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# The Origins of Shape-Note Notation

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## **Preface**

My first experience with Shape-Note singing was through my church choir in Massachusetts, in the New England region of the United States. We were handed the notation with very little explanation and only a brief labeling of the shapes on the staff. The compositional style of the music was quite raw in its simplicity, reminding me of other types of folk music from both the United States and elsewhere. However, this music was written in a polyphonic, choral style using the strange shaped note heads. We were not told where this music or the notation originated, only that it has a long folk history. While I did not understand why each shape represented a certain solmization syllable, or how each syllable was chosen, I enjoyed singing the music and the experience stayed with me over the years.

The first time I saw the English four-note solmization system from 16th and 17th century England, I immediately connected it with the four shapes in Shape-Note notation. There must be a connection, and if so, how did it manifest? Other scholars have started to research this connection, since Shape-Note has begun to rise in popularity again in the United States. However, it still remains a topic rarely discussed, if indeed it is known about at all.

This music, distinguished by its unique notation method, is a vital part of the early history of music in the United States. I believe that it is important to explore this tradition, beginning with the notation in which it is written and the influences out of which it was born. This research in turn will help us to understand its influence on the nation, and to raise awareness of this genre in the musical world. To that end, the goal of my research was to investigate the origins of this notation system. In this paper I will show that: a) it is a visual representation of 16th century England's solmization system, and b) the purpose of this notation most likely developed as a teaching tool to be used in the singing schools of New England.

I would like to thank my solmization teacher and advisor, Tabea Schwartz, for sharing her considerable knowledge and experience in the field, and for her support and guidance in this endeavor.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to document my investigation into the origins of the notational system known as Shape-Note. This style of notation was first published early in the 19th century, in the northeastern part of the United States, after which it spread west and south. In the modern practice, this religious genre is known for its raw approach to singing the three and four part pieces a cappella, and also for the unique notation from which the repertoire is read. It is a system of four shapes that replace the traditional note heads, each of which represents one of four solmization syllables. This paper will show the connection of the four syllable Shape-Note system to the earlier English four syllable solmization system popular in the 16th and 17th centuries, and attempt to answer the question of why the shaped-note system was created. The answer lies in the foundations of public music education in New England, and the religious practice of Psalm-Tune singing, popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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## 1.1 Introduction to Shape-Note

Shape-Note singing is a fascinating religious folk tradition unique to the United States. It began in the northeastern region of the country, known today as New England, at the end of the 18th century. During the 19th century it spread down the coast and into the mid-Atlantic states, where it survived in rural pockets into the 20th century. In the current living tradition, as described by Stephen Binns and Dr. Neely Bruce<sup>1</sup> in their respective articles on the modern practice, meetings are held in order to sing from a repertory of songs that have existed since the early 19th century. These gatherings are called “Singings” or Singing Conventions. Each Singing is different, and might include only the people from a small community gathering together, or draw participants from all over the country. While the roots of this music come from the Christian tradition of Psalm Tune singing, in modern times anyone from any (non)religious background can join in a Singing. Large modern Singings in the southern states may draw such crowds that it becomes an all day, or even two day affair. A proper Singing involves many hours of making music together, and often a large shared meal afterwards, provided by the participants. It is a celebration of spirituality and community shared through a musical experience.

A hallmark of this genre is the energetic and forceful way in which the participants sing.

Traditionally, there are no instruments involved, as it is a type of sacred choral singing with the standard three or four voice parts. The vocal tone production grows directly out of one’s speaking voice. No musical or vocal training is required, or even encouraged. Therefore, the tone quality is usually without much vibrato, and quite loud. It is a way of making music such that everyone can participate. There is no “audience” at a Singing, as it is not a performance. Everyone in attendance comes simply to sing together in community.

Singings have developed a formalized structure over the years. They are run much like a town meeting or any other community gathering. As both Bruce and Binns describe in their articles, someone takes the minutes, and there is a board of members who direct the

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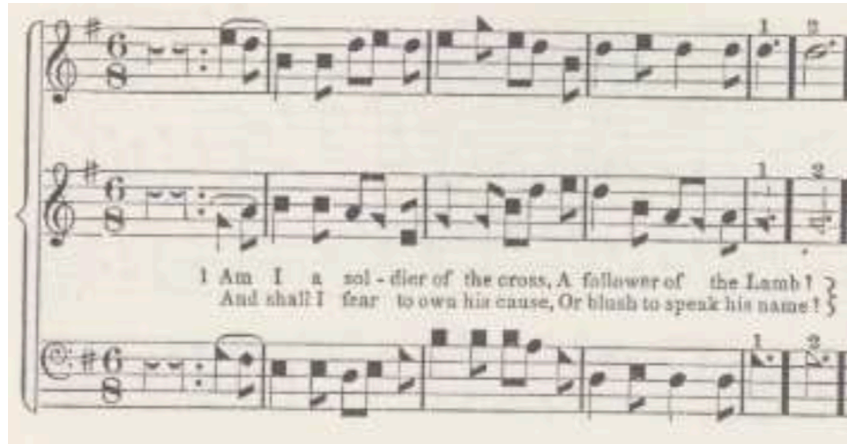
<sup>1</sup> Stephen Binns, “A Shape-Note Singing Lesson”, in: *Smithsonian in your Classroom*, (Autumn, 2000)  
Neely Bruce, “The Sacred Harp as Experimental Composition.” Neely Bruce Music, March, 2011

proceedings. As in a town meeting, anyone is allowed to suggest the next song, and/or lead a song of their choosing. The only stipulation is that the person leading the song should have enough musical knowledge to correctly bring in each voice part as needed, and be able to set the pitch in a place that is comfortable for all voice parts. However, new leaders are also encouraged, so a lack of musical knowledge or experience would not be a hinderance for those wishing to lead. Participants sit in the section with the voice part they choose to sing that day, and each section is arranged on one side of a large empty square. Each leader of a song stands alone in the center of the square, giving the pitch and directing the group by either “walking the song” - walking around the empty square to the beat of the music - or by beating time with arm gestures. They usually sing from a song book called *The Sacred Harp*, first published in 1844, with the most recent edition published in 1991. The defining characteristic of this living tradition, and the origins of its modern name, is the notation held in this book and other collections of the repertory. Shape-Note notation is exactly what it sounds like: different shapes used on the staff to represent different notes.

## **1.2 The Shapes and their Meaning**

There are four shapes used in Shape-Note notation: triangle, circle, square, and diamond. Each shape represents the “name of the note” using a solmization syllable: triangle indicates Fa, circle means Sol, square denotes La, and diamond is Mi. Ut and Re do not exist in this system of notation. As I have experienced when singing this music, it is the modern tradition that when first reading a piece, everyone sings their part first by “naming the notes,” or in other words singing it using the solmization syllables represented by the shapes. After the piece has been sung once on “names,” then it is sung again on text.

Example 1:



Christian Soldier by F. Price  
*The Sacred Harp*, Philadelphia: 1844. p. 57

As is evident in Example 1, in all other respects the notation is standard. Keys, clefs, time signatures, and rhythms all look and work the same as in modern notation. The only other difference is the text underlay is not provided for every part, it is simply written under whichever part lies in the middle. These shapes were standardized in the early 19th century, when many collections of music in Shape-Note notation were published, particularly in the southern states.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.1 The “English” System

By the second half of the 16th century, a variation on the traditional hexachordal solmization system was extremely popular in England. In later years it became known as “English,” “Four-Note,” or “Fasola” solmization.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper I will use the name English to refer to this system. As published in alphabetical letters next to the musical notation in John Day’s 1570 *Whole Book of Psalms*,<sup>4</sup> this system only employed the use of

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Binns, “A Shape-Note Singing Lesson”, in: *Smithsonian in your Classroom*, (Autumn, 2000) Neely Bruce. “The Sacred Harp as Experimental Composition.” Neely Bruce Music, March, 2011 David W. Steel and Richard H. Hulan. *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. University of Illinois, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Bernarr Rainbow, “Fasola.” *Grove Music Online*. 2001

<sup>4</sup> Bernarr Rainbow, “Fasola.” *Grove Music Online*. 2001

four out of the six traditional syllables, Fa Sol La and Mi. Thomas Morley wrote one of the foundational musical treatises for this system a few decades later in 1597, titled *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. At the time Morley wrote this treatise, in the form of a dialogue between master and pupil, Ut and Re were still used only in the lowest octave. He begins by giving the entire Gamut with the traditional hexachords labeled, and insisting that his pupil “get it perfectly without booke, to saie it forwards and backwards,”<sup>5</sup> or in other words, have it memorized. The traditional hexachord was still seen as the foundation of musical knowledge, but in practice it seems the Ut and Re were discarded after the lowest octave: “But this wee use commonly in singing, that *except it be in the lowest note of the part wee never use ut.*”<sup>6</sup>

Morley goes on to explain that one can replace the syllables Ut Re and Mi with Fa Sol and La, thus creating the scale Fa Sol La, Fa Sol La, Mi Fa. The result of this scale is that there is now a semitone between the first La and second Fa, as well as between the Mi and Fa which round out the octave.<sup>7</sup> The Mi-Fa relationship at the top of the scale is what defines the key, and since Morley continues the tradition of beginning with the Gamma Ut, Mi is naturally found in B. This compound scale can be seen in Example 2, where he begins with the Gamma Ut, Re, and Mi, because it is in the lowest octave, but then continues with the C scale Fa Sol La, Fa Sol La [Mi Fa].

