

SACRED HARP HARMONY: A PART-WRITING PRIMER FOR SHAPE-NOTE HYMNODY

Robert T. Kelley

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In our undergraduate music theory courses we teach students a set of procedures to emulate the composition style of the European composers who wrote tonal music from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. The problem of harmony that we shall explore here involves an alternative repertoire of tonal music that obviously does not follow the procedures that we teach in tonal music theory classes. The body of music to which I refer is the American hymn-writing tradition begun by the “First New-England School” led by William Billings (1746–1800) and continuing to this day in the shape-note singing community centered around the most popular current singing-school class book, *The Sacred Harp*. Follow along with Figure 1 as I play a 1968 recording of the hymn tune called “Villulia” sung by traditional Southern shape-note singers. (Warning: These folks aren’t classically-trained musicians and they don’t sing with any restraint. They also sing in keys of convenience, usually lower than the notated pitch level.)

Villulia, 8,7.

“Because of the blindness of their heart.” -- Eph. 4:18.

F# Minor John Newton, 1779.

J.M. Day, 1850.

1. "Mer-cy, O Thou Son of Da-vid," Thus poor blind Bar-ti-meus prayed, "Oth-ers by Thy grace are sav-ed, Now to me af-ford Thine aid."

2. Mon-ey was not what he wanted, Though by beg-ging used to live; But he asked, and Je-sus granted Alms which none but He could give.

3. "Lord, re-move this grievous blindness. Let mine eyes be-hold the day!" Straight he saw, and, won by kind-ness, Fol-lowed Je-sus in the way.

Figure 1: The hymn tune “Villulia”, as published on p. 56 of *The Sacred Harp*

- Villulia Recording

To shape-note singers this tune is just another enjoyable song to sing, but it immediately strikes the ears of one who has been teaching undergraduate harmony courses for many years as extraordinary. Note the abounding parallel octaves and fifths and incomplete triads, especially

the two moments where all parts land on an octave “E” that is approached by two pairs of parallel octaves. This is not the kind of part-writing that I advocate in my sophomore theory class. The question I would like to address today is whether one can formulate a set of part-writing procedures for writing in this style.

Thus far, ethnomusicologists such as Charles Seeger and Kiri Miller have written about shape-note singing; composers such as Aaron Copland, Alice Parker, William Duckworth, Walter Hartley, and Donald Grantham have brought shape-note tunes to wider exposure through their works; and musicologists such as Dorothy Horn and Wallace McKenzie have begun to address issues of harmony in this repertoire. Their approach, however, has largely been one of comparison with European tonal styles, rather than defining the idiom of shape-note harmony in its own terms. Table 1 provides an example of this approach as taken by Seeger (1940), who lists five distinguishing characteristics of shape-note harmony, in the form of part-writing rules that shape-note tunesmiths violate.

Table 1: Part-Writing Rules Broken in Shape-Note Harmony, according to Seeger 1940

1. parallel fifths, octaves, and unisons
2. parallel fourths between outer voices or between upper voices without a third in the bass
3. unprepared and unresolved dissonances
4. cadences on $\frac{8}{4}$
5. crossing of voices

All of these breaches of “proper counterpoint” appear in the famous shape-note tune “Wondrous Love”, given in Figure 2 as the tune appears in *The Sacred Harp*. Seeger introduces his discussion of shape-note harmony with an analysis of this tune, but uses the original three-voice version of the tune found in many nineteenth-century tunebooks such as *The Southern Harmony*, *The Harp of Columbia*, and early editions of *The Sacred Harp*.¹ In Figure 2, I have reproduced the four-voice setting (alto by Seaborn M. Denson, 1911) because today I shall outline a method for writing shape-note music in four voices.² Like many “folk hymns” in nineteenth-century shape-note tunebooks, “Wondrous Love” is an arrangement of an English folk tune. This tune was popular in the eighteenth century as “The Ballad of Captain Kidd”, but it was originally entitled “Coming Down”.

¹The three-voice setting of “Wondrous Love” was arranged by James Christopher, an associate of William Walker from the Upstate of South Carolina, and the alto part was added later.

²Horn (1958) discusses shape-note harmony as a form of quartal harmony based on Yasser 1932, and opines that this form of harmony prefers to be presented in three-voice settings rather than four.

