

1990

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### Recommended Citation

Loftis, Deborah C. (1990) "Southern Harmony Singing: A Tradition of Shape-Note Practice," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 3: No. 2, Article 5. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199003.02.5  
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## Southern Harmony Singing: a Tradition of Shape-Note Practice

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Deborah C. Loftis

The small town of Benton hosts the only shape-note singing in Kentucky that has an unbroken link with the nineteenth century. The annual *Southern Harmony* singing known as "Big Singing Day" began in 1884, and continues to meet in the Marshall County courthouse each year on the fourth Sunday in May.<sup>1</sup> Previously it has been viewed as simply another event in the tradition of the more popular tunebook, *The Sacred Harp*.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, several important distinctions that set *Southern Harmony* singing apart, especially as regards performance practice.

*Sacred Harp* singers sit in a hollow square; each voice part forms one side of the square and all the singers face in towards the middle. The leader stands in the center and conducts, turning to one or another side as needed. The hollow square enables the singers to hear each of the parts quite clearly. *Southern Harmony* singers, on the other hand, do not

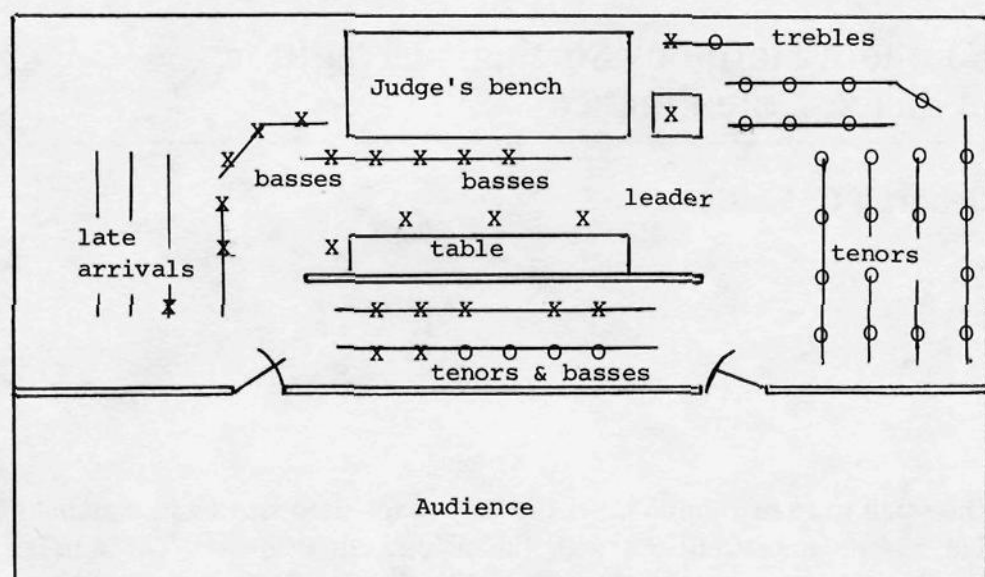
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1. The writer learned of Big Singing Day through an interest in American hymnody and has been a participant observer at *Southern Harmony* singing since 1981.

2. See George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933; reprint, New York: Dover, 1965), and Dorothy D. Horn, *Sing to Me of Heaven: a Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1952).

make a great effort to keep singers divided into parts (though they are generally so grouped). Nor do they form a square. The seating is adapted to the space available, rather than structured for an acoustical effect (see photo and diagram).

Diagram 1. Seating arrangement on Big Singing Day



Key: X = men O = women

Leaders of *Southern Harmony* conduct in the conventional 2, 3, and 4 beat patterns.<sup>3</sup> A unique tradition is associated with the 4-beat pattern: the phrase "down-left" is often spoken by the leader when a major phrase begins on the third beat. This spoken conducting pattern helps to keep the group together for the next entrance. *Sacred Harp* leaders conduct using only an up and down motion and, excluding the very newest leaders, seem more confident of their abilities. The continuation of the singing school among *Sacred Harp* singers has assured a number of skilled leaders. In addition, many beat the time at their seats as they sing.