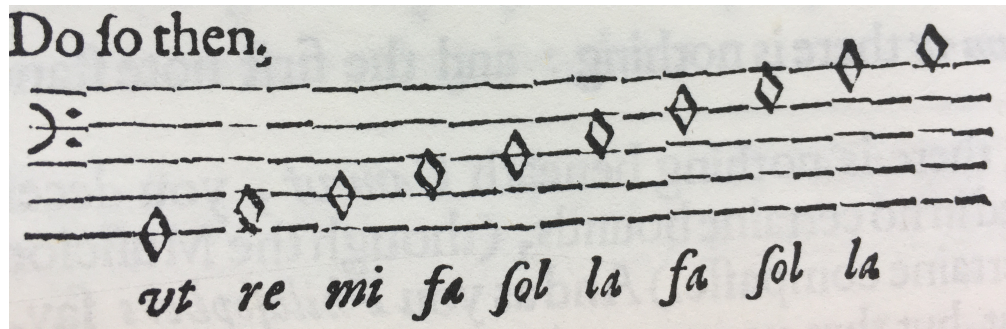
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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. London: 1597. p. 3

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. London: 1597. p. 4

<sup>7</sup> The semitone between La and Fa is not unique to the English system. The practice of ‘Fa super La’ in the continental hexachordal system employs the same relationship between the two syllables.

Example 2:

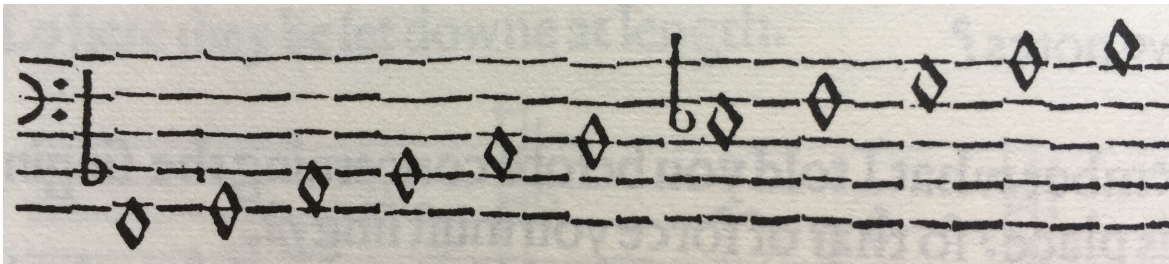


Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. London: 1597. p. 5

Thus in this example, even though he begins on the Gamma Ut, Morley is actually describing the C hexachord using these new syllables. Let us test this new system to see if we can reveal the traditional C hexachord. If we begin at C *fa ut*, which Morley has labeled Fa in Example 2, we can apply his premise that Fa Sol La replaces Ut Re Mi, and revert this Fa back to Ut. We can then repeat this process with D *sol re* reverting back to Re and E *la mi* reverting back to Mi, reconstructing the original C hexachord with the traditional syllables. If we continue to convert Morley's example back into the six syllable system, making allowances for the mutations, we get Gamma Ut Re Mi Fa, Re Mi Fa Sol, Re. Therefore, the final B, which is not labeled in this example, is Mi in the traditional hexachordal system. Now let us return the example to the English system. Excepting the lowest octave as Morley describes, we turn the Ut Re Mi of the C hexachord into Fa Sol La, returning to Morley's labels of Fa Sol La, Fa Sol La. To provide the final defining semitone for the C octave scale using the English system, we would add a Mi Fa. Therefore, this unlabeled B would also be Mi in the English system. The point of this exercise is to demonstrate that the English system functions in the same way as the traditional six syllable hexachord, it simply substitutes the initial whole tones Ut-Re and Re-Mi with the whole tones Fa-Sol and Sol-La. This is what creates the semitone between La (originally Mi) and Fa.

Morley goes on to show how this system can be extended beyond the traditional Gamut in Example 3. If we apply the English system to this example, while still keeping to his rule of starting with Ut in the lowest octave, we will label the notes thus: Ut Re Mi, Fa Sol La, Fa Sol La, Mi Fa. This example highlights the Bb scale, because our first Fa lands on the Bb and from there begins our new English system scale. The Bb scale, which while not a traditional hexachord, was a practical scale that was used in many compositions of the time in England. If we look at the Mi-Fa relationship in this example, we find it defines the Bb key, also referred to as “Mi in A.”

Example 3:



Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. London: 1597. p. 6

Not 20 years later, Thomas Campion expands upon this English system in his 1614 treatise *A New Way of Making Fowre Parts in Counterpoint*. In his edition of this treatise, Christopher Wilson highlights Campion’s contribution to the development of the English system<sup>8</sup> by crediting him with liberating it from Morley’s Ut/Re restrictions in the lowest octave, which created the rather awkward compound scale at the beginning of Morley’s examples. Campion removes completely the Ut and Re syllables, working with the tetrachord Sol La Mi Fa: “for the Scale may be more easily and plainly exprest by foure Notes, then by sixe, which is done by leaving out Ut and Re.”<sup>9</sup> Just to show we are still working with the same system, we can find this tetrachord if we take either of Morley’s examples and work backwards from the

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson’s Introduction to Thomas Campion’s *A New Way of Making Fowre Parts in Counter-point*, London: n.d. [1614] [Hants, England: Ashgate 2003], p. 20

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Campion, *A New Way of Making Fowre Parts in Counter-point*, London: n.d. [1614], p. 43

last Mi using the English syllables, resulting in Mi La Sol instead of Mi Re Gamma Ut, or read left to right, Sol La Mi [Fa]. Thus Morley also begins his examples with this tetrachord, although he did not label them as such. By stringing two of these tetrachords one after another, Campion achieves the entire octave, or ‘eight.’<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the ‘eight’ could be achieved by either Morley’s Fa Sol La, Fa Sol La, Mi Fa or Campion’s Sol La Mi, Fa Sol La, Mi Fa. Campion’s ‘eight’ labels both semitones of the scale as Mi-Fa, which differs from Morley’s initial La-Fa, but both agree that the final semitone, the defining one of the scale, be labeled as Mi-Fa.

As with the older medieval tetrachordal systems, the position of the semitone is paramount. Campion emphasizes this in the Preface of his treatise:

*The substance of all Musicke, and the true knowledge of the scale, consists in the observation of the halfe note, which is expressed either by Mi Fa, or La Fa, and they being knowne in their right places, the other Notes are easily applyed unto them.*<sup>11</sup>

He defines his scales by the position of the final Mi, saying either “in the sharpe” for Mi in B or the G hexachord, “flat Gam-ut” for Mi in E or a Bb in the key signature, and “flat in Elami” for Mi in A or a Bb and Eb in the key signature. These three scales were some of the most common used in the English musical practice of the time, which led eventually to adding a third flat and some sharp keys as well.

William Butler also defines the key by the “Master note” Mi in his 1636 treatise *The Principles of Musik*. This dense treatise echoes both Morley and Bathe<sup>12</sup> in that Butler also uses Fa for the seventh degree in a scale as Bathe does, but differentiates it from the normal Fa by

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<sup>10</sup> As pointed out by Jessie Ann Owens in her article “Concepts of Pitch in English Music Theory, c. 1560-1640,” Thomas Ravenscroft notes in his 1614 *Treatise of Musick* that the English use four or six notes as opposed to the Netherlands’ seven.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Campion, *A New Way of Making Fowre Parts in Counter-point*, London: n.d. [1614], p. 44

<sup>12</sup> William Bathe in his 1596 treatise *A Brieve Introduction to the Skill of Song* adds Fa as the seventh note in a scale, and hints that in practice musicians of the day replaced Ut and Re with Sol and La. Considered together, these two ideas create the scale Sol La Mi Fa Sol La Fa, which is the same scale Morley uses (as opposed to Campion’s double Mi-Fa scale), but merely starting at a different point.

spelling it Pha. He also uses the traditional Ut Re Mi syllables to begin his scale like Morley, rather than the Sol La Mi syllables that Campion employs. Thus in Butler's scale, the semitones would still be between Mi-Fa and La-Pha, like so: Ut Re Mi, Fa Sol La, Pha Ut. Pha would then lead to the traditional Ut, not Sol. However, even though Pha is the seventh degree of the scale, since it is only a semitone from La it is a lowered seventh degree. This means Mi is still the leading tone to define the key<sup>13</sup>, and that we are actually still dealing with the Fa Sol La, [Pha] [Sol La], Mi Fa scale introduced by Morley and used by Bathe. He follows Morley's rule of using Ut and Re in the lowest octave, and for beginning students in every octave above, but explains that because Sol and La serve the same function as Ut and Re in the scale they are often interchanged by well trained singers, as Morley, Campion, and Bathe all demonstrated.

