

# Fa-Sol-La (Shape-note) 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. Usually in the evenings, when students could congregate, the singing teacher would stay no more than one month in any community – but, lessons of approximately three hours duration were held each evening. It was the beginning of harmonic group singing in this nation, for the songs in the new "song books" were usually printed in four-part harmony. Such singing, usually unaccompanied, was brought with them by the settlers as the frontier moved south and westward.

The original shape-note notation had four different characters, one each to represent the pitches fa, sol, la, and mi, so that one would memorize a shape together 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 the 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, i.e., singing conventions, fifth-Sunday and allnight singings. These performances fulfill social needs as much as they are expressions of worship, for they are still often accompanied with pot-luck lunch 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 Indian Freedmen (Blacks) were taught to read shape-notes. Since the songs were published in four-part harmony, those quartets which emerged continue to be popular. (A similar tradition is found in the South.) In fact, Oklahoma is probably the western most area of the southern song belt.

Only two Black singing conventions exist in Oklahoma, the New Harmony and the New State singing conventions. 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, their goal being to promote humanity – intellectually, spiritually, and musically. All their song books "from which the praises of God are sung" were to be "text-books adopted by the convention." To perpetuate the tradition, singing classes continue to be held by authorized teachers, but the demand for new classes diminishes as popular gospel 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 each year as the nature of religious denominations changes.

#### *Suggested reading:*

Jackson, George P. *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (reprint, Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964).

Malone, Bill C. *Southern Music American Music*. (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1979).

White, Benjamin F. and E.J. King. *The Sacred Harp* (facsimile of 3rd edition [1859], Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1968).

#### *Suggested listening:*

*Sacred Harp Singing*. Library of Congress, AAFS L11

*White Spirituals*. Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1349.