

When I Can Read My Title Clear

Arranged by Alice Parker

Shape Note tune Pisgah. Text: Isaac Watts.

Lawson-Gould Music Publishers LG51340



Background Info:

- From the early American Sacred Harp singing tradition, early 18th century
- Text: Isaac Watts “Hymns and Spiritual Songs” from 1707
- Tune: PISGAH from “Kentucky Harmony” 1817, attributed to Joseph C. Lowry

The Sacred Harp is a living tradition of four-part acapella hymn singing. Begun in New England more than 200 years ago, the tradition took root in the southern United States and has been sung continuously ever since. Sacred Harp singing now occurs regularly in many communities outside of the South and is experiencing a rejuvenation and renaissance. The tradition is characterized by its full-voiced vigor, democratic participatory ethic, unique harmonies and system of musical notation, eclectic religious imagery, and strong sense of historic continuity and community.

Analysis

Form:

- Strophic, the four 4-bar phrases mirror iambic octameter flow of text
- Verse 1, m.1-16: SATB, no divisi, soprano melody throughout, ATB accompaniment lines
 - Laying out initial melody, harmonic & rhythmic steadiness, straightforward
- V2, m.17-32: TTB (8bars, melody in T2) texture, then SATB (8bars, melody again in Sop; ATB same harmony, but somewhat altered accompaniment lines)
 - Varying texture adds
- V3, m. 33-48: SSA (8bars, melody in A) texture, then TTB (8bars, melody in Bass); accompaniment lines (S1/S2 & T1/T2 respectively)
- V4, m.49-64, SATB, melody passes between alto & soprano w/B&T again with different accompaniment lines but similar harmonies)
- Reinforces the steadiness and assurance of heaven expressed in the text by regular phrase length, meter, and form

Melody:

- Firmly in A major, no accidentals, range from low ‘mi’ to high ‘sol’ with nothing greater than a third leap (except do-sol movement in final measure)
- Pentatonic melody (not using ‘fa’ or ‘ti’) with repetition for emphasis on ‘do,’ ‘la,’ and high ‘sol’ – these repeated notes are anacrusic and propel the singer toward cadence points
- Prominent third skips: mi-do-la, do-mi-sol
- Repetition of melodic phrases unifies the entire 16 bar melody, reassuring the singer to confidently live in the promise of God to the faithful

Harmony:

- The harmonic center is A major, with no accidentals in any voice part – steadiness, reassurance of where we are, what we’re here for
- Progression of A – f#m – A64 – V, A – f#m – D – E – A also happens in every 16 bar phrase, regardless of voicing
- While the melody is pentatonic, the accompanying vocal lines do sing ‘fa’ and ‘ti’, so IV and V chords do occur

Rhythm:

- Very regular and robust throughout – signifies the conviction of those singing it
 - Quarter, quarter, 4 eighths rhythm (and slight variants)
- 2/2 meter in regular tune throughout as well, however in this arrangement, Parker adds a 3/2 bar in the middle of each 8 bar phrase – allows space for tune (and singers!) to breathe
- Same rhythmic pattern of melody in every verse, regardless of voicing
- In final verse, accompaniment lines employ more running 8th notes, increasing overall intensity and driving toward the exuberant final phrase
- Cadences are identical melodically and rhythmically
 - Such repetition creates an engaging and spirited atmosphere in which to praise God and sing in community

Texture:

- Varies little within each verse itself, but distinctly from verse to verse (see Form)
- Melody is placed on top (V1, part of V2, part of V4), middle (part of V2, part of V4), and bottom (V3) – adds variety without changing too much
- Strong SATB, TTB, and SSA blocks of sound in presentation of each verse underscores the idea of communal singing and worshipping

Timbre:

- Strong and firm throughout – possibly “hard voice” singing style of Early American shape note hymn singing appropriate: full throated tone, not “trained” (see Background information)

Expression:

- Slight variation of dynamics from verse to verse, generally from *mf* to *f* for V1-3, with V4 beginning *mp* and dipping down to *p* before a strong crescendo to *f* in final phrase
 - Dynamics aren’t directly tied to text, but rather serve to build intensity to final phrase
- Tempo marking of “lightly, dancing” can also be used for expressive style, but beyond this, there are no other expressive markings
- Parker leaves the expression up to the performers, who will undoubtedly shape phrases according to contour and natural stress/unstress points
 - Perhaps the lack of expressive marking is to remain authentic – this tune was to be sung by congregants, lay people, and without pretense

Heart Statement

Steadfast assurance in heaven is manifested through the lively pentatonic melody and sturdy rhythmic repetition to create the heart of “When I Can Read My Title Clear.”