By the time of Christopher Simpson's 1667 *A Compendium of Practical Musick*, the shift to using only the four English syllables was ubiquitous in England. Simpson mentions "six syllables were used in former times"<sup>14</sup> and dutifully lists them, but on the very next page remarks:

*Four of these, to wit Mi, Fa, Sol, La, (taken in their significancy) are necessary assistants to the right Tuning of he Degrees of Sound, as will presently appear. The other two, Ut and Re, are superfluous, and therefore laid aside by most Modern Teachers. We will therefore make use only of Mi, Fa, Sol, La, and apply them to the Seven Letters, which stand for the Degrees of Sound.*

Simpson goes on to discuss the importance of Mi, falling in line with Morley, Campion, Butler, and Bathe, placing it as they did, first in B. He then explains the movement of Mi from B to E to A, and remarks that if it goes beyond A, then the music was meant for instruments. Simpson differs slightly from his predecessors as he discusses the semitone, describing it as a relationship with Fa: "*Fa* is but the distance of a *Semitone* or *Half-Note* from the Sound of

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<sup>13</sup> John W. Grashel, "The Gamut and Solmization in Early British and American Texts", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1981), p. 63-70

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Simpson, *A Compendium of Practical Musick* [...]. London: 1667. p. 4

that degree which is next under it; which *Semitone*, together with its *Fa*, must of necessity come twice in every *octave*".<sup>15</sup> Differing especially with Butler, Simpson saw no difference between the semitones La-Fa and Mi-Fa, and while it is Mi that defines the key, it is Fa that defines the position of the semitones.

## 2.2 Playford's Introduction

As this flurry of musical instructional material was being produced throughout the 17th century, John Playford's *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick* stands out as one of the most influential and widely read treatises of the latter half of the 17th century and beyond. Not only did his treatise have eighteen editions over the course of seventy years, but it was one of the fundamental musical influences of Colonial United States as well as in England. First published in 1654, its subsequent editions saw many tunes introduced into the Psalm singing tradition, and his instructions on how to properly place the first note of a tune still influence the Shape-Note singing tradition today.<sup>16</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I have used one of his later editions from 1674.

He begins much in the same vain as Simpson does, giving the six syllables initially, but stating that "in these latter times, Four are only in use, the which are *Sol, La, Mi, Fa*; so that *Ut* and *Re* are now changed into *Sol* and *La*".<sup>17</sup> Playford also states that the "Notes in use" in actual practice are far more than given in the traditional Gamut. Example 4 shows Playford's Gamut table:

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<sup>15</sup> Christopher Simpson, *A Compendium of Practical Musick* [...]. London: 1667. p. 7

<sup>16</sup> Playford is quoted by many, including Sally Drage in her paper "The Performance of English Provincial Psalmody c. 1690-c. 1840", Theodore Finney in his article "The Third Edition of Tufts' 'Introduction to the Art of Singing Psalm-Tunes'", Irving Lowens in his article "The Bay Psalm Book in 17th-Century New England", and David Steel and Richard Hulan in their book *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*, as describing how to pitch a tune to avoid 'Squeaking above, or grumbling below' in the highest and lowest voices. In modern Singings, as described by Binns and Bruce, the one responsible for giving the pitch is coached in much the same terms, cautioned to look at the whole range of notes in the highest and lowest parts, and to pitch comfortably in the middle.

<sup>17</sup> John Playford, *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*. London: 1674. p. 1

Example 4:

**THE GAM-VT, OR SCALE OF MUSICK**

	aa	la mj re	la	la	mj	
The Treble or highest Keyes.	gg	Sol re vt	Sol	Sol	la	
	ff	fa vt	fa	fa	Sol	
	E	la	la	mj	b fa	
	D	la Sol	Sol	la	la	
	C	Sol fa	fa	Sol	Sol	
	B	fa # mj	mj	b fa	b fa	
	A	la mj re	la	la	mj	
	The Meane or middle Keyes.	G	Sol re vt	Sol	Sol	la
		ff	fa vt	fa	fa	Sol
		E	la mj	la	mj	b fa
		D	la Sol re	Sol	la	la
		C	Sol fa vt	fa	Sol	Sol
		B	fa # mj	mj	b fa	b fa
		A	la mj re	la	la	mj
		G	Sol re vt	Sol	Sol	la
		The Bass or lowest Keyes.	F	fa vt	fa	fa
E			la mj	la	mj	b fa
D			Sol re	Sol	la	la
C			fa vt	fa	Sol	Sol
B	mj		mj	b fa	b fa	
A	re		la	la	mj	
G	F a m vt		Sol	Sol	la	
FF	fa vt		fa	fa	Sol	
EE	la mj	la	mj	fa		
DD	Sol re	Sol	la	la		
CC	fa vt	fa	Sol	Sol		

B Duralis
B Naturalis
B Mollaris

1                      2                      3

John Playford, *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*. London: 1674. p. 6

It is immediately evident that he is using only the English syllables, and although this table is structured as hexachordal tables are, it shows only the three scales also found in Campion, Butler, and Simpson: Mi in B (B Duralis), Mi in E (B Naturalis), and Mi in A (B Mollaris). The only place one sees Ut and Re are in the names of the notes, which he has not changed except to add additional notes higher and lower than the traditional Gamut. Playford, just as his contemporaries do, identifies Mi as “the principal or master Note, which leads you to know all the other”.<sup>18</sup> Following convention, Mi is first in B, then in E, then in A. Playford

<sup>18</sup> John Playford, *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*. London: 1674. p. 11

then extends this concept one step further and gives Mi in D, but also mentions that this fourth place is most likely intended for instruments, just as Simpson does.

Example 5:

1. *If that no Flat be set in B,  
Then in that place standeth your Mi.*  
Example. Sol la Mi fa Sol la fa Sol

2. *\*B fa B mi. But if your \*B alone be Flat,  
\*E la mi. Then \*E is Mi be sure of that.*  
Example. Sol la fa Sol la Mi fa Sol

3. *\*A la mi re. If both be Flat, your B and E,  
Then \*A is Mi here you may see.*  
Example. La Mi fa Sol la fa Sol la

4. *\*D la sol. If all be Flat, E, A, and B,  
Then Mi alone doth stand in \*D.*  
Example. La fa Sol la Mi fa Sol la

John Playford, *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*. London: 1674. p. 12-13

While it is not highlighted in the sources themselves, Playford, along with Morley and Campion demonstrate various forms of non-standard notation and labeling to convey a theoretical concept in their examples, moving beyond simply naming the English syllables underneath the notes. It is in these examples we begin to look for inspiration for the Shape-Note system.

