

Small dedicated following keeps shape-note singing alive

November 5, 2010

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (RNS)—The archaic sounds that fill the historic former church sanctuary echo, hauntingly, like a whispering ghost from the past.

Inside the 1902 building that once housed Second Presbyterian Church, the elaborate archways bounce back the sound of [Sacred Harp singing](#).

Tim Cook leads a class for shape-note singing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The ancient music is based on different shaped notes and is sung a cappella. (PHOTO/RNS/Mark Almond/The Birmingham News)

It's a style of music that once dominated rural evangelical religion, in the days before the Civil War and church organs, when a capella singing was the norm. It's never entirely died out, in part because of people like Tim Cook.

"It was once common throughout the South," said Cook, a shape-note singing aficionado who brought his lessons to the former church that's now part of the University of Alabama at Birmingham campus.

Cook's group of more than a dozen interested singers sat facing Cook as the song leader, holding wide-page hymnbooks filled with notes in the shapes of open and solid squares, diamonds, triangles and ovals.

Throughout the 1800s, the mournful harmonious sounds of a capella shape-note singing reverberated in churches throughout the South. It's now experiencing a renaissance of sorts in Sacred Harp songbooks and

conventions. But while Sacred Harp singing has surged, the more-complicated seven-shape-note Alabama Christian Harmony singing struggles to stay alive.

“We certainly don’t want it to die out,” said Emily Creel of Burleson, Ala., who carries on her family’s generations-long love affair with the music. “We do it to promote the heritage and tradition of the music.”

The Internet has helped create a revival for shape-note singing, connecting singers and bringing them together for events across the country.

[YHUfHNEZDPc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHUfHNEZDPc)

Cook says having the notes in different shapes makes it easier to read and sing the music in four-part harmony.

Participants sing the actual note sounds first: “fa” for triangle shape notes, “sol” for oval, “la” for square and “mi” for diamond-shape notes. Then they sing it with the lyrics.

The combination of archaic harmonies and old-style lyrics can be jolting to outsiders. To others, it’s addictive. Many of the shape-note songs were written by English composers such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, set to old English dance tunes and carried from churches in rural England by colonial settlers.

The tradition was carried to the South, where many churches continued the shape-note a capella singing of the hymns with complex harmonies. The songs may have archaic, cryptic names such as “Old Hundred,” better known in many hymnbooks as “The Doxology.” “Amazing Grace” appears in shape-note books as “New Britain.”

When pianos and organs became common in churches, a capella singing began to disappear, along with the complicated harmonies in the old hymnbooks.

Cook took up shape-note singing after moving from Michigan to Atlanta in 1995, and now he teaches it and leads singings.

“I’ve always like to sing a capella, four-part harmony,” Cook said. “When I heard this the first time, I said, ‘That is the voice of heaven.’”

—*Greg Garrison writes for The Birmingham News in Birmingham, Ala.*