

## **The Alto Parts in the “True Dispersed Harmony” of *The Sacred Harp* Revisions<sup>1</sup>**

Wallace McKenzie

Among the traditions of white folk hymnody none has endured with the success and vitality of Sacred Harp. The tradition is maintained with enthusiasm, not only in the rural South where it began with the 1844 publication by B. F. White and E. J. King of the tunebook with that title, but also in current Sacred Harp “singings” in many places over much of the continental United States.<sup>2</sup> The nature of the music, the manner of performance, and the atmosphere of the singings appear to have remained largely unchanged for more than one hundred forty years.

Most of the music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century editions of *The Sacred Harp* was printed in three parts: treble, tenor (which carries the melody), and bass. In the two principal books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The B. F. White Sacred Harp* (Cooper revision, 1902),<sup>3</sup> and *The Original Sacred Harp* (Denson revision, 1936),<sup>4</sup> alto parts have been added to most of the formerly three-part tunes. Most of the added alto parts were supplied by W. M. Cooper and S. M. Denson in their respective books, although many have no attribution in the Denson revision and many are attributed to other individuals in the Cooper revision. Some altos are identical — others are nearly so — in the two books, even when attributions name different sources (e.g., on p. 150 in both books the tune, “The Spiritual Sailor,” carries the annotation in the Cooper revision, “Alto, Mrs. R. D. Blackshear,” and in the Denson version, “Alto by S. M. Denson, 1911,” but the altos are identical!). *The Original Sacred Harp* is based on an earlier book with the same title, edited by J. S. James,<sup>5</sup> for which Denson had supplied the altos; the same altos Denson supplied for the James edition were included in the Denson edition when it first appeared in 1936. Subsequent editions have maintained those altos, with minor changes, while adding new tunes to the collection.

The Denson revision has been the most widely used of the 20<sup>th</sup> century books. Modern writers have considered the Cooper revision somehow “illegitimate.” Richard J.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is taken from *The Musical Quarterly* 1989 73:153-171; repaginated here.

<sup>2</sup> One has only to examine an issue of the *National Sacred Harp Newsletter* to see the number of places where “singings” are held in any one month. In the issue for May, 1987 (Vol. 2, No. 12), for example, one finds singings announced for California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Wisconsin, as well as in most southern states. Available recordings and cassettes are also advertised for sale.

<sup>3</sup> *The B. F. White Sacred Harp*, revised and improved by W. M. Cooper and others (Dothan, AL, 1902; Troy, AL, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> *The Original Sacred Harp*, Denson revision (Haleyville, AL, 1936; Cullman, AL, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Stephen James, ed., Seaborn McDaniel Denson, musical ed., *The Original Sacred Harp* (Cullman, AL, 1911).

Stanislaw, for example, in *A Checklist of Four-Shape Shape-Note Tunebooks*, lists in item number 283 the following: “Cooper edition.’ ‘Corrected’ and modernized — no longer in the tradition of the 1844 edition.”<sup>6</sup> Buell Cobb says, “those who considered themselves to have received the mantle B. F. White had passed down — though they admitted a revision was needed — could never sanction such an interloper” as W. M. Cooper.<sup>7</sup> Cooper did transpose many of the tunes down — probably, as Cobb points out,<sup>8</sup> to approximate the pitch at which they were customarily sung (since no attempt is made to sing tunes at actual written pitch),<sup>9</sup> and he did change many titles, using the first line of text instead of the revered old titles (e.g., p. 29, “Come, Humble Sinner” in Cooper, instead of “Fairfield” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century books and in Denson). The most irritating change to some was that Cooper included some modern, for that time, gospel songs, in the “new” rhythmic style, with many repeated, complete chords (e.g., “The Cleansing Fountain,” p. 382), whereas the Denson revision did not.