Wondrous Love. 12,9,6,6,12,9.

"A man that hath friends . . ." -- Pro. 18:24.

F Minor Mead's General Selection, 1811.

James Christopher, 1840.

1. What won - drous love is this! oh, my soul! oh, my soul! What won - drous love is this! oh, my soul! What won - drous love is this

2. When I was sink - ing down, sinking down, sinking down, When I was sink - ing down, sinking down, When I was sink - ing down

3. To God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing; To God and to the Lamb, I will sing; To God and to the Lamb,

4. And when from death I'm free I'll sing on, I'll sing on, And when from death I'm free I'll sing on, And when from death I'm free

That caused the Lord of bliss To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

Be - neath God's right-eous frown, Christ laid a - side His crown for my soul, for my soul, Christ laid a - side His crown for my soul.

Who is the great I Am, While mil - lions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing; While mil - lions join the theme, I will sing.

I'll sing and joy - ful be, thro' - out e - ter - ni - ty I'll sing on, I'll sing on, thro' - out e - ter - ni - ty I'll sing on.

Figure 2: "Wondrous Love", also known as "Coming Down" and "Captain Kid's Farwel to the Seas"

- Wondrous Love Recording

Notice the parallel fifths found throughout this tune, especially in the tenor and bass in the last three measures. The (added) alto voice frequently moves in parallel octaves with another voice (for example, with the bass and tenor in measure four, and with the treble in the last two measures). In the first two measures, there is not a single complete triad. In fact, each chord has only two different notes up until the last chord in measure three. Notice also the $\frac{8}{4}$ chord on the downbeat of measure two, an apparent $\frac{6}{4}$ chord with a missing third that defies the categories of second-inversion triads to which we restrict our undergraduate theory students' part-writing exercises. Even though this song is written in natural minor, it is traditionally sung in the Dorian mode to avoid the diminished fifth between G and D \flat on the second quarter-note of the antepenultimate measure and the corresponding spot on the first line. The tenor part, which carries the melody in all traditional shape-note music, is the only voice that has the note D in it at all, and the note A \flat is entirely absent from the melody part. If you look back at "Villulia" in Figure 1, you will find this same gapped scale in use, with the melody of that tune being entirely pentatonic. The use of gapped scales is indeed a prevalent feature of shape-note music.

We have gleaned a good amount of helpful information from analysis of what is "against the rules" in a traditional nineteenth-century shape-note tune. We might even have a somewhat better sense of how to compose a piece in this style as a result. For instance, studying these two tunes shows that using a pentatonic or other type of gapped "folk" scale will help to emulate the style of this music. We also can conclude that the traditional restrictions on the use of second-inversion triads and parallel voice motion do not apply to this music. Indeed, it is easy to look through any nineteenth-century shape-note tunebook and point out all of the ways in which the music "violates the rules". However, in many regards these stylistic observations have made the task of composing in this style even less well-defined. For example, parallel perfect intervals seem to abound in this music, but when is it appropriate and when is it not appropriate to use them? When should complete triads be used, and when should a note be left out? What are the principles of chord progression for this music, and what chords are to be used in particular situations? While these questions may be answered through further theoretical study, luckily, we can also refer to the writings of authorities within the Sacred Harp community, including a treatise on composition in the style of *The Sacred Harp* written by a shape-note composer.

In the 1936 Denson Revision of *The Sacred Harp*, Paine Denson calls the harmonic language of *The Sacred Harp* "dispersed harmony" and further defines this term to mean "free moving".³ Jackson (1933), however, defines dispersed harmony to mean that each part must be written on a separate staff (presumably because the parts are "free moving").⁴ McKenzie (1989), along with many current Sacred Harp composers, defines dispersed harmony as "a musical texture with many open fifths and fourths; the notes of the intervals are dispersed, *spread apart*, and

³Denson 1936, p. 21.

⁴Jackson 1933, p. 97.

sound that way”.⁵ There is thus a great deal of diversity in how people within the Sacred Harp community use the term “dispersed harmony”, but all of these definitions touch on aspects of the harmony of this repertoire that we have discussed. We gain a good bit more clarity on the term from its use in the writings of Sacred Harp singer and composer A. Marcus Cagle.

