

FA-SOL-LA (SHAPE NOTE or SACRED HARP) SINGING by Guy Logsdon

In New England before 1800 a revolutionary method of teaching singing to rural America was spread by "itinerant" singing-school teachers who used song books printed in an unusual musical notation: different tones were represented by different geometric shapes. The lessons were usually about three hours in length and were in the evenings when students could congregate. The singing teacher would stay no more than one month in any community. The songs in these new "song books" were printed in four-part harmony and thus helped to introduce harmonic group singing to this nation. Such singing was usually unaccompanied and was brought by settlers to the south and west.

The original shape-note notation had four different characters, one each to the pitches fa, sol, la, and mi, so that one would memorize a shape in association with its relative pitch. Eventually, by the late 1800s, through European influence, the seven character notation - do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti - became dominant and this method of reading music became known as "do re mi" singing.

Although shape-note singing is the only music notation system indigenous to the United States, the classical European round note characters have slowly replaced shape-notes in hymnals. Only the more conservative and fundamental denominations continue the shape-note traditions, usually at singing conventions, fifth-Sunday, and all-night singings. These performances fulfill social as well as religious needs for they are still often accompanied by pot-luck suppers or dinner-on-the-grounds.

The first known singing conventions and itinerant singing teachers in eastern and southern Indian Territory appeared in the 1870s. Both Indians and Black Indian Freedmen were taught to read shape-notes. Since the songs were published in four-part harmony, this tradition directly influenced the still-popular quartet style.

Only two Black singing conventions are known to exist in Oklahoma, the New Harmony and the New State. Their tradition was founded in an Indian Territory organization, the Union Singing Convention, about which little is known. The New Harmony Musical Convention existed as early as 1911. Its goal has been to promote humanity intellectually, spiritually, and musically. To perpetuate the tradition, singing classes continue to be held, but the demand for new classes diminishes as popular gospel music attracts more and more young people. Regularly scheduled meetings to "Sing praises Unto God" are held at different designated churches, since the membership is spread over a large area in east-central Oklahoma. While the current shape-note tradition is not limited to the Black singing conventions, the tradition grows weaker within the community as the nature of religious denominations changes.

Guy Logsdon is the former director of the Oklahoma Folklife Council. Logsdon grew up in Ada, Oklahoma and has lived and worked in Tulsa for many years. He is considered an authority on Woody Guthrie, Western Swing music, and many other topics.