

Shape Note Singing: The Punk Rock of Choral Music

Authors

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Essential Questions

What is 'a technology'?

What can we learn from shape note, a 17th century singing tradition, about open source practices today?

How can we create systems of creativity that are inclusive?

Introduction

In this workshop we will learn what shape note singing is and how to perform it. Shape note singing is a 250 year old american hymn singing tradition that is intended for people of all backgrounds and musical ability.

The ethos of Shape Note singing is open source and non-hierarchical. It is not staged for performance and has no conductor. Shape note principles are based on accessibility with a practice designed to allow for anyone, with any voice, and with no musical training to partake in 4 part harmony group singing. In this workshop, students will learn how shape note notation works, how to read it, how you can have a harmony without being a trained group of singers, and why music can be both complex, beautiful and accessible to make, with an instrument most of us already have and know well: our own voices.

Participants will learn and practice the basics of 4 part harmony singing in the shape note tradition. They will also be introduced to MuseScore, a free, open source notation software so they can write their own chorals with shape notation. □

Target Audience / Prerequisite & Pre-Assessment

This workshop is intended for young adults (12-18) and older adults (18+). No musical training necessary. It is a great way to get into singing if you haven't sung before, and/or always wanted to sing in harmony but felt shy about it.

Outcomes & Goals

- Know the basics of 4 part harmony singing and their own vocal range
- Establish rudimentary sight reading skills

- Gain insight and knowledge into working as a group through musical practice
- Have a broader musical vocabulary
- Be more familiarized with their own voices and their vocal capacities.
- Know the basics of healthy singing (don't hurt yourself!)

Pacing / Duration

Number of total hours the unit will take in a typical workshop session(s). Please try to take into account transition time between instruction and hands on exercises if any prep is necessary.

- Break down of the class schedule example:
 - :30 min: Overview and context of shape note singing and music terminology.
 - :1 hour: hands on singing exercise and sight reading shape notation.
 - :20 min: Intro to MuseScore and choral sheet music templates.
 - :10 min: Wrap up – student reflections and thoughts

Materials Needed

For students+instructors:

Water bottle (for ease of singing).

(optional but encouraged) Laptop with MuseScore installed -

<https://musescore.org/en/download>

For instructors:

Sacred Harp book, Denson Edition

Vocabulary (example)

- notation: a series or system of written symbols used to represent numbers, amounts, or elements in something such as music or mathematics
- Shape notes: are a musical notation designed to facilitate congregational and community singing. The notation, introduced in late 18th century England, became a popular teaching device in American singing schools. Shapes were added to the note heads in written music to help singers find pitches within major and minor scales without the use of more complex information found in key signatures on the staff.
- Four part harmony: refers to music written for four voices, or for some other musical medium where the various musical parts can give a different note for each chord of the music.
- Class: the term used to refer to a group of people singing shape note hymns together.
- Treble/Alto/Tenor/Bass: the 4 singing ranges of shape note harmony.

Exercise Descriptions

Overview

The overview will begin cover the history and context of shape note singing and why it can help us understand working with different moving parts in a group to create a unified whole. Rudimentary musical concepts will be covered at this point such as notation, rhythm, rudimentary sight reading etc.

we will read through the shapes and talk about why the shapes in the context of music theory are meant to aid the singers in picking up sight reading faster than traditional notation.

(dur: 30 min)

Hands on vocal practice

This is a mini-syllabus of the hands-on portion. Instructor will run through a series of vocal exercises intended to warm up the participants as well as getting them to feel comfortable using their voices in the class. Eventually the exercise will lead to 4 part harmony and reading shape note hymn New Britain/Plenary/Africa.

A. Unison/Scales

The group will first practice together vocalizing tones in unison. They will then sing through a major scale and a minor scale to recognize the different qualities of the scales. The instructor will loosely conduct the group through these exercises so everyone keeps time together.

B. Intervals and Chords

The entire premise of shape notation is based on graphically recognizing intervals. In this exercise, participants will sing through a series of intervals (maj/min 2nds, maj/min 3rds, perfect 4ths and 5ths) in unison.

(dur: A+B 10 min)

C. Harmony and Parts

Instructor will explain vocal ranges and assist students in finding their range. At this point dividing the class up to Treble, Alto, Tenor and Bass sections. The arrangement of the room will be a hollow square: each side of the square is a section.

In the hollow square arrangement, the group will then sing in unison through each part of 'Restoration' out of the Sacred Harp hymnal. No need to try and follow the rhythm at this point. Loosely sing through the notes of each part as a group.

Then the entire group will sing through the tenor part following the rhythm as best as possible. Then the group will repeat the tenor part, but this time, the alto section will sing its part. On the next repeat, the treble section will be added and finally, the bass section will be added.

(dur: C 30-40 min)

MuseScore

In this phase, participants will be introduced to MuseScore, an open source application for notation so that if they are can demo original harmonies as well as write them out for others to read through.

(dur: 20 min)

Wrap up

a group discussion and reflection on the workshop

(dur: 10 min)

Student Reflections, Takeaways & Next Steps

A recommended next step for participants is to attend a regular shape note singing. They can find information about local singing in nyc here - <https://nycsacredharp.org/>

Post Session

References

Comprehensive information about history and practice of sacred harp singing can be found at <https://fasola.org/>

The Sacred Harp, Denson Book 1991 edition.