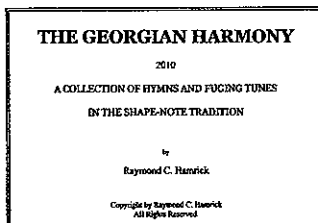


RAYMOND COOPER HAMRICK: Sacred Harp Craftsman

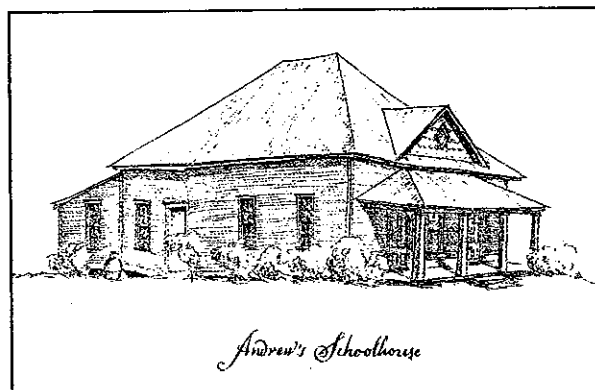
Jesse Karlsberg

Raymond Cooper Hamrick, 96, of Macon, has been around Sacred Harp music for his entire life. Perhaps the greatest living composer in the Sacred Harp tradition, Hamrick possesses a distinctive compositional voice that recalls the earliest American composers while embracing a fluid, melodic style, and expansive chordal palette all its own. He has written hundreds of Sacred Harp songs since the 1950s. His compositions are among the most used and best loved pieces in *The Sacred Harp*. A new tunebook, *The Georgian Harmony*, brings together 92 of his compositions, and an even larger second collection of his still-unpublished works is currently in production.

Hamrick is the latest in a succession of singers, teachers, and composers stretching back to 18th-century New England. From 1770 to 1810 composer-compilers such as William Billings, Daniel Read, and Stephen Jenks taught communities to sing and read music using hardback oblong books that often featured their own three- and four-part compositions for unaccompanied singers. In 1801 two New York-based tunebook compilers adopted a system that gave the notes of the scale distinctive shapes to correspond with the solfege syllables "fa," "sol," "la," and "mi" commonly associated with them. While decried by urban music reformers as unscientific and primitive, this manner of teaching singing – the idea of combining a solfege system, either 4 or 7 syllable, with a shaped note-head musical notation system – has proven resilient and adaptive. This method has persisted to the present through the practice of singing and teaching vocal music using tunebooks such as *The Sacred Harp*, *The Christian Harmony*, and *The New Harp of Columbia*, and is still in use as a teaching system in modern gospel, "convention" style singing schools. Use of *The Sacred Harp*, the most popular of these shape note tunebooks, was encouraged by singer-teacher-composers beginning with the book's co-compiler B. F. White, and continuing in the 20th century with such individuals as T. J. and S. M. Denson, A. M. Cagle, and Hugh McGraw. These proponents of Sacred Harp singing established large, multi-day singing



"Georgian Harmony" title page



Andrews Chapel (Schoolhouse). A common practice in the Sacred Harp tradition is to name a song for a place or person. Located just east of Thomaston, Andrews Chapel is one of the favorite meeting places for the South Georgia Sacred Harp Convention. (Illustration by Justin Levi)



Raymond C. Hamrick leading at a Sacred Harp singing at Mount Zion Church, Mt. Zion, Ga., early 1970s. (Photo by Bill Lightfoot)

conventions using *The Sacred Harp*, taught "singing schools," composed new songs in the Sacred Harp idiom, and supervised occasional revisions of the tunebook.

Hamrick was born on June 14, 1915, in Macon, to Horace Clifford Hamrick and Ida Eugenia Berry. His family attended Sacred Harp singings in the surrounding area, but neither Raymond nor his older brother Horace was interested in the music in their youth. As Raymond later recalled, "at that age . . . you're more interested in social things than you are musical." As a teenager, Raymond Hamrick developed an interest in classical music and began working as a jeweler and watchmaker. During the Second World War, he was a member of the U.S. Army Air Corps (Eskew, 2010).

After the war Hamrick returned to Macon and the jewelry business, but found that his social network from before the war had

evaporated. Feeling "at a loss," he agreed to accompany his older brother to a singing school in the southern part of Bibb County taught by Primitive Baptist Elder J. Monroe Denton. Hamrick enjoyed the experience, finding that he knew many of the young pupils attending the school. He was intrigued by the 18th century composition dates of many of the songs in *The Sacred Harp*, and ultimately wrote for more information to George Pullen Jackson, the author of numerous books and articles on the songs collected in tunebooks such as *The Sacred Harp*. Jackson sent Hamrick some of his books, and the two began a correspondence that cemented Hamrick's interest in the history of the tradition's music.

