

Minor Songs and Accidentals

Observations by George Pullen Jackson and Contemporary Singers

“There is still another type of minor-sounding scale... met with here and there in the *Sacred Harp*. It is that scale which has the lowered third and seventh and the perfect sixth.... In its lower tones it sounds minor (due to the lowered third) and in its upper reaches it sounds major (due to its perfect sixth)...”

Story of the Sacred Harp, (1944) page xiv in the facsimile edition of the 1859 *Sacred Harp*.

What makes life difficult for newcomers to Sacred Harp singing is that the 6th note in minor songs is printed in a way that misleads academically-trained musicians (traditional singers will sing it based on the SH minor scale not the key signature). We should be singing all the minor songs in the book (*except for the altos in 313b COBB) as if they had 1 more sharp or 1 less flat in their

key signatures, though the precise interval we sing is modified by the setting. (See Malone’s dissertation for further details.) We also should be singing notes with accidentals as if the symbol wasn’t there (most of the time), or finding another note to fit the harmony (only about 4 songs). So how do we know this? Because in SH, we trust the practice of traditional singers and the rudiments.

Warren Steel gets the final word: “There is some evidence that this practice goes back a long way, even if it was not universal. The important thing is that this is basically diatonic music; accidental and chromatic manipulation... are marginal to the style.” Which leads into why traditional singers do not observe accidentals even when they are printed in their music. Read on...

How to find the note you need to sing a snootch higher

If the key signature has no flats: mentally add 1 sharp to the signature. Or look for the Fa that is not the one just above the Mi and sing it higher than printed by a half step or so — as if it had a sharp sign.

La Mi Fa Sol La Fa Sol La

La Mi Fa Sol La Fa Sol La

If the key signature has flats: mentally remove the last flat from the signature. Or look for the FA that is not the one just above the Mi and sing it higher than printed by a half step or so — this means mentally giving it a natural sign.

La Mi Fa Sol La Fa Sol La

La Mi Fa Sol La Fa Sol La

*It’s complicated...

Judy Hauff

Minor Songs sung using the Sacred Harp Minor Scale

1. 71 Leander
2. 74t Inquirer
3. 80 Shouting Song
4. 82b Edgefield
5. 83 Vale Of Sorrow
6. 102 Fulfillment
7. 123b Cross Of Christ
8. 125 Expression
9. 126 Babel's Streams
10. 163t Morning
11. 165 Family Bible
12. 181 Exit
13. 201 Pilgrim
14. 215 New Topia
15. 224 Save Lord Or We Perish
16. 268 David's Lamentation
17. 275t Loving-Kindness
18. 278b Traveling Pilgrim
19. 296 Sardinia
20. 300 Calvary
21. 397 The Fountain
22. 399t The Dying Friend
23. 416 The Christian's Nightly Song
24. 442 New Jordan
25. 453 Holly Springs

Judy Hauff made this recording to illustrate how traditional Sacred Harp singers render their minor songs, using the "Sacred Harp" minor scale rather than what an academically-trained musician will sing. It is intended that listeners have their copy of *The Sacred Harp*, 1991 Denson edition, open on their laps and that they sing along. If listening to this recording is not sufficient to enable one to learn the treble, alto, tenor, or bass on these songs, contact

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for help. Tracks of a piano playing only a single part are available both for these songs and any of the minor songs not included on this recording.

For the theory undergirding the Sacred Harp Minor, read Dr. Thomas Malone's dissertation, available as a PDF from kayren.willard@gmail.com

Ananias Davisson and accidentals

from the Preface to Ananias Davisson's *Kentucky Harmony*, 1826 edition, though it probably appeared as early as his 2nd edition.

“ In this work the Author, in order to abbreviate its rudiments, has taken the liberty of dismissing seven characters, viz. the accidental flat, sharp, and Natural; the hold, the staccato, the direct, and the Counter, or C cleft. As it would be unjust, however trifling those characters are, to dismiss them without notice, we will briefly drop a few remarks, and pass them by. We shall first [this word illegible] the accidental flats and sharps; these characters we are told, stand in direct opposition to each other, the one pulling up, and the other down; from this stiffnecked contrast we beg to be released, believing them to be of no other use, than to destroy the ease and freedom of pronunciation, and convert the beauties of nature into a kind of sonata, that is not only more unpleasant, but almost impossible to perform with accuracy. I say almost impossible, because, when acquiring our first principles of sound, we are taught to pronounce the semitones between me and faw, and law and faw, and no where else; and consequently when one of those characters steps in, we must either deviate from our first principles, or go back and form a new system of seven semitones to the octave, (such as has never yet been seen) and learn to sound a semitone between every note, or remain inadequate to the performance. But a third character is presented to us called a natural, (for my part I call it unnatural), this character we are told restores a note to its primitive sound; here we would undoubtedly need a scale of contradiction, or something else, that would learn the pupil to say one thing and mean another, or in other words, name one note, and sound another, for we are commanded not to change the name, but the sound. For my part I have thought it advisable where

