

The Sacred Harp as Experimental Composition
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The Sacred Harp is one of many oblong tunebooks published in the United States in four-shaped notation, early in the nineteenth century. Co-edited by B. F. White and E. J. King, the book was first published in 1844, with an expanded reprint in 1850. Subsequent major revisions appeared in 1869, 1911 and 1935, this last commonly referred to as the Denson book. A fifth edition, full of substantial changes, came out in 1991. There are also what I will call “alternate” versions of the book; the *B. F. White Sacred Harp*, *The Colored Sacred Harp*, and what is familiarly known as the Cooper Book, these being outside the scope of this paper.

In spite of its curious and convoluted publication history (the result of five generations of schism and editorial assertiveness), *The Sacred Harp* represents an uninterrupted, living tradition of unaccompanied choral music, dating back at least to the period of the American Revolution. It is still printed in the four-shaped note heads invented in the late eighteenth century and popularized in the early nineteenth. The book has evolved, but in essential ways the style of singing it evokes is the closest thing we have to group singing as practiced by Americans of Revolutionary times. This remarkable tradition has been preserved without interruption in isolated parts of the rural South; in the late twentieth century it was revived in New England, northern Illinois, and in particular cities throughout the country. In 2011 it is thriving. At Wesleyan University, a pioneer in the Sacred Harp revival, as well as Yale, Brown, Emory and other universities, this music is taught and local singings are supported. Tom Malone recently hosted a conference on *The Sacred Harp* at Molloy College on Long Island. Fasola.org lists just over 300 all-day

singings and conventions from the Denson book alone, and South Congregational Church in Middletown, Connecticut will host the 36th annual New England Sacred Harp Singing Convention this fall. Sacred Harp singing is even gone international, with singings in England, Poland, and Ireland. A fledgling singing has just been announced in France, *mirabile dictu*.

The interested reader is referred to *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* by Buell Cobb, as well as the pioneering studies of George Pullen Jackson about shaped note singing and related music in the American South. There are any number of good books, articles and dissertations that have appeared in recent years on particular aspects of this music: for more information go to Fasola.org and follow the link for “resources.” In the remainder of this paper I hope to make a few points about the music itself and its relationship to American culture. Each of these points could easily be the topic of an entire paper, and much of my discussion will be oversimplified of necessity.

The original version of this talk was given in 1991 for the annual conference of SHEAR, the Society for the History of the Early American Republic, a scholarly organization devoted to the history of the United States before 1850. The reader should be aware that I have allowed myself the anachronism (from the point of view of SHEAR) of basing this paper on the Denson book and the 1991 edition, rather than the early editions of 1844 and 1850. Most of my examples, however, were written before 1850, though I have taken them as they appear in the recent books, mistakes, added alto parts and all. This is not the time to try to sort out a Sacred

Harp “Urtext.” In any case, what I have to say about these books and this repertory is on a more general level.

When it first appeared *The Sacred Harp* contained the basic types of music one can find in it today. These genres are not distinguished in the book, and follow one another without rhyme or reason. They are all mixed up together, not musically segregated. Successive generations of Sacred Harp composers have drawn from elements of one style or another to make new pieces, and there is a hybrid quality to virtually everything in the book composed after the 1869 edition. Nonetheless, even though it is not in the spirit of the collection, it is useful to distinguish between the hybrids and six “pure strains,” as a first step in orienting oneself in a bewildering profusion of more than 550 piece of music, composed over a period of two and a half centuries.

First, there is a small but significant group of psalm tunes and other plain tunes by English and continental European composers written before the American Revolution. The oldest of these is “Old Hundred,” a sixteenth century tune that appears in *The Sacred Harp* in a somewhat eccentric eighteenth century harmonization. Other tunes in this category include “Mear” and “St. Thomas.”

Second, there is an excellent sample of the work of New England composers during the period 1770 to 1820, the first extensive flowering of the art of musical composition in the English-speaking part of the Western hemisphere and to this day one of the glories of American music. The most important of these composers, among them William Billings of Boston, Massachusetts, Daniel Read of New Haven, Connecticut, Jeremiah Ingalls of Newbury, Vermont, and Justin Morgan, another

Vermont composer and the man who bred the Morgan horse, are well represented in *The Sacred Harp*. All of the composers of the so-called First New England School wrote psalm tunes in the style of earlier religious composers, the first category enumerated above; most of them also composed anthems (see below). The most popular genre with these composers was the fuguing tune, in which a first homophonic strain is followed by a polyphonic one. In my part of the singing school in Friday night we will sing a number of these; straightforward ones like “Northfield,” to be sure, but also more complex ones, to be discussed later in this paper, including “Morning,” “Edom,” “Morgan,” “Conversion,” “Huntington” and “Melancholy Day.” (*This is a reference to the singing school that David Ivey and I taught in Cork on 5 March 2010.*)

In the early nineteenth century a third, quite different type of composition begins to appear in collections of sacred music, a genre that has come to be known as the folk hymn. A folk hymn is a preexisting melody taken from oral tradition and harmonized in three or four parts. These harmonizations tend to be not like European art music, and are characterized by pentatonicism, parallel fifths and octaves, and an unusual amount of dissonance. The first printed folk hymn appears in 1815; folk hymns become popular very quickly. “Sawyer’s Exit” is a setting of the fiddle tune “Rosin the Bow.” “Family Bible” is undoubtedly a folk hymn, although I do not know the tune on which it is based. Other examples in *The Sacred Harp* include “Plenary,” a setting of “Auld Lang Syne” with funereal words, and “Wondrous Love,” related to a rollicking ballad about Captain William Kidd, the notorious pirate.

In 1850 and 1869 a variant of this style begins to appear in the book, which may be called the pop hymn. L. P. Breedlove, B. F. White and a few other composers began to take popular songs of the mid-nineteenth century and treat them as folk hymns, that is, giving the tunes pentatonic, dissonant harmonizations with a lot of forbidden parallelisms. As fascinating as this kind of piece is, it is outside the scope of this paper. Examples are “Sweet Home,” B. F. White’s arrangement of “Home, Sweet Home,” and “Happy Land,” an arrangement of an 1830s hit of the same name that tradition ascribes to L. P. Breedlove. Other examples are “Mary’s Grief and Joy,” White’s remarkable transformation of “Zula Zong” by J. P. Webster, and “Lover of the Lord,” based on Mrs. E. A. Parkhurst’s “Oh you must be a lover of the Lord.”

The revivals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced a new kind of song, now known as the camp meeting song. These songs use a standard hymn text, which is usually familiar, but interpolate a refrain that can be learned quickly and sung by a crowd. These refrains could be simple, like “glory, halleluia!” or a bit more complicated, for example “When I hear the trumpet sound in that morning” and “I am bound to die in the army.” Like virtually every possibility within the Sacred Harp style, these refrains are capable of extreme development. The refrain of White’s “Family Circle” is “Bless the Lord, O my soul! Praise the Lord, O my brother, Shout and sing, O my sister! Give Him glory, O my father! And rejoice, O my mother! And we’ll travel on together, And we’ll join heart and hands for Canaan.”

