

# “Sacred Harp” singing

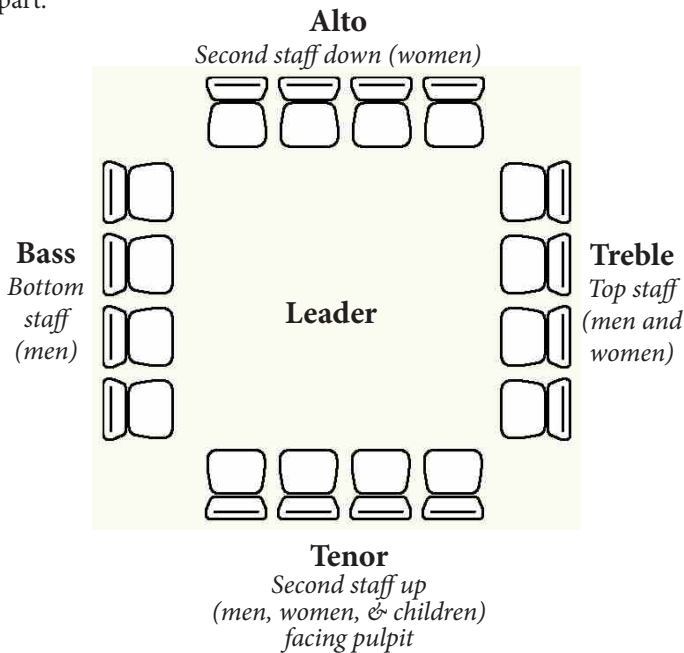
*The Sacred Harp* is a hymnal first published in 1846, referring to the human voice, as the “sacred harp.” It was sold throughout the south by traveling singing-masters, who would teach a community how to sing from it. This method of singing caught on and has become a tradition, continuous since that time.

The generosity of these southern singers has been astounding, as they have shared this music and their way of singing it with those from other parts of the country (and world.)

We sing plainly, without vibrato and with little attention to dynamics, pitching the songs in a range that is comfortable for the singers—no pitch pipes!—the pitch might be a significant change from what is written. The books have been typeset to reduce ledger lines, since the space is needed for the four staves, since each singing part has its own staff.

Be brave when you sing, Sacred Harp music is “never having to say you are sorry.”

Sacred Harp singers are divided into four parts, in a “hollow square,” to place the singers together with the others singing their part:



Tenor section—Melody  
 Bass section—Low harmony  
 Alto section—Middle harmony (some older hymns have no alto part, in that case, altos may sing any other part, but bass is preferred)  
 Treble section—High harmony

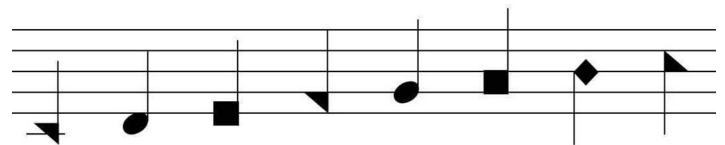
## Shaped Notes

This style of singing is known as shape-note singing, it is different from modern choral music in that the melody resides in the the TENOR, not the soprano, and each part is interesting in its own right—few “drone-alongs!”



Shapes help singers to sight-read—the intervals become automatic, after this singing method becomes integrated into the singer. When learned, singing shape notes helps us to sight-read quickly and accurately.

The C Major scale using shape notes:



The first time through a song, we sing the notes, using their shape names, then we sing the lyrics. Leaders will often select which verses are to be sung for those hymns having many verses. We only observe refrain repeats the last time through.

If you don't need the shapes, you may choose to sing “la.” The shapes are our servants, not our masters, so sing any way you can—but the shapes are a great help!

Many of us have these songs partially memorized—one of the most difficult parts of singing is trying to read the lyrics, it helps that many of the hymn poetry in *The Sacred Harp* is used multiple times.

These hymns are non-denominational and were written when death and illness were common.

We welcome all singers, religious or not, and we appreciate and honor our older singers who have carried on this tradition!

Join us, you are most welcome!

We sing on the first and third Mondays of the month  
 from 7-9 PM at:  
 Edgewood United Church  
 469 N. Hagadorn  
 East Lansing, MI

To find out about our local singing  
 and other singings nearby, visit <http://fasolamichigan.org>  
 More information about shape-note singing and singings around  
 the world may be found at <http://fasola.org>

