

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 and 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.

Bay Area Sacred Harp

<http://fasola.org/bayarea/>

East Bay • Palo Alto

UC Berkeley • San Francisco

Sacramento • Santa Cruz

Monterey

Text adapted in 2004 from *A Beginner's Guide to Shape-Note Singing*, 3rd edition, © Lisa Grayson 2001. 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 postpaid from the Chicago Sacred Harp Singers, 1807 W. North Avenue, Chicago IL 60622.