### 3.1 Non-standard Notation Pre-Tufts

Reverend John Tufts is often credited as the creator of the “First American Textbook” with his 1721 pamphlet *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes*<sup>19</sup> and as the founder of Shape-Note development using the non-standard notation of only letters and dots on the staff to

<sup>19</sup> Allen Britton, “The How and Why of Teaching Singing Schools in Eighteenth Century America”, in: *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, N. 99 (Winter, 1989)

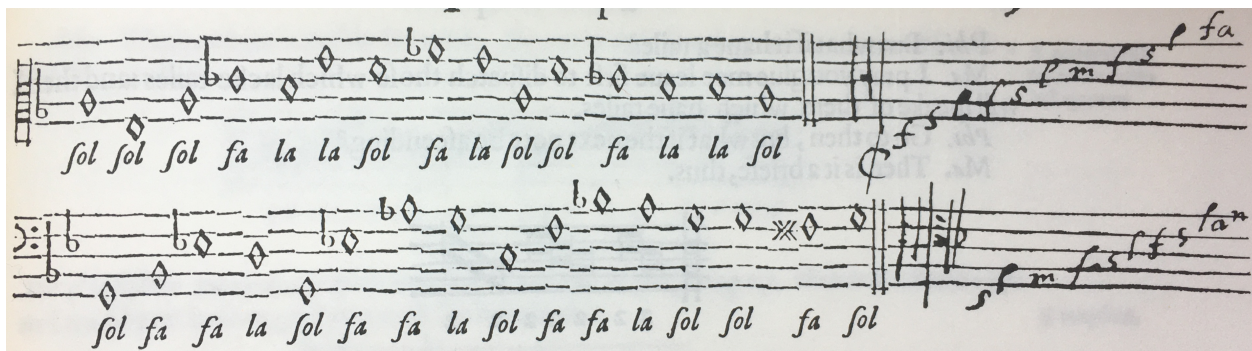
John Grashel, “The Gamut and Solmization in Early British and American Texts”, in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1981)

Irving Lowens, “John Tufts' "Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes" (1721-1744): The First American Music Textbook”, in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1954)

indicate pitch and rhythm.<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this paper, “non-standard notation” is defined as a type of notation specifically intended for vocal production that does not conform to the prevailing configuration at the time. Reverend Tufts did indeed create a system of non-standard notation that was extremely influential. However, the argument should be made that the non-standard notation that existed before Tufts would have exerted an influence over his and his contemporaries notations, and the notational systems of generations after him, including Shape-Note. In other words, Tufts did not “invent” the idea of non-standard notation for singers. The theory writers of the past century had already toyed with this concept. Tufts also was not the sole “founder” of Shape-Note development, but this statement will be addressed later in this paper.

Let us begin back with Morley, with an example of notation given that is not standard mensural notation with the text underlay underneath the notes. An example of this kind can be found on page 9 of his treatise previously mentioned, and is reproduced in Example 6.

Example 6:



Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. London: 1597. p. 9

<sup>20</sup> Terry Gates, “A Comparison of the Tune Books of Tufts and Walter”, in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988)

John Grashel, “The Gamut and Solmization in Early British and American Texts”, in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1981)

Irving Lowens, “John Tufts' "Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes" (1721-1744): The First American Music Textbook”, in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1954)

David Steel and Richard Hulan, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. University of Illinois, 2010

While this example begins in standard notation, at the end of both parts Morley has included a scale only using the first letter of the English syllable that correctly names each note in the given key. This type of notation does not give any rhythmical information, and therefore was most likely not meant to be anything other than an example of correctly identifying the positions of the syllables based on the key. However, it does bear a striking resemblance to Tufts' notation over a century later.

Campion uses, as does Playford, various forms of lute tablature in his treatise to aid in illustrating his point. However, since this notation is not intended to be used by singers, and is in itself a vast topic of research into notation systems developed for specific instruments, it is in the interest of this paper to focus solely on notation primarily meant to be sung both in instructional and performance settings. What Campion does include for singing is notated scales with the English syllables identified next to the notes rather than underneath them. While perhaps not as radical as Morley's example, it still places the syllables directly onto the staff rather than underneath it.<sup>21</sup>

This brings us to Playford, who some have credited in the past with being the inspiration for Tufts' notation,<sup>22</sup> as it was certain he knew Playford.<sup>23</sup> However, this statement has since

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Campion, *A New Way of Making Fowre Parts in Counter-point*, London: n.d. [1614], p. 44

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Finney, "The Third Edition of Tufts' 'Introduction to the Art of Singing Psalm-Tunes'", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1966), p. 163-170  
Sirvart Poladian, "Rev. John Tufts and Three-part Psalmody in America. Read in New York on February 17, 1951, at a meeting of the Greater New York Chapter", in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V. 4, No. 3 (Autumn, 1951), p. 276

<sup>23</sup> After the third edition of Tufts' Introduction was discovered by Theodore Finney in 1966, it was confirmed that he did indeed know Playford's work, as was evident not only in the Tunes of subsequent Tufts editions copied from various editions of Playford's Introduction (which had been investigated by others, namely Irving Lowens in the 1950s, and has since been corroborated by Terry Gates and John Grashel), but by directly referencing Playford's rules for tuning the voice, which are found in most editions of the Introduction. For more detailed information, seek Finney's article on his research.

been called into question as being too overarching.<sup>24</sup> Playford was indeed an influence on Tufts and his contemporaries, but his was not the sole influence. In addition to many of his Tunes being included in Tufts' collections, Playford provides exercises in which only the first letter of each English syllable is included underneath them, as evident in Example 7:

Example 7:



John Playford, *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*. London: 1674. p. 21

I include this in my non-standard notation because although the text is still beneath the normal note heads, the English syllables have been abbreviated to only their first letters, as we saw in Morley, and as Tufts will do in his notation. While the Morley example more closely resembles the Tufts notation, we do not currently have concrete evidence that Tufts knew Morley's Introduction, and it is certain he knew Playford, and that Playford knew Morley.

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<sup>24</sup> Terry Gates, "A Comparison of the Tune Books of Tufts and Walter", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988)

John Grashel, "The Gamut and Solmization in Early British and American Texts", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1981)

Irving Lowens, "John Tufts' 'Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes' (1721-1744): The First American Music Textbook", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1954)

David Steel and Richard Hulan, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. University of Illinois, 2010

### 3.2 The Bay Psalm Book

The final source of non-standard notation pre-Tufts that should be addressed is *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*, otherwise known as the Bay Psalm Book. This book was originally published in Boston 1640 with no author given, although it is thought to be the collective work of many contributors. It has the distinction of being the first book, musical or otherwise, to be printed in New England, as well as its 1698 edition containing the first music printed (as far as we know) in Colonial United States.<sup>25</sup> It was adopted by the residents of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a replacement for *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* by Sternhold and Hopkins that had been the standard collection since 1569, and brought over from England.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony was a primarily Puritan settlement centered in Boston extending up and down the coast of what are now the New England states. The Puritans were extremely strict in their religious devotion, and although they enjoyed music, that music had to be made only for the glory of God in both the church and the home. The Sternhold and Hopkins collection from the late 16th century was the standard psalm book used throughout the Colony. It contains 17 different metrical patterns,<sup>26</sup> which means the Psalm Tune repertory was rather large to accommodate these patterns. Musical notation is included in this psalm book, but only the melodies for each Tune. Eventually, the translations in the Sternhold and Hopkins psalm book were regarded as too “poetic,” and a call was made for a more literal translation. To introduce these new translations to the congregations, a practice called “lining out” began to develop. The minister of a parish would read out the psalm line by line, or chant it on one pitch, and the congregation would respond by singing the new text to the old

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<sup>25</sup> Wilberforce Eames’ Introduction to the facsimile of *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* [...]. Boston, 1640  
John Grashel, “The Gamut and Solmization in Early British and American Texts”, in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1981)

Irving Lowens, “The Bay Psalm Book in 17th-Century New England”, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1955), p. 22-29

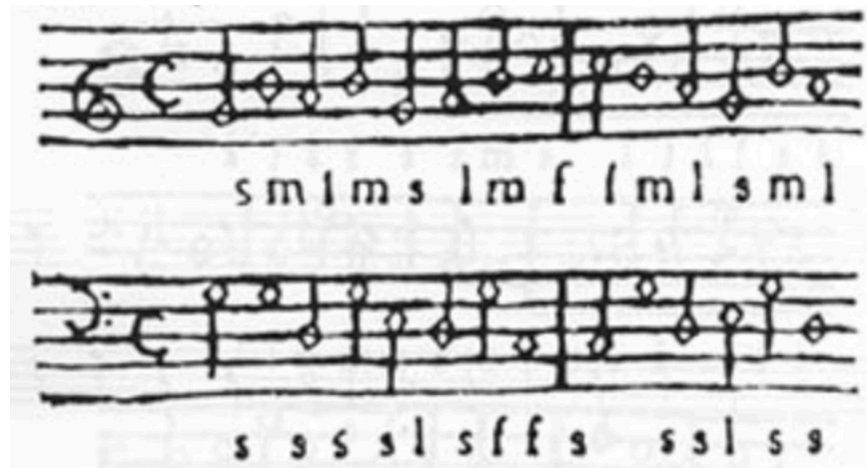
David Steel and Richard Hulan, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. University of Illinois, 2010

<sup>26</sup> Irving Lowens, “The Bay Psalm Book in 17th-Century New England”, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1955), p. 22-29

Nicholas Temperley, “The Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development”, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V. 34, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), p. 511-544