Marcus Cagle was the preeminent composer of Sacred Harp music throughout much of the twentieth century. At the end of his life, Cagle assembled a manuscript on what he called “Sacred Harp harmony” but never completed the work of publishing it.⁶ Malone (2008) has studied the treatise and its background and influence and presented his work at the 2008 joint meeting of the Society for Music Theory and the American Musicological Society in Nashville, and I thank him for directing me to the location of this rare document. Cagle coined the term “Sacred Harp harmony” to describe the unique style of the music in the *Sacred Harp* tunebook. Sacred Harp singers define “modern harmony” or “close harmony” as the opposite of Cagle’s “Sacred Harp harmony” or “dispersed harmony”. “Modern harmony” thus includes any classical music and European-based church hymnody, and especially Gospel music.

Cagle states that “part writing in Sacred Harp harmony contains both the dispersed-chord and the close-chord arrangement”, thus relegating the term “dispersed harmony” to a simple description of a chord as being in open spacing, rather than close spacing. He then offers this rather odd and intriguing definition of a dispersed chord: “When the alto is *written* above the tenor, it is called ‘dispersed’ harmony. When the next member of the chord below the tenor is given to the alto, it is called ‘close’ harmony. Also, when the alto skips the next member of the chord below the tenor and the treble is given the note skipped, it is called ‘dispersed’ harmony.”⁷ On the same page, Cagle then gives the examples provided in Figure 3 of dispersed and close chords. Cagle’s description of open spacing seems to be lacking, but if we inspect his illustration, we shall discover that Cagle in fact knew precisely what he was talking about.

It is common practice in Sacred Harp singing for the tenor part (which carries the main melody) to be sung in octaves by men and women, and the same is done with the top line, which is therefore called the treble part, rather than the soprano. Let us now examine each of the dispersed chords in Figure 3, keeping in mind this octave doubling of the two high-voice parts. In the first chord, regardless of in what octave the alto note is sung, it is clearly written above the tenor note on the treble-clef staff. Cagle tells us that this causes a chord to be dispersed. In the way that this chord would be sung by Sacred Harp singers, the basses would sing Eb3, the male tenors would also sing Eb3, the male trebles would sing Bb3, the female tenors would sing Eb4, the altos would sing G4, and the female trebles would sing Bb4. As we do in European classical tonal music, we disregard the bass voice when measuring chord spacing.

⁵McKenzie (1989), p. 158, emphasis his.

⁶Ruth Denson Edwards mentions Cagle’s treatise in her introduction to the 1971 edition of *The Sacred Harp*, calling Cagle an “authority” on dispersed harmony.

⁷Cagle 1968, “p. 8”, emphasis mine.

Illustration

E \flat Major A. M. Cagle

The illustration shows a musical score for E \flat Major in 4/4 time, consisting of four staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass). The score is divided into eight measures. The first measure is labeled 'Dispersed' and shows a triad with the alto voice skipping the chord tone below the tenor. Measures 2-4 are labeled 'Close' and show triads with no chord tones missing among the upper three voices. Measures 5-8 are labeled 'Dispersed' and show triads where the alto voice is written above the tenor voice. The bass line consists of a simple harmonic accompaniment.

Figure 3: Cagle’s (1968) illustration of dispersed and close harmony

Among the voices other other than the bass, there is a missing chord tone between E \flat 3 and B \flat 3. The chord is therefore dispersed. In chords 2–4, there is no chord tone missing among the upper three voices as sung with the tenor and treble in octaves. The fifth chord shows us what Cagle meant when he said that open spacing results when the alto skips the chord tone below the tenor, but the treble sings that note. It seems that we need to add to his statement that, when the chord member below the tenor is given to the treble, it is to be written above the tenor on the treble-clef staff for the chord to be dispersed. Chords 7 and 8 are also dispersed because the alto is written above the tenor. But chord 6 shows that when the alto is given the same chord tone as the tenor, the chord is also dispersed. Further, if we experiment with other chord voicings, we would discover that in Cagle’s definition of dispersed chord the words “treble” and “tenor” can be swapped and the definition will still be correct. Cagle thus did not adequately describe what he meant by “dispersed harmony”, but by looking at his examples and studying his words we can determine his meaning. It should be noted that Sacred Harp music contains an abundance of dispersed chords, since any incomplete triad is, by this definition, dispersed.⁸