The nature of the three-voice tunes in the many Southern shape-note tune books from the 19<sup>th</sup> century — specifically as determined by such contrapuntal-harmonic traits as frequent parallel fifths, octaves, and unisons; open fifths and other incomplete chords; unprepared and unresolved dissonances; and indiscriminantly appearing, non-cadencing second-inversion triads — raises several questions with regard to four-voice revisions. Why was it felt desirable to add a fourth part to these tunes which were known so well and had been sung for so long in their three-part arrangement? What part did low-voiced women sing in the three-part music? Was the alto part desired in order to provide an individual line for low-voiced women to sing? (Many alto parts in the Cooper book are attributed to women.) Was the addition of alto parts seen as an effort to bring the music up to date so as to attract younger singers? Did the adding of another melodic line result simply from a creative urge amongst some Sacred Harp leaders? What happens to the overall musical style when an alto part is added to a three-voice piece? Answers to most of these questions depend to some extent on the answer to the last one, which is the principal concern of this study.

Let us first consider some questions regarding the part printed directly beneath the treble (the alto, or counter) in the four-part pieces that were included in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sacred Harp books. The third edition of *The Sacred Harp* (1859) contains 421 pieces.<sup>10</sup> Of these, 320 are set in three parts; 101 have four parts: a ratio of three to one

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Stanislaw, *A Checklist of Four-Shape Shape-Note Tunebooks*, I.S.A.M. Monographs: No. 10 (New York, 1978), p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Buell E. Cobb, Jr., *The Sacred Harp, A Tradition and its Music* (Athens, GA, 1978), p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Hugh McGraw, President of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, says that Sacred Harp singers “sing in keys of convenience,” on the cassette, *How To Sing Sacred Harp Music — Its History and Tradition* (1984).

<sup>10</sup> B. F. White and E. J. King, *The Sacred Harp*, facsimile reprint of the third edition, 1859 (Nashville, 1968). References to the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Sacred Harp* are to this edition rather than the first edition (1844), because of availability. The two editions are identical as far as the first edition goes, to p. 262.

preponderance of three-part tunes. Most of the four-part tunes come from earlier sources, many of them fuguing tunes and anthems from one of the New England books of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is no indication that the four-part tunes were avoided by 19<sup>th</sup> century singers because of their having four parts instead of the then-normal three. Thirteen of the four-part pieces in *The Sacred Harp* (1859 ed.) were printed widely enough to make George Pullen Jackson’s list of “Eighty Most Popular Tunes” in pre-Civil War tune books: “Albion” (p. 52), “China” (p. 37), “Dublin” (p. 46), “Greenfields” (p. 127), “Kingwood” (p. 66), “Minister’s Farewell” (P. 69), “Pisgah” (P. 58), “Pleyel’s Hymn” (P. 317), “Salem” (p. 68), “Solitude in the Grove” (p. 138), “Tennessee” (p. 51), “Vernon” (p. 55), “Washington” (p. 147).<sup>11</sup>

In the “Rudiments of Music” section of *The Sacred Harp*, under the subheading, “Of the Cliff or Clefs,” the clefs are related to the voice parts. The C clef on the middle line is referred to as “the alto, or counter.” Then the voices are described:

Thus we see the bass assigned to the gravest of male voices, and the tenor to the highest of male voices; the treble to the most shrill female voices; the counter to the gravest of female, and boys voices; unless the counter be written on the G or F clef, and if so, take the best and most acute voices of both male and female, and perform it on the octave pitch.<sup>12</sup>

The image displays four musical examples of four-part settings, each with the alto part in a different clef configuration:

- GREENFIELDS:** The alto part is written on a bass clef (F clef) on the first line of the staff.
- GREENSBOROUGH:** The alto part is written on a C clef on the middle line of the staff.
- WHITESTOWN:** The alto part is written on a treble clef (G clef) on the first line, with notes placed above the staff.
- PISGAH:** The alto part is written on a treble clef (G clef) on the first line, with notes placed below the staff. The label "Second Treble." is placed above the staff.

The alto (counter) parts of the four-voice pieces in *The Sacred Harp* (1859 ed.) are notated in five different clef/range configurations: 1) bass or F clef (e.g., “Greenfields,” p. 127); 2) C clef in the alto position, on the middle line of the staff — the most common clef for the counter in 18<sup>th</sup> century tunebooks (e.g., “Greensborough,” p. 289); 3) treble or G clef, with the notes written above the treble, an octave above where an alto should sound (e.g., “Whitestown,” p. 211); 4) treble clef, with the notes in the same range as the treble, often labeled “second treble” (e.g., “Pisgah,” p. 58); and 5) treble clef, with the notes written below the treble, in the normal range for a female, alto voice. In the 20<sup>th</sup>

<sup>11</sup> George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1933), pp. 131-50.