Tunes they knew, which had diminished significantly from the repertory represented in the Sternhold and Hopkins.<sup>27</sup> Since the congregations already knew the few Psalm Tunes they used, the first edition of the Bay Psalm Book did not contain any musical notation, only the new text translations. It also contained only six metrical patterns as opposed to Sternhold and Hopkins' 17, which means that the congregations knew only a small number of the Tunes by heart, and the new translations in the Bay Psalm Book were meant to fit into these few Tunes. The Psalm Tune repertory continued to shrink until the 9th edition of the Bay Psalm Book (or possibly earlier in an earlier edition that does not survive),<sup>28</sup> in which Psalm Tunes were printed in two parts, as seen in Example 8:

Example 8:



Low Dutch Tune  
*The Whole Booke of Psalmes*. Boston, 1698

<sup>27</sup> Allen Britton, "The How and Why of Teaching Singing Schools in Eighteenth Century America", in: *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, N. 99 (Winter, 1989), p. 23-41  
 Nicholas Temperley, "The Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development", in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V. 34, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), p. 511-544

<sup>28</sup> Terry Gates, "A Comparison of the Tune Books of Tufts and Walter", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988)  
 John Grashel, "The Gamut and Solmization in Early British and American Texts", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1981)  
 Irving Lowens, "The Bay Psalm Book in 17th-Century New England", in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1955), p. 22-29

The notation strongly resembles the Playford Example 7, in that the English syllables are abbreviated to their first letter, and are placed under the standard notation. This is why the argument was made by Lowens, Gates, and Grashel that Playford's was not the only influence on Tufts and his contemporaries in the early 18th century, but that the Bay Psalm Book was a strong contender, and would have exerted equal if not more influence over the reforming musicians of the time.

### **3.3 The Singing Reform Movement**

What was hinted at in the previous section is the musical tradition in the Massachusetts Bay Colony around the turn of the 18th century consisted primarily of a handful of Psalm Tunes that could be applied to the various Psalm texts needed in a given service. The way in which these Psalm tunes were sung came to be known as the "Old Way" of singing. This sound was characterized as having weak and slow tempos, imprecise rhythms, and many extraneous notes.<sup>29</sup> The weak tempos and rhythms were due to the untrained singers being insecure in their notes and waiting to change notes only after they heard the Parish Clerk sing the next pitch, and the extra notes were caused by either inaccurate learning of the melody or ambiguity when singing the pitch. All of these phenomena can still be witnessed today in any type of amateur music ensemble. This "Old Way" of singing eventually became so disagreeable to the trained and untrained ear alike that an effort was made to establish Singing Schools to teach the members of a congregation how to sing properly in church.<sup>30</sup> Leading the push for better singing were the ministers of Boston, foremost among them Dr. Cotton Mather.

Known in modern times for his involvement in the infamous Salem Witch Trials of the late 17th century, Mather was a Puritan minister located in Boston in the early 18th century. Having become so concerned with the "old way" in which his congregation sang, he published a

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Temperley, "The Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development", in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V. 34, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), p. 511-544

<sup>30</sup> Allen Britton, "The How and Why of Teaching Singing Schools in Eighteenth Century America", in: *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, N. 99 (Winter, 1989), p. 23-41

sermon in 1721 called *The Accomplished Singer*, in which he argues that proper singing is the “*Ancient Way of Glorifying the Blessed GOD*”.<sup>31</sup> He proceeds to use various quotations from the Bible in an effort to prove that one can properly praise God only if one can sing the Psalm Tunes correctly. Mather states that “To *Sing PSALMS* is a Duty not only *Commended* but also *Commanded* unto us, in the Example which our SAVIOUR has given us of it, saying, *Do as I have done*.”<sup>32</sup> He says good Christians should practice good singing not only in the churches, but in their homes as well. He calls specifically to “(our YOUNG PEOPLE, who are most in the Years of Discipline,) would more generally *Learn to SING* and become able to Sing by RULE, and keep to the NOTES of the TUNES, which our *spiritual Songs* are set unto”.<sup>33</sup>

Mather, while one of the most influential voices, was not the only one calling for what came to be known as “Regular Singing.” Terry Gates has explored this “Regular Singing” movement in his article from 1990 *Music Education’s Professional Beginnings in America*. In it Gates describes the curriculum of a singing school master:<sup>34</sup>

*The time constraints on these early teachers (10 to 14 evening sessions over a two- to three-week period) do not support the assumption that tune-book contents, as presented in print, were learned in singing schools. The singing school teacher's function was to reverse thoroughly entrenched and well-loved singing habits that the reformers declared were unacceptable. Given that daunting task, these teachers would have had little choice but to narrow their focus to music-reading instruction and use any motivation techniques that would result in students' progress toward this end.*

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<sup>31</sup> Cotton Mather, *The accomplished singer*. Boston, 1721. p. 1

<sup>32</sup> Cotton Mather, *The accomplished singer*. Boston, 1721. p. 16-17

<sup>33</sup> Cotton Mather, *The accomplished singer*. Boston, 1721. p. 22

<sup>34</sup> Terry Gates, “Music Education’s Professional Beginnings in America: Early Eighteenth-Century New England Singing-School Teacher Qualifications and Program Goals”, in: *The Quarterly*, V. 1 No. 1&2 (Spring, 1990), p. 43

In other words, the singing school master's job was not to teach their students the melodies found in the Psalm Books. It was instead their job to help their students unlearn the "Old Way" of singing and learn how to read standard notation through the rudiments of the English system using the sources previously discussed, namely Playford's *Introduction* and the Bay Psalm Book (or the now out-dated Sternhold and Hopkins). This was a difficult task to accomplish, and if it was to be done effectively would require teaching material easier to understand by the average person. This is where Tufts and Walter come in.

#### 4.1 The Beginnings of Shape-Note - Tufts

As previously mentioned, Reverend John Tufts was at the forefront of this "Regular Singing" reform movement. As Finney quotes Tufts' Preface in his third edition of *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes*:<sup>35</sup>

*I wish that all who have learnt and are learning to sing, would be strictly careful to sing the Tunes true. That which makes me mention this, is, the Observation I have made of several Errors which have already crept into those Tunes which have been lately introduced into Congregations, as well as in some others that have been more commonly sung. 'Tis great pity but we should carefully strive against such Errors before they come to be deeply rooted. [...] WHAT a vast Addition would it be to the Pleasure of Singing, if we had more Female voices assisting in that Holy Exercise, and the sweet and sprightly Voices of our Children.*

This quote mirrors Mather's sentiments on "Regular Singing," especially the call for everyone, including women and children, to become trained in singing for the glory of God. Tufts first published his *Introduction* around the year 1721,<sup>36</sup> and the many subsequent editions showed

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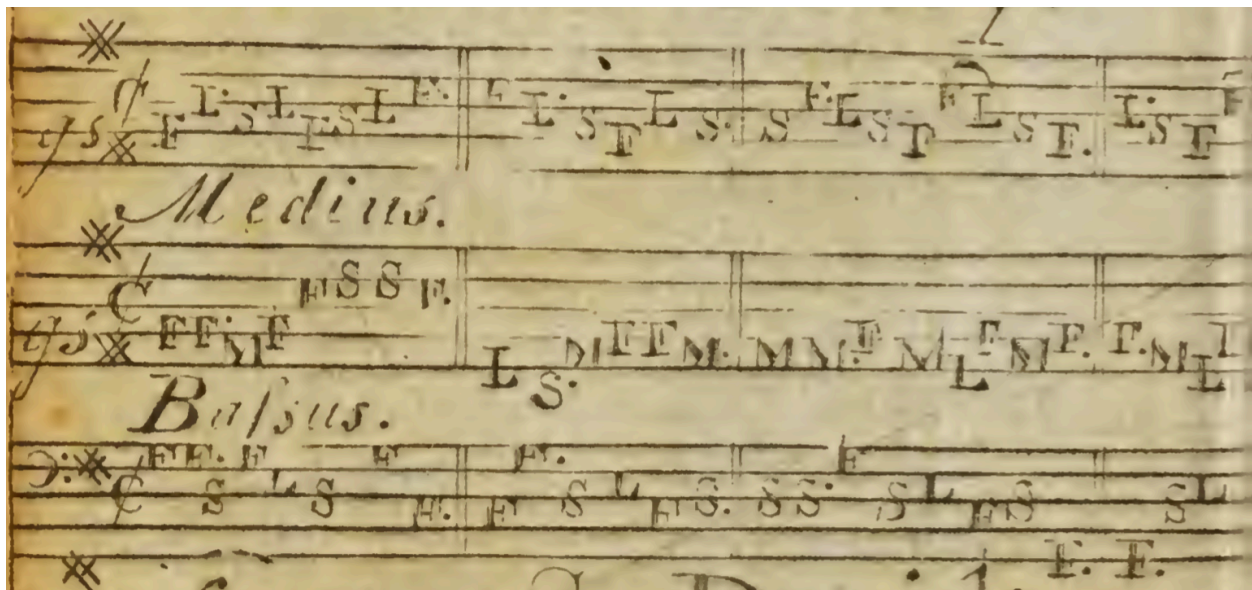
<sup>35</sup> Theodore Finney, "The Third Edition of Tufts' 'Introduction to the Art of Singing Psalm-Tunes'", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1966), p. 167

<sup>36</sup> For more details on the question of when Tufts first two editions were published, see Irving Lowens' 1954 article "John Tufts' "Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes" (1721-1744): The First American Music Textbook". A copy of the third edition has been found since this article was published [See Finney 1966].

it was extremely popular as an instructional tool in the singing schools, along with Thomas Walter's *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained*.

