



ACTIVITY 4: SHAPENOTE AND SACRED HARP SINGING

This lesson incorporates the following:

[A Shapenote Singing Lesson](#)

[Sweet is the Day, A Sacred Harp Family Portrait](#) (film and education guide)

[Let Us Sing, Southeast Georgia Sacred Harp](#) (online exhibit)

Grade Level: 3-8

Purpose of Lesson: To introduce students to the history and tradition of Sacred Harp singing in the American South. Students are also introduced to the unique shape note notation system and will sing a song using this notation.

Lesson Objectives:

1. Students learn about shapenote music and Sacred Harp singing.
2. Students understand the purpose and traditions of Sacred Harp singing.
3. Students learn the four shapes used in Sacred Harp singing and “sing the shapes” of “Yankee Doodle.”
4. Students explore the culture and traditions of a unique Southern folk group and expand their understanding and respect for other cultures.

National Standards

NATIONAL STANDARDS: MUSIC

- NA.5-8.1 [Singing, Alone and With Others, a Varied Repertoire Of Music](#)
- NA.5-8.5 [Reading and Notating Music](#)
- NA.5-8.8 [Understanding Relationships Between Music, The Other Arts, and Disciplines Outside the Arts](#)
- NA.5-8.9 [Understanding Music in Relation to History and Culture](#)

NATIONAL STANDARDS: LANGUAGE ARTS

- NL-ENG.K-12.2 [Reading for Understanding](#)
- NL-ENG.K-12.6 [Applying Knowledge](#)
- NL-ENG.K-12.7 [Evaluating Data](#)

NATIONAL STANDARDS: HISTORY, K-12

- [Historical Thinking Standard 1: Chronological Thinking](#)
- [Historical Thinking Standard 2: Historical Comprehension](#)
- [Historical Thinking Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation](#)

NATIONAL STANDARDS: HISTORY K-4

- [Standard 6](#): Regional Folklore and Cultural Contributions That Helped to Form Our National Heritage

NATIONAL STANDARDS: HISTORY 5-12

- [Era 10](#) Contemporary United States (1968 to the present)
- [Standard 2](#): Economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary United States

[All National Arts Standards](#)

Background Information for the Teacher: This lesson plan introduces students to the tradition of shapenote singing, particularly the Sacred Harp traditions of the American South. As a community-based, sacred singing tradition, it coincides with several “Rhythm & Roots” panels and artifacts: “Community Gatherings,” “Sacred Tradition Bearers,” and “Next Generation” (with its discussion of singing schools and Alabama’s Camp Fasola). The lesson, available online in PDF format, was originally published in the “Smithsonian In Your Classroom” magazine (October 2000). It includes a background essay on Sacred Harp and seven-shape singing traditions and a Lesson Plan “Keeping the Spirit Alive” in which students learn the four shapes used in Sacred Harp singing and “sing the shapes” of “Yankee Doodle” and “Chester.” Older students may be able to read the background essay.

Another Sacred Harp online resource is the documentary film [Sweet is the Day, A Sacred Harp Family Portrait](#), which gives an excellent introduction to one of the South’s important singing families, the Wootens of Sand Mountain, Alabama, and the role of the Sacred Harp singing tradition in the context of family and community. A Web-streamed version of the film, complete with background information, transcript, a background essay by folklorist John Beale, and an Education Guide, is available at <http://www.folkstreams.net/context,64>. This Education Guide and the film address the cultural role of Sacred Harp. Various discussion questions are suggested, as well as extensions. Ordering information is also available at <http://www.folkstreams.net/film,44>.

These two resources work well together or independently. The online exhibit "[Let Us Sing: Southeast Georgia Sacred Harp](#)" (see below) can also be used to provide some context and history of Sacred Harp. For younger grades, use photos and captions. To adapt the text labels to a suitable grade level, see [Adaptation Strategies](#) from "Louisiana Voices." Below are some general discussion questions suggested in the "Sweet is the Day" education guide, which could be used with the online exhibit, "Let Us Sing."

- Ask students to talk about the role of music and singing in their lives. Why do they sing? What are some different places they sing or listen to music? When do they sing alone? When do they sing in groups? What are some different reasons that people sing or listen to music? Talk about how different types of music make them feel.
- What are some of the different ways the tradition of Sacred Harp singing is carried on throughout generations (singing school, singing with families, community singing)? What are some songs or types of music that you have learned from older generations?
- What are some of the traditions attached to Sacred Harp singing (singing schools, "dinner on the grounds")? What are similar musical or cultural traditions in your community?
- What are some of the reasons for Sacred Harp singing? Is there a type of singing or music in your life that fills this same purpose?

(Questions Adapted from Sweet is the Day Education Guide)

Extensions

- Visit a shapenote or Sacred Harp singing event near your school. The Web site www.fasola.org includes list of singings around the country and many other resources. Look for a singing near you for local resources in this tradition. Alternatively, map the singings in your state or community.
- Explore some of the variations of this tradition in the Southeast, such as the African American Sacred Harp Tradition represented by Alabama's Wiregrass Singers, the Big Singing of Benton, Kentucky (Christian Harmony), and Old Harp Singing in Tennessee, among others.
- More extension ideas are available in the [Sweet is the Day Education Guide](#).

Additional Resources

(**Note: all southeastern states have shapenote singing traditions; just a few resources are listed here.)

[Awake My Soul](#), documentary film about Sacred Harp

[Camp Fasola radio program with interviews and music](#)

[Hoboken \(GA\) Sacred Harp radio documentary programs](#)

www.fasola.org; includes list of singings around the country and many other resources. Look for a singing near you for local resources in this tradition.

[Let Us Sing: Southeast Georgia Sacred Harp](#) (online exhibit)

[Sacred Harp, from Prof. Warren Steele's homepage](#); background information on Sacred Harp, including a useful, brief FAQ section

[Traditional Music of Alabama Vol. 2, African American Seven Shapenote Singing](#)
(includes streamed audio and a background essay)

[Traditional Music of Alabama Vol. 4, African American Sacred Harp Singing Wiregrass](#)

Notes Revised, liner notes in PDF and links to music example "Dying Boy" mp3