

# What's Going On Here?

## The basics of “shape note singing”

If you're reading this, you've stumbled upon a “shape note” (AKA “Sacred Harp”) singing, a community event open to all. Welcome! There is just one requirement: an interest in singing. This is not a choir. We sing for ourselves and for each other, not to perform. There are no auditions, and our singings are made up of whoever happens to show up on a particular day. This often includes every possible level of musical experience and ability ... from trained opera singers, to folks who sing in the church choir, to those who were asked *not* to sing in the church choir! All are welcome here.

**The tradition.** This form of music-making has been practiced throughout the country since its origins in New England in the late 1700s. The shape note system was developed to help people learn to sight read music, and even after the system lost favor in the Northeast, it continued to thrive in the American South, and has now experienced a revival in all parts of this country and in many places abroad.

**The book.** We sing from [The Sacred Harp](#), the most enduring of a series of books that have employed the shape note system. It was first published in Georgia in 1844, and has been continuously in print through several editions since then. We have books available for you to borrow at every singing, or you may purchase your own for \$20.

**The notation.** “Shape note” refers to the musical notation system you see inside the tunebook. The notes appear in four different shapes: triangle, circle, square, diamond. The idea is to make music accessible and easy to learn by adding an extra layer of information: the pitch of a note can be determined not just by which line or space it is on, but also by what the shape is. Additionally, shape notes expose the *intervals* between notes much more clearly.



Each shape has a syllable associated with it. (Triangle = Fa, Circle = Sol, Square = La, Diamond = Mi). Before we sing each song's words, we run through the song singing the syllables indicated by the shapes. This is called “singing the notes.”

**The style.** “Sacred Harp” also refers to a *style* of singing: open-throated, with heavy emphasis on rhythm and a lack of vibrato. Most Sacred Harp songs are written in four-part harmony, representing tenor (which carries the melody), bass, treble, and alto. The tenor and treble parts are sung by both men and women. (Women sing in either the high or low register.) Alto is typically sung by women only, and bass by men only.

**The community.** This is community music, intended to be fun, social, and/or educational. Most of the songs have sacred lyrics, but no particular religious or political philosophy is embraced, required, nor endorsed. In other words, we check our politics and our religion at the door when we come to a shape note singing. With this simple gesture, we transform our potentially disharmonious differences into exuberant, heartfelt harmony.

We have no concerts, no rehearsals, no attendance requirements and no audiences. Listeners are welcome, but we think this music is more fun to sing, so we tend to encourage people in that direction. Because we aren't performing, we don't worry about mistakes we make while singing, so we can relax and just try our best.

# Getting Started

## Now let's sing!

**Choosing a Seat.** We sit, facing each other, in our chosen voice part to form a "Hollow Square." Each of the four vocal parts occupies its own side of the hollow square. (See picture to the right.) Any type, quality, and range of voice should find a comfortable and important place within these harmonies.

The placement of the voice parts is not necessarily the same as in other choral music, so we recommend you start in the tenor section to learn the melodies of the songs and to get a sense of where your voice is best suited in this particular tradition. Sit next to someone who looks like they know what they are doing and follow their example, but please reserve the seats in the front row of each section for experienced singers. The front row singers are expected to help the group sing together in time and will lend support to less experienced leaders.



**Reading the music.** In the written music, the top line is the treble, second line alto, third line tenor (which carries the melody), and the bottom line is the bass.

Remember that the first time we sing the song, we sing the names of the notes (fa, sol, la, mi). Then we go back to the beginning to sing the words. If you can't remember the names of the notes yet, don't worry! Just sing "la" and you'll be right at least part of the time.

**Following the leader.** We do not have conductors in this tradition. Rather, every singer who is inspired to lead a song is invited to do so. The song leader chooses the song, stands in the center of the hollow square (facing the tenor section), and dictates the tempo with simple up/down movements of the arm. Other singers around the hollow square will mirror the leader's arm movements to help the entire group (which we call a "class") keep in time with the leader.

**Getting help.** If you are less than fully confident of your ability to sing shape note music after your first (or third, or tenth!) experience ... don't despair! We've all been there, and we want to help. Remember to be patient with yourself. We know that you can do this, and we understand that it takes some time to learn.

The best way to learn is to *do it*. Check out the schedule of local singings at [www.portlandsacredharp.org](http://www.portlandsacredharp.org), and come as often as you can. Make specific effort to attend our **free monthly singing schools**: On Last Thursdays we focus on the music itself; on Fourth Sundays we explore other dimensions of the tradition of Sacred Harp singing.

You can also find many videos of Sacred Harp singings on YouTube, and we sometimes have CDs available for purchase at our singings. For extensive background on the Sacred Harp singing tradition, and for information about local singings around the country (and abroad!), visit [www.fasola.org](http://www.fasola.org).

Welcome to PoSH. We're glad you're here. *Now let's sing!*