

First time at a Sacred Harp singing?

The *Sacred Harp* is the name of the tunebook we use, originally published 165 years ago in a tradition older still. The “sacred harp” refers to the human voice! This music is also called **shape-note music** — check out the explanation below, and be sure to look at the songs in the book to see what we mean.

The first thing you might notice if you’re just listening is that we are not professional singers (although a few trained voices occasionally find their way to us). Sacred Harp recalls the days when church music was intended to be sung by the congregation rather than the choir. We sing for the joy of it. And while listeners are always welcome, we singers don’t think of this event as a performance. Everyone is welcome to join in.

Where should I sit?

Sacred Harp music is divided into four parts: treble, alto, tenor (melody, or lead), and bass. Singers sit in a “hollow square” with each voice part taking one of the four sides and facing the center. (As you walk into the room, spot the all-male bass section to get oriented.) Depending on inclinations of temperament, timbre, or necessity, women and men double on both the treble and tenor parts, with women usually (but not always) singing an octave above the men. Any type, quality, and range of voice should find a comfortable and important place within its harmonies.

Men who sing tenor in standard choral music will probably be most comfortable singing tenor or treble; baritones may like tenor or bass; basses—well, no problem.

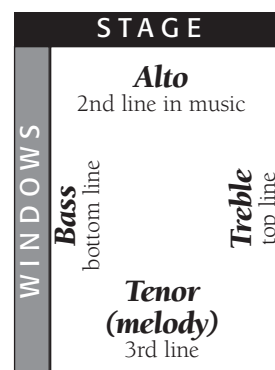
Women with high voices may like the tenor or treble parts (in high register); altos might try that part, although women with a strong low register could also sing tenor or treble in the men’s range.

When in doubt—sing tenor. That’s where the melody is. But feel free to move around to different parts to see what feels comfortable to you.

The song leader stands in the center, beating out the rhythm and delighting in the surge of voices and blending of sound from all four sides. (Newcomers are often encouraged to “stand in the middle” to experience the full power of the music.) Song leaders face the tenor section to help carry the melody of the song.

Sacred Harp leading is egalitarian. Everyone has a chance to lead the song of his or her choice. Newcomers are welcome, and encouraged, to lead. Don’t worry—just face the tenor section and follow the hand motions of the front row of tenors and you will be fine.

Voice parts in Ida Noyes Hall



Shape notes



Fa, sol, la, mi — the four basic notes.

The *Sacred Harp* tunes are written in standard notation, except that the notes appear in four different shapes (see illustration) — so the music is also called “shape note.” Itinerant early American tunesmiths and singing masters used this four-note system to teach sight reading to people without musical training.

Most of us first learned a seven-note “solfege” system: do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do. The Sacred Harp uses the old four-note English system: fa-sol-la-fa-sol-la-mi-fa.

With our shape-note system, there’s no need to worry about different keys. The shapes ingeniously indicate the different pitches. The interval between, say, any *fa* and the *la* above it is always the same.

Before singing the words to a Sacred Harp tune, we “sing the notes” by singing the syllables of the shapes.



C major scale, written to show how the shapes appear in whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes.

People who hear Sacred Harp music for the first time are often baffled when the entire room breaks out into what sounds like gibberish. New singers may be daunted by the shapes, especially on fast songs. But the person who now confidently sings mile-a-minute *fa-sol-las* had to learn them slowly, too. Jump in and sing “la” if you aren’t sure; you’ll be right 25% of the time. The shapes that seem so strange at first will soon help you to sight sing.

Seven frequently asked Sacred Harp questions

Why is everyone singing at the top of their lungs?

The symbols used to indicate loudness or softness in regular music are conspicuously absent from *The Sacred Harp*. And many experienced singers do sing at a consistent *fortissimo* that can be alarming to people hearing the music for the first time.

In Sacred Harp singing, loud is usually good, and louder is better. This is partly because of the music's origins as a true folk music sung by ordinary people for pleasure and worship, partly because loud singing provides more catharsis, more instant gratification, more visceral pleasure, than controlled singing. (No wonder many early church leaders considered it sinful, despite the pious poetry.)

Where's the audience?

We don't perform; we sing as an end in itself. Anyone is welcome to just sit and listen, but will be encouraged to borrow a tunebook and sing along. We have no auditions, no rehearsals — if a song doesn't sound quite right, we shrug it off and move onto the next one. All are welcome to join in.

Why don't you applaud?

Traditional singers regard applause during the singing as if it were applause during a worship service. We usually reserve applause for children and brand-new leaders. Even singers who do not consider the Sacred Harp experience to be a worship service acknowledge that we aren't performing, so there's nothing, and no one, to commend. We won't shush you if you applaud, but please realize it's not part of our tradition!

Why are people moving their arms up and down?

This is one of the most baffling aspects of Sacred Harp singing for newcomers. The hand and arm motions are a traditional way of keeping time. A song leader stands in the middle of the square and moves her arm to indicate the tempo; other singers join in the peculiar-looking movements because it helps them keep the rhythm.

Here's how it works. Sacred Harp tunes have straightforward rhythms; you can either march to most tunes or waltz to them. If a song is written in 2/2, 2/4, or 4/4 (march) time, the leader beats out **one-two-three-four**. She will bring her arm down for the first two beats of a measure, then up for the last two beats.

In 3/4 (waltz) time, the arm moves and stops halfway down on *one*, down further on *two*, and up on *three*. In all tempos, the hand is at its highest point at the top of a measure, and “jumps over” the measure bar.

What's with the gloom and doom?

We can't deny it: Many songs in *The Sacred Harp* tell of “the coffin, earth, and winding sheet,” as the otherwise sprightly tune “Morning Sun” (page 436) puts it. A majority of the texts are hymn or camp meeting songs, religious in nature; after all, shape-note music took root as a way to teach unlettered Americans how to worship through song. Some people are initially put off by many of the texts, particularly those who prefer a spiritual practice that's all sweetness and froth. Please know that some of the most enthusiastic Sacred Harp singers—including a large percentage of people at any singing in the North—do not subscribe to the same religious beliefs as the poets who wrote the texts, yet still appreciate their often austere and haunting beauty.

Help! I have no idea what's going on!

Don't despair—most people have this reaction when they go to a singing the first time. Remember the melody (tenor part) is the *third* staff down. Sit with the tenors and try to follow along. At a break in the singing, find someone who seems to know what he or she is doing and ask questions! We'll be happy to help you. Persevere: shape notes have taught generations of Americans to sing without formal training.

How can I learn more?

For extensive background and information on local singings across the U.S. and U.K., check www.fasola.org. Please sign in at the registration desk during the singing today so we can e-mail you information on local events. For example:

- There's a Chicago-wide singing once a month (usually the third Sunday, 4-6 pm).
- A group meets in Hyde Park every Thursday night, usually at singers' homes.
- Singers meet on the North Side in someone's home at least once a month.

New singers are always welcome. Please check www.chicagosingings.org or www.fasola.org for details.

Text adapted ifrom *A Beginner's Guide to Shape-Note Singing*, 4th edition, © Lisa Grayson 2009. Reprinted with permission of the author. More tips (including help with sight-reading, using songs you already know) can be found in this book, available for \$5.00; write to lisa@publica.com to order.