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BUCKWHEAT NOTES

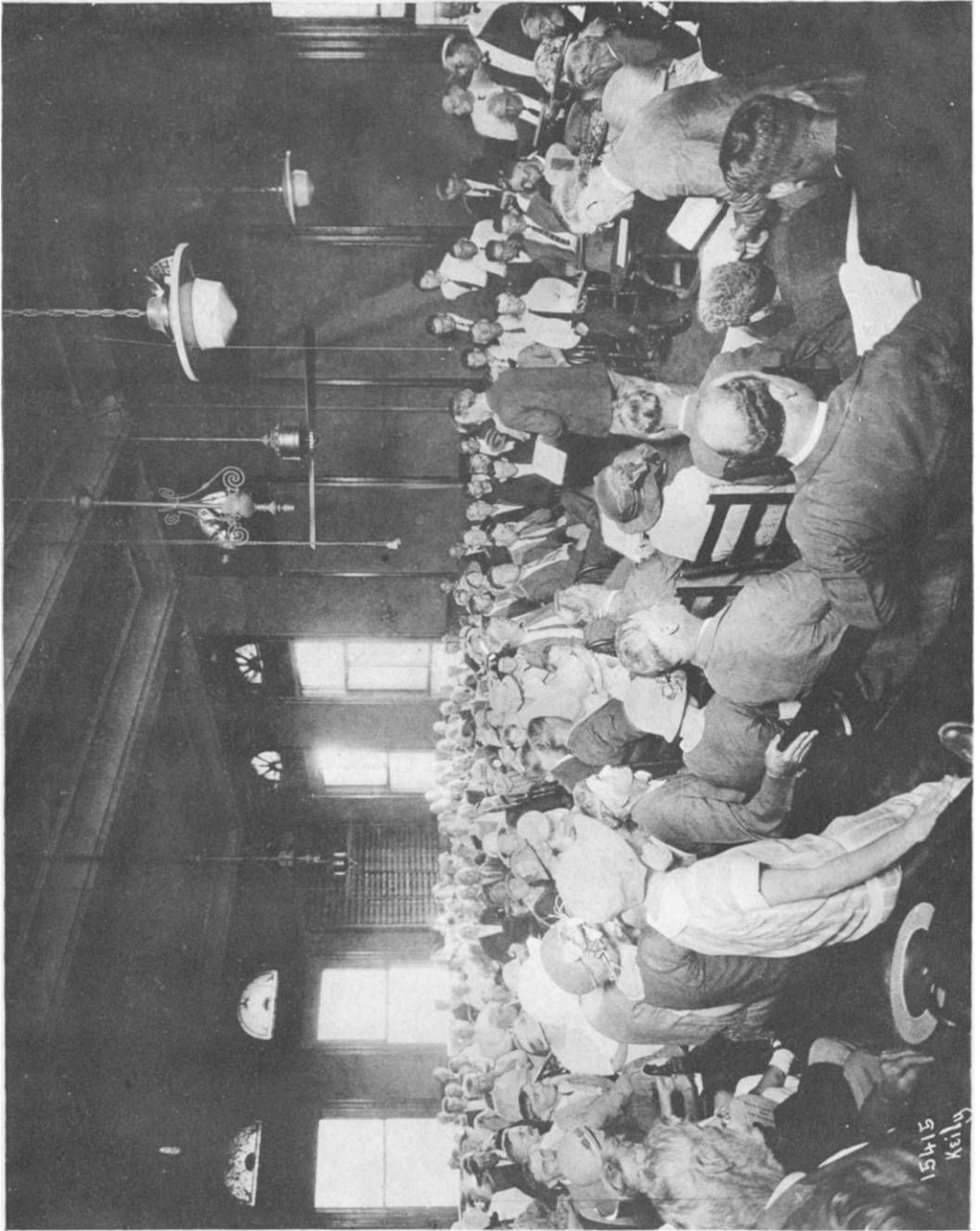
By GEORGE PULLEN JACKSON

IN the matter of its popular acceptance and actual use, the graphic symbolism of music has remained far behind that of speech. That is to say, inability to read music is far greater than language illiteracy. Among the many reasons for this acknowledged condition, one is without doubt the comparative complexity of notated music—with its variety of note-values, rests, clefs, staves, keys, rhythmic intricacies, etc., etc., as it confronts the would-be learner. It is the purpose of the author to tell in this article of a little-known but far-reaching and successful rural American attempt at simplifying the problems of reading music, especially for the beginner in singing.

The English-speaking people who, in the seventeenth century, streamed into the eastern coastal parts of what were to become the United States were, as it seems, wholly unable to read music notation. "Music" with them meant merely singing, that is congregational church-singing, by rote. And even that lean phase of music had sunk, after a few generations of settlement and pioneering, to an unbelievably low level. The tunes available to those sitting in the "meeting houses" had shriveled to a paltry few, and those few were miserably sung. Indeed, congregational singing must have been—if we may believe reports of the times—like some devil-take-the-hindmost responsive reading of the present day.