A fifth category of music in *The Sacred Harp* consists of more ambitious compositions that would rarely be found in modern hymnals. Sacred Harp tradition distinguishes between four types of such pieces; anthems, odes, set pieces, and long

songs. Anthems are elaborate compositions that take their texts from scripture. Odes are similar, but secular in nature. Set pieces are like anthems, but use rhymed poetical texts. A long song is just that. Anthems can be long, “Rose of Sharon,” for example, or short, like “Baptismal Anthem” or “David’s Lamentation.” Only two odes remain in the 1991 edition, “Ode on Science” and “Ode on Life’s Journey.” One of the few set pieces in the tradition is the magnificent “Claremont” by the elusive New Englanders Temple and Merrill. Two spectacular long songs remain in the book, “Southwell” and “Doddridge.”

The sixth category is reformed hymnody of the first half of the nineteenth century. It is the work of composers such as Lowell Mason and Thomas Hastings, who devoted their lives to stamping out the indigenous music of their New England forebears and replacing it with a more correct, European influenced style, modeled on the music of the great masters. Mason’s particular favorites for this purpose were Handel and Haydn (as in the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, which he helped to found). The interested reader can check out “Boylston,” “Hebron” and “Martin,” three very fine hymns of this type. Sacred Harp singers sing them in typical Sacred Harp style, not in the sentimental manner usually associated with nineteenth century hymnody.

There are many hybrid moves possible within these categories; most of them occur in the work of composers after 1850. One basic hybrid, however, appears in *The Sacred Harp* from the beginning, and is almost immediately popular. This is the fuguing tune written in the harmonic idiom of the folk hymn. “Melancholy Day” is an excellent example of the style; in the early twentieth century the Denson brothers

produced such pieces in considerable quantity. Another hybrid, which is something like a fuguing tune, but also something like reform hymnody, is B. F. White's "Loving Jesus," based on an eighteenth century Italian glee for male voices in praise of beautiful women.

These six categories are not mutually exclusive, and the hybridization process can incorporate other elements than the ones described. But perhaps this summary will orient those unfamiliar with the book and give at least an idea of what sort of thing it contains.

This kind of music was enormously popular in New England in the late eighteenth century. It spread down the East Coast, then into Pennsylvania and Ohio, finally reaching the Deep South. By the 1820s it was known throughout the country as it was at the time, that is, most of the states east of the Mississippi River. Lowell Mason and other reform composers began their campaign to eliminate this music in the New England states that saw its birth in the 1820s; by the 1850s it was no longer a living tradition in the area of its inception. The music survived in the Midwest into the twentieth century, but even there it has died out by World War One. Only in pockets of the rural South, the "cultural deep freeze" of the nation, did the music survive as a continuous tradition.

There are four major points I would like to make about this music, each of them related to the development of American culture. First, I will consider the vocal style itself. Second, I will describe the harmonic idiosyncracies of much of the music. Third, I will claim that Sacred Harp music is to a considerable degree spatial music, that is, often it depends for its aesthetic impact on direction and location as much as

the notes that are being sung. Fourth, I would like to examine certain peculiar passages that consist of only a single chord.

The vocal style. The manner in which Sacred Harp singers sing is not determined by vocal training. Rather, it is an extension of the individual speaking voice, what has been called “sustained speech.” This is the most common form of singing in the world, and virtually anyone can do it, whose vocal mechanism has not been damaged. Sacred Harp singers presume no vocal training whatsoever; in fact, in some ways cultivation of the voice can interfere with the proper traditional style.

Vocal production is the primary thing taught by any modern conservatory voice teacher, of course. When one hears of the traditional New England singing school master, or a Southern singing school in the twentieth century, or what David Ivey and I will do tomorrow night, it must not be assumed that vocal production is what is taught. Rather, what is taught in a singing school is how to read music, how to sing in three or four parts, and some stylistic niceties. Not only is vocal production not taught, it is rarely even mentioned. The sound that is produced is the result of the individual equipment of the singer and his or her native talent.

One powerful consequence of this attitude is that Sacred Harp singing is something that virtually anyone can do. If one can sing at all, it is possible to sing this music. Indeed, if one cannot sing at all, one can sing this music; the resulting wrong notes will easily be absorbed in the enthusiastic tumult of everything else that is going on. One may wonder about blend, the pet obsession of so many choral conductors. According to traditional Sacred Harp singers, you get voices to blend by

having more of them, not by requiring people to sing differently. With a large enough group the blend takes care of itself.

Traditional Southern singers sing without vibrato, and almost without exception the music is loud. (In eighteenth century New England, the birthplace of this music, more dynamic variety was expected by composers and singing teachers alike.) The straight tones and extreme volume of the music are intensified in traditional settings; small rural churches in the South are typically no more than wooden boxes of intermediate size. Such buildings reverberate and amplify the sound so it can be heard at a great distance. The effect, to those inside the building, is like being inside a violin. One feels as if one's head, indeed one's whole body, is being vibrated by ecstatic waves of sound.

There are fundamental democratic assumptions behind this music, which assert themselves almost immediately, even from so brief a consideration of the style. First, the music is participatory. There is no audience, although one may choose not to sing, and a typical singing will have listeners. However, there is no performer/audience dichotomy; indeed, there is no performance. People just come together to sing and to listen.

A Sacred Harp singing is in many ways analogous to the virtually defunct town meeting. The members of a community come together to discuss an issue. It is an issue that affects everybody, and those who have come are interested in it and affected by it. Not everyone will speak on the issue, but everyone is free to do so, if he or she chooses. Roles can change; people who are in leadership positions on one issue are not necessarily in leadership positions on other issues. And a crucial

measure of an effective town meeting is the number of people who have had their say.

In a Sacred Harp singing the singers are arranged in a square. There is a chairman of the meeting and an arrangements committee who make sure everyone who wishes to lead has the opportunity to do so. A secretary takes minutes. Leaders are allowed to sing one (or in the old days, two) songs of their own choice. The leader may also set the pitch for the other singers, and is expected to show the tempo he or she wishes to take by beating time. It is generally assumed that those who lead will know what they are doing. However, if an incompetent leader emerges, the person is cheerfully tolerated; after all, you can only do so much damage while leading one or two songs.

The basic format of these singings was in place as early as 1845, when the Southern Musical Association was founded. The Chattahoochee Convention, which still exists, was organized in 1852. Although the history of such things before 1845 is quite murky, most historians agree that the procedure of the all-day singing and the singing convention dates from at least the end of the eighteenth century, and grows out of the practice of New England singing masters.