<sup>12</sup> White and King, *Sacred Harp*, pp. 11-13. Confusion about the alto or counter, implicit in the last phrase of this quotation, may account in part for the preference of three-part music. No other evidence exists to suggest the idea of alto parts (counter) being sung in octaves, though for the treble and tenor to be so sung was and is common.

century revision, many (but not all) of the clefs are changed to the normal treble clef, with notes written in the normal register.

Evidence suggests that the F clef was used as a simple expedient to keep the notes on the staff when the part ran quite low; such a part is sung an octave higher than written. In *Wyeth’s Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*, we read, “This character is called the F cliff which heretofore has been used only in the Bass but in this collection, it will sometimes be found on the Counter, for the purpose of bringing the music in the stave.”<sup>13</sup>

The G clef with the notes written up the octave, sometimes served the same purpose, with the voices singing it an octave lower, i.e., treating it just like the vocal tenor G clef (except, as noted above in the quotation from *The Sacred Harp*, when “acute female” voices were singing the part). James Lyon, in *Urania* (1761), mentions this treatment in connections with a presentation of the C clef:

The C Cliff is movable in all Authors, but, the Line it stands on is always C, and must be sounded a 5th above the F Cliff, and a 5th below the G Cliff, except when the latter is prefix’d to a part design’d for mens voices (which is frequently the case with the Tenor & Counter in this book) then it is a 4th above the G Cliff, for that is now an Octave (or 8 Notes) below it’s [sic] usual place, and Unison (or the same sound) with the highest G in the Bass.<sup>14</sup>

These diverse clefs and their possible significations regarding intended vocalization of the parts do not constitute the principal issue here.<sup>15</sup> With few exceptions, the alto parts added to formerly three-voice tunes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century revisions are written in the treble clef at the normal octave. Three typical exceptions may be seen in “Kedron” (Denson, p. 48), whose alto is in the G clef with notes above the treble part; “Carnsville P.M.” (Denson, p. 109), with an alto in the same range as the treble, the parts crossing frequently; and “Frozen Heart” (Cooper, p. 93), which uses F clef for the alto.<sup>16</sup>

The term “Dispersed Harmony” is used to characterize the music of *The Sacred Harp*. It is articulated in the Preface and also under the heading of “Harmony” in the Rudiments of Music of the 1936 Denson revision: “The harmony used in this revision of the Original Sacred Harp is dispersed or free moving.”<sup>17</sup> Ruth Denson Edwards repeats some of the same language in an essay which appears in the 1971 edition of *The Origi-*

---

<sup>13</sup> John Wyeth, *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*, second ed. (Harrisburg, PA, 1820; facs. repr., New York, 1964), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> James Lyon, *Urania, or a Choice Collection of Psalm-tunes, Anthems, and Hymns* (Philadelphia, 1761), p. iii.

<sup>15</sup> For further information and questions about this issue, see Leonard van Camp, “Choral Balance and the Alto Part in Early American Choral Music,” *Choral Journal*, 15 (May, 1975), pp. 7-9.

<sup>16</sup> In the tune, “Will Guide Us Till We Die” (Cooper revision, p. 28), the alto is written in the G clef, but, erroneously, with the same notes as the C-clef alto part of the same tune in the 1859 edition, where it is called “Aylesbury.”

<sup>17</sup> The Original Sacred Harp (Denson, 1936), p. 21.

*nal Sacred Harp* (Denson revision). Here one reads, “the 1936 Denson Revision of the *Original Sacred Harp* is the true Successor of the James Revision of 1911, and is the only book that retains both the popular four shaped notes and True Dispersed Harmony.” She names Alfred Marcus Cagle (d. 1968), composer of several tunes in the Denson revision, as the “undisputed and unsurpassed authority on Dispersed Harmony,” saying that “he prepared a manuscript on the subject which was never published.”<sup>18</sup>

Cobb quotes an “anonymous spokesman” as saying, “‘dispersed harmony’ occurs whenever a chord exceeds two octaves or the alto goes above the soprano. Dispersed harmony is the opposite of close harmony.”<sup>19</sup> Only occasionally in *The Sacred Harp* does a chord exceed two octaves, or the alto go above the soprano, except in those cases in which the entire alto part is written up the octave, or when a second treble appears instead of alto. Jackson, in discussing the James edition of 1911, identifies dispersed harmony simply as “one part to each staff.”<sup>20</sup> “True dispersed harmony” best refers to a musical texture with many open fifths and fourths; the notes of the intervals are dispersed, *spread apart*, and sound that way.

