

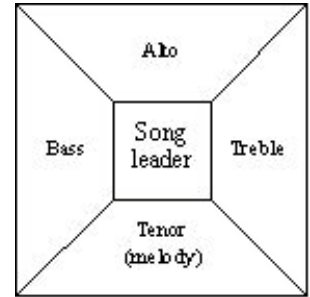
# What's Going on Here?

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The music we are singing today is from The Sacred Harp, a hymnal originally published nearly one hundred seventy years ago in a tradition that dates to Colonial times. It is passionate, spirited music that takes us back to the days when singing four-part a cappella hymns and anthems was a favorite American pastime. Any type, quality, or range of voice should find a comfortable and important place within its harmonies.

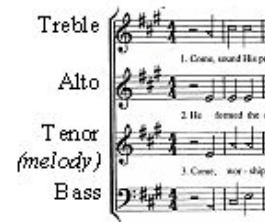
## Hollow Square

Sacred Harp music is traditionally sung in a "hollow square," with each voice part facing the center. The song leader stands in the center, beating out the rhythm and delighting in the unearthly blending of sound.



## Where Should I Sit?

Sacred Harp songs are divided into four parts: treble, alto, tenor, and bass. The melody is in the tenor line rather than in the treble or soprano line as in modern arrangements. The tenor line is sung by men and women, with the women usually singing one octave higher than the men. The treble line (top line), is sung by women and men, with the men one octave below the women. The alto line is sung mainly by women. The bass line is sung mainly by men. Move around the different parts and see what feels comfortable to you.



## Leading a Song

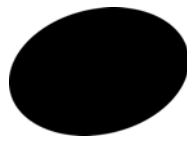
Leading is egalitarian at Sacred Harp singings: each song is led by a different person. Newcomers are welcome to try their hand at leading, just face the tenor section and follow the hand motions of the front row and you will be fine.

## What Are The Shapes For?

Music in The Sacred Harp is written in standard notation, except that the notes appear in four different shapes. These shapes represent a solfege system devised by itinerant tunesmiths and singing masters in the early 19th century to teach people to sight sing quickly. The solfege system most people are familiar with has seven syllables, one for each note of the scale: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, [do], but the same scale in The Sacred Harp's four-syllable system repeats the "fa-so-la" sequence: fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, [fa]. Why? Well, it's much easier to remember 4 note names than seven, so you can learn to sight sing faster - you'll start catching on after as few as one or two afternoons of singing.



**Fa**



**Sol**



**La**



**Mi**

## Singing the Notes

Before singing a song from The Sacred Harp, we "sing the notes" - that is, sing the tune using the Fa Sol La syllables. We go through it once or twice to learn our parts before tackling the words. This can seem strange to a newcomer, but just jump right in and sing "Fa" or "La" if you are worried. You are bound to be right at least 25% of the time! If you already can sight sing, the shapes can seem unnecessary. But many of us - including some with extensive musical backgrounds - have found that the shapes provide an excellent aid to sight singing.

## Not a Choir

The singing style of many Sacred Harp singers is full bore, guts-on-the-floor singing. They leave to others the delicate phrasing, the gentle modulation of dynamics and tone. Exposure to Sacred Harpers in full wail can be an ear ringing experience. The music is not intended to be examined critically; it is music to be experienced. Sacred Harp singing is not a performance sport; it is a participatory experience. Singers sing for each other, not for an audience. The inward-facing, hollow square seating arrangement reinforces this approach. You should form your own judgments of Sacred Harp singing by singing it, not by listening passively.

## Origins

The music of The Sacred Harp had its origins in New England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and moved southward from there. By the 1820's and '30's, the tradition had pretty much died in the North (with the appearance of the misnamed "better music movement"), but has remained a living tradition in much of the rural South. In recent years many non-Southerners have rediscovered this living folkway.

## All-Day Singings & Conventions

The primary way to experience the Sacred Harp phenomenon is at an all-day singing. These traditional events have been part of Southern life for over 150 years and date back earlier still to colonial times when itinerant singing masters traveled the byways of America, holding day-long and sometimes week-long singing schools. Farmers and townspeople would gather from miles around. The nominal purpose was to learn to sing, but the social aspect of the gatherings and the sheer pleasure of making music were the largest attractions. A convention is a periodic gathering of singers from a geographical region (county, state, or even the whole country). It often consists of one or more all-day singings, and sometimes a Sacred Harp singing school taught in the traditional manner.

## Singing in Homes

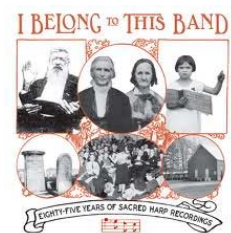
Today many singers meet in small loosely organized groups that sing monthly or bi-monthly in singers' living rooms, generally with a crowd of 15 to 25 at any given event. The same Sacred Harp sense of fellowship and democratic style persists. For some singers, these in-home events are the primary focus of their Sacred Harp singing. For others, singing in homes is mainly a way to keep in practice between trips to state and local conventions. Whatever your motivation, home singings are an excellent way to learn about and enjoy music from The Sacred Harp.

*By Keith Willard, Stephen Levine, and Chris Thorman*

## Regular monthly singings around Los Angeles



First Sunday of each month in Eagle Rock  
Third Sunday of each month in West L.A.  
"Learners" on Saturday before 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday  
in Santa Monica



Locations, times, contacts, private list: Browse to **FASOLA.ORG**, link to **"SINGINGS"**  
and then to **"SINGING IN LOS ANGELES"** [or phone 310-450-3516 ]