Even though this music requires no vocal training, and takes place in a democratic context open to all, it should not be assumed that there are no standards for its performance, and that no individual effort is necessary for the singing to succeed. Quite the contrary; although you need no vocal training to sing from *The Sacred Harp*, you must be musically literate. And you must have learned or at least attempted to learn, the traditional English seventeenth century system that survives

in Sacred Harp tradition, according to which one sings the scale on the syllables “Fa, sol, la, mi” rather than the familiar “Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do.”

The “fa so la” system is an outgrowth of late Renaissance hexachordal theory. There are two trichords of three notes each, separated by a half step. Drastically simplifying the medieval and Renaissance systems, seventeenth century English singers simply sang “fa so la fa sol la” for the first six notes of what we now know as the major scale. When the leading tone was needed, the syllable “mi” was sung. This system was taken to the colonies, of course, and was the principal teaching tool for musical literacy up until the 1820s, when Lowell Mason introduced the Italian “do, re, mi” system into the Boston public schools.

Throughout the eighteenth century ministers and singing school teachers collaborated in an intense, and enormously successful effort to encourage musical literacy. Beginning in the 1720s, as an attempt to suppress the extremely slow singing of a very small number of tunes in oral tradition (what has come to be known as the Old Manner of Singing), the movement to promote musical literacy reached its apogee at the time of the Revolution. A new nation, with new musical skills, created the optimal conditions for the production of new musical compositions. It was also a laboratory for new teaching methods.

With typical Yankee ingenuity, many of the singing masters observed that there were four notes (fa, so, la, mi) , which note heads were only printed with one shape. Would it not be easier to learn to sing if one could see at a glance which of the four notes was the one to sound? With four shapes one would have two visual cues, the shape of the note head and the position on the staff, instead of reading on the

basis of the position alone. Many singing school teachers presented one four-shape system or another; the one that became popular, and replaced all competing systems, was the one of Little and Smith in *The Easy Instructor*, 1801.

As a result of the singing school movement, the proliferation of new tunes, and the new pedagogical tool of shaped notes, musical literacy was more widespread in the early nineteenth century than ever before. One wonders if the same level of musical literacy has been found at any subsequent time in the United States.

The uncultivated vocal style of Sacred Harp singing, then, is not incompatible with musical knowledge; on the contrary, there is a certain virtuosity to the practice, in which traditional singers take considerable pride. Sacred Harp singings are also not really anarchistic, however loosely they are structured. This is a literate, organized tradition, in crucial ways not “folk music” at all, but “scientific music,” as singing from notation came to be known in the eighteenth century.

Harmonic Idiosyncracies. Since George Pullen Jackson brought this music to the attention of the scholarly world in 1933, much has been made of the extensive use of forbidden parallelisms by composers in this tradition. Indeed, one of the standard criticisms of the First New England School of composer, voiced by Thomas Hastings and many other reformers in the early nineteenth century, was that the music was technically crude; the ubiquitous parallel octaves and fifths were the most obvious example.

In 2011 all of this looks somewhat different. Parallelisms are certainly against rules based on eighteenth century European practice, but other kinds of

rules are possible, and there have been very different kinds of music to serve as models for these rules, even within the history of Western music. To many listeners what is so refreshing about Sacred Harp music is how medieval it all sounds.

Ensembles deeply involved in the early music revival play this music on recorders and viols, or even hammered dulcimers. Vocal ensembles such as The Western Wind, Anonymous Four and the Boston Camarata sing these pieces on programs with medieval and Renaissance music, and it all seems of a piece. All of those forbidden parallelisms appear far from repugnant when juxtaposed with early music; on the contrary, they seem attractive, colorful and sonorous.

Forbidden parallelisms are quite inconspicuous in Billings's "Rose of Sharon," but they are quite obvious in "Family Bible," which is so full of luxurious parallelisms it sounds like an early twentieth century arrangement. An extreme case is "New Topia" by Captain Reuben Munday,.

This composition is in a form that is a variant of the fuguing tune. In what is clearly intended as the fuguing section, however, the voices do not enter one at the time. Rather, one side of the square, the basses and altos, are answered by the other side, the leads and trebles. The basses and altos sing a striking enough passage, with strong open fifths and a particularly awkward set of parallel octaves at the end of the phrase. The consequent phrase in the upper voices is even more arresting; it is a veritable orgy of unequal parallel fifths. When the four voices join together there are parallel fifths all over the place, and even the chord d, a, a', e", which stacks two fifths up on top of each other and is not a conventional triad at all. What strikes the listener immediately is the willfulness of all of these fifths. This is not the work of a

composer who did not know any better and wrote parallel fifths and octaves because he was musically uneducated. Rather, this is the work of a composer who loved a particular musical effect and knew exactly how to get it. One observes in passing that it is also a wonderful way to bring out the latent terror in the text, which ends:

Remember you are hastening on
To death's dark, gloomy shade.
Your joys on earth will soon be gone,
Your flesh in dust be laid.

In a good performance by experienced Sacred Harp singers, loud and relentlessly without vibrato, "New Topia" can be hair-raising.

The composers of *The Sacred Harp*, while sprinkling their works with parallel octaves and fifths, also sprinkled them liberally with dissonance. In this style dissonances are typically unprepared, and common European prepared dissonances are rare. Suspensions literally never occur. Frequently in *The Sacred Harp* dissonance is the result of contrapuntal collision. That is, one part is going one way, and other another way, and the result is a dissonance. These clashes of parts are quite natural and occur on a regular basis. There is no sense that they are anything special. "Claremont" contains a number of dissonances of this type, as does "Loving Jesus." An extreme example is the fuguing section of "Huntington" by Justin Morgan.

"Huntington" has a notational peculiarity that, to my knowledge, was unique at the time it was composed. In the fuguing section the voices enter one measure apart, and immediately repeat a four-measure phrase. Each repeat is individually notated in the parts, so there is a repeat sign for the basses, one for the leads, one for the trebles, and finally one for the altos, the four repeat signs following each other at

one-measure intervals. The four parts of “Huntington” are notated in open score, like the other compositions in the book; one would expect that the repeat signs would apply to the entire system. That they do not is clear evidence that the composer thought of this effect completely in contrapuntal terms.

The first three entrances are quite consonant, but with the entrance of the alto it is clear that Morgan no longer cares whether the parts harmonize or not. When “Huntington” is consonant it is almost completely consonant, but when it is dissonant, as in the measure of the alto entrance, it is totally dissonant. When the repeats kick in it’s every part for itself. The resulting structure is an alternation of blocks of consonance and blocks of dissonance of considerable energy and clarity.

