

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Pluralism of the Sacred Harp”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 8, 2015

Call to Celebration

Imagine with me, if you will, living on a farm in a rural community. That’s just how many people lived in the beginning of the nineteenth century, before industrialization took off. Of course there would be no Internet, radio, TV or movies.

Working in the fields and tending the animals, it was a hard life with long hours. There wouldn’t be much time for recreation. Many farmers had few opportunities to have music in their lives or to hear traveling musicians.

Now, imagine a singing master comes to town. He goes door to door to invite everyone to assemble in the social hall of a church basement. People would be broken up into four groups. The tenors would carry the melody, the basses, the altos, and the trebles would sing their lines. Using names for the different notes, fa, so, la, and mi, the master would set to the task of getting everyone to sing inspirational music together in four part harmony.

And this wouldn’t be like singing in a tavern. You would sing songs derived from Biblical text, especially from the Psalms. You would make beautiful music, sing with gusto - as loud as you wanted – and give praise to the Lord, singing like a heavenly choir.

This is the great egalitarian tradition of nineteenth century Sacred Harp that continues to be practiced today. Our special guests, the Bennington Sacred Harp Singers, are here this morning to bring this tradition to us.

May the communal spirit of shape note singing be a source of meaning for us today as we join together in the celebration of life.

Introduction “What is Sacred Harp – Shape Note Singing?”

You may have noticed the funny shaped notes on the front of the order of service this morning. Instead of them all being round, some are triangular, square and diamond shaped. These are called “shape notes.” “Fa” are the triangle shaped notes. “So” are the regular round shaped notes. “La” are the square shaped notes. And “Mi” are the diamond shaped notes. This notation became popular in singing schools to help singers find their notes without needing to read the key signature. Fa, So, La and Mi are whole tones apart. La – Fa and Mi – Fa are half tones apart. So a C scale is Fa So La Fa So La Mi Fa.

The Fa-So-La system was invented long before that, around the turn of the first millennium. A Benedictine monk named Guido D'Arezzo was struggling to teach his monks to sing new chants correctly. The names for the notes came from the first two letters of Latin words they commonly chanted every day. He used those syllables to teach the monks the tunes for the chants. Shape note singing continues to be taught in the same way, though today using popular songs. Want to sing Fa-So? Return to Sender. Address unknown. A forth – Fa to Fa – Hear Comes the Bride. A fifth, Fa to So, Twinkle Twinkle Little star.

The association of Sacred Harp and shape notes goes back to the first song books published in the early 1800's for use in group singing. Many shape-note tunes are old folk melodies that made the passage from England, Ireland, Scotland, or Wales to America. Catchy songs were adapted by religious leaders and song-masters who asked "Why should the devil have all the good music?" They set pious lyrics to sprightly secular folk melodies and transposed pre-1800 revival songs to shape notation.

http://fasola.org/resources/Grayson_Beginners_Guide_2012.pdf

Before the Civil war, in rural areas, singing was often the only way people made their own music. Itinerant singing masters would come to town. They would teach as many as they could gather together how to sing in three and four part harmony using the shape-note method.

According to one historian, young students "also used the singing-school as a place where they could make new friends, exchange notes, flirt, walk home together after lessons, and in general, enjoy themselves."

After learning the basics of fasola, entire communities would gather for all-day singings. The largest of these frontier gatherings, which might last several days, were called "conventions." By 1860, conventions sprouted in the South, and dozens of shape-note tune books were in print. One of the most popular songbooks had the title "Sacred Harp."

http://fasola.org/resources/Grayson_Beginners_Guide_2012.pdf

Sacred Harp had a setback of interest and involvement after the Civil War but gained in popularity again during 1930's. Scholar George Pullen Jackson rediscovered the traditional singers in the Southern, rural back woods who were still singing this American folk music.

Since the 1950's and '60's Sacred Harp has once again been discovered and revived in some of the places it originated, including New England. There are groups who gather to sing right here in the Capital Region. (visit fasola.org to find them) Singing enthusiastically, embracing the rawness of amateur singing, singing conventions really do welcome every voice. They sing sacred words to primitive, powerful music with unusual voicings and unexpected harmonies.

I'm grateful we have the Bennington Sacred Harp singers here to bring that tradition alive for us today.

(Musical Interlude)

Reflection #1 Isaac Watts – nonconformist - rewriting the Psalms

If you sing a lot of Sacred Harp music, you'll be singing a lot of words and hymns composed by a fellow named Isaac Watts. He is lauded as the father of English hymnody having composed over 750 of them. We sing one of those hymns every Christmas Eve – Joy to the World (though the words in our hymn book are not exactly what he wrote).

He was born long before the Sacred Harp tradition in Southampton, England in 1674. His family was non-conformist. That meant they objected to 1662 Act of Uniformity. They did not conform to the practices of the established Church of England. Our Unitarian and Universalist heritage also goes back to the non-conformists so Watts, in a sense, was one of us. At the time, being a non-conformist led to persecution and restrictions in many spheres of public life, one of the reasons the Puritans and Pilgrims left for America.

At an early age Watts showed poetic talent. As a youth, asked in chapel why he had his eyes open during prayer he replied:

A little mouse for want of stairs
ran up a rope to say its prayers.

