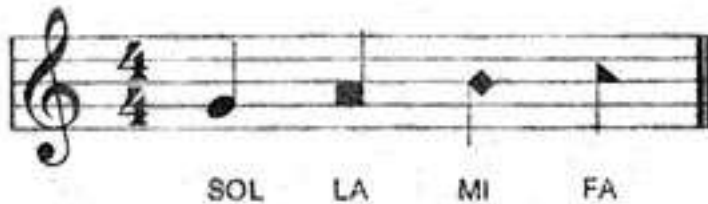


Shape Notes Story

The following article is an investigation into shape-note singing which was formulated in colonial New England. The Bidwell House Museum anticipates sponsorship of a shape-note concert to highlight the 2008 season. Reverend Adonijah Bidwell's parsonage is a fitting venue for songs of praise, hope and redemption sung in full voice with shape-notes as guidelines.



Smithsonian Folkways has put sound clips of three songs on a web site www.si.edu/folkways/sacredharp.htm.

Re-imagining Tyringham-Monterey's first minister's church services offers an opportunity to research the role music played in communal gatherings in 18th century Berkshire towns. Reverend Adonijah Bidwell knew well the psalmist's directive "to sing a new song unto the Lord" (Ps. 98:1) but four generations after the first English migration to New England, the type of music allowed in church services was a subject of controversy for ministers and town leaders.

In their attempt to establish a church state, the Puritan Fathers weighed that which was considered secular with that which they knew to be sacred. Most types of music were considered common, if not profane and prohibited from church services. Yet, as in all things in the New World, the tie with the Mother Country was formidable. The Puritans brought Henry Ainsworth's *Book of Psalms* with them across the Atlantic; it was prepared by Ainsworth in 1612 for separatists who fled from England to Holland. These psalms were sung in church services to about six tunes which followed the "parodying" principle; that is, the same tune could be ascribed to many psalms. The first book published in America was *The Bay Psalm Book* of 1640 and then *The Whole Book of Psalms* which contained no tunes at all. This meant that the congregation had to rely on memory for any church singing. The ninth edition of twenty, published in 1696 was the first to appear with tunes; the last edition was published in 1762 and it is likely that Reverend Bidwell used it in his services. Tunes were simple and most often performed by rote (reminiscing) and by improvisation. Women probably were not allowed to sing with men according to music historian, Grace D. Yerbury.

In 1713, a few years before Bidwell was born in Hartford, Reverend Cotton Mather complained that the young were corrupted by "foolish songs and ballads." In Boston sailors were fiercely derided when they tried to sing and dance around a Maypole. The records of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay indicate serious resistance to any music and merriment but people sang anyway and the seamen's songs of battles and marches were set to music and published in London from 1675 through 1780. If New England ways of living and of worship were directly linked to the Mother Country, it is worthwhile to

review the English and continental experience of music in worship which had evolved to lofty heights in several centuries.

Church music may have started when Rome's greatest 6th century missionary, Augustine, arrived in the old Kingdom of Kent in 597 AD armed with faith and song. He taught Scripture to the native English by plainsong which had its antecedents in the synagogue. It is wondrous to think of a young Aramaic -speaking, Jewish male, Jesus, singing sacred Hebraic texts in the temple. Chanting the scrolls was a useful and important tradition because biblical writing was devoid of punctuation and voice inflection carried meaning and emphasis.

Plainsong was codified in the monasteries by Pope Gregory the Great and like the Gothic edifices of the later Middle Ages, it was meant to lift hearts, minds and voices to Heaven. Simple line melody of plainsong was changed when harmony was introduced in 1240 in England's Canterbury Cathedral with a rendition of a 13th century Easter motet. John Holbert's *Psalms for Praise and Worship* describes Gregorian chant with its light psalm tones or melodies--which are selected in contemporary times for renditions of a particular psalm according to mood and rhythm. Monasteries dotted the British Isles and the continent; monks heard their voices resonate in great and sacred spaces. Often it would take multiple notes to sing the "A" in a Great Amen--it was angelic, heavenly and proscribed. The common man could not be expected to follow chanting in church services. When Henry VIII tried to break the power of the monasteries, one edict he pronounced was that at church services there could be only one note sung per syllable. This edict was an omen of the sound of protestant church music; everyone was expected to sing and they did.

By the 17th century in Europe, great choirs were specializing in music that ordinary people could not follow. Royalty commissioned the great works of composers such as Haydn, Handel and Purcell and these were performed not for the common folk but for the nobility. The organ was introduced in the middle of the 16th century. However, Oliver Cromwell's England took a major turn away from high brow church music. Cromwell's Parliament believed only unaccompanied song could be heard in church and the organ was banned in English churches. In was in this context that Puritans made their way to New England and from this state of mind, we can better understand the prohibition on anything that smacked of high church, Anglican or Catholic services.

