

# *Sacred Harp Colorado*

*July 2008*

## **Who We Are and What We Do**

The Rocky Mountain Shape Note Singers exist to preserve and promote the music and the traditions of American shape note harmony along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. We sing principally from the 1991 Denson revision of the Sacred Harp (Red Book), but use some songs from the Cooper Book (Blue Book). From time to time we will sing from other traditional books such as the Missouri Harmony and Norembega Harmony depending upon the spirit and the occasion. We welcome any and all to join us at our monthly singings held in the cities along the Front Range. Loaner books are available for use or purchase. Our monthly singings are usually held to the schedule supplied at the end of this newsletter, but holidays or special circumstance may dictate that we move a singing date. If you are new to us, please contact one of our members listed below for current location, day/date and time of a singing in your area.

## **Editorially Speaking**

Well, you can be in this business too long for your own good and the first indication that an editor is around the bend is when he or she starts making egregious errors. I did that last month when I managed to mix up the attribution of SH writing and SH photography- Martha Henderson (author) confused with Martha Beverly (photographer). May both parties forgive me or at least apply the “no harm, no foul” rule from sports.

Another oddity occurred at our last regular singing in the Springs when one of our singers called The Parting Hand Denson #62 in the course of our singing. I made more than one serious attempt to key the music and start the tenor line notes for the group. I flopped miserably. Finally, I realized what the problem was. In nearly four years of singing Sacred Harp, I have sung The Parting Hand many times, but since it is used almost exclusively as a closer with no notes sung, I had never heard the notes sung. Tells you that I rely more on my tonal memory than my sight reading skills – Bad practice particularly if you find yourself leading a group.

Speaking of leading a group. This month's culture section again relies on material posted by Martha Henderson on the fasola.org Singings list. Martha has a lot to say here and it is good reading for any Sacred Harp singer regardless of your experience level.

## **History, Traditions And Culture – Leading and Following by: Martha Henderson**

Dear Singers:

For years now, I've been observing leaders and asking myself some questions about leading in general and what makes a good leader. The Chicago convention, with its excellent singers and many good leaders, once again prompted me to consider this question.

Everyone is welcome to lead songs at a singing, but everyone who's been in singing any time at all knows that when certain people's names are called (and there are a lot of these people), the class will have a good experience with that song. So, what makes a good leader?

When I first began singing a long time ago now, and for some time afterward, I wondered why there were leaders at all, because the class could sing the songs without direction. Over time, however, it became clear to me that good leaders really are doing something besides just standing up there and waving their arms -- and the class does need them.

It seems to me that the purpose of a leader is, at the most basic level, practical: Leaders set the tempo and keep the class together. But they also do much more. If the class does not know a song, for instance, a good, strong leader can pull that class along in such a way that the song will go much better than it would have if the class had tried to sing it by themselves. If the class does know the song, a good leader can receive the energy that the class gives, focus it like a lens, and give it back to the class. Then the class gives it back to the leader -- and so on, in a sort of feedback loop. In this way, a good leader can raise the class above where they would have been able to reach by themselves.

Here are some other random thoughts about what makes a good leader, scribbled a long time ago on a sheet of scrap paper and recently found again:

1. Good leaders know their song really well -- so well that they "inhabit" the song, wear it like a second skin. Because they know the song so well, they are free to interact with the members of the class.
2. Good leaders make eye contact with the people in the class -- that is, if the class members are keeping their noses out of their books.
3. Some good leaders move around, use the space in the square -- though this is not a necessity, nor is it a requirement for good leading, since some who are not as clear in their leading also move around.
4. Good leaders have a "presence" in the square. They have the air of authority, gained from years of study and practice, that says, "I am at home here in the square. I know this song, and I know what I want to do with it." They gain the respect of the class.
5. Good leaders are able to communicate their wishes to the class through clear body language. (This takes some practice, as I have learned many times.)
6. Each leader has his or her own style, but all are easy to watch and to follow. No ungraceful movements, no stomping of feet or flinging of body parts. (I got this from Ms. Shelbie Sheppard. I strive to live up to it every time I lead.)
7. Good leaders show love and respect for the tradition and for the class of singers.
8. Good leaders pick an appropriate song for the moment. They have an

innate sense of which song might fit into the slot they have been given and which songs would not work as well. Also, they do not overtax a class by calling an anthem in the last hour of the day. (That last is my opinion, from having sung a six-page anthem -- with shapes -- at a convention several years ago. The fact that I still remember this, remember how hard and tiring it was, and can tell you which convention that was and who led the song, might tell you how unfortunately memorable those eight minutes were. Trust me, folks, you don't want to be remembered in that way.)

9. Good leaders realize it's about "we," not "me." You get to have your song sung, but be kind to the class and don't ask for too much. (See #8 about leading an anthem late in the day.)

I am thinking of a man, not a regular singer but someone who shows up once or twice a year, who came to our singing and called 159, Wondrous Love. He pitched it extremely high -- maybe even higher than it's written on the page. When I asked him to pitch it down some, he practically shouted, "NO! I like it that way!" So the trebles really had to struggle with that song. (This is the same man who thought that "screaming" -- his word -- is the way that Sacred Harp songs should be sung. He seems to have missed the point somewhere.) With all this talk of leading, I should also mention following, since the best leader in the world can't do much if the singers are sitting back in their chairs, have their noses in their books, and aren't paying attention. The class -- and the leader, too -- will get far more out of a singing if they do a few things which are both simple and difficult:

1. Watch the leader! What leader can convey his or her wishes if the class does not give their attention?
2. Look at and connect with other singers. We are singing together, not alone. This really makes a difference!