We can see from this example that studying Cagle’s treatise has been somewhat helpful in formulating a composition procedure, but not as helpful as one might hope. The page of Cagle’s manuscript that we have just discussed is possibly the most enlightening, but shows a lack of accurate generalization of the concepts that Cagle clearly understood. Sadly, throughout his treatise Cagle had difficulty putting into words why he chose to distribute the chord tones to individual voices in the manner in which he did so, instead resorting to simply giving a list of what scale degrees appear in each voice. Further, Cagle’s description of how to use each of the diatonic triads is not based on what chords are common and uncommon in Sacred Harp

⁸This contradicts McKenzie’s dismissal of this definition of dispersed harmony, but also embraces his notion of dispersed harmony as a preponderance of open fifths within a larger definition of dispersed harmony.

harmony, but rather comes from trying to structure a description of his composition procedure around a theory of “modern harmony” that includes all possible diatonic triads in its standard chord vocabulary.⁹ Cagle’s treatise is thus illuminating only to a certain point.

Cagle was an active member of the Sacred Harp community and heavily involved in the sub-community of shape-note composers, which included Hugh McGraw, editor-in-chief of several revisions of *The Sacred Harp* and composer of eight tunes in the current revision of the tunebook, and Raymond Hamrick, whose prolific output of close to 100 songs is currently being compiled into a tunebook called *The Georgian Harmony*. These composers frequently sent each other their compositions by mail for commentary and criticism and worked together on improving each other’s music. In the heyday of shape-note singing schools, composition was frequently taught by the itinerate singing master as part of the education of the more advanced singers in the class. This tradition of teaching Sacred Harp composition has been rekindled at Camp Fasola, a 4-day singing school taught by multiple teachers each summer in rural Alabama. I have gleaned a good deal of the composition procedure that I am about to present to you from these classes.

Table 2 outlines a composition procedure based on traditional shape-note composers’ methodologies. (I present this outline to students when I teach composition in shape-note singing school.) First, it is essential to note that Sacred Harp music should be written using a successive composition method. Simultaneous composition is possible, but the focus should be on good melodies in all four parts rather than proper chord structure. Using an appropriate melody for folk-influenced harmonies will help greatly in producing the right style. A good melody fits standard hymn meters and is largely pentatonic, although a diatonic melody will also work.¹⁰ The process of deciding what chord should accompany each melody note needs to be accomplished while writing the bass part. (We shall discuss the chord usage outlined in Table 3 shortly.) The bass part can sing any chord tone without regard to the resulting chord inversion, but the “non-pentatonic” scale degrees (i.e. $\hat{4}$ and $\hat{7}$ in major, $\hat{2}$ or $\hat{3}$ and $\hat{6}$ in minor) should be avoided except as non-harmonic tones. The only time when the chord inversion that is used is important is on the last bass note in the song, which must always be $\hat{1}$. The same procedure is followed for choosing the treble note: Good melody trumps good chord doubling, and non-pentatonic scale degrees should be used sparingly. Voice crossing is encouraged, rather than discouraged, especially in the tenor and treble voices. Likewise, the alto should have a good melody. The alto, as we have just seen when examining Cagle’s treatise, has a more important role to play than the other voices in determining the chord spacing. Dispersed (open spacing) chords are encouraged.

⁹Cagle used Pace 1916 as a model for his discussion of musical fundamentals. To be sure, in Cagle’s own compositions he uses all of the diatonic triads much more freely than most other Sacred Harp composers.

¹⁰The number of accidentals found in *The Sacred Harp* is very small. Included are a small number of raised leading tones in minor songs (which are often ignored by singers) several V/V chords, two V/vi chords (both in tunes by Lowell Mason), and one apparent V7/IV chord where the flat on $\hat{7}$ is usually ignored by singers.

