GETTING IN SHAPE (NOTE SINGING)

Centuries-old Sacred Harp *offers music for the masses*

Shape-note singing is what democracy actually sounds like. Well, maybe anarchism, says Karen Stingle, who has sung with the Eugene Sacred Harp Singers since it started in Eugene in the early 1990s.

Leaders cycle in and out, cutting down on the need for a fulltime conductor. And when you're standing in the middle of the group, whose members sing in a square that separates voice ranges, it's a powerful feeling, Stingle says.

The four-part a cappella music originated in New England during the 18th century. It was meant to teach the colonists how to sing, Stingle says.

The four parts — designating bass, tenor, alto and soprano ranges — are all melodic, Stingle adds. This makes it easier for newcomers to sing along, since each line isn't there for the sake of chord building or for harmonic support.

The group is called Eugene Sacred Harp Singers, and the *Sacred Harp* is the book that guides their singing. The book's music is written in shapes instead of the usual round notes with flags to denote rhythm. The system uses four different shapes — which define where the note is on the scale.

And the music has an American aesthetic. Because of Sacred Harp's use of open chords and parallel octaves, it's not surprising that Aaron Copland incorporated *Sacred Harp* music into his work.

In Copland's revisit of "Zion's Walls," he took out references to Jesus. Similarly, Eugene Sacred Harp Singers have removed many of the references to Jesus Christ to make the hymns more inclusive, Stingle says.

The group will perform Friday, Dec. 22, at the Holiday Market. Those who want to participate should show up for a sing-along on Sunday, Dec. 23, at the Eugene Garden Club. The group will open itself to audience participation, following the tradition of welcoming anyone to sing along.

If you're new to shape-note singing, Stingle tells newcomers to just sing "la, la, la."

"If you read music, it's not that hard," she adds. "But it's pretty welcoming to new people." ■

Eugene Sacred Harp Singers perform 11:30 am Saturday, Dec. 22, at Eugene Holiday Market, at Lane County Fairgrounds, and 7 pm Sunday, Dec. 23, at Eugene Garden Club, 1645 High Street.

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