Assessments of the effect of the added alto parts on the Sacred Harp tradition vary, but many feel that their presence erodes the tradition. Thus, Cobb says that adding the alto part “took some of the austerity out” of the music.<sup>21</sup> In another place he says, “the increasing importance of the alto part in the Sacred Harp around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought an inevitable increase in close harmony, resulting in a shift in much of the harmonic structure from quartal to tertian — because the alto centers on the third.”<sup>22</sup> Further, he says, “the third was a harmonic necessity virtually forced upon the Sacred Harp by the introduction of the alto part, and it should serve theoretically to sweeten or soften the spare chord structure of the Sacred Harp — make it sound less primitive.”<sup>23</sup> Davis C. Woolley says “this change [adding altos] may have been more satisfying to 20<sup>th</sup> century singers, but the sound and character of these folk tunes were altered.”<sup>24</sup>

The contrapuntal-harmonic style of the three-voice shape-note tune books has been observed with considerable fascination for many years. Charles Seeger’s 1940 article first called attention to the numerous parallel fifths, octaves, unisons, parallel fourths between outer voices or between the upper voices without a third in the bass, unprepared and unresolved dissonances, cadences on 8/4, and crossing of voices in this

---

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Denson Edwards, “Introduction and History of the Original Sacred Harp,” *The Original Sacred Harp* (Denson, 1971), no page (the essay is between the Preface and the Rudiments of Music).

<sup>19</sup> Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, *White Spirituals*, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

<sup>24</sup> David C. Woolley, preface to *The Sacred Harp* (1859), p. iv.

music.<sup>25</sup> These features, coupled with the melodic preferences for pentatonic and hexatonic modal scales, investigated so thoroughly by Jackson,<sup>26</sup> characterize much of the music contained in *The Sacred Harp*, as well as in other southern tune books originating before the Civil War, such as *Kentucky Harmony* (1816), *Missouri Harmony* (1820), and *Southern Harmony* (1835). Suggestions that this music rests on a quartal harmonic base make one think of cultural regression, because of the association of quartal harmony and parallel fifths and fourths with organum and polyphonic conductus of the 13th century.

The idea that this music might be controlled by a quartal harmonic system was suggested to Seeger by Joseph Yasser’s *Theory of Evolving Tonality*,<sup>27</sup> it was developed further by Dorothy Horn in her 1953 dissertation, “Medieval European Harmonic Parallels in the Shape-note Hymnals,”<sup>28</sup> and in her more recent *Sing to me of Heaven*. She maintains that in pentatonic tunes, “thirds and sixths are treated very much as dissonances are treated in traditional tertian harmony; they are ‘prepared’ and ‘resolved.’”<sup>29</sup> Cobb says that “it is generally accepted that the instinctive harmony for the gapped scales like those in the *Sacred Harp* is quartal rather than tertian.”<sup>30</sup> Although this position is not clearly supported by many tunes in *The Sacred Harp*, one does observe in this music a notable preference for sonorities resulting from incomplete triads, especially those of the open fifth, with the third omitted.

Because of this preference, one might expect the modernizing impulse of adding a fourth part to three-part Sacred Harp tunes to result in many more complete triads and in many less open fifths. In some tunes, this is exactly what happens, but many others have only a few thirds and fifths added to the incomplete triads, and all tunes leave some triads incomplete (see Table I). The typical archaic sound of this music is not generated by incomplete triads alone, but by a conjunction of those with a plethora of parallel perfect intervals, frequent non cadential second-inversion triads, and the other features cited by Seeger. If the impulse of adding alto parts to the three-voice tunes was that of bringing them up to date, the revisors needed to rewrite some of the other lines

---

<sup>25</sup> Charles Seeger, “Contrapuntal Style in the Three-Voice Shape-Note Hymns,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 26 (October, 1940), p. 484-85.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *White Spirituals*.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Yasser, *Theory of Evolving Tonality* (New York, 1932).