Another way in which composers create dissonance in *The Sacred Harp* is by building up chords made of fourths and fifths, or other intervals that are not the more traditional thirds. The resulting quartal-quintal harmonies, or perfect intervals overlaid with sevenths or ninths, are quite medieval in their effect. Two excellent examples from the early editions of the book are “Family Bible,” which contains very few triads and the chord d, g, g’, c”, two superimposed fourths, and “Service of the Lord,” which contains the chords e, a, f’, g” and g, c’, c’, g” in passing positions.

A composition of unusual harmonic interest is “Morning” by Amos Pilsbury. Composed in 1799, “Morning” is striking enough in its original form, three voices. The addition of the Denson edition alto part (wherever it came from) creates harmonic effects of truly startling originality. This is one of the most limited alto parts in the book and uses only the notes d’, d’, f#’ and g’. The narrow range and the small number of notes are not the complete picture, however. There are a total of

forty-three notes in this part, including twenty-five e's, eight d's, and five iterations each of f#' and g'. In other words, 58% of the time the altos are singing the same note. When they are not singing that note they sing either its upper neighbor, its lower neighbor, or the third member of the tonic triad. Since these notes are easily recognized as embellishing the tonic E, one can reasonably say that the altos are really singing the same note from beginning to end, with minor ornamentation. This means that in the middle of the texture one encounters a drone, which serves as a strong anchor for the extraordinary harmonic events that surround it.

A similar, almost obsessive concern with the notes of the tonic triad characterizes the bass part, which is almost always moving from e to g, back to e, to B and back to e. The lead and treble parts are more florid, but show a similar tendency to emphasize either E or B. With such limited melodic materials one might wonder how Pilsbury and the composer of the alto part managed to create such a powerful effect. (*According to Warren Steel, this alto part is "after Anna L. Blackshear, 1902."*)

The basic move is to establish the fifth, E and B, as a harmonic drone, just as the alto part creates a melodic one. (This is just one example of dozens in the book of the way in which the Densons and others who added alto parts to the three-voice pieces in the book succeeded in reinforcing some fundamental aspect of the original composition.) The other chords that surround this fifth can be as dissonant as a pandiatonic style will permit; Pilsbury and Blackshear let the chips fall where they may. But because these chords are ornaments to the primary sonority of "Morning" they can be wrenching and still make perfect musical sense.

To get to the specifics, the most violent dissonances occur on the second quarter of measure three; the fourth quarter of measure twelve; and, saving the best for the last, the second half of measure fourteen. Not so dissonant but equally striking because of their imaginative placement are the diminished triad in root position on the second quarter of measure six, and the magnificent entrance of the lead part in measure ten, where Denson has the altos move up from d' to e' to create a minor seventh chord in first inversion.

Since all of these harmonic effects are the result of voice leading, essentially ornamenting the fundamental pitches E and B, this piece can be reduced to a single static sonority. There are many similar compositions in the volume that contain passages that are almost entirely one chord; this point will be taken up later in this paper, with more musical examples.

One other harmonic detail of "Morning" should be mentioned here; the frequent, almost exclusive use of the fifth E-B with the B in the bass at cadential points. This is of course the composers' way of avoiding using the dominant chord, driving home to the singer or listener that this composition really has only one chord in it.

One might ask what difference all of these harmonic considerations make in this piece. To my mind, they make a great deal of difference at a fundamental level. Pillsbury and Blackshear have found a way to express the great agony of the text, which is a graphic description of the Passion of Christ, while at the same time maintaining the strength necessary to support the vision of the Resurrection in the last verse. This is a musical setting that has taken its harmonic cue, so to speak, from

the most fundamental images of the poem, no small achievement for any composer at any time, writing in any style.

And why is the whole discussion of dissonance in *The Sacred Harp* important in the large context of the study of American culture? European music at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was increasingly dissonant, and practically all major composers after Chopin and Liszt concocted more and more piquant chords. Taking his cue from the extreme harmonic complexity of Wagner, Schoenberg proclaimed “the emancipation of the dissonance,” as the new century began to unfold.

But in America there was no need to emancipate the dissonance. Indeed, the dissonance had been at liberty to do whatever it pleased for over a hundred years. The composers of *The Sacred Harp* wrote unprepared dissonances of several different types, beginning in the late eighteenth century; singers had sung them for generations, with conviction and considerable enjoyment. To be sure these composers were not graduates of conservatories, where they would learn the same restrictions and anxieties that affected their European contemporaries. But they were not exactly the self-taught diamonds-in-the-rough portrayed in so many scholarly books on this subject, either. Rather, they were the products of a homegrown system of music education that had its own teachers, its own apprenticeships, its own publications, and its own artistic standards. The foundation of this musical system was a body of indigenous music that had been rejected by the nineteenth-century sacred music establishment. For the Sacred Harp tradition, the stone the builders rejected had become the cornerstone.

But Sacred Harp music is not only dissonant; it is full of parallelisms and has a modal sound to it. Dissonance, parallel motion and modality are three hallmarks of medieval music; it is reasonable to say that this music is full of medievalisms, anachronistic as it may seem. The method of composition is similarly anachronistic. At the beginning of Western polyphony, and well into the fifteenth century, composers wrote parts one at a time. Specifically, a melody was written, then a part that sounded well with that melody, then a part that sounded well with the second part, and so on. Since composers did not write out pieces in score, it was not necessary that the parts all coincide with each other, but rather that they harmonize two at the time, so to speak.

Such an approach to composition had been obsolete in Europe for five hundred years, but we know from surviving letters and diaries that this was essentially how many a late eighteenth century New England composer wrote music. One composed a melody, then one wrote a bass that went well with it. The next step was the crucial one; the third part was to harmonize with the bass, not necessarily with the two parts together. The alto part filled in whatever was left. One could even add parts to previously completed compositions, another medieval practice that had been dead for centuries. B. F. White writes his portion of *The Sacred Harp* in three parts, and a generation or so later the Denson brothers and/or their wives and other female relatives add a fourth part. For a comparable situation in the history of music one must go back to the twelfth century; at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris Leonin composes the Great Book of Organum in two parts, and

his student and successor Perotin makes it his life's work to add a third part to his master's magnum opus.

By the end of the nineteenth century some of the most adventurous composers in Europe were looking to the Middle Ages for inspiration. In France Debussy and Satie, as well as a number of organist composers in major churches, studied Gregorian chant and organum, and began to throw fistfuls of parallel fifths in the face of musical pundits. Elsewhere, in England and educated America, composers inspired by folk song began to produce a similar sort of modal medieval mix; Ralph Vaughan Williams and Percy Grainger were particularly good at it, and a similar sound appears in some conservatory-trained composers in the United States at this time, notably Henry F. Gilbert.

