

Sacred Harp Shape-Note Singing

PRESS RELEASE 8/17/10:

Adams State College and Alamosa Presbyterian Church will host a workshop on **Sacred Harp shape-note singing** on Sunday, August 29, and Monday, August 30. Pete Mathewson of La Junta will lead the workshop, which is free and open to the public. No prior musical training is required; in fact, this kind of singing arose as a way to teach music to those who didn't read standard musical notation. Sunday's session is 4:00 to 8:00 pm and includes a light meal. Monday's follow-up session is 6:00 to 8:00 pm. Both sessions will be held in the Choir Room of the Music Building at Adams State. Plans are to begin regular monthly Sacred Harp "sings", at a location to be determined, after this workshop.

The "Harp" in Sacred Harp singing is the human voice. This style of singing has its roots in Colonial America. Singing schools in New England taught the colonists how to sing in four part harmony without instrumental accompaniment by using a system of distinctive shapes to represent the notes of the scale. These shapes give Sacred Harp its other names of "shape-note singing" and "Fasola" (from its use of the names Fa, Sol La and Mi to represent the notes of the musical scale). Over time, European-trained musicians discounted this music as uncultured; it migrated to the American South, where the all-day singing at the camp meetings of the Great Revival spread it far and wide. That all-day singing style continues, supplemented by shorter afternoon and evening "sings", as a lively and living tradition of communal hymn singing, not only in the South but now all over the country and around the world.

Sacred Harp singers sit facing one another in a square and sing strictly for each other. If you've never heard this music, you may be in for a surprise. The harmonies and the typically loud volume can make the rafters ring. Courtney Haden, writing in *The Birmingham Weekly*, calls the results "primal, unearthly sounds." According to the website for the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association, www.fasola.org, "How do the media describe Sacred Harp singing? *All Things Considered's* Melissa Block says, [This is full-body, shout-it-out singing.](#) *Time Magazine* says, [Nothing is weirder than Sacred Harp.](#) *The New York Times* (which has been covering Sacred Harp since the '30s) observes that when some people hear this music for the first time, they say, [I must do this.](#) The movie version of *Cold Mountain* included two Sacred Harp tunes sung by traditional singers, and the media paid attention. *The San Francisco Chronicle* wrote, [You hear its spareness, rawness and wild character.](#) *The Associated Press* quoted singer Judy Hauff saying shape note singing is [America's best-kept musical secret.](#) *The Christian Science Monitor* describes how the songs center around [death and resurrection, sin and repentance.](#)"

All interested community members are warmly encouraged to attend the workshops. Although registration is not required, it would help in planning for adequate materials and food. To register or for further information, please contact Katherine Griffis at Alamosa Presbyterian Church, 589-4384.