

THE SACRED HARP

American Shape Note Hymns

Cross the Atlantic

by Lewis Jones¹

In the Winter of 1994 "English Dance and Song" carried an article by Gordon Ashman. It was about West Gallery Music, "an amazing, powerful form of traditional music found in English parish churches and non-conformist chapels... between 1750 and 1850." Since Gordon's article the interest in this music, and the membership of the WGMA (West Gallery Music Association), have both continued to grow.

Unfortunately West Gallery Music was almost completely obliterated by the church authorities in the course of the nineteenth century, and it is only now being revived. Singers and scholars are digging out the music and testing it. At present there is no historically-based, commonly accepted canon, and for some time there is likely to be a fair amount of chaff among the wheat.

The same cannot be said of American Shape Note Music, the USA's equivalent of West Gallery, which stretches down to us in an unbroken tradition. This tradition has been a conservative one. The dominant Shape Note hymn book, The Sacred Harp, in the words of its present Music Committee, "has been left alone for most of its life." There have been only 4 revisions since it was first published by Benjamin Franklin White in 1844. These were in 1869, 1911, 1936 and 1991.² The 1991 edition includes 62 new entries. Some of them are recent compositions, but others are revivals from the period around the turn of the eighteenth century. Of more than 500 hymns in the 1936 edition 46 were deleted in 1991 on the grounds that they were seldom sung.³

The Sacred Harp is a thick, well produced, oblong book with hard covers. The music in it has notes with differently shaped heads (the so-called "shape notes") as an aid to sight reading. There is an Introduction which explains about the shapes and about the method of singing. The

repertoire includes psalms, odes, anthems, revival hymns, texts set to adapted folk tunes, intricate fusing melodies and a variety of modern compositions.

Shape Note singing is non-denominational, unaccompanied and participatory. There are usually four singing parts, soprano, alto, tenor and bass, with the tenors holding the melody line. The 4 groups of singers sit facing inwards to form a "hollow square." People are invited to stand in the centre of this square and call out a hymn from the book in use (often the Sacred Harp). The volunteers then set the pitch and lead the hymns by singing and beating time with their arms. A singing session usually lasts from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., with an hour's break for dinner at 12 noon.

In England there is a growing interest in American Shape Note Hymns. Early 1995 saw a visit by the American tutor Robin Fox during which he held a workshop near Oxford and others at Bury and Lancaster. In February 1996 a Village Music Weekend organised by the Christminster Singers in Oxfordshire was set to feature Larry Gordon and the American group Northern Harmony. The First Annual UK Shape Note Convention is to be held in September 1996 at Hitchin in Hertfordshire.

There are many affinities, too numerous to record, between Sacred Harp hymns and English traditional tunes. There is, for example, a clear similarity between "Leander"⁴ and the version of "The Gentleman Soldier" collected by Annie Gilchrist in Sussex in 1907⁵. A likeness can also be spotted between "Leander" and the "Lincolnshire Poacher"⁶. All three tunes are evidently part of a wider tune family identified by Vaughan Williams and Lloyd with the Scottish "Drumdelgie" and the Welsh "Dydd Llun y Boreu."⁷

Another example is "Young Henry the Poacher" from Norfolk.⁸ This was later adapted by Vaughan Williams, who collected it, to become "King's Lynn," the hymn tune normally sung to G.K Chesterton's words, "O God of Earth and Altar."⁹ "Young Henry" bears a similarity to "Holy City."¹⁰ It is even closer, however, to "Pilgrim."¹¹

This can be seen from the musical example below,¹² which compares the tenor or melody line of "Pilgrim" with the Norfolk tune. I have in no case altered the pitch of the notes except that, to make comparisons easier, I have transposed "Young Henry" into F# minor, the same key as

"Pilgrim." I have also arranged for each line of the American hymn to start with an upbeat valued at a crotchet rather than a minim. There are other modifications at the ends of lines, where, for example, fermatas have been added throughout to balance things up. Note that there are likenesses not just in the tunes but in the "Come all ye" style words.

As well as similarities to English melodies there are, as might be expected, numerous echoes of American folk song. For example, "Edmonds"¹³ seems to have been the original, in both words and tune, for the version of "When Adam was Created" harvested by Cecil Sharp in the Appalachian mountains.¹⁴ Note that the song as collected by Sharp differs from the printed version - evidence that Sacred Harp hymns, like other folk songs, were sometimes customised by their singers into their own individual versions.

Shape Note Hymns, like West Gallery music, can have a stunning effect. On the Internet the aficionados bear eloquent personal witness. "Shortly after dinner..." writes a visitor to a singing at Antioch, Alabama, "I started to cry... with a combination of joy and passion and pain and delight and grief." Another describes a rendition of "Sacred Throne"¹⁵ in Ida, Alabama: "The old men, beautiful, are red-faced and weeping with devotion." A third witness recalls the Texas Sacred Harp Convention of 1930, and the participation of the children: "The little ones were smothered with kisses and hugs. Tears streamed down the cheeks of young and old." And so it goes on, with more reports than it is possible to quote.

So how and why does this music have such an overpowering effect? My own view is that during Shape Note singings and conventions the Holy Spirit descends with grace and power upon believers and, if there are still any of them left by then, upon unbelievers alike. But you do not have to accept that. If you wish you can ascribe the emotions and the tears to the beauty, grandeur and power of these devastating texts and tunes.¹⁶

¹ This article first appeared in English Dance & Song in March 1996.

² Sacred Harp Publishing Company, Inc., The Sacred Harp: 1991 Edition, Preface. The Sacred Harp is fairly frequently on sale at British singings of shape note hymns. Failing that, you should be able to get a copy from amazon.com, the US branch of Amazon, the online booksellers.

³ This and other (unreferenced) information was taken from the Internet. To access it, first find the WGMA's

home page on: <http://www.sgpublishing.co.uk/gm/gm.html> and click on and follow up the links to get through to relevant sites in the USA.

⁴ Sacred Harp: 1991 Edition, 71.

⁵ R. Vaughan Williams and A.L. Lloyd, eds., The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs (1959), 41-2.

⁶ Percy C. Buck, ed., The Oxford Song Book (1931), no. 72.

⁷ Vaughan Williams, The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs, 114.

⁸ Roy Palmer, Folk Songs of Ralph Vaughan Williams (1983), 91.

⁹ Percy Dearmer, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Martin Shaw, eds., Songs of Praise (1936), no. 308.

¹⁰ Sacred Harp: 1991 Edition, 101.

¹¹ Sacred Harp: 1991 Edition, 201. There the tune is credited to Missouri Harmony (1820).

¹² The sheet music is in .pdf (portable document file) format, and can be opened, read and printed off with Adobe's Acrobat Reader, available free from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

¹³ Sacred Harp: 1991 Edition, 115. The hymn is credited to Edmund Dumas, 1869.

¹⁴ Maud Karpeles, ed., Eighty English Folk Songs (1968), 81.

¹⁵ Sacred Harp: 1991 Edition, 569.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Chris Whiting for introducing me to American Shape Note Hymns, and for helping me to write this article. Tragically, Chris died, at an early age, shortly after this article was written. His death is a sad loss to the members of the WGMA, and to all British fans of Shape Note Hymns and of West Gallery Music.