There is an intensity at *Sacred Harp* singings not present in *Southern Harmony* singing. *Sacred Harpers* move with purpose from one song to

3. Because of their concern for tradition, only men are allowed to lead at *Southern Harmony* singing. In contrast, anyone who chooses may lead at a *Sacred Harp* singing.

the next; the tempos are quick, the beat is accented with foot tapping, and the vocal quality is unrestrained. Nothing is held back; the energetic songs (which vastly outnumber the slow ones) are taken briskly, and the highest notes in the line are almost shouted in enthusiasm. The singers have a desire to "sing themselves out" during the course of the day. *Southern Harmony* singers are much more relaxed. The tempos are considerably slower, with little variation of tempo from song to song; the singing is softer, and more gentle. There is no audible foot tapping, no visible beating of time except on the part of the leader. Remarks and anecdotes are shared between songs; even the posture of the singers reflects savoring and remembering rather than excitement.

In shape note tunebooks there are two basic types of songs. In one the parts all move in a homogeneous rhythm, often with repeated phrases; the second type is the "fuging tune" in which imitative passages are employed. Also present are longer, more complicated compositions called anthems or set pieces, such as those by Billings and his contemporaries. On Big Singing Day nearly all the selections belong to the first category. The character of the texts and tunes in general tends to be wistful, peaceful, or solemn, and the tempos range from slow to moderate. The selections chosen at a *Sacred Harp* singing are nearly the reverse. About fifty percent are fuging tunes, and a number of anthems are sung as well. Among songs of the first type, most are spirited and energetic. The slow, reflective songs are enjoyed greatly, but they are the "change of pace" selections. Even though there is a considerable overlap of tunes in the two books, very few of the songs regularly heard at Big Singing Day are heard at *Sacred Harp* singings, usually no more than five.

Noticeable differences in sonority must also be pointed out. *Southern Harmony* singing has a sense of openness — of space between the voice parts. Tunes generally are harmonized in three parts, and since little care is taken regarding vertical sonorities, the result is an overwhelming majority of incomplete triads on strong beats. Another factor involves the distribution of parts between men and women. Usually only women sing the treble part, so that it sounds lighter in quality and softer than the tenor (with men and women), or the bass (with only men). The open quality of the incomplete chords, together with the lack of octave doubling of the top part, gives a sense of hollowness or sparse texture. *Sacred Harp*, on the other hand, is written in four parts. The alto parts were added starting with the 1911 edition, and care has been taken to fill out the triads. Furthermore, there is a conscious effort to distribute male and female voices as evenly as possible on the upper three parts so that a full, closely woven texture is created.





Above: the Marshall County courthouse, Benton, Kentucky, sight of the "Big Singing Day." Below: Raymond Lay Nichols, "Granddaddy of *Southern Harmony* singing."



A greater impact of oral tradition exists among *Southern Harmony* singers. Unlike *Sacred Harp* singers who seem able to sing any tune in the book (for many this is a point of honor), *Southern Harmony* singers falter noticeably when a visiting leader chooses an unfamiliar selection. It appears that, with the exception of a few who received musical training elsewhere, *Southern Harmony* singers depend more on oral tradition than on an ability to sing by shapes.

*Southern Harmony* singers have tried to preserve their tradition without change. The new editions published in 1939, 1966, and 1987, are actually facsimile reprints of the 1854 edition of *Southern Harmony*.<sup>4</sup> Little influence has come from other groups. As early as 1933 G. P. Jackson noted that Benton held the only regular *Southern Harmony* singing in existence. Most of the singers on "Big Singing Day" sing *Southern Harmony* only on that occasion each year, and do not sing with any other shape note tradition.

*Sacred Harp* singers, on the other hand, have embraced changes willingly. The tunebook has undergone several revisions, the last in 1971 (one is in preparation now), and a number of new compositions, albeit in the traditional style, have been added. Many singers travel to various communities to sing *Sacred Harp* throughout the year.

*Sacred Harp* singers gather to sing with the primary focus on the music itself. *Southern Harmony* singers place emphasis on remembering their family and community heritage, and reforging the link that defines their identity. Singing is the vehicle for communicating these feelings. The music, the rituals of procedure, and the anecdotes shared all work together to preserve something more than the old songs: the identity of the people. As the singers gather each year and sing, they remind themselves and each other of their link with the past. Because the yearly ritual seems to suspend time on this day, singers can be reunited with parents, brothers and sisters, and savor memories of childhood days through the songs and traditions that have remained constant.

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4. For a thorough discussion of the five editions published from 1835 to 1854, see Harry Eskew, "William Walker's *Southern Harmony*: Its Basic Editions," *Latin American Music Review (Revista de música latino americana)* 7 (1986): 137-148. The edition of *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* currently available is edited by Glenn C. Wilcox and published by the University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, 1987).