Table 2: Procedure for Composing a Shape-Note Tune

1. Write or borrow a melody.
 - (a) The melody should fit a standard hymn meter or a particular text.
 - (b) Good melodies are often pentatonic or at least emphasize the pentatonic scale with only passing tones on the other two scale degrees.
 - (c) Binary form is a useful way of structuring a melody.
2. Write a bass part.
 - (a) Decide what chord to use for each melody note. (See Table 3.)
 - (b) Choose the chord tone that makes the most *melodic* sense so that the bass part is enjoyable to sing.
 - (c) Mostly use the non-pentatonic tones ($\hat{4}$ and $\hat{7}$ in major, $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{6}$ in minor) only as passing tones.
 - (d) The bass should stay mostly below all other parts, but may cross above the tenor occasionally (if the tenor is running low.)
 - (e) The bass must end on the keynote or tonic pitch.
3. Add a treble part.
 - (a) Choose the chord tone that makes the most *melodic* sense so that the treble part is enjoyable to sing.
 - (b) The treble part should sit mostly in the upper part of the same range that the melody covers. When the melody ascends to the upper register, the treble should cross below the tenor so that there is a “weaving” effect between these two voices.
4. Add an alto part.
 - (a) Choose the chord tone that makes the most *melodic* sense so that the alto part is enjoyable to sing.
 - (b) Also consider chord spacing when writing the alto part. Your harmony should include a substantial number of open, or dispersed, chords. The alto part is crucial in opening up space between the voices.
5. “Grade the run”.
 - (a) Check for discords (adjacent scale degrees within a chord).
 - (b) Circle the chord roots and consider changing the “unusual” chords.

Table 3: Chords to Use in Shape-Note Composition

Major Key	I	ii	V*	vi
Minor Key	i*	III	v	VII*

*Omit the chord’s third

A dispersed chord can be created by finding the empty chord tone among the *four* notes sung by the tenor and treble parts and consciously not filling it with the alto note. Also, as Cagle observed, the alto can literally fill in a missing chord tone between the female tenor and treble parts, and the chord will still be dispersed because there will still be a gap between the male tenor and treble parts. But more important than chord spacing, chord inversion, chord choice, chord completion, parallel voice leading, or even a discord in the music, is melodic interest.

Table 3 gives a list of chords that should be used almost to the exclusion of all others in the Sacred Harp style. The chords marked with an asterisk are commonly left as open fifths, but leaving out other chord tones is also common and should be done whenever the melodic lines demand it. (Sometimes it nevertheless makes a better melody in one of the parts to complete the triad.) Note that the chord tones that are generally left out, and the diatonic triads that are not often used are based around the non-pentatonic scale degrees. Specifically, most V chords in major should be presented as open fifths (or fourths). Likewise, one should omit the third in tonic and subtonic chords in minor. The subtonic triad frequently substitutes for the dominant chord in minor, but not always. The dominant triad in a minor key is seen in both its minor and major (raised leading tone) forms. Seventh chords are not generally used in Sacred Harp harmony, since they are seen as discords. Any chord can progress to any other chord in this style, but authentic cadences should usually be harmonized with V (with no third) to I in major keys, and VII (with no third) to i (with no third), or (major or minor) V to i (with no third) in minor keys. Finally, the first chord in all songs should be tonic, even if the melody note is $\hat{5}$. This is because in practice the key for the music is always given using a tonic chord.

Before leaving the procedure in Table 2, I should mention the system that Hugh McGraw and other Sacred Harp composers use for finding discords and other problems in their music. Figure 4, which we shall discuss in more detail shortly, demonstrates this analysis notation. Simply write down a vertically aligned list of the scale degree numbers contained in each chord. If the list contains two numbers whose difference is 1, you have a discord in that particular verticality. Scanning through Figure 4, we can quickly see that there is a discord between $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ on beat 3 of measure 7, when the word “like” is being sung. There is a brief passing discord on the “and” of 3 of the next measure, immediately following the repeat dots. Two measures later, there is a discord on beat 3 (on the word “but”), and the following measure has discords on the first and last chords of the measure. One last discord appears two measures later on the “and” of 3 (again on the word “but”). Sacred Harp composers call this analysis technique “grading the run”. I use this technique in my own writing, and I also like to circle the root of each chord so that I can examine my chord usage and compare it to the chart in Table 3. Despite the apparent lack of attention in shape-note music to chord inversion, I also take note of the inversion of each chord when grading the run. I shall return to this topic in just a moment.

New Britain. C.M.

"And David the king came and sat before the Lord and said, Who am I, O Lord?" -- 1 Chron. 17:16. "According unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." -- Ps. 51:1.