<sup>28</sup> Dorothy Horn, “Medieval European Harmonic Parallels in the Shape-note Hymnals,” (Ph.D. Theory, Eastman School of Music, 1953).

<sup>29</sup> Dorothy Horn, *Sing to Me of Heaven, A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books* (Gainesville, FL, 1970), see chapter 8.

<sup>30</sup> Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, p. 35.

so as to reduce the number of parallels.<sup>31</sup> In fact, few changes were made to the existing pieces. In addition to the transposition of some tunes noted in the Cooper edition, occasional changes of rhythmic detail (such as replacing a dotted quarter-eighth pair with two even quarter notes) and occasional changes of individual notes in both editions may be found, but no changes were made in the existing parts to reduce the parallel intervals or to fill in incomplete triads. Also, as Table I shows, the added alto parts actually increase the total number of parallels, sometimes with many new ones (e.g., “The Morning Trumpet” and “Mount Vernon,” both versions).

The same can be said, to a lesser extent, of second-inversion triads (6/4 chords), whose frequent appearance in Southern tunebooks tends to undermine functional harmonic motion. The fact that added alto parts actually created new second-inversion triads speaks, on the one hand, of incomplete chords in the three-voice tunes and, on the other hand, of an absence of discrimination in regard to the sound of second-inversion triads by the composers of the alto lines. For an alto line to “create” a full second-inversion triad, what must exist in the three-part piece is the interval of a fourth only, in which case the alto adds the sixth (see Ex. 1, “Holy Manna,” mm. 2 and 4), or the interval of a sixth, in which case the alto adds the fourth (see Ex. 2, “Idumea,” m. 2). Instances of both abound. Some of the six-four chords created by altos are conventional cadential six-fours; they are omitted from the tabulation.

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "Holy Manna" in 4/4 time, featuring four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are: "1. { Come, thy fount of ev'-ry bless-ing, Tune my heart to sing thy grace, } / { Streams of mer-cy nev-er ceas-ing, Call for songs of loud-est praise; }". The score includes first and second endings for both the vocal lines and the bass line.

Ex. 1. “Holy Manna”  
 (“Lord, Revive Us”),  
 Cooper Revision, first  
 phrase

<sup>31</sup> One 20<sup>th</sup> century editor, J. L. White, did revise the other lines to bring them into the style of mainstream hymnody, in *The Sacred Harp: A Collection of Psalm and Hymn Tunes, Odes and Anthems*, fifth edition, much improved and greatly enlarged (1909). This book begins with a large collection of tunes (282 pp.), mostly in three parts, after which a new section begins, with new pagination, a new Rudiments of Music section, and then, many of the same tunes from the first section set again, this time in four parts of normal, common-practice harmony. Although a few copies of this revision are extant, it apparently was never used to any extent.

Ex. 2. “Idumea”  
 (“Indumea”), Cooper  
 Revision, first phrase

Table I was devised to provide some general indicators about the effects of added alto parts to tunes in *The Sacred Harp*. A dozen tunes were selected to serve as a cross-section of the literature. The chosen tunes appear in all three versions of *The Sacred Harp* under consideration, and they also appear in Jackson’s list of “Eighty Most Popular Tunes.”<sup>32</sup> The only other criterion followed in the selection of the repertory was that it contain a variety of types, including examples of hymns, fuguing tunes, and revival songs, that are currently performed with some consistency by Sacred Harp singers. This repertory is representative, in general ways, of the large collection of folk-like pieces included in the books. The list of tunes in Table I contains two fuguing tunes (“Jerusalem,” and “Mount Vernon”), two revival songs, with chorus (“Happy Land,” “The Morning Trumpet”), and eight hymns. Six of the tunes are pentatonic (“Detroit,” “Happy Land,” “Holy Manna,” “Idumea,” “New Britain,” “Ninety-Third Psalm”), five are hexatonic (“Jerusalem,” “King of Peace,” “Morning Trumpet,” “Weeping Saviour,” “Wondrous Love”), and one uses a full diatonic scale (“Mount Vernon”).

