

# “Come Sound His Praise Abroad” Sacred Harp Singing across Europe

by Jesse P. Karlsberg



Photo by Ewan Paterson

If you've attended CDSS camps, folk festivals or folk schools you're likely familiar with Sacred Harp singing, a sacred, shape-note, a cappella, group harmony-singing tradition with deep roots in the U.S. South that has spread across much of the country in the past forty years. What you may not know is that Sacred Harp singing is currently experiencing unprecedented growth in Europe.

This September was a watershed moment in this growth: Camp Fasola—a Sacred Harp singing school and summer camp held each summer in Alabama—had its first European session, near Gdansk, Poland. Bookending Camp was two Sacred Harp conventions: the seventeenth annual United Kingdom Sacred Harp Convention (hereafter UKSHC), held this year in Winnersh, England, and the first Poland Sacred Harp Convention, held in Warsaw. I was lucky enough to attend all three events. What I witnessed was extraordinary excitement, rapidly growing convention organizing capacity, extremely capable full-voiced harmony singing as accomplished as that heard in the United States, and an unprecedentedly international setting for powerful emotional and spiritual connection and love of singing together. An added delight of bringing Sacred Harp music to such new and unusual places was the opportunity for cultural exchange. At every stop along the way, Sacred Harp singers were treated to songs, dance and crafts relating to local folk traditions.

### **Popularity Spreads in Europe**

Sacred Harp singing was first introduced to Europe in the mid-1990s through tours of the United Kingdom by Larry Gordon's Vermont-based children's singing ensemble Village Harmony, and a small chorus organized by Wesleyan University music professor Neely Bruce. The first singing convention in Europe, the UKSHC, was established in 1996.

While singing has steadily grown in England since that time (there are over twenty-five annual singings held in the country at present) the introduction of this music to other European countries is a much more recent phenomenon. In 2008 I accompanied musician and ethnomusicologist Tim Eriksen to teach a weeklong Sacred Harp workshop at a music festival in Jarosław in southeastern Poland—a booking arranged by Eriksen's Polish wife, Magdalena Zapędowska-Eriksen. The phenomenal response to this workshop laid the foundation for weekly Sacred Harp singings in two Polish cities and formed bonds that led Polish singers to make subsequent trips to sing in the United States and hold additional singing schools featuring American teachers in Poland over the next few years.

In 2010, Juniper Hill (a former student of

Neely's) began teaching at University College Cork in Ireland and established a Sacred Harp singing college course. The enthusiastic group of young singers who enrolled quickly set up a second singing in downtown Cork which drew additional participants. The Cork singers held the first Ireland Sacred Harp Convention in 2011, an event attended by healthy American, English and Polish contingents. Meanwhile, a group of singers had begun meeting weekly in a Bremen, Germany World War II bunker to sing Sacred Harp; New York City-based singer Aldo Ceresa and London singer Michael Walker quickly organized a pair of singing schools in Germany to build on this interest. Word of Sacred Harp singing traveled across the social networks of many of these singers, spawning new groups in Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow, Paris and Berlin in 2011 and 2012—with individual singers in the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Italy, Lithuania, and the Netherlands also looking to build local interest in this tradition.

### **The United Kingdom SHC**

Held on September 15-16 in the village hall of Winnersh, a small town outside of Reading, the UKSHC kicked off our trip. More than twenty-five Sacred Harp singers from the United States were joined by a large contingent of younger singers from Cork, Ireland, dozens of singers from across England, and representatives from Poland, France, the Netherlands and Scotland. The convention's secretary reported that one hundred forty-five singers had registered—making this the largest UKSHC to date.

The Convention was capably run by Michael Walker and meticulously organized, with timetables (British for "schedule") posted around the hall, along with information on such essential matters as the locations' nearby pubs. Given the difficulty of singing for hours while suffering from jetlag, I was particularly thankful for the steady stream of tea and coffee available at every break! The singing itself was enthusiastic and well-balanced, with a degree of choral blend perhaps a little bit more evident than at many Sacred Harp conventions in the United States. The class of singers excelled at singing the New England fuguing tunes such as "New Jerusalem" and "Evening Shade" that have been English favorites since the early days of singing in the country, but a number of singers led Southern camp meeting tunes, and contemporary plain and fuguing tunes, demonstrating the European singers' expanding Sacred Harp musical vocabulary.