By the 18th century in England, English composers were influential both in Europe and in New England in Protestant worship. Isaac Watts and John and Charles Wesley were convinced of the strategy of making liturgy simple through rhyme. Their hymns spread enthusiastically in country chapels under the principle that music belonged to the people and that they should be encouraged to sing in church services. By 1747 morning services included "lining out", that is, a parish clerk led every part of the service and psalms were recited or sung as he directed. There were, in addition, many amateur musicians in country villages and they began to accompany the singing. The Wesleys even brought British folk and popular tunes into the hymnals by exchanging secular words for religious words. Other leaders of insurgent Protestantism repudiated the priestly dominance of the Catholic services which were conducted in Latin and rallied their congregations to sing in the vernacular.

It is in this atmosphere that in Massachusetts, there was controversy in the first half of the 18th century--the exact time that young Mr. Bidwell was training to be a minister.

some ministers believed that singing by notes was a signal of impiety. What could be worse is that it would lead to the use of instruments in church. One Massachusetts town gave the congregation an organ in 1735 and the congregation refused it. Cromwell's ban on organs in England was short-lived but the attitude was re-played in New England until the resurgence of Anglicanism in the urban areas and the secularization of Puritanism which occurred in the second half of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century.

The first instruction book on singing was called *The Art of Singing Psalms* by Reverend John Tufts, minister of Newburyport in the 1720's. The first shape-note system was developed by William Little and William Smith in 1748 under the title *Easy Instructor: or a new method of teaching sacred harmony*. At first it was vigorously opposed in its birth place of New England. It was, however, responsible for a movement that grew quickly as shape-note singing schools developed; these were early America's most significant musical institution offering a brief course in musical sight reading and choral reading and using tunebooks with instructions, exercises and sacred choral music. In New England a four-note system of music developed that we now refer to as shape-note singing. The four shapes used as note heads were a triangle, an oval, a square and a diamond; these represented the four syllables of the diatonic major scale which they knew as Faw, sol, law, faw, sol, law, mi, faw. The pitch of each note corresponds to its shape, independent of lines and spaces on the musical staff. The notes for soprano and alto are placed on the top staff and for tenor and bass on the lower staff. No one knows who authored the system but it is possible to trace its popularity.

The Great Awakening in the mid 18th century is the specific reason for the popularity of shape-note music. The emotional revivalism that swept Massachusetts and other Protestant colonies in the second half of the 18th century is the exact time frame for the preaching of Reverend Adonijah Bidwell.

It was at this time that a body of religious songs was written, published and sold by educated tunesmiths according to William Lynwood Montell in his book *Singing The Glory Down*. Montell maintains "these new compositions attempted to eliminate the practice of singing hymns in a slow monotonous voice." At first they were sung by ear and memory but eventually the shape-note tunes were transcribed and published in collections of psalm tunes adapted for worship, revivals, prayer meetings and family worship. It was considered a great improvement over the "old" system of lining out--where the deacon read out a line of text and the congregation responded.

In the "new" system, students learned to sing music composed in three and four parts; the singing school acted as a primary means of teaching and disseminating music in New England during the 18th century. Most of the songs were imported from England but by the end of the 18th century, New England tunesmiths were copying the English poet, Isaac Watts and wrote pieces not only for worship but for artistic expression. A four part homophonic setting of psalms and fusing tunes was favored. In both, the tenor line holds the tune but the three other voices hold strong and independent melodies. Congregations who sang the psalms and other sacred music in shape-note style were the transitions needed to consider the introduction of other formalities in church services, e.g., church choirs.

By the early 19th century, shape-note singing was over in New England. However, the "singing school" movement spread to the South and was thriving well into the 20th century. Marsha Genensky's forward to the CD recording entitled "American Angels"

says that the four-note system expanded to a seven-note system by the 1840's and songs continued to be sung at camp meetings and evangelical religious gatherings. The recording alluded to is a collection of anonymous Anglo-American spiritual vocalized songs (2003 Harmonia Mundi, USA) and the tradition is carried on because it brings about a feeling of community. The songs are about grace, conversion, the difficulties of life on earth and the rewards to look forward to in the hereafter. The great ethnomusicologist, Alan Lomax, visited a congregation in Fyffe, Alabama who were still using a song book called "The Sacred Harp" in the 1950's, a compendium of 573 shape-note tunes. He said, "All participants displayed confidence in their natural voices. The atmosphere was totally democratic...here, I thought, is a choral style made for a nation of individualists."

Most of the peculiar characteristics of shape-note singing date back to the New England composers and the ministers who allowed it in their services. Smithsonian Folkways has put sound clips of three songs on a web site: www.si.edu/folkways/sacredharp.htm. For those who would like to participate in shape-note singing, the Third Annual "Connexion" and Ingalls Bicentennial Singing convention will take place in Newbury, VT on July 21st. Visit fasola.org for more information. Billed as 'glorious music', the singing starts at 10:00 am and continues to 4:00 pm with a pot-luck dinner at 12:30 pm. And, you can look forward to the Bidwell House sponsorship of shape-note singing next season.