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AHEAD | Sacred Harp Singing Conventions; Concerts by (and for) Singers

By BETH GREENFIELD

IN the folk tradition of Sacred Harp music, the "harp" refers to the voice -- many, many voices, usually, of people who have come together to sing, a capella, in glorious four-part harmony. Together, they are carrying on a style of singing that has survived in American communities for hundreds of years, long enough to enjoy renewed popularity in the 21st century.

Also known as shape-note singing -- because its text is a songbook published in 1844 that uses a system of printed shapes to aid people without musical training -- the singing that came to be known as Sacred Harp can actually be traced further back, to Colonial New England and to England before that. Its unique sound, dense and almost eerily spiritual, contains unusually melodic harmonies, and can be described as Gregorian chant meets bluegrass.

In early America, this style of singing moved south and took hold in a number of states including Georgia, where it took the name Sacred Harp, and was preserved in rural churches long after fading away elsewhere. Musical scholars who rediscovered it in the 20th century were fascinated that such an artifact had survived. Charmed, new adherents soon took up the tradition.

Today's fans are not necessarily religious -- just passionate about singing. Opportunities to take part abound through local "practice sings," or "singings," held monthly or even weekly in towns and cities in more than 30 states, as well as Canada and Britain. Local sings also have annual singing conventions, as they are called, generally lasting two days and attracting participants of all types and ages.

"You'll see 70- and 80-year-olds from the South, plain folk from the Midwest and young hip guys from New England," said Buell Cobb, 62, author of "The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music" (1978). "The fact that it just cuts across demographic lines is so amazing."

Mr. Cobb, a retired BellSouth public relations director, is also an organizer of the three-day National Sacred Harp Convention in Birmingham, Ala., in June, which is open to anyone and typically draws 400 to 700 people from 25 states, he said.

Most of the songs are unfamiliar to singers outside the tradition, though at least one hymn sung in Sacred Harp groups, "Amazing Grace," is well known. For newcomers, Mr. Cobb explained, a first encounter with the "powerful and elemental" sound can inspire many different reactions. "Some will say, 'Oh, that's interesting,' while others will say, 'Wow, that's beautiful,'" he said. "And then there is a certain, small percentage of people who say, 'I must do this.'"

Aldo Ceresa of Brooklyn, 36, an online book and music reseller, first heard a recording of Sacred Harp five years ago and is now a regular at local sings in Brooklyn, Manhattan and New Jersey and at annual sings around the country. "A good annual sing has 90 to 100 songs a day," he said. He is now organizing the third annual New York City All-Day Singing for September.

Sacred Harp singers sit in what's called a hollow square, with one voice part (treble, alto, tenor, bass) on each side, all facing center and toward one another, and singing out loudly. Individuals take turns standing in the center to lead. Anyone is welcome to listen or take part; copies of the traditional songbooks are usually on hand.

A schedule of singings across the country is maintained by the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association on the Web site fasola.org (from the Sacred Harp learning tones fa, so and la). In San Francisco, the Golden Gate Singing Convention takes place tomorrow. A flier lures in newcomers by saying: "The harmonies achieved by these untrained early American composers were so rich and delightful as to border on the sinful." Coming in May are conventions at the University of Chicago and in Montclair, N.J.

Summer brings Birmingham's convention, as well as the fourth year of Camp Fasola. Created by the Alabama-based Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association, a nonprofit collective, the camp is a five-day singing getaway for adults and children, with time for swimming, fishing and hiking.

"It's all about fellowship -- and the music, of course," said Jeff Sheppard, 76, president of the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association and a third-generation shape-note singer. "I could not tell you how many singings I've been to in my life." Each is equally compelling, he said, though he discerns one main regional difference: "They sing awfully fast up north."

DETAILS

SAN FRANCISCO

What: Golden Gate Sacred Harp Singing, www.fasola.org/sf/goldengate.

When: April 21.

MONTCLAIR, N.J.

What: Garden State Sacred Harp Singing Convention, mysite.verizon.net/gssh.

When: May 19 to 20.

CHICAGO

What: Midwest Sacred Harp Singing Convention, shape-note.uchicago.edu.

When: May 26 and 27.

BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

What: National Sacred Harp Singing Convention, www.fasola.org/singings.

When: June 14 to 16.

ANNISTON, ALA.

What: Camp Fasola 2007, fasola.org/camp.

When: July 2 to 6.

NEW YORK

What: New York City All-Day Singing; www.manhattansing.org.

When: Sept. 15.