Tufts begins by briefly explaining the English syllables, and where the semitones lie in the manner of the English masters. In keeping with Playford and the others, Mi is identified as the principle note, and is once again placed first in B, then E, then A. Tufts then breaks away from the tradition of Playford, and describes the sharp keys also in terms of Mi, so Mi in F is the key of G, Mi in C is the key of D, and so on. He continues his separation from Playford by specifying that all parts to be sung together are assumed to be in the same key. Once he has sped through these initial instructions, Tufts describes how his notational system works. Example 9 shows an excerpt of his notation:

Example 9:



Canterbury  
John Tufts, *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes*. Boston, 1721?

In order to read it, one must first understand that each letter represents the corresponding English syllable, so F is Fa, S is Sol, L is La, and M is Mi. If the letter stands on its own with no dots following, it represents one beat. If a single dot follows the letter, this means it is held for two

beats. Two dots means it is held for four beats. If there is a “slur” over two letters, as in the third measure of the top line in Example 9, this means these two notes occupy the space of a single beat. Tufts does not address dotted rhythms, and as they only come up rarely in this repertoire, it seems this was left to be intuitively felt by the singer, who would have already been familiar with the piece, rather than notated. Now let us consider Example 10 below, which is the first three measures of the top line in Example 9 transcribed in modern notation:

Example 10:



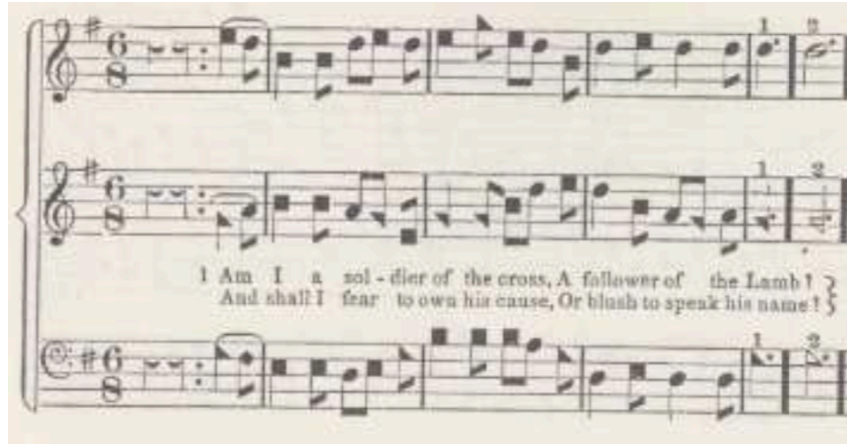
Transcription by Author

If we were to analyze it using English solmization, we would begin with Fa, because as Tufts explained, when a sharp is in F, that is where one finds Mi. So since Mi is F (sharp), then Fa must be G. Our analysis would then read Fa La, Sol La Fa Sol La Fa, and so on until the end. If we compare this with Tufts’ notation, we find it is exactly what he has written. Therefore, the analyzation aspect, or the theoretical understanding that goes hand in hand with reading music, has already been done for us. We no longer need to understand why G is Fa, A is Sol, and so on, we simply need to read the syllables as they appear on the staff. This makes the job of the singing school master, whose goal was to help students sing better in church, far more efficient. Now they do not need to teach the students the proper names of the notes, they need only read the syllables already given on the staff. It is little wonder Tufts’ *Introduction* became so popular. However, this process obviously breaks down once the students go back to their Bay Psalm Book, which is written in the standard mensural notation.

It is this reading of the syllables that is analogous to Shape-Note notation. While the notation does not look the same, it serves the same purpose as Tufts’ notation. As long as one remembers what the name of each shape is, the theoretical analysis of the music is already

completed. Let us take the top line of Example 1, reproduced in Example 11 in modern notation:

Example 1:



Christian Soldier by F. Price  
*The Sacred Harp*, Philadelphia: 1844. p. 57

Example 11:



Transcription by Author

Remembering that Mi is the leading tone, we start with La, and continue Sol, La La Sol La Sol, La Fa La Sol La, Sol La Sol Sol Sol. If we look back at Example 1, we find that the shapes exactly correspond to our analysis. This is why many credit Tufts' notation as the foundation upon which Shape-Note notation is based.<sup>37</sup> In light of the evidence, this paper agrees with

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<sup>37</sup> Terry Gates, "A Comparison of the Tune Books of Tufts and Walter", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988)

John Grashel, "The Gamut and Solmization in Early British and American Texts", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1981)

Irving Lowens, "John Tufts' 'Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes' (1721-1744): The First American Music Textbook", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1954)

David Steel and Richard Hulan, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. University of Illinois, 2010

this claim. However, another minister of Boston should be acknowledged in addition to Tufts in contributing to the foundation of Shape-Note, Reverend Thomas Walter.

#### 4.2 The Beginnings of Shape-Note - Walter

The other important treatise for non-standard notation to come out in 1721 was Thomas Walter's *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained*. Often rivaling Tufts for the title of "First American Music Textbook," Walter was also a member of the "Regular Singing" movement, and began his treatise with an appeal similar to both Mather and Tufts, aimed at families and "Young People, to accomplish themselves with Skill to Sing the Songs of the Lord, according to the Good Rules of Psalmody".<sup>38</sup> He gives an account of the current state of Psalm singing, calling it "miserably tortured, and twisted, and quavered, in some Churches, into an horrid Medly of confused and disorderly Noises."<sup>39</sup> He goes on to discuss the "Old Way" of singing, questioning:

*Therefore, any man that pleads with me for what they call the Old Way, I can confute him only by making this Demand, What is the OLD WAY? Which I am sure they cannot tell. For, one Town says, theirs is the true Old Way, another Town thinks the same of theirs, and so does a third of their Way of Tuning it. But let such men know from the Writer of this Pamphlet [...] that the Notes sung according to the Scale and Rules of Musick, are the true old Way.*<sup>40</sup>

It is therefore his goal to help remove the "Old Way" of singing from the congregations, and follow the example set by Playford in describing the "true old way" according to the rules of English solmization. He gives the Gamut Table as Playford does, however it is extended to include the sharp keys as well as the flat ones. Mi is once again identified as the master note, and the semitones between Mi-Fa and La-Fa are also identified.

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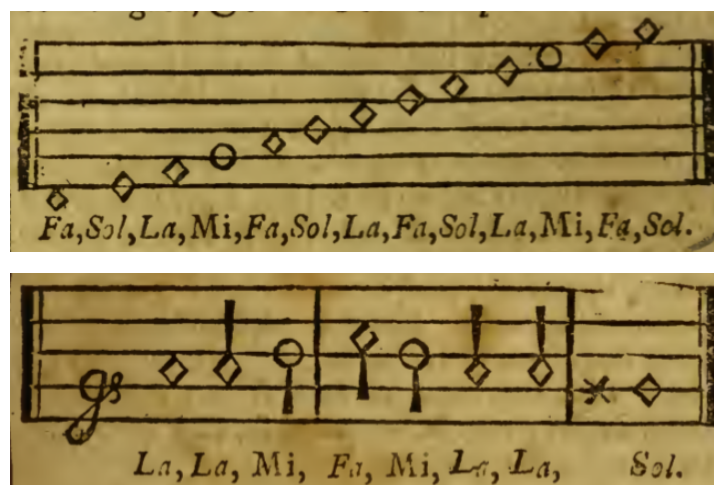
<sup>38</sup> Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained*. Boston, 1721. p. ii

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained*. Boston, 1721. p. 2

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained*. Boston, 1721. p. 3

It is this identification of the Mi that convinces me Walter should also be included as a founding source for Shape-Note. In his notated examples of the English solmization scale on page 10 and subsequent examples beginning on page 11 (as seen in Example 12), in order to highlight the position of Mi, he changes the shape of the note to a circle rather than the usual diamond:

Example 12:



He is quite consistent with it in his instructional material, then returns to standard notation for the proper Psalm Tunes. This is noteworthy because it is a visual representation of the required English syllable, just as Tufts used in his notation. However, unlike Tufts' notation, this is the first instance we have seen up to this point of changing the shape of the note head based on the corresponding English syllable. While the shapes do not represent the same syllables as they do in official Shape-Note, it is around this concept that the later notation is based.