In New England, where conditions in the early days were not much better, people bestirred themselves in the first part of the eighteenth century. John Tufts and Thomas Walter produced two little song-books which stressed the importance of singing "by note," increased the visible supply of tunes, made a brave attempt at showing what part-singing was, and led singing into its first temptation to escape the control of the church, if not of religion, and to pursue an independent career in singing-schools.

In this singing-school movement—about the only strong domestic one in music for over one hundred subsequent years—appeared the first real need of musical notation. For notes, Tufts used the letters F, S, L, and M, placed on and between the conventional five staff-lines. These were the initials of the four syllables, fa, sol, la, and mi, which will be recognized perhaps as



The Alabama State Sacred Harp (Four-Shape) Singing Association in Birmingham, Alabama, July, 1929

the notes of that system of solmization which the colonists had brought with them from England, and had not yet totally forgotten. Their ascending scale was sung fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa, and not do, re, mi, etc., the diatonic sequence which, though now familiar to us, was a much later importation. Walter's book had the regular notes with diamond-shaped heads which were then customary in church-tune books. But he used the fa-sol-la-mi series of note names in his explanations of the rudiments of music, just as did all subsequent singing-school teachers and all American books of such songs for over a hundred years afterward.

In the singing-school the rustic musical neophyte had to join with others of the same voice-range in singing their part over and over "by note" before being allowed to use the words. And in this practice the difficulty in learning that a note in a certain staff position was fa in one tune and la in another of a different key was very real. It was a hindrance to reading which the earnest teacher would fain have removed. But the way to surmount this obstacle did not appear until about the year 1800, when two teachers, William Little and William Smith (of whose lives almost nothing is known), produced a song collection called "The Easy Instructor, or, a New Method of Teaching Sacred Harmony." Its second edition (the only one of which I have seen a copy) was printed at Albany, N. Y., in 1802. In this book each of the four notes was provided with a different shape-head. Fa was , sol , la , and the rarely used mi was . The ascending scale therefore appeared as follows:



This was a boon to the singing-school scholar. For it dispensed with all the formerly necessary guessing as to the name of a note, once that name was associated in his memory with a particular shape; and this association of shape with name helped the singer to identify the melodic or harmonic character of the notes.

There has been some doubt expressed as to whether Little and Smith were the real inventors of these note shapes. That doubt has been caused by the fact that Andrew Law, an active singing-school teacher in Connecticut, got out a book a little later which he called a "Music Primer," in which the same shapes

were used but without staff-lines to support them, the notes being merely raised or lowered, much as they would have appeared with lines. Law claimed the system as his own. His claim may have been technically correct. He may have intended to appropriate merely the *sequence* (ascending) of the note shapes (which was $\underset{\text{a}}{\text{b}}$, $\underset{\text{sol}}{\text{b}}$, $\underset{\text{la}}{\text{b}}$, etc., as opposed to Little and Smith's $\underset{\text{fa}}{\text{b}}$, $\underset{\text{sol}}{\text{b}}$, $\underset{\text{la}}{\text{b}}$, etc.), and the discarding of the staff may have been his idea. But the five lines, as Law soon discovered, could not be done away with. The sequence of note shapes offered by Little and Smith was preferred to that of the Connecticut teacher and came into general use by country singing-schools.

When we say "country" singing-schools we mean very nearly all of them. For, as fast as cities developed, just so fast did music and musical practices in those centers tend to conform to the more advanced ones of Europe. And to just that extent did the domestic singing-schools find it more agreeable to take their homespun religious music and its notational "helps to read" into the culturally virgin stretches of the West and the South.

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An indication of the popularity of the new notation may be found in the number of books in which it was used. I have found thirty-six different books of this type which were published during the fifty-seven years following 1798. And there are doubtless many more. Nineteen of the thirty-six known books apparently were used chiefly in the South, the other seventeen in the North.

Timothy B. Mason's experience in Cincinnati, in 1834, may serve to illustrate the popularity of "patent" notes there and the forces which worked for and against them. It seems that Mason came to these musical backwoods with the self-imposed mission of converting them to urban ways. He prepared an excellent song-book, "The Ohio Sacred Harp," and intended to drop it as a round-note bomb into the shape-note camp. But "such was the ignorance of any other kind of notes [than the shaped ones] west of the Alleghenies, that when the Messrs. Mason [Timothy and Lowell, his brother] published their . . . book . . . they were obliged, against their convictions of right, to suffer the publisher to make use of such notes to accommodate the wants of that region."¹

¹N. D. Gould, "The History of Sacred Music in America," Boston, 1853, p. 55.