C Major John Newton, 1789.

Columbian Harmony, 1829, arr. William Walker

Figure 4: “New Britain” as arranged by William Walker

- New Britain Recording

Let us now explore the general characteristics of this style that may help bolster the part-writing procedure that I have outlined. In the four-part chorale-style part writing that is taught in music theory classrooms around the world, we can answer the students’ question “Why do we have to avoid parallel fifths and octaves?” by explaining the desire of tonal composers to make the music sound contrapuntal rather than like magadized monophony. Harmony is more interesting to play or sing when the voices are perceived as being independent, rather than just replicating the melodic line of another part. It is true that one can still have functional harmony when using barre chords on a guitar or when changing chords on the piano by simply shifting your left hand to a new position (“Louie, Louie”-style or like “Lean on Me”). While these chords still possess at least some of their tonal function, there is no real melodic interest in singing just one voice of these chords, since one would simply be singing along with the bass line. Our exploration of shape-note hymnody today clearly shows that contrapuntal and melodic interest are of great importance in both traditions. The contrapuntal nature of the European tonal style evolved as a reaction against a magadized style of parallel organum. The singing-school tradition and shape-note hymnody also evolved as a replacement for a magadized monophonic singing tradition, but did not assert as violent an overthrow of the droning sounds of the tradition of lined-out hymns brought to America by Scots-Irish immigrants. More information on this history and its influence on Sacred Harp harmony can be found in the work of Tallmadge (1975), Sutton (1982), and Norton (2003), who investigate the relationship between Tallmadge’s “Folk organum” and shape-note hymnody.

How, then, without a restriction on the use of parallel voice leading, does Sacred Harp

harmony maintain a sense of polyphony, that “free-moving” quality so highly valued in the writings of Sacred Harp singers? In shape-note music, voice independence is asserted not through avoidance of parallel perfect intervals, but rather by frequent voice crossing, independence of the rhythm of text delivery among the parts, and independence of melodic rhythm. There are a few plain hymns in the Sacred Harp where all parts always move with the same rhythm, but in general, rhythmic independence of the parts is prevalent in this music and explains why this music is always printed in open score. Among the old psalm-tunes, folk hymns, and camp-meeting spirituals in *The Sacred Harp*, the favorite type of song among many shape-note singers is the fuguing tune, a genre born of the American singing-school movement begun in New England in the 18th century. As each part enters one after another, the texts and rhythms overlap, and the voices interweave and create just as much voice independence as any rigorously composed work of 18th-century counterpoint.

Another general characteristic of this music was brought to my attention by Shaw (2009). Shaw, after having studied this music for some time, attended his first Sacred Harp singing and was struck by a sense that certain chords, usually the unclassifiable $\frac{6}{4}$ chords that appear frequently in this music, achieve a certain “transcendent” quality when they are sung by traditional singers. I decided to pay attention to this phenomenon whenever I was participating in a shape-note singing, and concluded based on my own intuitive sense of sonority that for me these “transcendent chords” are not always $\frac{6}{4}$ chords, but are often various types of “chords of the sixth” and can also be enhanced by the addition of a discordant element. It would extend well beyond the time that I have been allotted to speak with you today to fully investigate and categorize these, but I would like to spend just a moment looking back at Figure 4. In the early 1830s, William Walker of Spartanburg, South Carolina compiled one of the most influential collections of shape-note hymnody of all time, *The Southern Harmony*. In addition to presenting for the first time the folk hymn “Wondrous Love” and what became the definitive harmonization for many folk hymns and spirituals, this tunebook included a folk hymn called “New Britain”. This is not the first time that this world-famous melody had been set down in print, but the folk song’s origins before its first publication in the obscure Tennessee tunebook called *The Columbian Harmony* are lost in the proverbial mists of time.¹¹ William Walker, however, was responsible for arranging the tune the way it appears in Figure 4 and first pairing the text of John Newton’s poem “Faith’s Review and Expectation” with this tune. Walker added the alto part that you see in Figure 4 about 30 years after writing the three-part arrangement found in *The Southern Harmony*. We can therefore credit “Singin’ Billy” Walker, author of the *Southern Harmony*, with the fortuitous pairing of text and music that made “Amazing Grace” into one of the most beloved hymns of our time.

