



HISTORIC WESTVILLE
Georgia's 1850's Living History Museum

Is Sacred Harp Really “Babel Confusion?”

By Matthew M. Moye

It's been called “Babel Confusion,” “authored by devils,” “a miserable device,” “outlandish gibberish,” and “a fearsome hodgepodge of sound.” Its historical detractors were not shy.

Nowadays, new listeners often have similar reactions to Sacred Harp music. Is there mysticism in the syllables? Why do you need shapes if you have a musical staff? How are the shapes and syllables related to the discordant harmony? Is the music denominational? What about the song titles? Here is an attempt to de-mystify the culture:

Syllables and Shapes.

Everyone who has seen *The Sound of Music* is aware of solmization, the singing of syllables. Julie Andrews sang in a major scale “Doe-ray-me-fah-so-la-tea-doe.” (Doe is first and last, because it is the same tone, separated by an octave.)

The practice actually goes back to 11th century Italy, when Guido D'Arezzo created a seven-syllable system—one for each full step in an octave: “ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la, and si.” It was a musical aid for teaching clerical music.

By Elizabethan times, the folk of England had eliminated three syllables. The remaining syllables were fa, sol, la, and mi. If Julie had lived in the 1500s, she would sing, fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa. Why four syllables, when there are seven major tones in a scale? It is apparently yet another simple thing that the English managed to complicate!

It was not till 1700 that these syllables became associated with notation (round noteheads, in this case). By 1800, the syllables took shapes—round, square, triangle, and diamond. Because the logic of four syllables escapes most people, a seven-note system re-emerged by 1850. This time, seven shapes were invented as well. Both four- and seven-note singers are practicing in the South still. However, when a person says she sings “Sacred Harp,” she is clearly preferring the older four-note system.

Educational Value. Veteran shape note singers are adamant that the system helps teach music. Their strongest claim is that the shapes help them recognize intervals in new songs. The singers continue to use the notes, because each gathering is a class, even if there are no novices present. (Novices are urged to participate and to lead.)

Those of us who learned round notes on a piano bench may remain skeptical about the value of the shapes. I hasten to add, however, that Sacred Harpists are better informed about musical structure than any other lay group I've ever witnessed.



Denominational Influences. Congregationalists started singing schools in the 18th century. Even then, though, the schools were for the community and decidedly not denominational. Further, neither schools nor tunebooks have ever been adapted to any denomination's regular worship service.

Members of any Protestant denomination that existed in America between 1700 and 1850 no doubt have participated, and with enthusiasm.

Nevertheless, the fa-sol-las survive today, largely due to the post-Civil War practice of Primitive Baptists. One reason is that Primitive Baptist theology is resistant to outside influences. Shapes and syllables were deemed destructive by Lowell Mason and others in the 1830s. Where other denominations deferred to Lowell's judgment, the Primitive Baptists were indifferent. We should all be grateful for their sense of tradition.

Since 1980, there has been a revival of Sacred Harp, ironically in urban settings and in New England. Singing schools have thus returned to their origin. Today's new wave of singers are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Moslem—any tradition. It is truly inter-denominational now.

The Sound of the Music. Even from your first exposure to Sacred Harp, you will recognize a connection to America's 18th century roots. The discordant and pentatonic structures of the harmony are your clues, and they are often compared to the bagpipe. On the other hand, the shapes and syllables, while fascinating, have nothing to do with the plaintive harmonies. Listen to the music without the shapes and syllables. That's the true test of the music.

The Song Names. Modern songs have names that relate to the subject of the song. Some fa-sol-la songs are that way, too. However, an American tradition is that song arrangers (who work out the harmonies) are allowed to give the tune a name of their own choosing. Thus, there are songs named after states ("Florida"), counties ("Cleburne"), towns ("Cusseta"), churches ("Sardis"), people ("Seaborn"), and others.

The greatest hymn of all time, "Amazing Grace" (#45a), is called "New Britain" among Sacred Harpists. There no doubt is such a place in New England.

Conclusion

Sacred Harp is not "Babel Confusion," nor any of the other derogatory titles. We may think of it as typically American—a combination of a lot of traditions.