restorations were necessary, to make them myself rather than leave them to the scholar*; having learned from experience that when left to the latter, it remains undone. As there are four concords which can be advantageously used in composition; I think it better to remove a dissonant, and place it where it will harmonize, than to trouble the learner with a train of useless characters. I will venture to assert, that any person, who will undertake to teach a raw set of youngsters, that have no knowledge of the degrees of sound, will find it sufficiently difficult, to get the unavoidable semitones performed with accuracy, without being pestered with sinks, and raises and primitive restorations. Now I do not wish to be understood, to entirely curtail the authority of the natural; far from it, I use it as a restorative in certain pieces where the key is transposed, and requires to be restored to its natural standing; as in the Prodigal Son; but in no other case. As I have other characters to dispose of, I shall dispense with the present and proceed to three others equally useless, viz. the hold, the staccato, and the direct. The first that seems to be presented is the hold; of this I am inclined to think with Mr. Billings, that it serves no other purpose than to afford grounds for contention: one Teacher says it must be held a certain length of time, another something longer, a third as long perhaps as both; But to settle the dispute, let us refer to the ingenious Authors, and see what they say on the subject. “The note over which this character is placed,” says one, “must be held no longer than its usual time.” “Notes thus marked,” says another, “are held beyond their usual time.” Now if any person will take those rules of somewhat, and something

beyond, and establish therefrom a fundamental principal by which we can be governed, and thereby add any thing to the beautys of Psalmody, I feel willing to subscribe to the plan; otherwise I shall lay it aside as useless. But here comes a staccato, this we are told shews that the note over which it stands, must be sounded in a distinct manner; in that case I would have all my notes staccatoed, as I wish them all distinctly sounded. As to the direct, the Authors themselves proves it to be futile, for although they name it as being usual, they never show us a specimen of its utility; Smith, Little, Wyeth, Billings, Holyoke, Adgate, Atwell, Peck, and many others now in my possession have turned through all their anthems, without ever offering it a seat. These are my reasons for turning six characters out of office, believing them to have no other tendency, than to swell the rudiments and perplex the learner with a crowd of mysteries which are in my opinion useless. I will farther add, in connection with this argument, that the gentleman from whom I received my instruction, had been in the constant habit of teaching for fifteen years; and was pronounced a teacher of first eminence; and by that gentleman to the best of my recollection, I never was stopt by the interposition of an accidental flat, sharp, or natural, either to sink half a tone, raise half a tone, or make any primitive restoration; neither was I commanded to pay any respect to a staccato, or to hold any note longer than I had good grounds to support it. The seventh character, is the C Clift, which in this work is set aside, and the G Clift, (which answers alike for tenor, treble, and counter), is substituted in its stead... ”

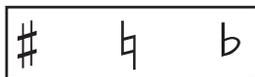
[* Mr. Davisson here uses “scholar” in the sense of “student”. Comparing his tunebook with others, it becomes clear that he simply stripped out the accidentals, the directs, holds, and the staccato marks wherever he saw them.]

William Moore and accidentals

The Columbian Harmony, published 1825, used in West Tennessee, printed in Cincinnati. Moore is the composer of HOLY MANNA, SWEET RIVERS, THE CONVERTED THIEF and others presently in the *Sacred Harp*.

“ In the Introduction, William Moore declared that he had followed Ananias Davisson “in laying aside several characters as useless, viz., the accidental sharp and flat, the natural, the hold, the staccato, the direct, and the counter cleft.” ”

B. F. White and accidentals



from John Bealle, *Public Worship Private Faith, Sacred Harp and American Folksong*, 1997, University of Georgia Press, beginning on page 134. Additional comments are in italics and within brackets [].

“Neutral in Politics and Religion, the masthead proclaimed — “devoted to Art, Science, Education, Morality, and the Advancement of Sacred Music.” Founded in 1852 in Hamilton, Georgia, the *Organ* was genuinely a newspaper, the first in sparsely populated Harris County and the only county paper during its run. B. F. White, who compiled the first edition of *The Sacred Harp*, was, in fact, not described as the *Organ*’s editor but as its “superintendent,” his voice a designated extension of the Southern Musical Convention...

At one point, (justifying his attack of a “defective” music system), White described his obligation to readers in this way:

We were appointed Superintendent of the *Organ* as a musical sheet, for the purpose of advancing the science of Music and protecting the system as we think it should exist—and detecting all systems and customs which are found in counteraction. (2 February 1856)

Until March 1855, a separate editor, G. W. Wilkinson, was listed inside the paper with the terms of subscription, just below the inscription “published by authority of the Southern Musical Convention.” B. F. White was named in the masthead. “Neutrality,” it seems, was meant to cover a specific set of issues in which White took no part. It certainly did not apply to music...

