

Shape-Note Music

What is shape-note music? Where did it originate? When? Why? How? Who?

Colonial New Englanders sought to rekindle the fervor that had long since died out in English church singing. Illiteracy, both in notes and letters, proved to be a serious drawback. So enterprising “tunesmiths” enabled untrained singers to sight-read music without having to understand key signature.

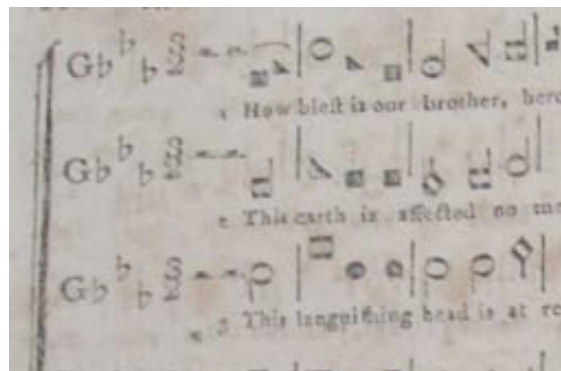


Shape-note book on display in the Dana House Museum's Music Room

How was this done? Instead of using round-head notes of the eight-tone scale, this notation used and uses shape-note heads for each of the four notes: “fa” is a triangle, “sol” is a circle, “la” is a square, and “mi” is a diamond. In this way, shape-note music sung a cappella as fa, sol, la, mi, fa, became widely accepted.

Starting around 1720, this musical notation also expanded the growth of the singing school movement in New England. Woodstock, too, recognized and enjoyed the music of these enterprising itinerant tunesmiths. William Billings, probably one of the most talented, composed over 340 sacred choral pieces. Justin Morgan, famous for Figure, the progenitor of the Morgan horse, was considered one of the most eloquent of this period. Timothy Swan, Charles Dana’s father-in-law, wrote many secular and sacred hymns. In 1805, Andrew Lang wrote a well-known shape-note music book

Below, detail showing heads of shape-notes.



entitled *The Art of Singing*. The Woodstock Historical Society is fortunate to have a copy of this book now on exhibit in the Music Room.

By 1810, however, this music, considered crude and primitive, waned in popularity. Tunesmiths, their schools and their shape-note books moved south and west to more receptive places. Nonetheless, a recent revival in New England has come to pass. In fact, some six years ago, even Woodstock, under the sponsorship of the Woodstock Historical Society, thoroughly enjoyed a shape-note fest in the village Courthouse. This memorable revival firmly proved that this old-time music, crude and primitive as it may be, can still shake the timbers and quicken the heart.

Written by Gina Moore
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