

# America's Oldest Indigenous Musical Tradition

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The inventiveness of the American mind has long been well documented. Mention of Eli Whitney, Robert Fulton, Henry Ford, the Wright Brothers, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, Frank Lloyd Wright, D. W. Griffith, and others immediately conjures up visions of their many developments in diverse arts and crafts.

The naming of other persons, lesser known but perhaps of equal or greater importance, does not bring such universal recognition. Examples of this category are Kentuckians (by birth or adoption) Matthew Sellers in aviation, William Kelly in steel making, Gideon Shyrock in architecture, Nathan Stubblefield in broadcasting, and Will S. Hays, Jonathan E. Spilman, and Anthony P. Heinrich in music.

Another such artisan was an eighteenth century Philadelphia printer named John Connelly. Although very little is known about him personally, an invention attributed to him has had almost as far reaching effects in its field as have many creations of these other individuals. Connelly's invention was in the field of music notation, and was designed to simplify the teaching of music, so that more teachers could teach more students how to read and sing more music more quickly than with standard music notation.

Today, in the world of music, his invention is known as shape notes, or, more specifically, fasola notation. In his day, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was more commonly called patent notation, as a federal patent was issued upon its development.

The basic idea was one of "Why didn't I think of it?" simplicity. Instead of having the heads of all musical notes look alike, Connelly used a simple geometric shape for the heads, utilizing a different shape for each syllable in the scale. Thus, by providing a visual device to help the aspiring musician, progress toward the goal of reading music was much swifter.

This printing, which is known as fasola notation, looks a little unusual to us today, mainly because it uses only four different shapes in the seven-note scale. However, this is quite plausible when we know that it was common in the eighteenth century, and late into the nineteenth century, to sing musical scales with only four syllables instead of the seven generally used now. Today, in singing a scale from bottom to top, we would sing "do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do." Then, one would sing "fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa." There were only four different sounds used, with three of them being used twice. Thus, Connelly needed just four shapes for his new note heads. (In a refinement of his development, which is another story, seven shapes began to be used in the nineteenth century when seven syllables came into vogue.) He chose a right triangle for fa, a circle (sometimes flattened) for sol, a square (sometimes slightly elongated) for la, and a diamond for mi.

By using these four shapes instead of the common round note head, a relative simplicity in reading music was obtained, through the visual and mental association of the shapes with their respective syllables and sounds. To illustrate the esteem in which this new notation was held, we need only note that the first published book using it was called **The Easy Instructor**. This book, in fasola notation, was so popular that it was published in numerous editions over a period of about thirty years.

However, it was other books which provided the impetus of longevity to fasola notation. Principal among these were Andrew Wyeth's **Repository of Sacred Music Part Second** and Ananias Davisson's **Kentucky Harmony**, both published about 1815. In these two books we find the first major unbroken thread to today's fasola music, for these were the first to combine the long-lived, universally-sung secular tunes—both "true" folk tunes and those composed in folk style—with well-known sacred texts and with fasola notation.

This combination of the secular folk tune (either part of the genuine oral tradition or composed in that style by native composers), the sacred text, and the fasola notation was looked on with disfavor by the newly urbanized and sophisticated eastern seaboard centers which to this point had ardently supported indigenous music. At the same time, settlement and development of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys and the great religious fervor of the southern camp meetings all provided, on the nation's frontiers, a receptive situation in which the music, the texts, and the notation were nurtured and came to be cherished.

It was a perfect case of need and fulfillment coinciding geographically, chronologically, and spiritually. Later, with the geographical, cultural, and economic isolation of the south as a result of the Civil War, this entire package of music, text, and notation became an inseparable part of the south. What had been scorned with disdain by the European-oriented sophisticate of the east was welcomed by the pragmatist of the frontier.

Fasola notation exists in an active form today in the use of two main books. They are the **Southern Harmony**, by William Walker, and the **Sacred Harp**, by Benjamin F. White and others. Legend tells us that Carolinians Walker and White, who had married the Golightly sisters, together compiled the **Southern Harmony**, and that it was entrusted to Walker to take north for printing. When it appeared in print with his name only on it as author, an irreparable rift between the brothers-in-law was created. Subsequently, the **Sacred Harp** appeared with White as the principal author.

In a way, White got belated revenge, for his **Sacred Harp**, in numerous editions, today is by far the more widely used of the two fasola books. However, in this very dissimulation, the tradition of which the **Sacred Harp** was an original part has become so diluted as to be virtually nonexistent and unrecognizable.