Just as composers in the Sacred Harp tradition did not need to emancipate the dissonance, they did not need to be inspired by the bracing sonorities of medieval music. Open fifths, parallelisms and free-wheeling polyphony had been part and parcel of their music for generations. And predictably, when American composers educated in the mainstream began to discover *The Sacred Harp* they found it a source of inspiration, just as the previous generation at the turn of the century was inspired by medieval practice. Henry Cowell and Virgil Thomson were profoundly interested in this music, and their protégé Henry Brant (of whom we will hear more later) was an enthusiast for Sacred Harp tunes most of his life.

The whole attitude toward harmony and counterpoint that characterized the First New England School of composers and their Southern successors seems remarkably free from academicism. William Billings actually articulates this attitude

in the prefaces to his various volumes of original music, and the new “Rudiments of Music” that introduce the 1991 edition spell out many aspects of the style of composition that I am describing. In the United States, to be educated, even to be a “scientific musician,” does not mean to be pedantic. In fact one can have a fine disregard for, or ignorance of, the rules of European composition and write music of great energy and emotional depth.

Alas, the innate but somewhat naïve self-confidence that made this attitude to musical composition possible was to disappear in New England. Daniel Read, after Billings perhaps the finest of these composers, developed a terrible inferiority complex in his old age and began to “revise” his earlier compositions, and produce ones that were more proper. Transplanted to the South, however, both the style of composition and the cavalier attitude about rules continued to flourish. B. F. White is the most accomplished and consistent composer carrying on the tradition, with his own individual eccentricities thrown in, to be sure. On occasion the Denson brothers, in the early twentieth century, can be even more thoroughgoing in these matters than their model and mentor.

Sacred Harp music as spatial music. Spatial music may be defined as music that depends for its effect not only on the notes that are played or sung but also on the distribution of the various musical components in three dimensions. In a real sense all music is spatial, since all musicians must sing or play in a particular location and will be heard by someone who is in another particular location. However, few composers have consciously exploited this musical fact in their work. In the late

Renaissance Andrea Gabrielli and his nephew Giovanni Gabrielli wrote antiphonal polychoral pieces that placed groups of singers in particular balconies in Saint Mark's Church in Venice. Monteverdi and any number of other early Baroque composers delighted in echo effects, placing the echo parts offstage or in a remote gallery. In New Spain many composers continued this tradition, writing multichoral spatial pieces for cathedrals in Mexico City and Lima long after the fashion for them subsided in Europe.

Hector Berlioz in nineteenth-century France placed auxiliary groups of brass instruments in balconies and designed orchestral textures where the left half of the orchestra answers the right half, and vice versa. His famous *Symphonie Fantastique* has an off-stage oboe solo in the third movement and massive off-stage bells in the finale. In the United States certain works of Charles Ives, notably "The Unanswered Question," require the spatial separation of the component groups of the composition (the strings here, the flutes there, the solo trumpet in the distance). Ives's "Universe Symphony" was envisioned for four orchestras of four different mountaintops. Inspired by these and other conceptions of Ives, Henry Brant made a career of writing spatial pieces on a large scale, for multiple groups of singers and/or instruments, surrounding the audience.

In American churches today, Protestant and Catholic, the choir is in one spot, either in front of the congregation, behind the congregation, or to one side. In the eighteenth century, however, in the Congregational churches of New England, a very different model obtained. Meeting houses of the period typically had a balcony on three sides, and the choir of the church stood at the edge of the balcony, singing over

the heads of the of the congregation towards each other. Today the sound of a church choir emanates from one direction, usually on the same horizontal level as the congregation. In the late eighteenth century the sound emanated from three directions, approximately fourteen feet above floor level, more or less surrounding the congregation. The leader of the choir stood in the center of the balcony, in the rear of the church, where he would be clearly visible to the entire group, and kept time by moving his hand up and down with the beat.

But singers did not only sing in church services. Most group singing was for recreational purposes, and singers sat around a large table, or, if the group were larger, in chairs arranged in a square. All the people singing one part sat with each other. In the Sacred Harp tradition this informal arrangement has become institutionalized, but it is clear from internal evidence that most, if not all New England composers took this spatial arrangement for granted.

In the fuguing tunes of New England composers, the second part, that is the fuguing section proper, typically begins with the basses alone. Like the /English fuguing tunes that serve as the model, many of the most popular American fuguing tunes build the musical texture up from the bottom, that is the bass is followed by the tenor (or lead, as it is called in the Sacred Harp tradition), then the alto, and finally the soprano (or treble). From a purely musical point of view, that is, considering the pitches themselves, this is a perfectly logical and strong arrangement.

However, a large number of New England piece, and virtually all of the Southern fuguing tunes, do something a bit different. The order of entrances is bass,

lead, treble, alto, concluding with an inner part. This seems somewhat odd until one realizes that this is the order of the parts in space, beginning at the leader's right and moving counterclockwise. This order of entrances allows the leader to begin facing the basses, bring them in, rotate ninety degrees and bring in the leads, rotate again and bring in the trebles, and finally, with his or her back to the leads, bring in the altos. Many traditional Sacred Harp singers in fact do bring in the parts rotating in the manner, and some of them do what amounts to a dance in the process.

Since all sound is directional to some degree, and vocal sound, like all wind music, is more directional rather than less, the circulation of the sound is clearly audible. To those sitting in the square, and to the leader standing in the middle, each of the four parts is perceived as coming from its own specific direction; by bringing in the parts in the order the sound literally moves around the room.

This arrangement, which I will call counterclockwise entrances, is found in forth fuguing tunes in the Denson edition of *The Sacred Harp*, as well as in a number of anthems, set pieces and long songs. Some of the most popular of the New England fuguing tunes contain counterclockwise entrances, including "Greenwich" by Daniel Read (1793) and "New Jerusalem," by Jeremiah Ingalls (1805). "Huntington" by Justin Morgan has two sets of counterclockwise entrances, occasioned by the peculiar sectional repeats discussed above, giving the leader the opportunity of turning in a circle two times in succession.

There are an additional twenty tunes that begin with the basses and altos singing together, then rotating through the lead entrance to bring in the trebles. This is an obvious variation on the counterclockwise scheme, often occasioned by the

addition of an extra (non-original) alto part. Again, there are some very popular pieces in the book that proceed in this manner, “Morning” and “Melancholy Day,” for example.

The tour de force of counterclockwise entrances, however, is “Morgan.” The fuguing section begins with the typical bass, lead, treble, alto entrances, a measure apart. In the eleventh measure of the fuguing section, however, the process repeats, but begins with the bass and alto together, the variation on the counterclockwise entrance mentioned above. This has the effect of telescoping the four measures required for the first set of entrances into three measures. But in measure eighteen of the fuguing section the bass begins again, followed by the leads, the trebles and the altos, this time a half-measure apart, telescoping the third set of entrances into two measures. Almost immediately this rather dizzying effect is repeated, beginning in the twenty-first measure of the fuguing section, and in the twenty-third measure the composer starts to do it a third time. This seems excessive even for the anonymous composer of “Morgan,” and where the third and final alto entrance should be there is a strong cadence, followed by a concluding phrase.