In addition, extensive research has been done into the origins of the Tunes used in Tufts'

*Introduction*. Finney, Lowens, and Gates all found evidence that Tufts leaned heavily on Walter's *Grounds* for his choice of Tunes, in addition to the Bay Psalm Book and Playford's *Introduction*.<sup>41</sup> Gates also found evidence that both the Tufts and Walter sources were used in

<sup>41</sup> Theodore Finney, "The Third Edition of Tufts' 'Introduction to the Art of Singing Psalm-Tunes'", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1966)

Terry Gates, "A Comparison of the Tune Books of Tufts and Walter", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988)

Irving Lowens, "John Tufts' 'Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes' (1721-1744): The First American Music Textbook", in: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, V. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1954)

the singing schools. Walter's Grounds were even printed with extra blank pages for advanced students to write their own musical excerpts and notes. This indicates that both were widely available to the public, and their subsequent editions emphasizes their popularity. Neither Tufts nor Walter are the actual inventors of the Shape-Note notation, of course, but both deserve equal recognition in laying the foundation upon which Shape-Note is based.

## 5.1 The Easy Instructor

Shifting to the end of the 18th century, the invention of the standardized Shape-Note notation that is still in use today has been credited to a few different people;<sup>42</sup> however, what is clear is that the first collection of Shape-Note notation was published in 1801 in the instructional manual *The Easy Instructor* by William Little and William Smith. In their Preface, taken from the English tune book *Sacred Harmony* by Ralph Harrison,<sup>43</sup> Little and Smith confirm that the "Regular Singing" movement is still the primary motivator for singing instruction, by including an appeal much like Mather, Tufts, and Walter for the young people to learn proper singing. They lament that many young people spend their free hours engaging in pointless entertainments, and argues that if they would instead learn to properly sing:

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<sup>42</sup> As Richard Crawford reveals in his book, *Andrew Law, American Psalmist*, Little and Smith were not the actual inventors of the standardized shapes. Law, a contemporary of both Little and Smith, describes in a letter from 1806 that Little was given the shapes by a mysterious "Mr. Colloney," whom Crawford has identified as John Connelley, a Philadelphia shopkeeper. Further confusion is added when one considers that Smith was not originally an author of *The Easy Instructor*. Lowens discusses this authorship confusion in his article "The Easy Instructor: A History and Bibliography of the First Shape-Note Tune-Book." He looks at Edward Stammers, who's name in the printed editions only appears with a quote from the Uranian Society of Philadelphia. Lowens' theory is that Stammers and Little were originally the collaborators on *The Easy Instructor*, but Stammers died in 1802, and Little needed another collaborator, which is when Smith stepped in. For a more in depth look at this confusing tangle, see Lowens' article as well as Crawford's book and *The Makers of the Sacred Harp* by David Steel and Richard Hulan.

<sup>43</sup> Allen Britton, "The How and Why of Teaching Singing Schools in Eighteenth Century America", in: *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, N. 99 (Winter, 1989), p. 23-41

*they who come to sing may learn to pray - that they whose only wish it was to be entertained may find themselves instructed and improved? Such is the happy tendency of well regulated song in the house of God; but alas! how seldom is this part if the service accompanied with its proper effect.*<sup>44</sup>

The “Old Way” of singing then is still pervasive throughout congregations, despite the efforts of the singing school masters. Little and Smith go on to describe the sound that should be the aim of every singer, that “The high notes in all parts should be sung soft and clear, but not faint: The low notes full and bold, but not harsh. The best general rule of singing in concert is, for each individual to sing so soft as to hear distinctly the other parts.”<sup>45</sup> This description is noteworthy in that it differs immensely from the modern Shape-Note tradition. As described at the beginning of this paper, the modern tradition of Shape-Note singing is quite loud and forceful, which is at odds with Little and Smith’s description of what essentially is the ‘sound pyramid’ concept.

After these general remarks they describe their new system of notation. This page is partially reproduced in Example 13. What is immediately observable is the influence of the English theoretical treatises of the previous century. At the left edge of the page is the labeling of the notes and lines of each staff. This bears a striking resemblance to the obligatory Gamut Table found in all English theory treatises from Morley to Playford. The letter names, while no longer labeled with their hexachordal names, are still given on the left, each necessary singing clef is provided on its proper staff line, and the associated English syllable is given on the right. For brevity’s sake, Little and Smith have only given the solmization syllables for Mi in B, but just as Morley does, they begin with the low G (or Gamma-ut), and proceed up to the high G (or gg solreut), as Playford includes. The similarities between the English treatises continue at the bottom center of the page, as Mi is described once again as the

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<sup>44</sup> William Little and William Smith, *The Easy Instructor*. Philadelphia: n.d. [1801]. p. 6

<sup>45</sup> William Little and William Smith, *The Easy Instructor*. Philadelphia: n.d. [1801]. p. 8

defining note in the key. They briefly list all the flat and sharp keys currently in practical use, going all the way up to four flats and four sharps.<sup>46</sup>

Example 13:

*Treble & Tenor.*  
 G sol This character, called the G cliff, is used in Treble & Tenor, and usually stands on the second line.  
 F faw  
 E law  
 D sol  
 C faw  
 B Mi  
 A law  
 G sol  
 F faw  
 E law

*Counter.*  
 G sol This character, called the counter cliff, is used in Counter, & stands on the middle line.  
 F faw  
 E law  
 D sol  
 C faw  
 B Mi  
 A law  
 G sol  
 F faw

*Base.*  
 A law This character, called the Bass cliff, is used in Bass, and stands on the 4th line.  
 G sol  
 F faw  
 E law  
 D sol  
 C faw  
 B Mi  
 A law  
 G sol

The first column shews the names of the lines and spaces—the second the names and order of the notes.

Sol Law Mi Faw

Notes. Rests.

Semibreve  
 Minim  
 Crotchet  
 Quaver  
 Semiquaver  
 Demisemiquaver

Round Square Diamond Triangle

A half note, represents the semitones between mi and faw and law and faw.

2 Bars. 4 Bars. 8 Bars.

The natural place for Mi is in B,  
 But if B be flat Mi is in . . . E ♯ If F be sharp Mi is in . . . F  
 if B & E . . . . . A ♯ If F & C . . . . . C  
 if B E & A . . . . . D ♯ If F C & G . . . . . G  
 if B E A & D . . . . . G ♯ If F C G & D . . . . . D

William Little and William Smith. *The Easy Instructor*. Philadelphia: n.d. [1801]. p. 9

The obvious difference from the English treatises, and indeed any source we have looked at so far, is in the center of the page. Here Little and Smith introduce the new shaped note heads.

The circle, square, and diamond shapes we have seen in mensural notation and Walter’s

<sup>46</sup> These similarities with the 17th century English treatises can be seen in many of the important musical educational texts printed in the United States at the end of the 18th century. Two of the most prominent examples are Oliver Holden’s 1793 *Union Harmony* and William Billings’ 1794 *The Continental Harmony*. Both sources include a table labeling the notes in a Gamut-like fashion, and use the English syllables. Holden and Billings also both identify Mi as the defining placement in a key, and all rhythmical values are given using the English terms (Crotchet, Quaver, etc.). Billings even uses the format of Morley, including a dialogue section between Master and Scholar, explaining further the concepts he has just introduced. For further reading on Singing School treatises, see Allen Britton’s article on the subject.

identification of Mi. The triangle we have not seen before, but it is a basic and important geometrical shape, easily distinguishable from the others and not too difficult to print. These are labeled with their respective English syllable at the top. Each rhythmical value is demonstrated and labeled for each shape, and here we find a subtler connection to the English system in the names of the rhythmical values, which are the English terms such as Crotchet and Quaver. For additional instructional clarity, the shapes are identified below each column and the semitones between Mi-Fa(w) and La(w)-Fa(w) are addressed.

This format, and the use of the English syllables makes it quite clear that the English solmization system was the primary one in use in the United States, specifically in the singing schools, up until this point. *The Easy Instructor* is Little and Smith's attempt to make learning music easier and more efficient for those "who have not the advantage of an instructor," just as their predecessors Tufts and Walter attempted to achieve with their instructional guides. The Shape-Note notational system was therefore a successful attempt at non-standard notation for singers to easily read and comprehend the English system of solmization.