After selling fifty thousand shape-note copies of the Ohio Sacred Harp, Mason carried out his fell purpose of a round-note edition. Urban competition was stronger, better organized and "higher class." So the Yankee singing-school master took his national scheme to the smaller places where round notes and organs did not corrupt the singers of harmonic parts and where concertizing "families" did not break in and monopolize the tunes.

Rural singing-schools and their inevitable shape-notation had a happier fate in the South. For there the unfavorable factors, urbanity, itinerant providers of concert music, church organs, and the like, were completely absent. The inland and highland South was filled by those who debarked at Philadelphia and Baltimore. They were Scotch, Irish, Welsh, and German, people who fell right in with the Yankee singing-school masters who were already working in eastern Pennsylvania and thereabouts, and strengthened the singing element among the great masses of settlers who wandered southwestward and westward. In this broad section, the upland South, no musical notation other than the shape sort was known for decades. Of the nineteen singing-books "for churches, singing-schools and private societies" compiled in this section between 1815 and 1855 the most widely used were Kentucky Harmony (Harrisonburg, Va.), Columbian Harmony (Wilson County, Tenn.), Missouri Harmony (St. Louis, Mo.), Genuine Church Music (Winchester, Va.), Southern Harmony (Spartanburg, S. C.), Union Harmony (Maryville, Tenn.), Sacred Harp (Hamilton, Ga.), Hesperian Harp (Wadley, Ga.), and Social Harp (Andersonville, Ga.). Each compiler was a teacher and propagandist of shape-note singing. Naturally, he boosted his own song-book, usually over as wide a territory as possible, in numberless singing-schools, and—beginning around 1850—also in singing conventions. The earlier books were printed from type in various little home-town print-shops. The later ones were made from stereotyped plates, usually in Cincinnati or Philadelphia.

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The fa-sol-la solmization and its four-shape notation, though immensely popular for half a century, were doomed from the moment when the do-re-mi habit took root on these shores. In the 1840s the South, apparently the last stronghold of the ancestral solmization practices, began to feel the presence of the new notes. And the Civil War period marked the end of growth

for the four-shapers' notation and its books. But, although not a single *new* compilation came out after that period in four-shape notation, at least two of the *older* books remained in wide use. One of these, William Walker's "Southern Harmony," after a popularity extending over more than fifty years following its appearance, is today all but extinct, with "singings" being held annually in but one place, Benton, Ky. The other, "The Sacred Harp of 1844," is still fully alive, with many singing-schools conducted in New England's best manner of one hundred and fifty years ago, and with hundreds of weekly, monthly, or yearly singings or conventions in the territory which extends in a broad belt from northern South Carolina westward, taking in practically all the hill country as far as Oklahoma and northeastern Texas, leaving out the flat coastal lands farther to the south, and Tennessee, and the territory north of it. The "Fasola Folk," those who still apply the Elizabethan names to the notes of songs made in pre-Revolutionary America and sing them with the help of the 132-year-old "patent notes," still number from about 30,000 to 50,000 souls. One may take it reasonably for granted, therefore, that the complete disappearance of that lusty vestige of our early culture remains far off.

But the story of the Fasola four-shapers and their rural guilds is not the whole story of shape-notes. Nor is it the bigger part of that story, quantitatively. When the do-re-mi style reached the domain of the rural southern songsters, it split them into two factions, those intransigents mentioned above who preferred to "seek the old paths and walk therein," and the less conservative and eventually far larger group which saw the advantages of "seven names for seven notes." But even these "moderns" were loath to give up the tried and trusted "glorious patent notes of William Little and William Smith." While the shape-noters were in this quandary, Jesse Aikin, an enterprising Pennsylvania singing-school teacher and song-book compiler, came forward with a voluminous do-re-mi book called "The Christian Minstrel" (Philadelphia, 1846); it was printed in a notation in which the four old shapes were preserved and three others were added, making the ascending diatonic scale appear as follows:



The popularity of the Aikin innovation is proved by the fact that his book enjoyed one hundred and seventy-one editions and

by the even more eloquent fact that he very soon had many imitators. These imitators were made to feel that the shapes, at least the three new ones, were Aikin's own property. So they used the old set of four, nobody's notes, and made their own threesomes to complete the seven. Among such inventive compilers were Alexander Auld of Ohio, M. L. Swan of Tennessee, Joseph Funk of Virginia, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, and William Walker of South Carolina. But the Philadelphian had preëmpted the best primary shapes. His imitators had to make shift with shapes which were far less practicable as note heads. They went on, however, each his own way for some twenty years. In the early seventies Aikin began to see that he would be better off if he made his shapes more available to other song-book producers. And the other compilers not only saw the inherent disadvantages of their own makeshift note shapes but they envisaged the advantages, to all of them, of a united front with a single notation in the entire shape-note field in the face of their now active round-note adversaries. The desired condition was realized beginning with the year 1873. And in a surprisingly short time all seven-shape notations other than the Aikin sort had disappeared.