The tunes in Table I are listed by their conventional titles, although four of them are different in Cooper: “Detroit” carries the title, “Do Not I Love thee, Lord”; “Holy Manna” is titled “Lord, Revive Us”; “King of Peace” is titled “Solid Comfort”; and “New Britain” becomes the now common “Amazing Grace.” In addition, “Idumea” is misspelled in Cooper “Indumea.” Keys of the tune in Denson are the same as they are in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Sacred Harp* books, but some have been changed in Cooper: “Holy Manna” (“Lord, Revive Us”) from C major to B-flat major, “New Britain” (“Amazing Grace”) and “Ninety-Third Psalm,” from C major to A-flat major, and “Wondrous Love,” from F minor to G minor. Only in three of the selected tunes from Denson is the person responsible for the alto named, and they all are attributed to S. M. Denson, 1911: “Happy Land,” “King of Peace,” and “Wondrous Love.” Sources for all altos in Cooper are given. Nine are by W. M. Cooper, himself: “Detroit” (“Do Not I Love Thee, Lord”), “Holy Manna” (“Lord, Revive Us”), “Jerusalem,” “King of Peace” (“Solid Comfort”), “the Morning Trumpet,” “Mount Vernon,” “New Britain” (“Amazing Grace”), “Ninety-Third Psalm,” for which Cooper also took credit for the transposition, and “Weeping Saviour.” “Happy Land” was

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, *White Spirituals*, pp. 131-150.

Tune	Added Parallels 5th, 8th, unison		Added 3rds		Added 5ths		Added Root (4th)		Created 6/4		Added Dissonance		Remaining incomplete chord			
	C.	D.	C.	D.	C.	D.	C.	D.	C.	D.	C.	D.	w/o 3rd		w/o 5th	
													C.	D.	C.	D.
<i>Detroit</i>	12	10	2	0	0	1	3(1)	3(1)	1	0	1	4	18	18	7	6
<i>Happy Land</i>	5	2	23	23	0	2	2	4	2	1	2	2	10	10	4	3
<i>Holy Manna</i>	5	6	11	13	2	2	2(1)	2(1)	2	2	9	7	15	13	2	2
<i>Idumea</i>	11	6	3	13	2	3	3	1	0	2	2	0	15	5	4	4
<i>Jerusalem</i>	6	4	3	2	7	13	4(1)	2	3	2	3	2	12	13	11	6
<i>King of Peace</i>	9	5	5	4	4	6	1	2(1)	0	0	1	0	15	18	7	3
<i>The Morning Trumpet</i>	13	14	3	4	1	2	1	1	1	2	3	2	22	21	9	8
<i>Mount Vernon</i>	15	15	6	9	6	4	7	7	1	2	1	1	28	25	8	10
<i>New Britain</i>	11	4	1	9	2	2	4	6	1	3	3	2	15	7	3	0
<i>Ninety-third Psalm</i>	7	8	4	6	1	2	4(1)	3(1)	3	3	6	3	14	12	3	4
<i>Weeping Saviour</i>	3	2	4	17	2	4	0	0	0	3	1	2	17	3	3	1
<i>Wondrous Love</i>	10	14	11	7	5	5	0	0	0	0	2	2	28	32	4	4
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>31(4)</b>	<b>33(4)</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>51</b>

Table I. Twentieth-Century Altos of Cooper and Denson

provided an alto by “Miss Henrietta Spivey”; “Idumea” (“Indumea”), by J. W. Watson; and “Wondrous Love,” by “Mrs. R. D. B.” (Blackshear).

The numbers in Table I represent only what resulted from the adding of respective alto parts. The numbers of parallel fifths, octaves, and unisons in the first double column represent the parallel fifths, octaves, and unisons that the alto voices added to those already present in the three-voice version. The same is true for “created” six-four chords; these would not exist without the new alto line. Added thirds, fifths, and roots were counted only if they were missing in the three-voice, original version; if the alto duplicated one of these parts of the chord, it was not included in the tabulation. The fourths in parentheses, in the column labeled “Added Root,” are tabulations of situations wherein the other parts are in unison, and the alto adds the root a fourth above. The resulting *implied* second-inversion triads were not included with added six-four chords.

As can be seen in Table I, the fuguing tune “Mount Vernon” contains fifteen new parallel perfect intervals in both versions; these come in addition to eight that were already present. The added thirds for this tune (6 in Cooper; 9 in Denson) still leave many chords without a third (28 in Cooper; 25 in Denson). “Holy Manna” with eleven (in Cooper) and thirteen (in Denson) added thirds, still contains fifteen and thirteen open fifths (chords without thirds) in the four-voice versions.