In Figure 4, the chords that I would classify as “transcendent” include the two first-inversion

¹¹Turner and Collins (2002) conjectures that the tune is of Scottish origins.

vi chords that appear where we expect tonic chords on the downbeats of measures 2 and 4, and the tonic $\hat{6}_4$ chords on the downbeats of measures 10 and 11, on the words “lost” and “now”. It is the “now” chord that I find the most intriguing. As you listen to this recording, listen to how the discordant $\hat{6}$ added by the alto part to this already “transcendent” $\hat{6}_4$ chord creates a moment where purely the sonority overshadows all other aspects of our enjoyment of this music.

- New Britain Recording

It is not just any type of dissonance that will create such a “juicy” chord that works so well within the idiom. In folk-influenced American music, the continuum from consonance to dissonance can be quantified by 1) open fifths and octaves being the perfect consonances, 2) thirds and sixths being rich and full, their imperfect consonance detracting from McKenzie’s “dispersed harmony”, 3) the discordant notes of the pentatonic scale being the “transcendent” mild dissonances, 4) the harsher diatonic dissonances being reserved for passing and accessory tones, 5) and the chromatic dissonances being almost entirely absent from the repertoire. As much as I relish the discord in “New Britain”,¹² the editorial committee of *The Sacred Harp* in the 1960s decided to “correct” the discord, changing the strident $\hat{6}$ in Walker’s alto part to a consonant $\hat{5}$. In fact, most shape-note singers do not appreciate these discords in the way that I do, and I have not found any evidence that shape-note singers enjoy singing any of these “transcendent” chords in the way that Shaw and I do. I also have no evidence that composers were seeking some ecstatic quality when choosing a second-inversion triad to harmonize a given melody note, and self-examination suggests that I may be finding sonorous bliss in these moments simply because the chords are unexpected and defy the norms of classical tonality that I have studied for so long.

However, these so-called “transcendent chords of the sixth” are (to my reckoning) more common in the work of Marcus Cagle than in many other Sacred Harp composers’ music. There is some evidence in Cagle’s treatise that he was conscious of this, having studied Pace’s *Modern Harmony*. Cagle says “Chords are strongest with the fundamental tone in the bass, but to give variety a chord may be inverted and the third or the fifth used in the bass while the fundamental is used in some other part.”¹³ Cagle’s song “Faith and Hope” is reproduced in Figure 5, and I have “graded the run” for this song. Observe the many discords on the top brace of music, especially the clash between $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{3}$ on beat 3 of measure 4, and the “transcendent” $\hat{6}_4$ chords throughout the third full measure of the bottom brace as I play the recording of this composition.

¹²This same discord occurs in a number of Sacred Harp songs, including p. 285t “Arnold” and p. 30t “Love Divine”, where the discordant $\hat{6}$ is the highest note in the treble part, making it an especially ecstatic-sounding chord.

¹³Cagle 1968, “p. 6”.

Faith and Hope. C.M.

"... when he hath tried me ..." -- Job 23:10.

A. M. Cagle, 1959

F Major

1. What shall I do, shall I lie down and sink in deep de - spair? Will He for-ev - er wear a frown nor hear my fee - ble prayer?

2. When I can read my ti - tle clear to mansions in the sky; I'll bid farewell to ev - 'ry fear and wipe my weeping eyes.

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

No, He will put His strength in me; He knows the way I've strolled; And when I'm tried suf-fi - cient-ly, I shall come forth as gold, gold.

When we've been there ten thou - sand years, bright shin - ing as the sun, We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first be - gun, gun.

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

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Figure 5: Cagle's "Faith and Hope", p. 462 in *The Sacred Harp*

- Faith and Hope Recording

One of the main reasons that the fasola tradition never died out in the twentieth century is that each revision of *The Sacred Harp* has featured new compositions in the old style by living composers. These composers learned the style by finding mentors to critique their work and help them improve their melodies. It is my hope that, by setting down guidelines for composing in this style, not only will new composers feel encouraged to write in this style, but also the door will be opened to more scholarly analytical and musicological study of shape-note music. The compositional method outlined here is thus only a first step in developing an understanding of the harmonic language and compositional tradition of American shape-note hymnody.

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