Aikin's book has been dead long since. But the series of note shapes which he invented is marching on in the little manila-bound books that emerge from more than a score of rural southern print-shops in a total of well over half a million copies a year. These books are used in hundreds of country singing-schools and scores of big singing-conventions. And the singers using these books in the southern states alone must run up into the millions. There probably is a considerable use of the notation elsewhere, too. For some of the publishers tell me that they ship books to every state in the Union. One declared he had made shipments to Europe. The seven-shapers feel quite superior to the "old-timey" four-shapers with whom they have little truck.

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I shall add a few observations as to the sorts of songs to which this peculiar notation has clung and as to the influence which it has exerted. All the songs in all the varieties of shape-notation have been and are still religious choral pieces. The old-line "fasola" songs are of two principal sorts: the "fuguing" songs of the domestic New England school exemplified by the compositions

of William Billings in the latter part of the eighteenth century,² and the "camp-meeting" or "spiritual" songs which appeared in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The fuguing songs, dead everywhere else, are still immensely popular in southern Fasola circles. And the large number of such songs appearing in all editions of the Sacred Harp has been augmented in recent decades by compositions in the same manner by southern rustic musicians. The "spiritual" songs are a body of what was called a hundred years ago the "unwritten music" which grew from the soil, literally, in camp-meeting environments. It was completely unrecorded, that is, as far as the *music* is concerned, before the fasola folk began notating it. They caught the tunes, cobbled three harmonic parts around them, and placed their own names in the right top corner of the page where we usually look for the composer. Thus these singing-school folk became collectors and recorders of a valuable phase of religious folk-song.

The "spiritual" songs are alive today not only among the Sacred Harpers; they are also the main body of song in the books of the Primitive Baptists where they appear in the seven-shape notation. And the ghost of these "white spirituals" walks in the "Negro spirituals," old style. But these Negro "interpretations" of the White Spirituals remained "unwritten" until the white and black folklorists and musicians stepped in.

The seven-shapers by and large have deserted both these older types of song. Their books blossomed out, shortly after the Civil War, in the then new "gospel hymn" type of music. And they have stuck to it, with some little development, ever since. The southern rural song-book compilers now use every year no less than 1500 new songs of this sort, composed by tunesters of their own territory.

The shape-notations may be looked upon as having fulfilled the mission which their originators had in mind. As "singing notes" they have appealed to generations of singers of more or less simple sacred part-songs, and to these alone. They have made singing and learning to read music much easier. And that means that shape-notation has increased popular singing. How much, we can only surmise. The notation has done more. In being allied solely with rurals, and rural institutions, both musical and religious, it has helped to organize and solidify those folk-institutions, folk-mindedness itself, and thus to make the country folk more group-conscious and self-respecting.

²*Cf.* THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY, April, 1930, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Fugue-Tune' in America," by Edwin Hall Pierce.

But in helping to organize the rural culture, this musical movement has drawn the fire of the natural enemies (natural in America, at least) of ruralism. I refer to the city-controlled church organizations and to the urban musical institutions. Fifty years ago a prominent maker of Methodist hymnals in Nashville called shape-notation "a dangerous delusion." His church soon learned, however, to fight the shape-note devil with holy fire, that fire being a shape-note edition of the authorized hymnal. Today the Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South prints more shape-note song-books for its country congregations than round-note books for those in the cities.

The urban fosterers of music *comme il faut* became from the start quite put out with their countrified colleagues. It rained epithets. Many an article in the musical magazines of the early post-Civil War period reviled the proponents of "measle-toed" and "square-toed" music, or assured them that their "buckwheat notes" were about "good enough for niggers." The "character-shapes" enthusiasts returned the fire. The editor of the "Musical Million" (chief organ of the country musical-folk, published monthly for over forty years at Dayton in the Valley of Virginia), brought telling sarcasm to bear on the propagandists for the "monkish music" and accused those "round-heads" of trying to put over what was, to his way of thinking, a "foreign language" to the beginner in singing.

Today peace reigns. The country folk—white, black and red (yes, even the Indians of Oklahoma read shape-notes "like a crow picks up corn"), in church, singing-school, and all-day-singing-and-dinner-on-the-grounds—sing from the little 35-cent shape-note books whatever, wherever, and whenever they want to. The urban musician has forgotten his grudge, and even the object of that grudge has passed from his consciousness. The only ones who have a real kick coming are the setters of shape-note music type whose job is about seven times harder than that of the round-note music compositor.