

Sacred Harp and West Gallery singing traditions

The four songs in this next section all come from amateur singing traditions in England and the southern USA which flourished between 1700 and about 1860, and are currently enjoying a revival.

■ Sacred Harp singing

Sacred Harp singing is a non-denominational community singing event emphasizing participation, rather than performance, and with no distinction between choir and audience. The style of singing—a loud, clear and very direct sound—stems from singing schools which were popular in America during the colonial period. At these ‘singings’ the participants are arranged in a large open square, facing each other, with individuals taking it in turn to stand in the centre and lead by beating time. The repertoire consists of psalm tunes, folk hymntunes, odes, and anthems which, although Christian in origin, are not outwardly religious in performance. Everyone sings from printed music in which the shape of the note-head indicates the sung syllables: ‘fa’ is a triangle; ‘so’ is a circle; ‘la’ is a square; ‘mi’ is a diamond. There is no instrumental accompaniment; the ‘harp’ reference is to the original songbook first published in 1844 called *The Sacred Harp*. This style is also known as ‘shape-note singing’ and ‘fasola’.

Composers had a fondness for ‘fuging tunes’, in which one or more lines of the verse would be treated like a series of fugal entries, and most settings were for four voices, with frequent octave doubling of some parts to make up for the lack of instrumental support. Around 1800 there was a change to treble-tune settings and a vogue for ‘correct’ European music, which swept away much of the tradition. Fortunately it spread to the South, where shape-note composers developed it into a unique style which was stark and simple, with much doubling of 5ths and octaves, using some British traditions of improvised modal harmony. The notation system allowed anyone, whatever their experience or vocal ability, to sing any part. Song No. 5, ‘Ye nations all’, is an excellent example of this tradition, which, like the *Voiceworks* principle itself, encourages participation and access by all!

■ West Gallery music

West Gallery music is the traditional music found in English parish churches and nonconformist chapels between 1700 and 1850, before it was suppressed by the authorities and driven out of the churches. The rich and wonderful musical history of the great English cathedrals is well documented; what little information has been found about music in lowly parish churches suggests that not much was heard, and that it was unaccompanied singing (or solo) and of poor quality. The origins of West Gallery music seem to have sprung from a desire by the

church authorities at the end of the seventeenth century to ‘improve the quality of psalmody’, and this was greeted with enthusiasm by parishioners who wanted to relieve the tedium of long services in which they were largely inactive. Two obstacles to improvement were the lack of suitable material and a space in which to perform. John Playford, who was an eminent composer of English dance music, also published psalm tunes and hymntunes which were becoming popular. This in turn encouraged many local composers and teachers to compose for their churches. At first the music was confined to psalms, as only the word of the Lord was permitted, but eventually hymns began to appear, the early ones being paraphrased settings of biblical texts. For example, ‘While shepherds watched their flocks by night’ has been set to over 150 tunes, two of which appear in this section. The problem of a performing space was solved by the hasty erection of galleries in the west ends of the churches—hence the name.

Churches then began to establish singing groups, paying a ‘Proper Person’ to instruct willing parishioners how to sing psalms. Singers were paid in kind—ale, beef, dinners, and treats—and they were known as the ‘quire’ to distinguish them from the organ-driven robed groups of the cathedrals. Early West Gallery music was dominated by male voices, with the melody given to the tenor, and three- or four-part harmony underpinned by a bass and provided by a contratenor and trebles above. Inexperienced and untutored singers often found it difficult to hold their own lines against other parts in this unaccompanied music, so instruments were gradually added as resources allowed. Hymnbooks were purchased if funds were available, but often the singers would lovingly copy out words and tunes of new pieces into their personal tune-books; as a result very few survived.

Mixed groups of singers and instrumentalists soon became an important part of parish life; they earned much respect and had significant status and independence, often falling foul of church authorities! West Gallery music began to decline with industrialization, the move from country to town, and greater conformity. The growth in congregational worship demanded simple hymns of immediate appeal, so the relative complexities of gallery music were abandoned. As the Victorians and the Church gained authority, hand-copied manuscripts of psalms and hymns were replaced by mass-produced hymnbooks, and instruments by barrel-organs, and many of the singers crossed the road to the welcoming Methodist chapels, to the streets, or to the pub!

There are many organizations dedicated to keeping these old traditions alive through singing events and publications, and details can be found on some excellent websites.

5 Ye nations all, on you I call

RESOURCES ► CD track 5 (verses 1, 2, and 6 only) ► Warm ups: Nos. 15, 18, 42, 46

Information

This is a typical example of a southern American shape-note song (see definition on page 17); it was arranged from a folk melody by ‘Singin’ Billy’ Walker, a successful singing teacher, composer, and compiler of several shape-note books. *The Southern Harmony*—a four-shape book of songs—from which it is taken, was first published in New Haven in 1835. The seven-shape *Christian Harmony* was published after the Civil War in 1867.

The melody of ‘Ye nations all’ was probably recorded orally from the European settlers before the tune-books were introduced. It has a wide range (an octave and a 4th), and is pentatonic (the ‘gapped’ scale) with a feeling of the Aeolian mode to the harmony: it sounds minor with a flattened leading-note (the F). In common with songs of this tradition, the melody is in the tenor; but the practice of doubling means that any type of voice (tenor, alto in the same octave, or soprano/treble an octave higher) can sing it together, which will help produce an even sound. It can be sung in any key that is comfortable; F minor may suit younger voices as long as the basses are happy with the lowest notes. This piece works well as a two-part song with an instrumental bass accompaniment.

Starting

- Sing Aeolian and pentatonic scales and minor arpeggios, making sure the voices stretch at least the range of the song (eleven notes from bottom to top).
- Practise singing minor triads, then open 5ths (remove the 3rd of the chord). Use the rhythm and words of the opening phrase—‘Ye nations all’—as an exercise.
- Everyone should sing the opening phrase of the melody (the first two bars) to establish a good swing to the rhythm and a strong robust sound (see Ideas if this is difficult to achieve). Aim to sing through the length of the notes without too much decay (think of an organ sound, which keeps going when you hold down a note, rather than a piano, which dies away).

Teaching and rehearsing

- Make sure the whole group can sing the melody first, allowing for individuals who cannot access the whole range. Use the words immediately, or a suitable vowel sound if teaching by rote—‘ve’ (sounded ‘vair’), or ‘ne’ to achieve a forward and open tone.

- The melody structure is AABA; the first phrase (bars 1–4) is repeated in bars 5–8 (with a slightly different ending), and this phrase comes again in bars 13–16. The group should sing these phrases first, with the leader filling in the missing bars (9–12) to complete the melody. Teach this middle section last.
- The bass and treble lines should be approached in the same manner: regard them as simple folk melodies in their own right rather than as harmonizing parts. Make sure they flow and have a sense of shape and phrasing about them; they repeat like the melody.
- If all voice parts are to be sung, learn the bass next to give a sense of the harmony; having said that, any two parts on their own will sound a bit bare—it’s a feature of the style!
- The notes must be very secure before you attempt all the verses; inexperienced singers find it hard to look at both music and words when they are separated.
- Decide how short each note is to be at the ends of phrases to allow singers to breathe (bars 4, 8, 12).
- How long do you want the last note to be? Singers will appreciate a gap between verses!

Ideas

- If the vocal sound is not robust enough it may be that mouths are not open enough and the tone is a bit too soft and delicate. Try the following exercises to improve the sound:
- Get singers to make a mocking sound like little children do when teasing someone—‘ne ne ne ne ne’—make it very nasal; sing a line of music attempting to make the same kind of sound.
- Squeeze together the thumb and forefinger of each hand. Using a scale of 1–10 use different pressure—just touching for 1, and really hard for 10. Hold hands up level with shoulders and while squeezing at pressure 5, sing some of the song; repeat this at pressure 2, then 8, and so on. You should notice a stronger sound with higher pressure because the diaphragm and vocal folds become more engaged, and support the sound better. This is useful as a general exercise to improve tone strength.

■ Listen out

- Every phrase begins with an upbeat or pick-up note (anacrusis). These can be neglected by conductor and singers without care. Singers must breathe in good time, and conductors can help with an appropriate gesture—an extra flick of the hand or fingers—to be encouraging. Practise the opening phrase, breathing both slowly over a couple of beats (good for the start of each verse) and quickly (between phrases).
- The rhythm must swing with energy; don't let the upbeat notes (the third and sixth crotchets of each bar) get bogged down. This can easily happen when singers are making a big and open strong sound; keep the sense of shape.

■ Performing

- Don't be too fussy about variety in performance, as this shape-note style was simple and direct. Try a verse with unison melody only.
- Give the odd verse to a solo voice or small group, with hummed backing. This will give dynamic variety without changing volume settings.
- A simple drumbeat will help to give the feeling of swing and energy.

5 Ye nations all, on you I call

American folk melody
arr. William Walker (1809–75)

S./A. 1. Ye na - tions all, on you I call: come, hear this de - cla - ra - tion, And

T. 1. Ye na - tions all, on you I call: come, hear this de - cla - ra - tion, And

B. 1. Ye na - tions all, on you I call: come, hear this de - cla - ra - tion, And

5 don't re - fuse this glo - rious news of Je - sus and sal - va - tion! To

8 don't re - fuse this glo - rious news of Je - sus and sal - va - tion! To

9 roy - al Jews came first the news of Christ the great Mes - si - ah, As

8 roy - al Jews came first the news of Christ the great Mes - si - ah, As

roy - al Jews came first the news of Christ the great Mes - si - ah, As

13

was fore - told_ by pro - phets old: I - sai - ah, Je - re - mi - ah.

was fore - told_ by pro - phets old: I - sai - ah, Je - re - mi - ah.

was fore-told by pro - phets old: I - sai - ah, Je - re - mi - ah.

2. To Abraham the promise came, and to his seed for ever,
A light to shine in Isaac's line, by Scripture we discover.
Hail, promised morn! the Saviour's born, the glorious Mediator—
God's blessèd Word, made flesh and blood, assumed the human nature.
3. His parents, poor in earthly store to entertain the stranger,
They found no bed to lay his head but in the ox's manger;
No royal things, as used by kings, were seen by those that found him,
But in the hay the stranger lay, with swaddling bands around him.
4. On the same night a glorious light to shepherds there appearèd;
Bright angels came in shining flame: they saw and greatly fearèd.
The angels said: 'Be not afraid! although we much alarm you,
We do appear good news to bear, as now we will inform you.
5. 'The city's name is Bethlehem, the which God hath appointed;
This glorious morn a Saviour's born, for him God hath anointed.
By this you'll know, if you will go to see this little stranger:
His lovely charms in Mary's arms, both lying in a manger.'
6. When this was said, straightway was made a glorious sound from heaven;
Each flaming tongue an anthem sung: 'To men a Saviour's given!
In Jesus' name, the glorious theme, we elevate our voices;
At Jesus' birth be peace on earth; meanwhile all heav'n rejoices.'