In this composition the rotation of parts in space occurs four times, followed by an incomplete fifth rotation. (With the required repeat of the fuguing section these numbers double.) The rotations are not only numerous; they seem to speed up, both by telescoping the entrances and by having the rotations take place closer and closer together. This is clearly the result of a conscious compositional decision on the part of the composer, since no one could come up with such a scheme intuitively. The spatial aspect, in addition to being completely calculated, is the most

important aspect of the composition. “Morgan” has no particular melodic or harmonic excellence, but it is an exciting piece of music nonetheless, precisely because it exploits the spatial possibilities of the style.

In addition to the variant mentioned above—bass-plus-alto, followed by lead, followed by treble—composers in *The Sacred Harp* introduce any number of other contrapuntal situations that make it clear that they are thinking of the music in space. Where the fuguing section should be in “Loving Jesus,” there is a wonderful call-and-response passage between one side of the square and the other; “Edom” by Elisha West begins the fuguing section with a most memorable alto entrance; and anthems in *The Sacred Harp* are full of all sorts of spatial effects that need not be enumerated here. Elsewhere in the book one finds such arrangements as brief fuguing moments introduced in the first section of a composition (“Newburgh” by R. D. Munson, 1810); sectional solos followed by tutti passages, pitting one section against the group (also “Newburgh,” and most of the anthems in the book); and antiphonal passages that divide the square in the shape of a cross, rather than diagonally (the tour de force case is “Lawrenceburg” by T. J. Denson).

Supply Belcher was one of the most eccentric of the early New England composers, and perhaps the most dissonant American composer of the period. His tune “Conversion” is interesting for another reason; it is a tour de force of spatial music, on a miniature scale. The text, by Isaac Watts, is important to note:

When God reveal'd His gracious name,
And changed my mournful state,
My rapture seem'd a pleasing dream,
The grace appear'd so great.

The world beheld the glorious change,
And did Thy hand confess;
My tongue broke out in unknown strains,
And sung surprising grace.

The imagery of this poem is all about change, and very great change at that. In each quatrain a form of the word “change” appears, first as the active verb “changed,” then as “glorious change.” The reference to “a pleasing dream” is followed by references to “unknown strains” and “Surprising grace.” All is change, surprise, and altered states of consciousness.

How does Belcher portray this complete and transforming change in music? Very simply, but very effectively. Since singers are so used to entering in a counterclockwise direction, beginning on the leader’s right, the most forceful musical change imaginable, in a fuguing tune, is to enter in a clockwise direction, beginning on the leader’s left. This is the only fuguing tune in the book that has this particular arrangement of entrances, and the only one I have ever seen of this type anywhere. Again, like the entrances in “Morgan,” it is not possible that this is a coincidence; the entrances in “Conversion,” which are an obvious and powerful analogue to the change described in the text, are clearly the product of active human intelligence. A real composer wrote this piece, who knew exactly what he was doing.

Again, one must ask the question, why is this sort of thing important? And what does it tell us about American culture? In the first place, considerations of space are important elements in later American music, and figure prominently in the works of major composers, in particular Charles Ives and Henry Brant. That both of these men were profoundly interested in and influenced by American vernacular

music cannot be a coincidence. It is not known whether or not Ives ever had any contact with the compositions of Billings or his contemporaries; this kind of music died out in Connecticut long before Ives was born. But Henry Brant was an enthusiastic admirer of *The Sacred Harp* for years, although he did not think of it as spatial music until this aspect of singing in a square was pointed out to him, late in his life.

It is fascinating that American rural hymnody prefigures the practice of two major twentieth century American composers. But there is more to this issue. The use of space in the shaped note tradition is fundamentally different from the European use of space in two ways. (In these ways, not even the music of Ives and Brant is different from European models.) First, because the music is completely participatory, there is no audience to surround, or otherwise impress with directionality. After choirs stopped singing in galleries on three sides of New England congregations, the last vestiges of the typical performer/audience relationship passed out of this tradition. So now, and since the early nineteenth century, the square is itself the space; the singers themselves experience the spatial effects, and live the spatial dimension of the music as well as perceive it.

(This happens in monastic communities, of course, and other religious situations all over the world. But *The Sacred Harp* is not a hymnal, and Sacred Harp singings are not religious rituals, and the entire tradition is suffused with democratic mechanisms not typical of most religious institutions that cultivate spatial music.)

Second, and equally important, in this tradition the preoccupation with spatial effects is not found in the music of a handful of geniuses who burst on the scene infrequently. Rather, one sees these effects in the works of dozens of composers of humble origin and small pretense, composed over a period of 200 years. At some level, however isolated that level may be from the “mainstream” of art music and the music of urban churches, the notion of experimenting with space, as an essential aspect of musical composition, has entered the consciousness of a great number of ordinary Americans, over a period of generations.

Music with only one chord. The reader will remember the discussion of “Morning,” which I have claimed can be reduced to a single sonority, the fifth E and B. Although there are neighboring tones and passing tones, some of them making strong dissonances, there is no real motion from this tonic to a dominant or any other chord, as you would find in functional harmony. There are many passages of this sort in *The Sacred Harp*, and they are striking in their ubiquity. They constitute, in my opinion, one of the most important traits of the style, and one of the traits that separates the later Southern composers from the earlier New England ones. Amos Pilsbury was a New England composer, but “Morning” is a very unusual New England piece. The one-chord obsession, so to speak, is constant in the music of B. F. White, his students, and his contemporaries.

Before discussing specific examples, it is important to define exactly what I mean by “one chord.” This does not mean literally repeating the same sonority, of

course. Rather, I am using this admittedly imprecise term to refer to a particular type of pentatonic simultaneity.

First, consider the major triad with an added sixth, a familiar chord used in popular music throughout the twentieth century. In the key of C major, for example, the notes of the tonic triad configured in this manner are C, E, G and A; even though these notes can be refigured to make a minor seventh chord, there is not that much difference in the overall effect, in most musical contexts. The pitches are exactly the same, and if they are all present one perceives them as a unified sound, in spite of any permutations, changes of position, inversions, etc.

A further variation is to superimpose the pitch D in this situation, which might or might not be part of a fifth build on the pitch G. More likely, in a highly pentatonic context the D is merely a passing tone, and mixes right in with the other four pitches, changing the color slightly. The listener will still perceive this as a unified sound, however. This is what I propose to call “one-chord music.” With this expanded notion of “one chord,” large chunks of Sacred Harp music can easily be understood as having one basic sonority, which absorbs passing chords and other sorts of incidental ornamentation without effort.