Letters would also come from distant communities, suggesting that the sphere of influence of the *Organ* extended beyond B. F. White’s colleagues and the Southern Musical Association...

When White sought to present a particular view of an issue as standard, he would sometimes do so in the guise of pedagogical dialogue. He might even assume a kind of paternal role, such as in “Answers to Little Susa’s Question” (17 May 1854), giving the impression that there were simple answers to controversial questions. In the following excerpt White established that sharps and flats were invented by Guido long ago to avoid moving the clefs, and then continued:

Q. Has there ever existed any other keys besides the two present keys, namely the major and the minor?

A. Not primarily; there were the variety of substitutes, and bore the name of Keys, without attaching the names of major or minor to them, and were only subservient to a kind of artificial taste, without any substantial value, and were of but short duration.

...In a similar lesson, “Answers to Mr. Sikes,” White taught that the interval sounded a perfect

fifth above the tonic was more basic than other fifths, that likewise the fourth below was more basic than the fourth above the tonic, that the location of the leading tone (mi) was different in the major and minor scales, and thus the seventh in minor music was not a leading tone (25 April 1855). [*This assertion directly opposes those who would raise the 7th note of the minor scale, using an accidental, to create a harmonic minor as in #117 BABYLON IS FALLEN.*]

Apparently Little Susa was not the only intended recipient of this lesson. Preceding her “lesson” was the regular column, “Musical,” in which B. F. White, writing on behalf of the Southern Musical Convention (the articles were signed “Sup.”), would address musical issues of general concern. In this installment, White had urged that all music be “systematically composed” on “one fundamental principle” — the tonic note was the foundation, “just as though the notes were to be called by a given name to express their proper position in intonation.” White anticipated opposition to this and was concerned enough to call for debate: “Let us hear from the opposer, and we will go into the investigation at length.” [*That is, he is saying that all Sacred Harp style music should be written without any accidentals so that a Fa is always a Fa, and never sometimes a Fi.*]

Indeed, there were apparently music teachers in his sphere of influence who were advocating alternatives to the diatonic scale. Those who had confused Little Susa were advocating more than two (major and minor) keys. [*Such as the harmonic minor scale.*] Some taught that no semitones (and thus only one key) existed, with no distinction between major and minor scales (“Musical,” 28 February 1855). Likewise, in another letter, the anonymous “Georgia Boy” returned to the subject of Mr. Sikes’s lessons because some teachers were insisting that the seventh be raised in the minor scale. As he put it, “Sharpening the seventh sound of the minor scale is an artificial composition” (2 February 1856).

The larger import of such challenges, of course, was to disturb the order of the Southern Musical Convention. “A spirit is abroad in the land,” as White described it, “to contend against a custom and system of music which has been in use, unmolested, for one hundred years or more; as new musicians spring up, new ideas spring up with them” (“Musical,” 28 February 1855). In this instance White took care not to mention the names of the “new musicians,” but elsewhere this was not the case. On several occasions he and other writers took on as adversaries Isaac

Holcombe, Lowell Mason, Thomas Hastings, and Isaac Baker Woodbury, who advocated European principles in the name of “scientific” music. These men, particularly Holcombe, were cited on several occasions as representing the opponents of the old “custom and system of music.”

...Undaunted, Holcombe and Woodbury apparently contributed their opinions again the next year in favor of the raised seventh (minor scale, as leading tone) and fourth (major scale, used as modulation). This time, the anonymous “Georgia Boy” took up the defense, labeling as “artificial” the accidentals in GREENWICH (*Sacred Harp*, 183, raised seventh in the alto part, seventh measure) and PHOEBUS (173, raised seventh in the alto part, eighth measure). He also took issue with the implications of Holcombe’s reference to WINDHAM (38), “as it is written,” as a model scientific composition:

“Yes, sir, we understand the above connection.— You aimed a blow at the standard works of this country. I mean works written by men of the South, and adopted by the Southern people. I find that those standard works that you have reference to do not seem to suit the taste and wishes of our Southern people. They are somewhat like yourself—rather hard to be understood.” (2 February 1856)

I presume that the writer was referring to the practice of overriding musical notation (such as raised sevenths) in traditional performance, and was defending the practice on the basis of a regional consciousness.

Lest this practice be attributed too much to blind adherence to “tradition,” it needs to be emphasized that nineteenth-century singers knew well the basic physical properties of musical sound and the function of notation. They believed that the diatonic scale was “natural,” that there were two modes (major and minor), and that the use of accidentals was artificial. They knew the location of various intervals: where the semitones appeared, where various fourths and fifths appeared, and which of these were most pleasing to hear. Moreover, they could relate these principles to the physical properties of sound: in September 1855, Columbus Howard read a circular before the Southern Musical Convention that demonstrated the mathematics of musical intervals by string-length experiments. ”

NOTE: unanswered is why White didn’t emulate Moore & Davison & strip out accidentals when he reprinted songs including them.