The numbers in the Table reveal considerable similarity in the effects of the altos in the two books. The Denson altos overall add more thirds (96 [Denson]: 65 [Cooper] ) and fifths (46:32), and they leave fewer open fifths (177:209), and add fewer parallel perfect intervals (90:107). Most notable individual examples illustrating this disparity are “New Britain” (9:1 added thirds; 6:4 added roots; 7:15 triads remaining without a third; and 4:11 parallels), and “Idumea” (13:3 added thirds; 5:15 remaining open fifths; and 6:11 parallels). In “Wondrous Love,” however, we find exactly the opposite result in two ar-

Ex. 3a. “Weeping Saviour,” *The Sacred Harp*, 1859 edition.

**WEeping SAVIOUR. S. M.** Psalmist, 471st Hymn. *E. J. King.*

Ex. 3b. “Weeping Saviour,” *The Sacred Harp*, Cooper Revision.

**WEeping SAVIOUR.** Alto by *W. M. C.*

eas: more added parallels in Denson (14:10) and more added thirds in Cooper (11:7). Few other clear distinctions between the effects of the respective altos in the two revisions can be observed in these areas.

As the totals in Table I demonstrate, Cooper’s altos maintain some features of the contrapuntal-harmonic style described above somewhat more closely than do those of Denson. However, many of the Denson altos make more interesting melodies, owing to their wider range and higher tessitura (e.g., “Weeping Saviour,” Ex. 3); many others follow very closely, or, as pointed out above, duplicate, the altos of the Cooper book (e.g., “Holy Manna,” “Mount Vernon,” and “Wondrous Love”). when these altos first appeared in the James edition (1911), Cooper viewed it as an infringement of his rights and took legal action, without success.<sup>33</sup>

In both books, however, the alto melodies are consistent with the contrapuntal-harmonic style of the three-part pieces. Far from simply filling in thirds and fifths of incom-

<sup>33</sup> Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, p. 95. The bill in equity brought by W. M. Cooper against J. S. James was dismissed with the statement, “the addition of alto parts to well-known hymns, sung for years with only the three parts of soprano, tenor, and bass, is not such a new and original work as entitles the composer to a copyright.” *Cooper v. James*, District Court, N. D. Georgia, 37, May 16, 1914. My thanks to Hugh McGraw for supplying a copy of this document.

Ex. 3c. “Weeping Saviour,” *The Sacred Harp*, Denson Revision.

**WEEPING SAVIOUR. S. M.**

And when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it.—LUKE 19: 41.

REV. BENJAMAN BEDDOME

Key of F # Minor.

JOSEPH BARNBY

plete chords, as Cobb asserts,<sup>34</sup> these lines are endued with a modal melodic quality. In some cases the individual melodic impulse transcends the harmonic restrictions and constrained range of a normal alto part by introducing dissonances (Ex. 1, “Holy Manna”), by crossing the treble line (Exx. 1 and 3), and at times by falling in with another line for a few notes in parallel octaves, or unisons (Ex. 2).

In order further to assess the character of the alto parts in the revisions, they were compared with altos that appeared in certain four-part tunes in the 1859 edition of *The Sacred Harp* (“China,” p. 37; “Dublin,” p. 46; “Greenfields,” p. 127; “Pisgah,” p. 58; and “Vernon,” p. 55). These altos exhibited the same characteristics — adding some thirds and fifths, creating parallel perfect intervals, and leaving incomplete triads — as the altos in the revisions (Table II).

Some of the tunes which appeared in three parts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century editions of *The Sacred Harp* and for which altos were added in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had earlier lives as four-part pieces. “Ninety-Third Psalm” was printed in Wyeth, *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*, with four parts, the alto of which differs from the 20<sup>th</sup> century *Sacred*

Tune	Added Parallels 5th, 8th, unison	Added 3rds	Added 5ths	Added Root (4th)	Created 6/4	Added Dissonance	Remaining incomplete chord	
							w/o 3rd	w/o 5th
<i>China</i>	4	6	6	0	0	0	8	8
<i>Dublin</i>	4	2	12	0	0	1	9	5
<i>Greenfields</i>	6	7	9	6(1)	2	3	22	6
<i>Pisgah</i>	9	11	4	3(1)	2	18	40	23
<i>Vernon</i>	10	5	3	1	1	1	15	4

Table II. Nineteenth-Century Altos

<sup>34</sup> Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, p. 92.