After getting a whipping for his insolence, he reportedly cried out:

O father, father, pity take
And I will no more verses make.^[1]

His prayer was denied. He wrote many, many more verses throughout his life. After his graduation from college he was called to minister to a non-conforming independent church in London. A quite liberal fellow for his day, he held religious opinions that today we might call ecumenical. Watts had a great interest in promoting education and scholarship, loved science and published a respected book on logic. One of his great passions, though, continued to be music and poetry.

In his day, Catholics traditionally chanted and sang the Psalms, the Songs of David, in Latin. John Calvin began the tradition of translating them in the vernacular and having them put to music. This inspired Watts to do his own translating of the Psalms. He introduced a new way to do it. The Psalms of course were originally written in Biblical Hebrew. [Watts believed](#) they

needed some theological updating. Sure, David was a Jew who lived long before Jesus was born. But, were he to be reborn again in Elizabethan England, surely he would want to update his texts to include Christian beliefs and practices. (Both being divinely inspired instruments of God) Thus the Psalms should be “renovated” or as Watts put it in 1719, imitate the language of the New Testament.

I have an example of this for you using the 23rd Psalm. Many of us know the beginning of the King James version:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul:
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Now hear Watts renovated version

My Shepherd is the living Lord;
 Now shall my wants be well supplied;
 His providence and holy word
 Become my safety and my guide.

In pastures where salvation grows
 He makes me feed, he makes me rest;
 There living water gently flows,
 And all the food's divinely blest.

My wand'ring feet his ways mistake,
 But he restores my soul to peace,
 And leads me, for his mercy's sake,
 In the fair paths of righteousness.

Not an exact translation by any means but the regular meter and rhyme make for much better hymns.

(Musical Interlude)

Reflection #2 “Better music” movement & connection with South & West

In New England, the singing masters were a lively bunch. They frequently became their own tunesmiths, cranking out lively pieces, arranged in non-traditional polyphonic harmonies. Instead of following European traditions of composition, tunesmiths such as William Billings, Daniel Read, and Justin Morgan used as models the vigorous Scottish and English parish church music which made free use of counterpoint and dance rhythms coupled with loose harmonic rules.

After the Revolutionary war, European trained musicians began arriving in the Northeast. They were appalled by the “crude and lewd” shape note music. Urban leaders of the “better music” movement like Lowell Mason advocated for singing to be scientifically taught in a formal classroom setting rather than the informal process of community singing schools. In the Northeast, that approach won out. But the singing schools continued in the South and West out of the reach of the intellectual elite.

The hymns we are singing today all come from the Sacred Harp tradition. While the music comes from the song book, the words mostly do not. Yet this one retains the Christian spirit in language that a wider array of Unitarian Universalists can embrace.

Hymn No. 315 “This Old World”

Reflection #3 Value for us today

If you sing Sacred Harp music for long, you’ll notice some of it is fixated on death and glory. Here are two quartets of verse:

What’s this that steals, that steals upon my frame?
Is it death, is it death?
If this be death, I soon shall be
From ev’ry pain and sorrow free.

Your sparkling eyes and blooming cheeks
Must wither like the blasted rose;
The coffin, earth, and winding sheet
Will soon your active limbs enclose.

Many of us might find some of the traditional Christian language not quite in line with our theology. You might ask yourself, what could a non-believing person get out of singing this music? I was interested to read in a beginners guide that some put the meaning of the language to one side. Another approach is to read the text metaphorically and find deeper

meaning in it than the surface of the language.

I'd like to focus on a deeper experience that Sacred Harp taps. It is often said that the psalms cover a wide range of emotional experience. The agony of illness and loss, the glory of victory, the avarice of jealousy, the emptiness of abandonment, the fear of threat, all these feelings leap from the psalmist psalter. Music lifts those emotions off the page and into the mouths of the Sacred Harp singers.

So even if we might not agree with the theology, it is hard to disagree with the universal human emotions expressed in the music. The beauty of the melodies and harmonies penetrate our defenses and affect us. That, I believe, is what catches in the heart as people have a communal experience of singing together.

It is the communal feeling that is cherished not the elegance or correctness of the performance. People can sing as loudly or softly as they feel moved to sing. Missing a note isn't an embarrassment. Like that lovely song, All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir, All Shape Note Singers Got a Place in the Choir too. There is wide permission not to be good at it. Community singing carries the whole to a unity in diversity. In that way, Sacred Harp singing is very Unitarian Universalist in spirit.

There are many ways to grow our spirits. Seeking the perfection of flawless, beautiful reproduction of sacred music has its place. So does the congregational singing we do each week to make our own joyful yet sometimes off-key noise. I'm definitely one of those who regularly messes up the words and notes to the hymns, even the ones I know well.

If we have a creed in our creedless way, it is the embrace of the chronically unfinished and unperfected nature of each of us. Yet, somehow, when we come together in community, the blending of our imperfections creates something real and something beautiful we can sing about that both keeps us humble and helps connects us to what is beyond us.

Let that spirit inform this next song.

Hymn No. 193 "Our Faith Is but a Single Gem"