Hamrick soon began attending singings outside his south Georgia area, meeting prominent Sacred Harp singers, teachers, and composers Hugh McGraw and A. M.

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Cagle. These two recognized Hamrick's love of Sacred Harp singing and were impressed by his historical knowledge of the music and his deep, sonorous bass voice. They soon enlisted him in activities supporting Sacred Harp singing. Hamrick was among a group of Sacred Harp singers who traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1970 to participate in the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife. He returned to Washington in 1973 to participate in another festival, and was present to sing during the dedication of a historical monument to B. F. White in Hamilton, Ga., in 1984.

Driven by his interest in the history of the tunes in *The Sacred Harp*, Hamrick began to collect old shape note tunebooks, corresponding with used booksellers across the United States. He ultimately accumulated about 100 volumes, many of which were the best preserved or only surviving copy. Hamrick studied these tunebooks, lent them to researchers, and provided them for use in producing facsimile editions, making their contents accessible to singers and scholars.

Hamrick also became interested in the range of practices associated with Sacred Harp singing. Noticing that song leaders in west Georgia set faster tempos than those commonly heard in south Georgia, Hamrick began a multi-year study of singing tempos, documenting differences between regions and changes over time. Hamrick also studied the practice of keying songs by ear, comparing recordings and surveying preeminent pitchers. He wrote the first article on the subject of keying music for the *National Sacred Harp Newsletter* in 1986.

A self-taught composer, Hamrick began writing Sacred Harp music in the late 1950s. His first published song—dedicated to Millard Hancock, a tenor singer, pitcher for the South Georgia Sacred Harp singers, and mentor to Hamrick—was included in the 1960 edition of the *Original Sacred Harp*. Learning to write in the style took considerable time and effort. "I still have some of my early efforts," he wrote in 2005, "and I wonder where I came up with some of [the] musical ideas expressed therein" (Raymond Hamrick, personal communication, November 21, 2005).

Hamrick and McGraw exchanged tunes and advice on harmonization with A. M. Cagle until Cagle's death in 1968, and continued to share music with each other in the decades that followed. While McGraw's writing in many ways resembled the style of other 20th-century Sacred Harp writers such as Cagle, Hamrick's music drew largely on the sweeter sound and more expansive



Raymond Hamrick and Hugh McGraw (Photo by Pat Graham)

chordal palette of the earlier New England composers whose work was included in *The Sacred Harp*. As Hamrick remarked in 2006, "Marcus [Cagle] and I had some discussion on [harmony writing], but he felt, as I did, that you write what you feel." "In my early days," Hamrick noted, citing three early New England composers, "I especially liked the Billings, Swan, and Read music." But while he is unique among contemporary composers in hewing so closely to the 18th-century New England styles, he is characteristic in his belief that the composers should emulate the model provided by *The Sacred Harp*. "As the book says, 'Seek the old paths and walk therein,'" he insisted. "Change can't improve a great traditional style" (Raymond Hamrick, personal communication, April 23 & July 30, 2006). Dan Brittain, an acclaimed band arranger and highly regarded contemporary Sacred Harp composer in his own right, echoed this: "Raymond has an intuitive understanding of the style associated with 4-shape music. His music is indeed original, but at the same time, remains true to the tradition of The Sacred Harp and the other books of that style" (Dan Brittain, personal communication, October 24, 2011).

An unusually prolific Sacred Harp composer, Hamrick has written several hundred songs over the past 60-plus years. He writes of constantly having "music of various types running thru my mind," remarking that "occasionally the urge to write becomes so strong that [a song] practically writes itself." Following the uniform practice of Sacred Harp composers stretching back to the book's publication, Hamrick always begins by composing the melody, or tenor line, followed by the bass, treble, and finally the alto which, "being the least important, can then be dealt with." Yet his music is notable for the flowing and melodic quality of all four parts, a characteristic Hamrick adopted at the advice of older composers

who instructed "that each part should be a singable tune of its own." Indeed, even his alto lines are remarkable for their wide range and melodic interest. Hamrick attributes his commitment to writing melodic alto lines to an admonition from legendary Sacred Harp leader (and alto singer) Ruth Denson Edwards, who, after singing an especially boring alto part out of *The Sacred Harp*, remarked to Hamrick, "Don't you ever write an alto line like that!" (Raymond Hamrick, personal communication, March 21, 2007).

In addition to his first song, included in the 1960 *Original Sacred Harp*, Hamrick had two songs added to the 1966 edition of the tunebook and five published in the most recent 1991 edition. Hamrick served as a member of the music committee that edited the 1991 Sacred Harp and from 1986 to 2002 served as president of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, the nonprofit that publishes the tunebook. In addition to his own compositions, Hamrick selected a number of compositions by 18th-century New England writers for publication in *The Sacred Harp*.