Ex. 4. "Mount Vernon," fuguing section (mm. 12-26), altos by Jenks, Cooper, and Denson.

Sacred Harp words: What help remains be - neath the sky? Our  
 Jenks words: Where shall our coun-try turn its eye! What

Jenks Alto  
 Cooper Alto Where shall our country turn its eye! What help remains be-  
 Denson Alto What help remains beneath the sky? Our  
 What help remains beneath the sky? Our  
 Where shall our nation turn its eye, What help remains be - neath the sky?  
 Where shall our nation turn its eye, What help remains be - neath the sky? Our

friend, pro-tec - tor, strength & trust, Our friend, pro-tec - tor, strenth & trust, Lies low & mould'ring in the dust.  
 help re-mains be - neath the sky! Our friend, pro-tec - tor, strength & trust Lies low & mould'ring in the dust.

neath the sky! Our friend, pro-tec-tor, strength and trust Lies low & mould'ring in the dust.

friend, protector, strength & trust, Our friend, protector, strenth & trust, Lies low & mould'ring in the dust.

friend, protector, strength & trust, Our friend, protector, strenth & trust, Lies low & mould'ring in the dust.

Our friend, protector, strength & trust, Lies low & mould'ring in the dust.

friend, protector, strength and trust, Our friend, protector, strength & trust, Lies low & mould'ring in the dust.

*Harp* revisions.<sup>35</sup> “Kedron,” which also was printed in Wyeth — but as a three-part piece, appeared earlier with an alto in Amos Pilsbury’s *The United States’ Sacred Harmony* (Boston, 1799, p. 67); the Denson revision repeated the same alto. Stephen Jenks’s *New-England Harmonist* (1799, p. 9) contains an earlier four-voice version of “Mount Vernon”; the alto in that version differs in particulars from those of the two 20<sup>th</sup> century revisions of *The Sacred Harp* — which are quite similar with each other, but the effect is quite the same as regards the features enumerated in Table I (Ex. 4).

A particularly intriguing case is “Majesty,” by William Billings. This tune first appeared in *Singing Master’s Assistant* in four parts.<sup>36</sup> Although it was not included in the 1859 edition of *The Sacred Harp*, the Denson revision adds it (p. 291) in a version with a new alto, composed by Hugh McGraw, Chairman of the Music Committee for the 1971 edition of the Denson revision, and Executive Secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company. What makes this case remarkable is that, while the two altos are similar in general and in some particulars, the alto by McGraw holds melodic interest at least equal to the one by Billings (Ex. 5).

Finally, to return to another of the questions raised at the beginning of this report: what was the motivation for adding alto parts to the Sacred Harp in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? If it were for the purpose of modernization, one would have to conclude that the composers held rather hazy notions about modern hymn style. It seems much more likely that the impulse to compose alto parts for these three-part tunes that were so well known and loved is the same impulse that motivated early church poets and composers to produce antiphons to go with the established psalm verses, to trope and gloss the sacred texts, and to invent melodic lines to go with the well known and loved chant in early organum. Indeed, these 20<sup>th</sup> century composers of alto melodies are continuing the ancient Christian tradition of responding creatively to an existing musical canon.

---

<sup>35</sup> Wyeth, *Repository, Part Second*, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> William Billings, *Singing Master’s Assistant* (Boston, 1778), p. 203.

Ex. 5. "Majesty" (mm. 1-16), altos by Billings and McGraw.

The first system of the musical score for "Majesty" (measures 1-16). It consists of five staves. The top staff is the vocal line with lyrics: "The Lord de-scend-ed from a-bove, And bow'd the heav'ns most high; And". Below it are two alto parts: the first is labeled "Billings Alto" and the second is labeled "McGraw Alto". The bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment, with the bass line on the bottom staff. The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

The second system of the musical score for "Majesty" (measures 1-16). It consists of five staves. The top staff is the vocal line with lyrics: "un-der-neath his feet he cast The dark-ness of the sky.". Below it are two alto parts and two piano accompaniment staves. The music continues in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat).