

STAR IN THE EAST: AN EARLY AMERICAN CAROLS WORKSHOP

November 15, 2025 - 2 p.m.
Kalamazoo Friends Meeting House
Sam Sommers, singing school teacher
Assisted by Dr. Will Fitzgerald

Sam



emm
early music
MICHIGAN

About the Workshop

The American tradition of shape note singing was developed in the early nineteenth century and grew out of a movement to encourage congregational and social singing. The notes, which are printed on a musical staff in squares, diamonds, triangles, and ovals, are meant to help even beginner singers with no musical background to quickly and easily learn how to read music and sing. While shape note singing is over two centuries old, there are several specific shape note traditions that are still active and, indeed, growing—including Sacred Harp singing, which enjoys a thriving presence in Kalamazoo.

In the first hour of this workshop, Samuel Sommers will offer a general introduction to shape note singing and participants will learn about the shapes, the syllables that correspond with them, and the usual method of singing a song using both the notes and the lyrics. In the second half of the workshop, led by Will Fitzgerald, participants will practice their new skills and sing a variety of festive holiday tunes from the shape note tradition together, including STAR IN THE EAST, which will be sung at the EMM holiday concert “An Early American Holiday.”

About Early Music Michigan

Early Music Michigan was founded in 1996 as the Michigan Bach Collegium. In 2009, we changed our name to Early Music Michigan to emphasize our mission of performing a wide variety of early music generally speaking, music written and performed before the nineteenth century—not limited to the works of J. S. Bach. As an early music ensemble emphasizing historically informed performance, we occupy a valuable niche, providing music and creative programming that would not otherwise be available in the greater Kalamazoo area. Our mission is to perform early music in a dynamic, varied, and historically informed manner that honors this body of rare and ancient musical treasures, the artistic voice, and the humanity of collaborative music making.

About the Workshop Leaders

Samuel Sommers has been singing Sacred Harp since 1992. He has participated in many shape note singings and conventions in the Midwest and the Southeast. Sam has been an eager student in many singing schools taught by traditional singing masters. He is a board member of the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association (SHMHA), a non-profit organization whose purpose is to promote Sacred Harp singing and its traditions. Sam has been a teacher at Camp Fasola since 2009. He has taught classes and workshops in Alabama, Ireland, England, and Poland.

Will Fitzgerald has been singing Sacred Harp regularly since 2005, participating in singings and conventions throughout the US and in Ireland. Will is also a teacher at Camp Fasola, and worked on text preparation for the 2025 edition of The Sacred Harp. He leads twice-monthly shape note workshops and singings in Kalamazoo, and has both sung with Early Music Michigan and is currently a member of their board.

FA is like a flag.

SOL is round like the sun.

LA is two **L**s joined.

MI Diamonds are for "me."

A Shape-Note Scale

FA SOL LA FA SOL LA FA MI FA

YANKEE DOODLE

F Major Traditional

FA FA SOL LA FA FA LA SOL LA SOL LA SOL LA SOL FA FA LA SOL SOL SOL LA FA FA MI SOL

Yan- kee Doo - dle came to town, A - rid - ing on a po - ny; He

Traditional

FA FA SOL LA FA LA SOL LA SOL LA SOL LA SOL LA SOL LA SOL LA MI SOL LA MI FA FA

stuck a fea - ther in his hat And called it ma - ca - ro - ni.

SCALE PRACTICE. Based on exercises from *The Sacred Harp*, 1844. + marks full accent and † marks half accent.

INTERVALS PROVED. From *The Easy Instructor*, 1809.

DA CAPO AND DAL SEGNO DEMONSTRATED. Based on examples from *The Christian Harmony*, 1867.

This mu-sic we re-peat,
Both lines of text complete; Sing on without a stop, Then *Da Capo*—"from the top,"
D.C. End at the double bar.
Come now, and sing with me Merrily as on we go; "From the sign" or *Dal Segno*,
D.S. Ending at the double bar.

A Basic Guide to Get Started

Sacred Harp singers sit in a hollow square with one voice part per side. Most of the music is in four parts, with each part reading its own staff.

TREBLE
high harmony for men and women

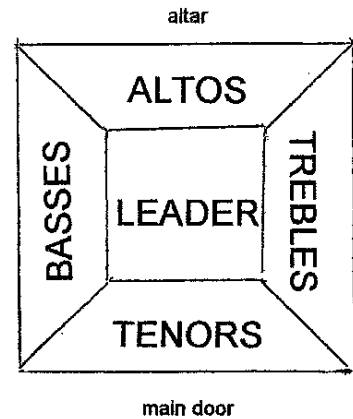
ALTO
low harmony for women

TENOR
or "lead" for men and women

BASS
low harmony for men

Lord, when Thou didst ascend on high, Ten the

Lord, when Thou didst ascend on high, Ten thou



Shape Note Notation

Before singing the words of a song, *Sacred Harp* singers sing "the notes," consisting of syllables fa, sol, la, and mi, corresponding to four shapes associated with various pitches in the scale. This is a valuable aid to sight reading music, and also gives the class the chance to sing the tune before trying to sing the words which may be printed some distance from the notes. Singing the notes might be omitted at the leader's discretion for a memorial lesson or during a familiar anthem. Internal repeats are generally taken to fit in all the text, but final repeats are taken only on the notes, if desired, and on the last verse.

C major scale F major scale

Fa Sol La Fa Sol La Mi Fa Fa Sol La Fa Sol La Mi Fa

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

A minor scale D minor scale

La Mi Fa Sol La Fa Mi La La Mi Fa Sol La Fa Mi La

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Fa Mi La Sol Fa La Sol Fa Fa Sol La Fa Sol La Mi Fa

Joy to the world! the Lord is come.

F major scale

C major A minor

Come, lit-tle chil-dren! Sing this! Come, lit-tle chil-dren! Sing this!



☆ Learning Songs ☆

Start

Does the song start with a rest or a note?
What's the tonic note? What is your starting note?

Time

What is the mode of time?
Does it stay in that mode throughout the song?

Accent

Where is the accent in this song?

Repeats

Are there any repeats? Are they mandatory or optional? Is there a tricky repeat?

Special

This catch-all includes fermatas, rests, page turns, and secret knowledge.*

Here are listed some songs in *The Sacred Harp*.
Can you apply the STARS criteria to sing them correctly?

123b	Cross of Christ	83t	Vale of Sorrow
28b	Wells	168	Cowper
98	Dull Care	412	New Hosanna
	170	Exhilaration	

*Shhh, they're secrets! But I like you, so I'll tell you some:

- Sing the first part of the bottom brace of 143 softly.
- The repeat at the end of 408 is unusual. Sing to the quarter note before the repeat mark; all parts except the basses rest. The basses repeat the 2/4 part and hold; tenors repeat the 2/4 part and hold; trebles repeat the 2/4 part and hold; altos repeat the 2/4 part and hold. Everybody ends the note with the fermata when the leader cuts it off.
- A few leaders will observe an unwritten fermata on the word "now" toward the end of 369. They may regard this as standard and customary (it isn't) and not warn the class it's coming. Watch.
- Some (not all) fine leaders will abruptly speed up 291 at the chorus.

Accent

is a stress of voice or emphasis on one part of a sentence, strain, or measure, more than another.

Primary (or full) accent and secondary (or half) accent for the various modes of time are:

Accent is made with the voice and *not* with the hand.

2 2	1 2 3 4
4 4	1 2 3 4
2 4	1 2
3 2	1 2 3
3 4	1 2 3
6 4	1 2 3 4 5 6
6 8	1 2 3 4 5 6

Q What is a measure?

A It is that division of time by which the movement of the music is regulated. It is the space between two bar lines on the staff.

The primary accent is the stronger and in the first and second modes of Common Time the primary accent is placed on the first part of the measure as the hand starts down in marking time to the right of the measure bar, and the secondary accent comes on the third part of the measure as the hand starts up to the left of the succeeding measure bar. In the third mode of Common Time with only two quarter notes to the measure, the accent comes on the first part of the measure as the hand starts down.

In the two modes of Triple Time, the accent comes on the first part of the measure as the hand starts down on the first beat.

In the two modes of Compound Time the primary accent comes on the first part of the measure as the hand starts down to the right of the measure bar and the secondary accent comes on the fourth part of the measure as the hand starts up.

These rules never vary, unless the regular accent is displaced by some SPECIAL arrangement of the notes or rests by which the measure is filled.

Syncopation occurs when a short note is placed on the accented part of a measure and is followed immediately by a longer note, the usual accent is thereby temporarily displaced and shifts to the longer note.

Emphasis may have reference to stress of voice upon emphatic words which may be sung without regard to the Rhythmical accent, as by a Syncopation.

—from Paine Denson's *Rudiments of Music*

Poetry, like music, has natural accents. When the natural accents of the poetry do not correspond to those of the printed music, the notation is said to be misbarred. In performing a misbarred piece, one follows the notation in marking time but not in singing accents. Where there is a conflict between the poetry and the music, the poetry overrules the music and determines the accents.

—from John Garst's *Rudiments of Music*

Marking Time in Space

A leader marks or beats the time of the song with the hand to tell the class the desired speed. Singers may keep time too, with the leader; it helps you to keep your place in the music. Besides, the practice will be beneficial when you lead your lessons.

We have seven modes of time in *The Sacred Harp*: three of common, two of triple and two of compound.

You can walk or march to common time. It has two pulses (down and up) to the measure.

You can waltz to triple time. It has three pulses (down, down and up) to the measure.

You can jig to compound time. Think *The Irish Washerwoman*. Like common time, it has two pulses (down and up) to the measure.

All the modes of time start and end with the hand up. Always start and end with your hand up, even when the song begins with a rest.

The rudiments of older Sacred Harp books had specific suggestions for the speeds of the various modes of time. Our present book states that speed is at the discretion (not the whim) of the leader. A song shouldn't be so fast or slow that proper accent is impaired.

	Mode of Time	Seconds per Measure	Beats per Minute
common	2/2	3	40
	4/4	2½	48
	2/4	1½	80
triple	3/2	3	60
	3/4	2	90
compound	6/4	2½	48
	6/8	1½	80

“Modest downward and upward strokes are much to be preferred to ‘winding’, ‘grabbing’ and ‘snatching’ methods.”

☞ *It takes a pound of practice to an ounce of rudiments.*

KEYING MUSIC

Keying a song is the practice of finding the ideal pitch for the tonic note and communicating that pitch to the class, along with other important notes needed to begin the song. Individuals' keying styles and methods may vary, both in terms of hearing the notes in their mind and sounding them out loud—but the goal is always to key the song clearly and at a pitch where singers in all voice parts can comfortably reach all of their notes.

There are multiple methods that keyers may use to find a suitable pitch. Keyers might recall the sound of the song in question or of a more familiar song written in the same key, memorize the sound of the tonic in several different keys, or remember the sound of a certain note on the staff and relate that to the key in question.

A song's opening chord consists of the first note of each part. When giving the key, sound all the notes in the opening chord. The opening chord usually contains the song's tonic or key note, but even if it does not, it is still important to also sound the tonic. Each note only needs to be sounded once, even if it is the first note for two or more voice parts.

For many songs, the opening chord forms a tonic triad: a three-note chord composed of scale degrees 1, 3, and 5. Sounding these three notes in ascending order, the major triad is "fa-la-sol" and the minor triad is "la-fa-la."

Some songs begin with a dyad: a chord with only two scale degrees. Especially in minor keys, this is often scale degrees 1 and 5. While it is acceptable to sound only the two notes in the dyad, including the third scale degree to complete the triad may help singers better hear the song's tonality.

Starting pitches do not need to be sounded in a particular order. Depending on the keyer's preference, the notes may be sounded in ascending order, in descending order, or in an order based on the configuration of the opening chord.

All singers have a role to play in helping the keying process go smoothly. Make sure not to hum or sing while the keyer is finding their notes. Do not offer opinions on the song's key unless the keyer or leader has specifically asked you to do so.

Excerpts from RUDIMENTS OF MUSIC in *The Sacred Harp 2025 Edition*
Lauren R. Bock

When someone asked Hugh McGraw, “What is your favorite song?”
he answered, “The one I’m singing.”

After some little time, I have come to learn the value of such an idea.
If this song is my favorite, I will have a good time at the singing.

First, a couple of “thou shalt nots”:

- Don’t make a list of songs you don’t like. If you do, somebody will sing that list every weekend.
- Don’t express dislike for a song at a singing. Someday a little old lady next to you might tell you, “That was my daddy’s song.” Or worse, “My granddaddy wrote that song.” Confiding to a person that you really don’t see what there is attractive about a particular song is tantamount to saying that his child is homely.

If you sing Sacred Harp long enough, the miracle will happen. And the miracle is this: Every song in the Sacred Harp will remind you of a person, or a place, or a singing, or a family. Many of these memories will be sweet, but some will be tinged grief and a sense of loss. But the memory will bring the person or place back for a time and we can enjoy being part of the cloud of witnesses.

But why is this song my favorite? The tune? The words? The people who sang it, wrote it, loved it, before me?

Once at Camp Fasola, I was talking with a lifelong traditional singer about some things I had learned about poetic meter. I guess I was getting pretty excited when my interlocutor suggested, “But I don’t have to know those things to sing this music.” Touché. Still, if I know something about the poet, or about the composer, or about the people for whom either text or tune was written, it makes the whole experience all the richer.

Life is sweet, but it is uncertain. This could be my last chance to sing *this* song. Sing it like it really means something. It does. It’s my favorite.



These notes are from my lesson plan for the class “Singing Favorites with Sam” at Camp Fasola, youth emphasis, 2017 in Anniston, Alabama. – Samuel Sommers, November 2025

A short history of shape note singing

Will Fitzgerald

June, 2025

There is a long history of assigning *syllables* to musical notes. They go back at least to the 11th century, to Guido of Arezzo, who invented a couple of different systems for assigning syllables. One eventually led to the “do-re-mi” system we are familiar with. Another used just four syllables. The four-syllable system was in widespread use in England before American colonization, and that’s what the early English colonists used. In other words, they used the “fa-so-la” version, instead of the “do-re-me” version.

The “First New England School” is a cover term for composers in colonial America who used the music theory of England of the time (especially William Tans’ur and Aaron Williams), as well as their own new ideas, to write music, usually music for use in the churches. They often published their own books and taught itinerant singing schools. In the 1991 edition of the Sacred Harp, composers from this school include William Billings, Jeremiah Ingalls, Daniel Read, Justin Morgan, Timothy Swan, Jacob Kimball, Lewis Edson, Oliver Holden, and Supply Belcher. Billings, especially, wanted to create a distinctly new American sound. He published the first book in America of songs created solely by Americans. It’s important to note that, although many of these composers were self-taught, their music was typically composed, not arranged.

In 1801, William Little and William Smith came out with a tune book called *The Easy Instructor*, and it assigned different shapes to the note heads of the notes according to their syllables. Their shapes were probably invented by John Connelly. These were sometimes called “patent notes” since their inventors claimed copyright to them. There were, in fact, a number of competing systems, and tune books were being printed and used throughout the colonies and the early days of the United States. Much of the music in these books was written by the New England composers, so sometimes it’s viewed as a New England thing, but there were books published in other parts of the country, not only in English, but also in German. Much started in New England, but there was a lot of rapid spreading of tunes and music systems, especially through singing masters who went around teaching people to sing from these books. Again, it should be noted that this means this was not so much of a folk music effort, but a specific method of music pedagogy and even music theory.

But New England also produced a backlash against shape note singing. In the late 1700s and early 1800s there was so much music and music theory being created in Germany that the musicians in New England, began to react against what they saw as the more primitive English system, especially as musical instruments like organ and piano became more prevalent. One might even say that the locus of music in the United States moved from the human voice to the piano. The foundation of The Handel and Haydn Society in Boston, in 1815, and the work of Lowell Mason are often seen as watersheds of this change. And, in large part, the English four-syllable and four-shape system was dropped, and the early American composers ignored.

However, this music had spread west and south, and continued to be used in many communities. (I haven't seen any evidence of it being present in Michigan. One New England composer is buried here, but he moved in as an old man). It's strongest and longest communities have been in Georgia, Alabama, and east Texas.

The Sacred Harp was first published in 1844, and has been in continual print ever since, going through several revisions and editions. It was kept alive by rural church communities; cities tended to follow along with the "better music" methods. Even so, it should not necessarily be described as "folk music" in the sense that, for example, rural ballad traditions are folk music. This has always been based on a printed source, a set pedagogy (the "rudiments" in the beginning of the book), singing masters and singing schools. It's better to describe it as a *different* music system from standard Western music, rather than a more primitive one. Of course, there are probably ten thousand pieces of music in the standard Western repertoire to every one in the shape note tradition, but this seems more like the winner of a popularity contest, rather than something being more advanced or less advanced. Pianos can do a lot more than human voices can, but, at the end of the day, they are not human voices but mechanical ones. Pianos allow one person to play many notes at once, and let others watch and listen. In shape note singing, you need many people to join together, it's something like manually intensive labor. But it's not clear at all to me that mechanizing music in this way was a net win. In the shape note tradition, everybody sings, and everybody leads. Eight-year-old children can lead and sing, and eighty-year-old adults can lead and sing, and over time, we all become better leaders and singers, even while we are enjoying ourselves, our music, and (for some of us) the worship each time we sing.

Shape Note Singing Near and Far

Local “practice” singings

Kalamazoo

Third Sundays, 4-6 pm, with potluck following. 4124 Persianwood Dr., Kalamazoo.

Second and Fourth Mondays, 7-9 pm. Quaker Meetinghouse, 508 Denner Street, Kalamazoo. Location tbd.

Grand Rapids

First Saturdays, 9:30-11:15 am (although somewhat irregular). Christ Church, 2500 Breton Rd., SE, Grand Rapids.

East Lansing

First and Third Mondays, 7-9 pm. (except Labor Day). Edgewood United Church, 469 N. Hagadorn Road, East Lansing. <https://fasolamichigan.org>

Goshen, Indiana

First Sundays, 3-5 pm, with potluck following. Millrace Cohousing Common House, 631 River Race Drive, Goshen, Indiana.

Ann Arbor

Second Sundays, 1-4 pm, The Ark, Ann Arbor. 316 S Main St, Ann Arbor.

Annual Singings

Midwest Convention. Chicago, Usually, Memorial Day weekend. 2026: May 30 & 31. Check: <https://shape-note.uchicago.edu/>

Univ. of Michigan All-Day (appears to not be happening this year)

Mid-Michigan All-Day singing. Faith Lutheran Church, Okemos. Saturday before the first Sunday in May

Michiana All-Day Singing, Saturday before 3rd Sunday in July

Kalamazoo All-Day Singing, 3rd Sunday in July

Central Ontario, All-Day Singings, Last full weekend in August

Camp

Camp Fasola, Monday, Camp Lee, Anniston Alabama <https://campfasola.org> Annually around the July 4th weekend.

NEW HOSANNA. L.M.

Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest. —Matt. 21:9.

B♭ Major. Dobell's *New Selection*, 1806.

Arr. H.S. Rees, 1859. Alto W.M. Cooper, 1902.

1. Wake, O my soul, and hail the morn, For un-to us a Sav-ior's born;
See how the an-gels wing their way To ush-er in the glo-rious day.

Glo - ry, glo - ry, let us sing, While heav'n and earth His prais-es ring,

2. Hark! what sweet music, what a song, Sounds from the bright celestial throng!
Sweet song, whose melting sounds impart Joy to each raptured list'ning heart.

Glo - ry, glo - ry, let us sing, While heav'n and earth His prais-es ring,

3. Come, join the an-gels in the sky, Glo - ry to God who reigns on high:
Let peace and love on earth abound, While time revolves and years roll round.

Glo - ry, glo - ry, let us sing, While heav'n and earth His prais-es ring,

p Ho-san-na, Ho-san-na, Ho - san-na to the Lamb of God. Glo - ry, glo - ry, let us sing, While heav'n and earth His praises ring, Ho-san-na, D.S.

f Ho-san-na, Ho-san-na, Ho - san-na to the Lamb of God. Glo - ry, glo - ry, let us sing, While heav'n and earth His praises ring, Ho-san-na, D.S.

STAR IN THE EAST. 11s & 10s.

51

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.—John 1:14.

C Major. v.1 *Brick Church Hymns*, 1825. v.2-5 *Reginald Heber*, 1811.

R. Herron, 1826. *Alto Harmonia Sacra*, 1866.

1. Hail the blest morn, when the great Me - di - a - tor Down from the re - gions of glo - ry de - scends;
 2. Cold on His cra - dle the dew - drops are shin - ing, Low lies His bed with the beasts of the stall;
 3. Say, shall we yield Him, in cost - ly de - vo - tion, O - dors of E - dom and of - f'rings di - vine,
 4. Vain - ly we of - fer each am - ple ob - la - tion, Vain - ly with gold would His fa - vor se - cure;
 5. Bright - est and best of the sons of the morn - ing, Dawn on our dark - ness and lend us thine aid;

Shep - herds, go wor - ship the babe in the man - ger, Lo! for His guard the bright an - gels at - tend.
 An - gels a - dore Him in slum - ber re - clin - ing, Mak - er, and Mon - arch, and Sav - ior of all.
 Gems of the moun - tain and pearls of the o - cean, Myrrh from the for - est and gold from the mine?
 Rich - er far is the heart's ad - o - ra - tion, Dear - er to God are the prayers of the poor.
 Star of the east, the ho - ri - zon a - dorn - ing, Guide where our in - fant Re - deem - er is laid.

Anonymous, before 1820 (first stanza)

Reginald Heber, 1811 (other stanzas & chorus)

11 10. 11 10.

Transcribed from Hauser's *Hesperian Harp*, 1874.

A minor

Star in the East

Arranged by Deodatus Dutton, 1830

Arranged by William Hauser, 1848

5 10

1 { Hail the blest morn, see the great Me - di - a - tor Down from the re - gions of glo - ry de - scend! }
 { Shep-herds, go wor-ship the babe in the man-ger, Lo, for his guard the bright an - gels at - tend. } Bright-est and best of the sons of the

2 { Cold was his cra - dle, the dew - drops were shin - ing; Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall; }
 { An - gels a - dore him in slum - bers re - clin - ing, Ma - ker, and mon - arch, and sove - reign of all. } Bright-est and best of the sons of the

3 { Say, shall we yield him, in cost - ly de - vo - tion, O - dors from E - den and of - ferings di - vine? }
 { Gems from the moun - tain and pearls from the o - cean, Myrrh from the for - est and gold from the mine? } Bright-est and best of the sons of the

4 { Vain - ly we of - fer each am - ple o - bla - tion, Vain - ly with gold we his fa - vor se - cure; }
 { Rich - er by far is the heart's a - dor - a - tion, Dear - er to God are the prayers of the poor. } }

15 20

morn - ing, Dawn on our dark - ness and lend us thine aid; Star in the east, the ho - ri - zon a - dorn - ing Guide where our in - fant Re - dee - mer was laid.

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morn - ing, Dawn on our dark - ness and lend us thine aid; Star in the east, the ho - ri - zon a - dorn - ing Guide where our in - fant Re - dee - mer was laid.

Save the Date!

AN EARLY AMERICAN HOLIDAY

Early Music Michigan explores holiday music from New England, New France, and New Spain. Enjoy early American classical and folk music for instruments and voices, plus cookies and cider at a post-concert reception!

December 6, 2025 - 3 p.m.

First Congregational Church, Kalamazoo

Pay what you will for tickets!

earlymusicmichigan.org/earlyamericanholiday/



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