Scholars of music theory and academics studying Sacred Harp singing have admired Hamrick's compositions. Robert Kelley, associate professor of music at Lander University in South Carolina, has remarked that "Mr. Hamrick's very melodic bass parts are what stand out most to me when I sing his music. Most music has the basses skipping around to create a solid chord structure, but Mr. Hamrick's bass parts are mostly mellifluous conjunct lines." Commenting on Hamrick's originality among composers within and beyond the Sacred Harp community, Kelley noted that "[t]he way that Mr. Hamrick's bass parts cross above the tenor or sit on an unusual chord tone makes for interesting and beautiful sounds that you don't hear quite as often in other Sacred Harp music and virtually never

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in other styles of vocal music" (Robert Kelley, personal communication, October 24, 2011). Stephanie Tingler, associate professor of voice at the University of Georgia, notes, "I have found Raymond's music to be beautifully simple and profoundly moving. The texts and melodies are wide ranging in character, and yet there is always a pervasive continuity of voice" (Stephanie Tingler, personal communication, October 25, 2011).


Hamrick's songs in *The Sacred Harp* are popular and much loved by Sacred Harp singers as well. His song "Christian's Farewell," for example, is now the second most widely used song to close a singing

Hamrick tells of awaking one night, in the middle of a dream that featured an angelic choir of singers, stretching "as far as they eye could see," singing a beautiful melody. Finding a pen and paper, he jotted down what he remembered of the tune before falling back to sleep (Hinton & Hinton, 2008). He harmonized the tune after waking and titled it "Lloyd," a dedication to two Sacred Harp singing friends (Lloyd Redding and Lloyd Landrum) and to Benjamin Lloyd, compiler in 1841 of *Primitive Hymns*, a collection from which Hamrick has drawn many of the hymn texts he has set to music. In 2010 "Lloyd" was the song most often sung at Sacred Harp singings (Song Use, <http://fasola.org/minutes/stats>). As Hamrick has said, "the singers just took that one up and made it their own" (Hinton & Hinton, 2008).

In September 2005, at the annual Sacred Harp singing at Haynes Creek Church in Loganville, several singers were talking with Hamrick about how much they liked his music in *The Sacred Harp*. Hamrick volunteered that he had quite a number of songs that he had written that had not been previously published. John Hollingsworth of Ila offered to typeset these songs, if Hamrick was willing to provide them. Hamrick agreed to give Hollingsworth a few songs, which Hollingsworth then typeset and brought to various South Georgia Convention Sacred Harp singings, where the gathered singers took some time at the end of the day to sight-read through them. Hamrick continued to share compositions with in small batches and the decision was made to compile and publish these songs in a collection to make them more widely available to the Sacred Harp community. The resulting tunebook, *The Georgian Harmony*, debuted at a singing in September 2010 at Liberty Hill Church near Barnesville, attended by the composer and a large group of singers from across the United States. *The Georgian Harmony*, which contains 92 of Hamrick's previously

ADVENT P.M.

B Flat Major
Lloyd 23 Arr. Raymond C. Hamrick
11/97



"Advent": a Christmas song (one of many) from "The Georgian Harmony"

unpublished songs, has since been sung from by groups of Sacred Harp singers from Oregon to Maine. A compact disc recording of the debut *Georgian Harmony* singing, edited by Bill Hollingsworth, was published in early 2011.

In the summer of 2011 Hamrick gave Hollingsworth a second batch of around 100 unpublished tunes written across Hamrick's entire period of compositional activity. Georgia Sacred Harp singers are currently meeting every few weeks to sing and "workshop" these tunes with the composer in preparation for the publication of a second volume of Hamrick's music.

At 96 Hamrick says his participation in Sacred Harp singing is "tapering off—regretfully" (Raymond Hamrick, personal communication, November 21, 2005). Yet Hamrick continues to attend singings in south Georgia and metro Atlanta. He has remained an active and prolific writer: more than 40% of the songs in *The Georgian Harmony* were composed after he turned 90. He also continues to work as a jeweler and watchmaker, working a few hours a day, three days a week, at Andersen's Jewelers in Macon, a shop he owned for 50 years before recently selling it to an apprentice. Hamrick has donated his remarkable collection of tunebooks and hymnbooks, along with his papers, to the Pitts Theology Library at Emory University. He continues to serve, as he has for decades, as a gracious and generous mentor to Sacred Harp singers and aspiring composers. His gentle wit, remarkable memory, and disarming charm make him a delightful presence at singings,

and a living treasure in the Sacred Harp world.

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Jesse Pearlman Karlsberg is a doctoral student at Emory University, where he is a Woodruff Fellow. He is both a student and a practitioner of Sacred Harp singing.