At Minja Lausevic's memorial in Massachusetts, a student of hers talked about how she would teach Sacred Harp singing to the class. He said that one day, she got them to look up, look at each other, instead of down in their books, and he described what a huge difference it made to the singing. Minja had it right: Look up!

3. Keep time and help keep the class together by keeping the beat with your hand. This really does help! Try it both with and without, if you want to really test this.
4. The front bench singers should really sing and lead.

We've heard this over and over again: At all-day singings, if singers are on the front bench, they should be working hard to help keep the class together and to give the leader their full attention. Everyone in a singing should be putting forth energy, because it's that energy that makes a singing rise off the ground and connect to the ineffable Divine, but those on the front bench should be doing it more. They also help to gather the energy, focus it, and give

it back to the leader who, optimally, is giving it to them.

In no way do I mean this list to discourage anyone from singing or leading because they are not "good enough." "Good enough" is a relative term that doesn't mean much in reality. Obviously, everyone at a singing is at a different level, and we all still sing together and get something meaningful out of it. These are just ideas to strive for as we continue our journey through singing.

I'm certainly not perfect at any of this, nor do I know everything. I don't think there really is an end point at which we can say, "OK, I know everything there is to know about singing now, so I can be done learning about it." I probably will be striving to improve my singing and leading until the day I die. Not to show off, but so that I can communicate better with the class, so everyone will have a better experience. I've merely written here some ideas that I keep in mind and work toward as I go on.

Does anyone else have any ideas about what makes a good leader and a good follower?

Martha Henderson  
St. Paul, MN

## **Looking Ahead**

2008 National Shape Note Gathering (various books) 10 – 12 July 2008 at the Ozark Folk Center, Mountain Home, AR. <http://www.ozarkfolkcenter.com/events-calendar/special-events/>

Sacred Harp Singing Convention (Denson Book) 26 – 27 July at Coker United Methodist Church, San Antonio, TX. This singing celebrates the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Coker Methodist. More info contact: Mike Hinton at: 210/545-2245 or [phnxmike@aol.com](mailto:phnxmike@aol.com).

East Texas Convention 9 – 10 August (Cooper Book) Henderson Community Center, 302 Fair Park, Henderson, Texas. More info: Robert Vaughn, (903) 863-5379.

West Texas Singing 16 August (Denson Book) Crosbyton Primitive Baptist Church, 401 S. Emerald St., Crosbyton, Texas. More info: Kathy Taylor, (806) 789-2493.

Southwest Texas Convention - Fall Session 30 - 31 August (Cooper Book) Austin Waldorf School, 8700 S. View Rd., Austin, Texas. More info: [Alexa Gilmore](mailto:Alexa.Gilmore@att.net), (512) 963-6932, or [Gaylon Powell](mailto:Gaylon.Powell@att.net), (512) 249-8931.

Rocky Mountain Convention 27 - 28 September (Denson Book) Balloon Museum, Albuquerque, NM.

## *Where We Sing and How to Find Us*

**BOULDER** Regular singings are 2nd Friday of each month 7-9 pm, at the home of Peter and Mary Lou Van Laanen. Contact Mary Lou for details at 303-447-9379 or e-mail her at [vmarylou@indra.com](mailto:vmarylou@indra.com)

**DENVER** Sings weekly each Monday except the first Monday from 6:40 – 8:40PM at St.

Andrew's Church, 2015 Glenarm Street or St. Mark's Orthodox, 1409 S. Vine when St. Andrew's is not available. This group also sings monthly on the fourth Sunday, from 1:00 to 3:00 PM in one of these two locations. Bring a dollar as a contribution to the book fund. For the location of any specific singing, please contact Pat Dolan at 303-778-6297 or e-mail him at [ruralplain@aol.com](mailto:ruralplain@aol.com) or Sharon Kermiet at [skermiet@goodwilldenver.org](mailto:skermiet@goodwilldenver.org).

**COLORADO SPRINGS** - Sings regularly on the 2nd Sunday from 1:30 to 3:30 pm at the Pikes Peak Primitive Baptist Church 12<sup>th</sup> and Pikes Peak on the Westside. Please bring a dollar donation to the book fund. Pete Mathewson is the contact at 719-469-5241 or e-mail him at [71mgbgt41@gmail.com](mailto:71mgbgt41@gmail.com).

**FORT COLLINS** - The singing is normally the first Monday of each month 7-8:30 pm at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 2000 Stover Street. Contact Hill Grimmett for specifics at 970-231-1197 or e-mail him at [hill@sacredharpcolorado.org](mailto:hill@sacredharpcolorado.org)

## **Sacred Harp On The Web**

Our local websites are Sacred Harp Colorado at [www.sacredharpcolorado.org](http://www.sacredharpcolorado.org) and the Rocky Mountain Shapenote Singers at <http://lamar.colostate.edu/~dakspk>. The national web site is [www.fasola.org](http://www.fasola.org)

## **Sacred Harp Colorado Newsletter Editor:**

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