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Sacred Harp Conventions: Some Handy Guidelines

(Shorter Version)

If you haven't been to a large singing before, you may not know that it's not just a longer version of the weekly singing. It's a lot of fun, but because it's structurally based on long-standing traditions, it's quite different from the informality of a weekly singing, and it can be a little disorienting. Here are a few pointers to help you understand what's going on.

1. Before you get there, be aware that people often DRESS UP for singings. In the South and in many other places, people wear their "Sunday best" to singings. If you feel up to it, consider doing the same.

2. It is also a fact that Sacred Harp is part of a Protestant Christian tradition, and for some people these singings are a living part of their religious practice. **IT IS IMPORTANT TO RESPECT THE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF WHICH SACRED HARP IS A PART, EVEN IF WE DO NOT OURSELVES BELONG TO THOSE TRADITIONS.** The singing will commence and conclude with a PRAYER given by the CHAPLAIN. There is also a prayer given before lunch. During the prayer, the class stands in silence while the chaplain speaks.

3. A singing has OFFICERS, namely a chair, vice-chair, secretary, and sundry others, who run the singing. Attendees always REGISTER, and the secretary takes MINUTES (if you attend such a singing, you are entitled to receive that year's MINUTES BOOK upon publication). Most singings maintain the fiction of electing the officers during a business meeting, held in the morning; in reality, last year's vice-chair is, with rare exceptions, elected chair, and most if not all of the other officers are appointed beforehand. The outgoing chair is the chair until the business meeting is held, however, and it is the outgoing chair who starts things off. The opening song is frequently, but by no means always, HOLY MANNA (59).

4. And then there's the singing. There is a designated PITCHER at any given point in the singing, to whom all will defer. When the pitcher is giving the triad, don't interfere. You are always free to pitch your own tune if you are leading; in that case, let the pitcher know. The pitcher is usually on the front bench of the tenors.

5. There are too many people and too much shuffling around to lead by going around in a circle. Instead, an ARRANGING COMMITTEE (sometimes a lone 'ranger) takes the registration cards of those who have indicated they wish to lead and calls out the names of the leaders. The arranging committee will always call out the name of the leader as well as the person to follow.

TIP: If you hear that you are leading next, get prepared with your page number, and if you're in the middle of a row or in some out-of-the-way spot, position yourself to make it to the center of

the square quickly. (Also, keep a back-up tune in mind in case the tune you were planning to lead gets called before it's your turn.)

6. When LEADING at a larger singing, put the needs of the group first. It's polite to select a few verses (generally no more than three verses, or two of a longer tune). If you're an inexperienced leader, WATCH THE TENORS and let them guide you.

When leading, always remember to:

- call out your page number loud and clear as you're walking up
- stand in the middle of the square
- face the tenors the majority of the time
- beat clearly and steadily, with a motion large enough to be seen but not so large as to obscure the rhythm (generally, the forearm, and little else, moves up and down)
- keep the chitchat to a minimum (if somebody calls out "which verses?", that's sometimes a hint to get going already)
- tell the class which verses you want and whether you want to repeat, and stick to it

7. At a larger singing, the FRONT BENCH of each part, and of the tenors in particular, beats time and is responsible for being in tune and on time. The front benches also help guide the leader if the leader seems uncertain, and generally have to stay extra-aware of what's happening. You don't need a special pedigree to sit on the front bench, but it is polite to defer to more experienced singers, especially out-of-towners.

8. Sacred Harpers are known for their HOSPITALITY. People who have traveled far to get to the singing are shown extra courtesy. If there isn't enough time for everyone to lead, those who have traveled to sing with us get priority. In general, we try to make the out-of-town singers feel like our honored guests--which is what they are.

9. Another aspect of hospitality is FOOD. Local singers are asked to contribute to the noontime potluck. People do remember the food, and every once in a while a singing gets a Reputation. A skimpy potluck is nobody's idea of a fun time. You can keep your hot dishes hot and cold dishes cold by wrapping them in newspaper and then in multiple layers of blankets or towels.

10. At the end of the singing, there is a concluding song, usually PARTING HAND (62). After singing the notes, the class usually takes the parting hand by walking around and shaking hands (or exchanging hugs) with fellow singers. I recommend memorizing it, or at least getting familiar enough that you only need to glance at your book a few times. The final song is followed immediately by the concluding PRAYER.

11. It is nice to help CLEAN UP.

12. This may seem like a lot to deal with, but the relative formality of a larger singing is refreshing for its order and its connectedness to the past. At a larger singing, you'll MEET PEOPLE you don't often sing with, and because local singing communities overlap at larger singings, you inevitably SING NEW AND UNFAMILIAR SONGS. If you attend several

conventions, you'll find over time that each singing is like a reunion of distant friends. The composition of each singing convention is unique and temporary, and yet each singing experience taps into a palpable and quite solid larger singing community, a communion of singers if not a communion of saints. WELCOME.

See also p. 25 in *The Sacred Harp*, 1991 ed.