## 5.2 Influence throughout the 19th century

The invention of the Shape-Note notational system spread like wildfire throughout the country. *The Easy Instructor* had many subsequent editions, and although Little and Smith appear to have had a falling out,<sup>47</sup> their instruction manual flourished. Unsurprisingly, due to the success of the notational system, imitations began to appear almost immediately. Lowens and Britton explore these at some length in their article "*The Easy Instructor (1798-1831): A History and Bibliography of the First Shape-Note Tune-Book*", but in the interest of brevity this paper will focus on a particularly influential tune book that lead to the Shape-Note repertory still in use today.

In 1810 John Wyeth printed his *Repository of Sacred Music*, followed three years later by his *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*. Both of these tune books used the Little and

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<sup>47</sup> Irving Lowens and Allen Britton explore this strained relationship in their article "*The Easy Instructor (1798-1831): A History and Bibliography of the First Shape-Note Tune-Book*".

Smith's Shape-Notes to make the music as accessible as possible. Wyeth borrows heavily from Little and Smith's example, beginning with a brief explanation of the Gamut and providing a table much like Little and Smith's, starting with low G (Gamma Ut), proceeding to the high G (gg solreut), and labeling every note with the corresponding English syllable. He also, following the long established tradition, identifies the keys in regards to the placement of Mi. What is noteworthy about Wyeth's explanation of the shaped note heads is that he identifies it as "the knowledge of *faw sol law-ing*."<sup>48</sup> This implies that the knowledge of the English solmization syllables had become so well-known, that a term like "faw sol law-ing" would be instantly recognized and understood. This term "faw sol law-ing" is still used in modern Singings to mean specifically singing the tune first on its shaped solmization syllables (what is also known as "naming the notes"). Once the singers have finished "faw sol law-ing," they repeat the tune using the actual text.

Wyeth's two Repositories also borrowed heavily from the actual psalm tunes included in Little and Smith's collection. Lowens and Britton found evidence that "nearly half of its 156 tunes were taken directly from various editions of *The Easy Instructor*."<sup>49</sup> These psalm tunes represent the musical shift beginning to take place in the United States. Until Little and Smith's collection, the psalm tunes included in most tune books were drawn heavily from the older Playford/Tufts/Walter repertory. Little and Smith's repertory included almost exclusively American composers, such as William Billings and Oliver Holden. As the copyright for *The Easy Instructor* changed hands,<sup>50</sup> each editor followed the musical taste of the time, which was shifting further and further from the influence of Europe. Wyeth took this trend even further, beginning to shift not only away from Europe, but away from the New England composers as well, including more Southern composers in each edition. It was these psalm tunes, printed in both Little/Smith's and Wyeth's collections, that proved to be a

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<sup>48</sup> John Wyeth, *Repository of Sacred Music*. Harrisburgh: 1820. p. 15

<sup>49</sup> Irving Lowens and Allen Britton, "The Easy Instructor (1798-1831): A History and Bibliography of the First Shape-Note Tune-Book", in: Irving Lowens (ed.), *Music and Musicians in Early America*, New York: 1964, p. 134

<sup>50</sup> Irving Lowens and Allen Britton, "The Easy Instructor (1798-1831): A History and Bibliography of the First Shape-Note Tune-Book", in: Irving Lowens (ed.), *Music and Musicians in Early America*, New York: 1964, p. 115-137

major influence on the composers found in the Shape-Note collection *The Sacred Harp*, which is the preeminent collection of Shape-Note repertoire in the 20th and 21st centuries. This shift in the musical center of the young country paved the way for the Shape-Note repertory as we know it today. As the 19th century wore on, New England music educators such as Lowell Mason, who saw Shape-Note as music for the poor and uneducated, began to shift the prevailing musical preference back towards the European influence over the home-grown folk. Thus the Shape-Note tradition was pushed into the Southern States, where it survived in rural pockets until today.

First published in 1844 by Benjamin Franklin White and Elisha James King, *The Sacred Harp* is the foremost collection of Shape-Note notation and repertoire in the United States. The 1991 edition provides the principle material used in modern Singings across the country. Influenced by other Shape-Note collections such as William Walker's *Southern Harmony*, *The Sacred Harp* is a patchwork collection of psalm tunes from the 17th century English influence up through 19th and 20th century folk hymns and spirituals. In his 2011 article, Dr. Bruce explores the different styles of music found in the 1991 edition of the collection. The majority of the repertoire included comes from the so-called "First New England School" of composers, mainly late 18th century composers such as William Billings and Daniel Read. Another large portion of the repertoire is from the early 19th century, now categorized as Folk Hymns, which were preexisting melodies harmonized in a simplistic manner using parallel fifths/octaves, and liberal dissonance. A few of the oldest psalm tunes included come from the Playford influence in the Colonies. A comprehensive discussion of the tunes and composers included in *The Sacred Harp*, is found in David Warren Steel's and Richard H. Hulan's book *The Makers of The Sacred Harp*, published in 2010. They examine each composer included in the collection, as well as the origins of the tunes with brief overview of the Shape-Note notation as well.

## **6 Conclusion**

The Shape-Note notational system on the surface is a relatively recent invention in the vast history of musical notation. Officially beginning in 1801 with Little and Smith's *The Easy*

Instructor, the system has been in continuous use since then, beginning first in New England, surviving in pockets of the South, and recently reemerging in states like Connecticut and Massachusetts through collections such as *The Sacred Harp*. However, when the origins of this system are examined, the theoretical understanding behind it is far older. Tracing the influence as far back as Morley, the English solmization method is indeed the defining characteristic of Shape-Note. Most of the prominent late 16th and 17th century English theoreticians, namely Morley, Campion, Butler, and Playford, describe in an increasingly specific and distinct manner the development of the English system of solmization in England. This system was clearly carried over to the English Colonies in North America, specifically in Sternhold and Hopkins *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* and Playford's *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*, and provided the basis for musical teaching in the Colonies. The first music teachers, born out of the desire to improve singing of the Psalms in church, drew not only from *The Bay Psalm Book* and Playford, but also created material written for use in their instruction. Members of the "Regular Singing" movement, spearheaded by Boston ministers, encouraged new innovative instructional materials like Tufts' *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes* and Walter's *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* to assist the singing masters in their endeavors: to teach congregations of all backgrounds the rudiments of musical understanding and good singing. Experimentation with non-standard forms of notation to achieve this goal lead to the appearance of Shape-Note in 1801, and the centuries of traditions associated with the singing of psalm tunes merged together with the notation, and has survived into the 21st century. Today we are able to experience the living tradition of singing Psalm Tunes using English solmization in the Singing Conventions of *The Sacred Harp* Shape-Note repertory throughout the United States.

There remains many open questions about each step of the development of this tradition. My research was able to trace the general influence of the English system on Shape-Note, but was unable to pinpoint the finer details of transmission. What would be needed are personal sources such as diaries or letters from the influential people in the field, like Tufts or Connelley/Little and Smith, which specify what editions of what sources they were using when developing their notational systems. These sources are yet to be discovered, if indeed they exist, but what can conclusively be said for my research is that Shape-Note notation is

clearly a descendent of the English system, and was certainly used as a teaching tool in the first music schools of New England. It can still be used today in music classrooms to familiarize students with solmization syllables, as well as help orient their reading on the staff. Many modern instructional books for beginners have a version of non-standard notation to label either the letters or syllables. Why not use a system that was invented for just this purpose? Shape-Note is meant to be used by people at all levels of proficiency. In fact, the influence of this system of teaching music reaches far beyond the Shape-Note tradition, into the very foundation of music education in the United States. Taken into an even bigger context, this system of teaching music using English solmization informs the essence of the first compositional style to develop from within the Colonies. It should therefore inform the performance of this music, and all other genres influenced by this music, not only the Shape-Note tradition.

As a living tradition, Shape-Note has evolved beyond its original form. This makes it important to distinguish when performing this music whether to follow the living tradition or the historical method. If the performance aims to follow the historical methods of the Psalm Tune singing, then the instructions of Playford, Tufts, and Walter in regards to the treatment of the solmization might be taken into account. In my own practice, I would like to introduce this more historically informed approach to modern Shape-Note singing. While the living tradition is important to preserve, performing Shape-Note as Little and Smith describe would bring the music back to its roots, and give a different perspective on the music composed in the early days of the United States.

Shape-Note notation is a fascinating remnant of the 17th century English solmization system, which turns the theoretical analysis and understanding of the music into an easily read visual representation that can be interpreted and performed by anyone who can remember the “names” of the four shapes. In this way, Shape-Note notation has taught generations of people, amateurs and professionals alike, a complex musical system thought to be isolated to a few centuries of English history; and it will continue to teach future generations the English system through not only the Shape-Note notation, but through a community built on a musical experience shared throughout the centuries.

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