After supper on Saturday, the English singers held a social back at the village hall which featured performances by acclaimed Irish traditional singer Aine Ui Cheallaigh, and Mellstock Band founder and concertina player Dave Townsend. Dave has long

been a fixture at Sacred Harp singings in the United Kingdom. Aine, of Cork, encountered Sacred Harp singing at the first Ireland Convention in 2011 and traveled that summer to attend singings in Alabama.

### **Camp Fasola Europe**

On Monday many of the singers present at the UKSHC made our way to Chmielno, a small town in the Kashubian region of northern Poland where we were joined by additional Polish and German singers for Camp Fasola Europe, held September 17–21. Camp was held at Wichrowe Wzgórze (which happens to mean “Wuthering Heights”), an EU-funded retreat center devoted to the cultivation and preservation of traditional Kashubian dance, song, and crafts.

This international group of about sixty campers enjoyed classes taught by lifelong Alabama singers David Ivey, Karen Ivey and Judy Caudle, Sacred Harp composer P. Dan Brittain, Tim Eriksen, English singer Chris Brown, and me. The campers were more eager to learn than any other group of students I’ve encountered, and were a talented and enthusiastic bunch. During the week campers learned the traditional “rudiments of music,” attended classes on the various skills and responsibilities connected to Sacred Harp singing (ranging from setting the key to songs by ear to preparing food for “dinner on the grounds”), and had opportunities to learn about historical and musicological aspects of Sacred Harp singing as well. Camp also featured a singing every evening, organized each night by a different group of campers. P. Dan Brittain—whose songs in *The Sacred Harp* were already much loved by Sacred Harp singers in Europe—was a particular favorite of many of the campers. His morning “rudiments” classes introduced new singers to many of the oral traditions of west Georgia Sacred Harp singing in the 1970s, where Dan himself had learned to sing this music. A session during which campers sang many of Dan’s unpublished songs was also a favorite.

After the singing on one evening, the campers were treated to a performance by Tim Eriksen, whose wide-ranging musical output stretches from folk to punk to world music. Another night a Kashubian folk song and dance troupe performed. Kashubian language and culture was repressed during the Soviet occupation of Poland; during this time, Kashubians developed a system of pictures paired with music as a means of teaching Kashubian words to young people without arousing suspicion. In a remarkable inversion of the performer-audience dynamic, the Kashubian folk ensemble asked our group to sing a song for them at one point during their concert. After it concluded, our groups took a joint photograph. As was the case at the social in Winnersh, the presence of Sacred Harp

singing in Poland had proven to be an opportunity for cultural exchange.

### **On to Warsaw and the PSHC**

After a day-long bus trip to Warsaw featuring the “first Autokary Sacred Harp Convention” (Autokary means “bus”—highlights included an hour-and-a-half long break for a nap and an attempt to get passengers in a bus the next lane over to sing with us), campers made their way to their hosts’ houses for some much needed rest. The next morning, these singers joined others who had attended the Convention the previous weekend, and a large crop of Polish singers and fresh arrivals from abroad for the first Poland Sacred Harp Convention (PSHC), held September 22–23.

Running late the next morning, the singers I was staying with and I could already hear the sound of singing as we walked through the gates of Warsaw University. We turned around a corner, and were stunned by how full and beautiful the sound was that flooded out of the second-story singing room across the courtyard below. The sound intensified further as we made our way into the Geography Department building and walked up the stairs. In the room were over a hundred people, the most international group of Sacred Harp singers ever assembled, singing together beautifully. The result was intensely moving.

