of the singing. Usually, the minutes provide little more than a list of names and the tunes that those people called, but their lack of information does not mean that they are not important. In fact, the submission of minutes to a singing newsletter or website signals that the “event is thought to have

more certainly ‘happened’ to the broader collective of singers” (Bealle 171). John Bealle traces the importance of the minutes to the “conservative influences of traditional performance practices” that lead singers to follow the customary ways of organizing and running an event (172). A singing is seen to be more legitimate if it takes minutes because they are distributed to a wider singing world that scrutinizes the singing and chooses if a future event by that group is worth a trip. Thus, the parliamentary procedure extends the reach of isolated groups and serves to make claims at authenticity in the tradition. To illustrate my point, let me offer an example from my fieldwork. My contingent from the Lowcountry Sacred Harp Singers arrived early at the Pioneer Day All-Day Singing in Simpsonville, SC. We sat down in our respective vocal sections and chatted with the organizers and other early birds. After a while it was decided to warm up before the rest of the singers got there. 30b “Prospect” was called, but it was made clear that this song was a warm-up only. The chair made a point to the secretary not to record it on the minutes. When not in official session, these songs are simply music, but when they are sung under the proper conditions, they become much more. Taking minutes does more than record the order of events. It is seen as a signal of a legitimate singing and as an embodiment of the equality between the singers.

Finally, the last feature of ritual democracy is its most basic – elections. Like any organization, shape note singing groups benefit from having an established leadership to work out the logistics of having an all-day singing or convention. However, the elected leadership also has a ritual role, that of presiding over the activity in the hollow square. For the most part, this is a very small role to play, but its importance is more in its presence than in its true function. For example, in Simpsonville, the president was unable to make it to the singing. The vice president was there but chose not to step into the role. The group then decided to elect someone else to act as president. At the end of the singing, a single vote was held to nominate and elect all of the officers to their current positions, and it passed unanimously. In this group, there was no political struggle to accompany the elections because the president of an all-day singing group does not carry with it many duties or any privileges. In this way, it modeled an ideal body politic for the

Protestant democrat. Singers already have almost complete control over how the ritual plays out, so the governance of the group need not insert itself beyond the easy work of presiding over the meeting. Thus, the singers perform a perfect democracy free from the negative influences of politics.

The Covid-19 pandemic offers a prime example of the way that the singers deal with political conflict. Every group that I interacted with or researched attempted some sort of online video conferencing format for their singings during the height of Covid restrictions. Due to the opinion that the music needs to be performed live to be properly experienced and because many of the older singers had technological limitations, most participants were eager to transition back to singing in person. Some singers, though, were hesitant to return for health reasons. At the singings I attended in July through September of 2021, masks were suggested but few singers wore them. Before and after the singing, people made their opinions on the matter quite clear on both sides, but there was an understanding that during the singing political argument is off limits. "Politics" is artificially prohibited from the hollow square, not because the movement fails to engage with politics, but rather because the ritual demands that those "degrading influences" not be modeled as a part of their pure Protestant democracy.

All of these efforts to separate the hollow square from the mundane, break down barriers, and structure the ritual democracy serve to bring about a state of *communitas* as well as a profound aesthetic experience. The hollow square becomes a classically liminal space separated from the mundane world both spatially and by the prayers and procedures which call a convention to order. The singers also do a great deal to ensure ritual equality and promote "direct, egalitarian encounter... between people as people" such that it become almost a textbook example (L. Jones 9406). However, the singers themselves would describe this sense of connection with other participants as "fellowship" instead. One informant described the feeling as similar to a runner's high with endorphins "coursing through [his] head... thinking about the friends that I may have seen that day" (Stecker). This sort of fellowship is also a major lyrical theme, underscoring its importance to the tradition at large. Appeals to Christian unity are exceedingly common, such as

in #228 "Marlborough" which proclaims, "Let every land their tongues employ," or #276 "Bridgewater," which calls to "Let the Redeemer's name be sung ev'ry land by ev'ry tongue." Beyond the general theological claim about the fundamental equality of all believers, many tunes directly address the fellowship of shape note singing rituals. A popular closing song, #62 "Parting Hand," gets at the feeling of *communitas* quite well in its second verse. The hollow square where the singers "met to sing and pray" is noted as the place "where Jesus shows his smiling face" (62). Not only is the singing the closest connection between the singers and God, it is also the "sweetest union" between the singers themselves.

In addition to the sense of connection with fellow singers, it is common for participants to feel "very much overwhelmed by the power in the room and even be brought to tears to the point that [they] cannot even vocalize [themselves]" (Jones). The sensation of standing in the middle of the hollow square is particularly affective because each of the independent parts can be heard in balance with each other, and they create a sort of swirling effect as the fuguing subject moves from voice to voice. "When everything just lines up and the sound is just like otherworldly," the singers frequently report getting goosebumps and being overcome with emotions (Stecker). For example, the tune #178 "Africa" has a particular sequence of rises and falls which, when sung well with a large group has been known to bring many singers to the "liberating and alarming regions of human experience" (including myself at a singing in Savannah) (Bealle 235). The powerful sensations are in part enhanced by all of the aesthetically democratic features of the tradition. For example, notating the music with shape notes and taking the time to sing the notes as a part of every tune makes sure that the singers will have the technical aspects of the music down to bring about the most powerful effects.

In conclusion, Sacred Harp singing is a complex ritual informed by the ethos of nineteenth century American Protestantism. Though it takes its roots from that collection of traditions, it continues to evolve to this day as these practices are recontextualized. The work of establishing ritual space is accomplished by the hollow square arrangement which centers the singers on the music and the community. It emphasizes that the

music exists for the singers rather than an audience or the clergy. Further, parliamentary procedures democratize the singing such that social barriers are dissolved to bring about ritual equality. This effect in turn brings about a strong fellowship which amplifies the aesthetic and spiritual experiences of the singers. In a moment of political polarization, this tradition demarcates the “sacred” with a classical vision of democracy. It is one free from the division of a two-party system, one which attempts to rise above the insularity of social media and corporately-owned news outlets, and construct in its place unanimity centered on devotion to the music that is truly for the people and by the people.

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