In addition to “Morning” by New England composer Amos Pilsbury, there are other passages in the work of New England composers that are similar in effect, among them particular phrases in “Claremont,” and various fuguing tunes of Morgan, Read and Billings. As I stated earlier, however, it is the Southern composers who develop the one-chord technique in its extreme purity.

Here are some examples by Southern composers taken from different editions of the book. "Millennium," by William Walker, 1831, was incorporated in the first edition; it is a song in which practically every pitch is a member of the F major triad. The pitch D accounts for most of the other notes. There are occasional passing tones. In the second measure, for example, there is a triad built on the seventh degree of the scale, but it is a passing chord that is only a sixteenth note in duration.

The most conspicuous point is the cadence, which is always a repeated F major chord. There is no normal dominant-to-tonic motion at the end of any phrase in the piece. Nor is there any strong dominant at any other point in the composition. The lack of dominant function always implies harmonic stasis, and indeed in "Millennium": there seems to be no need for the harmony to go anywhere; perhaps Walker saw harmonic stasis as appropriately millennial. The compositional interest is in the melodic writing, or in the texture, or in the use of register; one can focus on these aspects of the piece, and let the static harmony take care of itself.

There are many such moments in *The Sacred Harp*. The can approach minimalism, or even phase music. "Morning Sun" by S. M. Denson (1911) has virtually no dominant at all. There are two subdominant functions in the course of the piece, and about five passing dominants occur (depending on what you are willing to consider a dominant). Practically every other chord in the piece is some version of an Eb major chord. The perfect cadence (V-I) actually occurs once and once only, at the very end of the piece. The effect is of one chord that gets activated and then chatters along for a while, much in the manner of Steve Reich.

An even more uncompromising version of this technique, probably the purest one in the book, is the fuguing tune “Fillmore” by J. P. Reese, which first appears in the 1869 edition. There are even fewer suggestions of dominant harmony in “Fillmore” than in “Morning Sun”; one could claim that there are no real dominants, and this piece is a single F major sonority. Like many other extreme effects in this volume, this one seems tied to the words. The second quatrain, the text of the fuguing section, reads as follows:

Thus I will sing till nature cease,
Till sense and language are no more,
And after death Thy boundless grace
Thro' everlasting years adore.

One-chord music, harmonically static but at the same time full of rhythmic energy, seems the perfect expression of an ecstatic experience far beyond the limitations of the intellect.

There are other pieces, less radically consistent, which contain extensive one-chord passages of this sort. Consider the brief camp meeting song of E. J. King, co-author of *The Sacred Harp*, “Service of the Lord.” It is almost exclusively pentatonic, in F; of the 148 pitches in the four parts there are only three B flats and five Es. The remaining 140 pitches are either F, G, A, C or D. There are very weak dominants at the cadence points; the overwhelming effect is of a reiterated F major chord.

“Loving Jesus,” an arrangement by B. F. White of an eighteenth century Italian glee, is more conventional harmonically, except in the penultimate phrase, “Glory, honor, praise and power Be unto the Lamb forever!,” which is one chord based on G. Two other compositions of White are almost as uncompromising as “Service of the

Lord.” “The Morning Trumpet” does contain other chords than the tonic, but the final phrase of both strains is exclusively F# minor. In “Baptismal Anthem” there are a few dominants at structural points, but more often the phrases are exclusively A flat major.

So many of White’s compositions contain this sort of phrase that it can be considered a stylistic trait of his music. The extreme case of the technique occurs in “The Red Sea Anthem.” This piece, which first appeared in the 1869 edition and was unfortunately removed from the 1991 edition, contains huge stretches that are simply an A major chord. It was the third longest composition in the book, and White’s magnum opus. There are 114 measures of music, and the great majority of the cadences (twenty-two) are I-I, that is one tonic chord followed by another. There are only seven cadences that involved dominant chords; five authentic cadences (V-I) and two half cadences (I-V). The entire piece never gets away from the tonic, to any appreciable extent.

So what is interesting in this composition? The texture is always changing, and it has enormous rhythmic propulsion. The text concerns the Exodus, and the triumphant passage of the Jews through the Red Sea. It is as if the A major chord in some sense represents the Red Sea; it is a wall on your right and a wall on your left, and the rhythm is the only thing that gets you through it. I have no idea, of course, whether or not something like this was in B. F. White’s mind when he wrote this piece, but I find it a convincing explanation of the use of this technique in conjunction with this text and the dramatic situation it describes.

Why do these one-chord passages seem so important? There is certainly something very American about them, and perhaps it is the memory of so many ballads from the past, so often accompanied by drone instruments, which make static harmonies so appealing, even haunting. Composers like B. F. White, J. P. Reese, and the Denson brothers pre-figure in an eerie way the late twentieth century minimalist school, not so much the sweet music of Philip Glass or his populist equivalent George Winston, but the more rough-edged textures of Steve Reich and the modal fantasies of John Adams. Just as *The Sacred Harp* contains the seeds of American spatial music of the twentieth century, it contains the seeds of minimalism.

But there is certainly more to it than this. Where else can one find this kind of harmonic stasis, coupled with great textural interest and rhythmic vitality? There are isolated pieces by Renaissance composers, mostly descriptions of battles, which are similar; and certain passages in Beethoven (the development of the first movement of the Pastoral Symphony comes to mind) are obsessively concerned with one chord. In opera one finds the opening Toccata of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and the 139 measures of E flat at the beginning of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. But these European masterpieces all seem unlikely models for small-town Southern composers before the Civil War.

Although I cannot prove this, and perhaps it can never be proved, I am convinced that the model for this kind of passage is the singing of Southern blacks. Outside of Europe, Africa is the principal continent where polyphony arose, and the singing of African blacks, while polyphonic, tends toward harmonic stasis in exactly

the same way as a piece like "Fillmore." As everyone who has heard African music can perceive, the static harmony is a framework for the most elaborate and exciting rhythmic and textural effects; in short, exactly the sort of thing that white Southern composers were doing in this collection, albeit on a smaller scale and using different materials. This music does not sound particularly African, but it cannot be coincidental that it is using an African technique.

George Pullen Jackson claimed, with accuracy in a number of cases, that many of the black spirituals are in fact derived from the shaped note tradition and from denominational hymnals of the early nineteenth century. But in American music, indeed in American culture, the black/white interaction is a two-way street. Not only did blacks hear religious tunes of white people and make them their own through profound stylistic transformation; whites heard the singing of black people, which is unforgettable, and the harmonic style of black singing left its profound stamp on a substantial body of compositions by white people, for three generations.