On the other hand, Walker's **Southern Harmony** is in limited use today, although over 600,000 copies of it were sold in a few short years after its publication. However, because it was sold in such tremendous

numbers and was so popular, it was not republished after 1854 until modern photo-offset editions were produced. Its proponents have stuck doggedly to the traditional methods of performance, and so tenacious has this been, even though not consciously done, that one can hear today superb examples of what our ancestors were singing, perhaps as much as four hundred years ago. Apparently the one place in the world where the **Southern Harmony** is being used with any degree of regularity is in Benton, seat of Marshall County, in the far western portion of the Commonwealth of Kentucky which is known as the Jackson Purchase.

Since 1884, an annual all-day singing using the **Southern Harmony** has taken place in Benton on the fourth Sunday in May. It was begun by James R. Lemon, who removed to Marshall County as a child when his family came from the Carolinas. Why Lemon chose the **Southern Harmony** for use at the Big Singing is unknown. It may have been because of its great popularity and near universal acceptance, or it may have been that his family knew Walker before migrating. Regardless, it was a fortuitous choice, for the combination of Big Singing and **Southern Harmony** is, like ham and eggs, inseparable.

The antiquity of the tunes in the **Southern Harmony** is without question, especially upon hearing them performed. Many of them are neither major nor minor in key, but are what is called modal, which is a sound unusual to modern ears. These modes, rather than keys, provide a prime clue to the age of the tunes, for although most of them were not written down until around 1800, the majority of composed music had lost this modality some two hundred years earlier. However, this music, whether in the true folk-oral tradition or newly composed in that style, had previously not been written or published, and thus retained the modal elements popular in the Renaissance.

It seems also to be without question that one reason for the fantastic sales success and continued popularity of the **Southern Harmony** is the very fact that this music was published versions of the oral tradition that had long been loved, assimilated, and bequeathed by successive generations. The ready acceptance of the tunes was implemented by the wide appeal of the texts. Although some texts were newly written, the majority of them originated in the writings of Isaac Watts and the Wesleys. Because the Psalm paraphrases and hymn versifications of these men had great popular appeal throughout English-speaking Protestantism, the texts, as the tunes, were widely known and readily accepted.

The notation likewise was timed perfectly to fill a great need. The reform ideas of Zwengli, Luther, and Calvin concerning the necessity of congregational participation in religious services were reinforced by the intense religious fervor and New Testament practices of the great camp meetings. However, for all to sing well, all must read music; to read music quickly, fasola was indispensable. Literally thousands of individuals became reasonably competent sight-singers through the use of shape notation.

This music thus served a dual purpose. With its secular tunes, it was taught in the ubiquitous secular Singing School. With its sacred texts, it was suitable for use in worship. The notation was thus a tool both of learning and of performance.

Because of the relative isolation of Benton until modern engineering and transportation bridged the four great rivers which nearly encompass it, the traditions of the Big Singing have been assiduously preserved, as have been the even earlier traditions represented in it. One can hear a modal folk tune harmonized in the stark voicings of the high Renaissance; perhaps a tune which was already several generations old in this country when it was first written down nearly two centuries ago. One can hear a hymn by Watts, written perhaps as early as 1707, which was already a century old when set to its even older tune. One can hear the singing of fa, sol, la, mi syllables, which are a pattern that can be traced at least to the sixteenth century. And one can hear these sung from a shape notation which will soon be two hundred years old.

In short, in the Big Singing in Benton, Kentucky, one can listen to—or, better, participate in—the Oldest Indigenous Musical Tradition in this nation. At a time when we are thinking of Bicentennial Celebrations, the Big Singing is a unique chain linking us not only to those early Federal days of this great nation, but also to even older traditions which even earlier Americans knew, practiced, and loved.

NORTHFIELD. C. M.

How long, dear Je - sus, oh! how long Shall that bright hour de - lay; Fly swiftly round, ye

Fly swift - ly round, ye wheels of time, Fly

Detailed description: This system contains three staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a common time signature. The middle staff is in treble clef with a common time signature. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a common time signature. The lyrics are written below the middle staff. The music consists of rhythmic patterns of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and repeat signs.

Fly swift - ly round, &c. And bring, &c.

wheels of time, And bring the pro - mised day, And bring the pro - - mised day.

swift - ly round, ye wheels of time. And bring, &c

Detailed description: This system contains three staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a common time signature. The middle staff is in treble clef with a common time signature. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a common time signature. The lyrics are written below the middle staff. The music continues with similar rhythmic patterns, ending with double bar lines on each staff.

This is one of the most famous tunes of the folk oral/composed American musical tradition. It is a fuge or fugging tune, so called for the imitative entries of the voices, and is in fasola notation. It is reproduced by permission from the 1966 reprint edition of the **Southern Harmony**.