Introducing the Piece

- Bring in the title for my vehicles & show images of Packers ownership share and Land title
- TPS – People frame these or sometimes even keep them in a vault. What is so important?
- Arrange singers in hollow square, short primer on fa-so-la shape notes

Skill Outcome: Students will sing phrases with emphasis, diction, and direction appropriate to this genre.

Strategies

- Speak text w/o pitch or rhythm – determine cadence & seek familiarity (ie. Shakespeare)
 - Underline stressed words
 - Volunteers to read text aloud & discuss choices
 - Choose key words in text
 - Speak text in pairs, with emphasis on key words (& volunteer for class to analyze)
- Sing unison melody. Where specifically can diction become muddled? Compile list & generate transferable concepts.
 - Melismatic passages: separation, breath energy, diaphragm activity
 - Use warm-ups created by me for short melismas.
 - 1 day: rehearse all melismatic passages consecutively, section by section, in small competition
 - Consecutive consonants: “read my” becomes “rea-duh-my,” “bid farewell” becomes “bi-duh fare-well” etc.
 - Students create warm ups using consecutive consonants from Adams.
 - Final consonants: what beat of each measure, with what emphasis?
 - Students create warm ups with final consonant practice using Adams.
- Sing Adams warm ups & tamper with phrasing (ie. purposely demonstrate odd phrasing)
 - Ask group to copy exactly, then ask “Why was this difficult?” TPS & volunteers
 - Volunteer to visually draw what we sang & volunteer to create a kinesthetic action to what we just sang
 - Repeat: pp-ff, ff-pp, ff-pp-ff, pp-ff-pp, no phrasing, random (pp-ff-pp-ff, etc).
 - Visual manipulations: Hoberman sphere, slinky, etc.
 - Discuss: Can there only be one high point in each phrase? Students defend answers. Discuss concept of “running-arrive-rest” and determine points phrase by phrase:
 - Group #1: m.1-8, #2: m.9-16, #3: m.17-24, #4: m.25-32, #5: m.33-40, #6: m.41-48.
 - After comparison & analysis, all discuss m.49-64.

Assessments

- Informal: Class discussion of areas of diction difficulty & list on board
- Formal: Students will create text to a warm up with diction difficulties, paired with an Adams warm up
- Formal: Journal - How did your neighbor make their diction and phrasing come alive today? Highlight a particularly good example and explain why.
- Informal: Class analysis of rehearsal recordings

Knowledge Outcome: Students will explore the early American Sacred Harp singing tradition to determine the authenticity of this arrangement & of our performance.

Strategies/Assessments

- 2 day research project
 - a. Divide into separate groups – book computer lab

- i. What does shape note singing sound like? How should it be performed?
 - ii. Brief history of the shapes (notation) in shape note singing
 - iii. Who were the people that participated in this type of singing?
 - iv. Overview of the kinds of texts used (authors, meter, mood, subject, etc)
 - v. Overview of the kinds of tunes used (composers, folk sources, meter, melody, rhythm, etc)
 - vi. Does shape note singing still exist today?
 - vii. Cool things not specifically in other categories
- b. Before first day
 - i. Assign groups – research on own, make mini powerpoint slides to be compiled by group
 - ii. Have all info on thumb drive or Google Docs, ready to be accessed the next day
 - c. First day
 - i. Compile information into powerpoint, eliminate redundant info, craft into cohesive, logical presentation (somewhere between 5-7 minutes worth)
 - ii. Choose who will speak (multiple people) and practice what you'll say
 - iii. Make sure you've fully answered the question – other people in the class will want to know
 - d. Second day – Presentations & Journal question: How will you use what you learned today in your performance of “When I Can Read My Title Clear?”
- Q for after reading articles & listening to videos: How many ways can we find in which Parker's arrangement differs from the original shape note hymn?
 - a. Compile list on board
 - b. Discussion about each – Why do you think she did this? What does this difference add to or take away from the original?

Affective Outcome: Students will discuss how beliefs about life after death affect their lives today.

Strategies/Assessments

- Read letter to Steven Levine from end of Sacred harp info sheet
 - Thoughts? (class discussion near end of process)
- Journal: Do you think about death? Why/why not?
- Death Quotes matching game:
 - Steve Jobs – “for the past 33 years...” or “no one wants to die.”
 - MLK – “a man who is not fit to die for something...”
 - Oscar Wilde – “death must be so beautiful...”
 - Tecumseh - “When your time comes to die...”
- Students will bring describe one piece of art of their choosing that speaks to them about the afterlife (music, poetry, art, dance, theater, personal story). 1-2 paragraph description.