Of course whites in the South before 1850 were much more likely to hear the group singing of blacks than whites in New England; this is why there is so much more of this kind of writing in *The Sacred Harp* than there is in any New England collection. The call and response patterns in so many Southern tunes (which also occur with less frequency in New England composers) are another direct link with black music. The listener will remember earlier comments about "Loving Jesus" and "Lawrenceburg," in which it was observed that half of the singers in the square antiphonally answer the other half. There are also any number of pieces in the book that pit one of the sections against the other three. All of this has a distinctively

African feel to it, and this structure, or *modus operandi*—which is undeniably African—is stronger than whatever melodic or harmonic situation happens to coincide with the antiphonal pattern.

There are many other aspects of this volume that would be interesting to discuss, but limitations of space do not allow it. However, certain conclusions can be drawn. *The Sacred Harp* and the tradition out of which it grows is a democratic, participatory form of music making. It requires education, but does not discriminate on the basis of native ability. It is a training ground for leadership, and any qualified person can lead in a Sacred Harp singing. Incidentally, performers do not have to sing the same part all the time; singers frequently move from one quadrant of the square to another, depending on what song is sung, the range of the part, vocal fatigue, or a simple desire to change for a while. You may sing or listen, according to your mood.

These democratic ideals are not incompatible with the highest standards for quality in composition, and much of the finest music written in the United States is part of this tradition. There is an experimental side to all of this, in spite of the bedrock conservatism that preserved the music, and the traditional way of singing it, against powerful odds. The composers who contributed to *The Sacred Harp* have a penchant for extreme harmonic effects, especially dissonance, modalism, and harmonic stasis. They are also capable of skillfully manipulating the spatial aspect of singing in a square to produce powerful and original effects.

In this tradition the seeds of a complex musical culture are sown; it is not coincidence that the country that produced Sacred Harp singing also produced Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, and Henry Brant, not to mention the minimalists and many composers in my generation who are directly influenced by this music. William Duckworth, for example, has written a twenty-movement choral work called *Southern Harmony*, based on twenty eponymous selections from that volume; he also has a percussion piece called “Family Circle” that systematically exploits the harmonic stasis inherent the B. F. White’s tune of that name. In my own work I have incorporated the style of *The Sacred Harp* in a four-act operatic allegory of the American Revolution, and composed dozens of pieces in shaped note style. (One of these, “Heavenly Union,” was accepted for inclusion in the 1991 edition.)

This is only the tip of the iceberg. There are nineteen living composers represented in the 1991 edition. At least one of them, Bruce Randall, has composed thousands tunes in this style. (He writes in an Email, on March 24, 2011: “The latest count is 5,233. That includes all stuff in Shape Note/Early New England/West Gallery style.”) Larry Gordon, in his Village Harmony camps, has encouraged two generations of interested teenagers to compose in this style. And it should be remembered that John Cage based three of his finest works on early American music in this tradition: *Apartment House 1776* (a joint commission by the major orchestras of Boston, Chicago, New York and other cities), “Some of *The Harmony of Maine*” for organ, and “Hymns and Variations” for twelve solo voices, based on two short compositions by Billings (the psalm tunes “Old North” and “Heath”).

Art music in America has been well-nourished by *The Sacred Harp*. Unfortunately, the mainstream of American sacred music took a rather different turn about 1830, and embraced an aesthetic course that was sentimental in its essence and allowed for experimentation only as a form of rebellion. Curiously, it also insured a much higher degree of racial separation, at least on an artistic level. In the long run, with their insistence on correct singing and the superiority of European models to indigenous ones, the reformers of the early nineteenth century seem to have dealt an almost fatal blow to participatory music making for the average citizen.

Virtually every Christian denomination in the United States has voiced a fervent desire for a less sentimental, more participatory, more integrated, and more artistically significant style of religious music, but so far it has yet to appear. Such a music would have profound implications for our culture, and its influence would extend far beyond the confines of organized religious experience. Perhaps we can learn something from *The Sacred Harp* about how to create such a music in American, rather than European terms, and reclaim an extraordinary part of our cultural heritage in the process.

Neely Bruce
July 21, 1991
Revised March 2011

POSTSCRIPT: As mentioned early in the body of this paper, it was first presented in 1991 at the national conference of SHEAR (the Society for the History of the Early American Republic). It was revised early in 2011 for presentation at University College Cork in Ireland, where an abbreviated version was delivered the day before

The First Ireland Sacred Harp Singing Convention and Singing School. Many people in Cork asked for a copy of the complete paper, so I have cleaned it up and am posting it on my website. While it is accurate, to the best of my knowledge, this document has no pretensions to scholarship. Rather, it was written to whet the appetite of historians and composers concerning a major aspect of American music that might lie outside their ken.

When I returned to the United States, I quickly became engrossed in reading *The Makers of the Sacred Harp* by David Warren Steele, with the assistance of Richard H. Hulan. This book has been long anticipated by scholars and singers alike, and it is worth the wait. I am delighted to see so many details in print that corroborate so many of my ideas and impressions concerning this music. (Like Emerson, I tend to read in order to reinforce what I think about whatever it is.) I'm also delighted that the authors get my bio correct, which is not always the case. One minor correction—"Heavenly Union" was not, as Warren says, written for the 1991 edition. I had already written it, and submitted it for publication along with five other already-composed pieces, when Hugh McGraw issued a call for new tunes in the late 1980s.

The Makers of the Sacred Harp is such an exciting volume, and so dense, that it will take me some time to digest it. I would like to point out, however, that Warren also speculates about the influence of black music on these composers, particularly the Georgia composers, in the years just before and after the Civil War. And I was delighted to learn that Amos Pilsbury, the composer of the remarkable fuguing tune "Morning," much discussed in my paper, lived in Charleston, South Carolina. Before

reading about him in this book I only knew that he was “from New England.” So let me assert that “Morning” is also influenced by the singing of Southern blacks, just like “Fillmore” and “The Red Sea Anthem.”

B. F. White emerges as an ever more fascinating and important figure in American music. I am increasingly convinced he is a major composer, deserving of a book of his own.

A LIST OF PIECES IN *THE SACRED HARP* REFERRED TO IN THIS PAPER
Unless otherwise stated, these compositions can be found in the 1991 edition

Baptismal Anthem	Millennium
Boylston	Morgan
Claremont	Morning
Conversion	Morning Sun
David’s Lamentation	New Jerusalem
Doddridge	New Topia
Edom	Newburgh
Family Bible	Northfield
Family Circle	Ode on Life’s Journey
Fillmore	Ode on Science
Greenwich	Old Hundred
Happy Land	Plenary
Hebron	Rose of Sharon
Huntington	Sawyer’s Exit
Lawrenceburg	Service of the Lord
Lover of the Lord	Southwell
Loving Jesus	St. Thomas
Martin	Sweet Home (Cooper Book)
Mary’s Grief and Joy	The Morning Trumpet
Mear	The Red Sea Anthem (Cooper Book)
Melancholy Day	Wondrous Love