The PSHC was led capably by two of the singers who had attended the workshop Tim and I had led four years ago: Malgorzata Perycz, and Justyna Orlikowska. These singers and the rest of the Polish crew had done an extraordinary job organizing the convention, which ran so smoothly that their work was practically invisible. These singers had organized rides for dozens of international guests and had arranged for host housing for more than half of the convention’s attendees; visitors were staying not only at Polish singers’ homes, but at their parents’ houses! The sound at the PSHC was excellent—all four sections were strong, and the class handled difficult fuguing tunes and anthems such as “Norwich,” “Alabama,” and “Easter Anthem” as ably as slow and simple plain tunes. The class soared to an energetic and emotional highpoint during the hour after “dinner on the grounds” on Saturday when—energized by a satisfying lunch of a variety of Polish delicacies piled high across four tables—singers from Poland, the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland were called one after another to lead the class in a sequence of high-powered and lively songs.

Singers gathered that evening for an excellent social, featuring a *cappella* Polish and Balkan singing and a band leading Polish traditional dancing. The social started at a café and wound its way to an art

websites. This issue of the newsletter contains a note from the Website Technology Task Group about their questionnaire seeking more information about specific needs (see page 4).

Two other task groups are looking into internal issues that may help the Board function more effectively. How can we make better use of volunteers around the U.S. and Canada? What changes will make it easier to set policies? Should we modify the basic governing structure of the organization?

Finally, throughout this past year, planning groups have been laying the groundwork for the CDSS Centennial celebration less than three years from now. In March of 1915, in New York and Boston, Cecil Sharp established two American affiliate groups of the English Folk Dance Society, the start of today's CDSS. From that small beginning, we've grown to an organization with hundreds of affiliate groups and thousands of individual and family members. It's time to draw attention to our work as we expand our offerings with new initiatives: Centennial publications, strategic partnerships with kindred organizations, community celebrations throughout the United States and Canada, tours of bands and callers, and a dynamic and expanded website. Stay tuned!



*(Sacred Harp Singing, continued from page 12)*

space located in an abandoned former mansion and library. (Many singers returned to this location for a second ad hoc social Sunday night, putting off our inevitable departure for a few more hours.)

On Sunday the singing was slightly more subdued—a core group of participants had been singing now for nine straight days and were, unsurprisingly, tired, but the singing was nonetheless strong all day. As the convention wound down thanks were given to the Polish organizers of the weekend's (and the week's) activities; the teachers, organizers and planners of camp; the singing masters who had helped get Poland singing going; and two United States-based nonprofit organizations who had supplied free Sacred Harp songbooks for use at the convention.\* After singers resolved to meet again for a future Poland convention, and took announcements of upcoming singings to be held around the world, the class sang a favorite song, "Hallelujah," to bring the convention to a close. After singing on the shape notes, the singers spontaneously rose to their feet and began to shake hands and embrace—taking the traditional parting hand that concludes most Sacred Harp conventions in the United States.

At these unprecedented international gatherings, singers from across Europe and the United States formed new life-changing emotional connections made possible through community singing. Transplanted to these fertile new grounds, Sacred Harp singing facilitates cultural exchange and continues to inspire community and forge emotional and spiritual connection as it does in the United States. In the wake of these events, Sacred Harp singing in Europe seems stronger than ever before and poised to experience continued growth.

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*Here are some videos from the many posted on youtube from the UK and Poland Conventions by user bigglories; the links will be posted on our website with this article by mid-December:*

- *Singers from across Europe and the United States take the parting hand while singing "Hallelujah" at the conclusion of the first Poland Sacred Harp Convention: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bbvDc7js8A>*
- *Allison Blake Steel of Chatham, New York leads "I'll Seek His Blessings" at the first Poland Sacred Harp Convention: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2gJbXFc8LQ>*
- *Jesse P. Karlsberg of Atlanta, Georgia leads "Alabama" at the first Poland Sacred Harp Convention: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAMErk4QdnE>*

\* The Sacred Harp Publishing Company (originalsacredharp.com) donated the cost of shipping the songbooks and the Joe Beasley Memorial Foundation (joebeasleymemorialfoundation.org) donated the cost of the books themselves. The Publishing Company now offers subsidized shipping for all international Sacred Harp case orders so that the cost of books in places like Poland and Australia isn't prohibitively high. The Beasley Foundation often donates cases of songbooks to new singing groups that can't afford a case to use as loaners to newcomers to their regular singings.