

A brief introduction to Sacred Harp singing

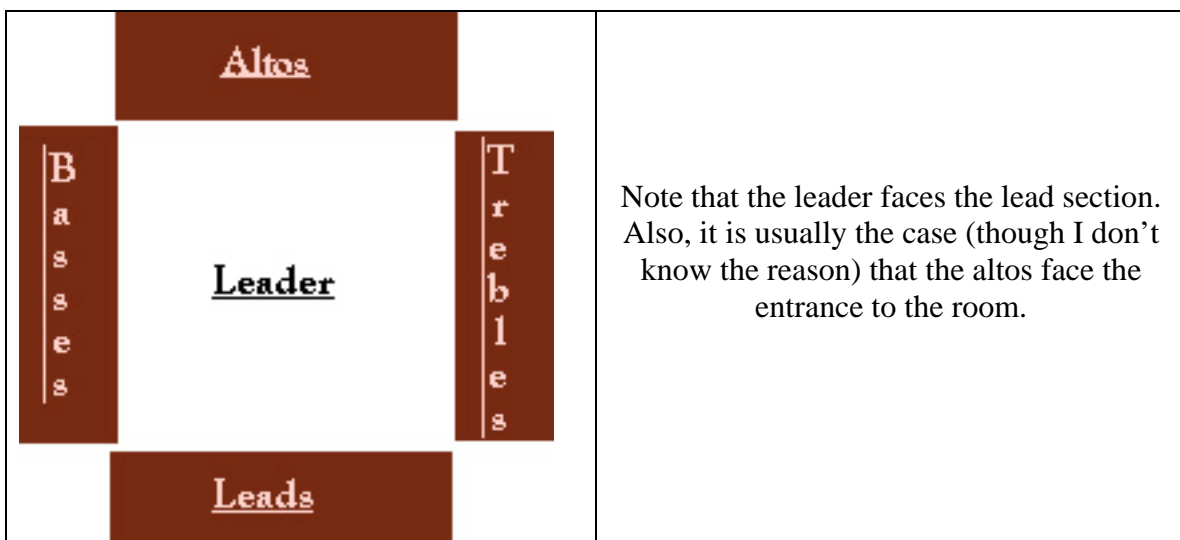
by Bradford West

1. *What is it?*

Sacred Harp singing is a living tradition of a cappella social hymn singing. Its roots are in English country parish singing and early New England [singing schools](#). The Sacred Harp was first published in 1844, and has been in continuous publication ever since. The notes are given different shapes according to their station in the scale, rather than having a uniform round shape. The shaped notes are a very useful tool in the process of learning to sight-sing. The music is cathartic, joyous, and exhilarating.

2. *Where do I sit?*

Shape-note singers generally sit in a hollow square. That is to say that the four parts (bass, tenor [or lead, as it's known in this tradition], alto, and soprano [known as treble]) sit in a square facing each other. If you don't know what your range is, it's probably best to sit with the leads, as this part carries the melody, unlike most other a cappella music in which the soprano carries the melody. If you do know your range, you could sit in that section or, again, in the lead section until you get more comfortable with your reading and singing. The hollow square usually looks like this:



3. *Reading the music*

Each note head is associated with a [solfege](#) syllable:



The FA, SOL, and LA each have two places in the scale. A major scale would look like this:

FA SOL LA FA SOL LA MI FA
 (do re mi fa sol la ti do)

This is similar, but simpler, than the better known form of solfege which goes *do re mi fa sol la ti do*. In other words, you would sing the notes that you associate with *do re mi...*, but you would sing, “fa sol la fa sol la mi fa”. The shapes always have the same relation to each other, no matter what the key is. For example, the above sample shows a D-major scale. Other major scales take these shapes in the same order and move them en masse to another place on the staff, starting at the tonic. So an F-major scale would look like this:

FA SOL LA FA SOL LA MI FA
 (do re mi fa sol la ti do)

Note that the tonic in both cases is a triangle, or FA. For a minor scale, start from what would be the sixth note in a major scale and work up from there. So if you take the above scale and start on the LA below the tonic F, you have a D-minor scale (D-minor being the relative minor to F-major).

LA MI FA SOL LA FA SOL LA
 (la ti do re mi fa sol la)

In this tradition, we sing the names of the syllables first to familiarize ourselves with the tune, and then move on to the words. To illustrate this, here is the first line of Joy to the World, which happens to feature a complete major scale from top to bottom:

FA MI LA SOL FA LA SOL FA
 JOY TO THE WORLD! THE LORD IS COME

You will not get the names of the notes right away, but the more you sing, the more familiar you will be with the shapes until you find that you know them well enough to read tunes you've never seen before.

4. ***Leading***

When a leader is chosen (or volunteers) at a singing, he or she calls out his or her tune choice by page number, and stands in the middle of the hollow square to lead. The leader chooses which verses to sing, the tempo, and where to repeat.

If the leader is not very experienced with leading, the front bench of the lead section will help lead the song. The front bench of the lead section will always have at least one very experienced person (probably more) who can help lead songs and generally keep things moving along. Therefore, it is never frowned upon for beginners to get up and lead. Beginners are also free to invite an experienced singer into the middle of the hollow square to help lead.

Leading in this tradition varies slightly from leading (conducting) other music. Very often, a conductor will beat every quarter note in a 4/4 song. Usually, only two of those quarter notes are beaten for Sacred Harp music. Here are the various beating styles you will see:

a) **4/4, 2/4, 2/2, 6/8, 6/4 time signatures**

The leader will almost always beat twice for each measure with these time signatures: once down for the first half of the measure and once up for the second half of the measure. There is one exception for 4/4 time.

Occasionally, a leader will choose to lead by beating each measure *down/over/back/up* rather than *up/down*.

b) **3/4, 3/2 time**

The leader will beat three times for each measure: *down/down/up* on one plane rather than defining a triangle in the air.

5. ***Further internet resources***

[Fasola page](#)

[Warren Steel's Sacred Harp page](#)

[Fasola singings and discussion lists](#)

[The Sacred Harp Publishing Company](#)

[Steven Sabol's Sacred Harp page](#)

[List of local singings](#)