

‘Cold Mountain,’

CATSKILLS-STYLE

Singing School Grants ‘Sacred Harp’ New Life

By Emily F. Popek

On a cold February night in Margaretville, a group of area residents gathered to loudly, forcefully and joyfully bring a 170-year-old tradition to life.

A small group of singers and a slightly smaller group of onlookers met in the Catskill Mountain Artisans Guild community space in the Commons Building to celebrate the conclusion of a week-long singing school with a little food, a little wine and a lot of singing.

Sitting in an open square of folding chairs, the singing school pupils belted out songs of death, salvation and the grace of God. The music soared shakily out the door and down the stairs, rising and swelling in concert with the rhythmic beating of the singers' arms as they counted out the time.

Organized by Ben Fenton of Fleischmanns and taught by Ben Bath of Red Hook, the singing school introduced participants to “The Sacred Harp,” a hefty, no-frills book of songs from the 19th century and earlier, written for four singing parts. Open it up, and you'll see, mixed in with the usual round note heads, triangular, diamond-shaped and square notes.

But whatever you do, don't call this “shape note singing.” Ben Bath won't stand for it.

“‘Shape note’ is a totally invented term,” said Bath, an ethnomusicologist and Bard College graduate who has been leading a Sacred Harp singing group on campus for about seven years. “You can call it ‘fasola’ singing; you can call them ‘patent notes,’ but the term ‘shape note’ is total BS.”

OK. So they're not called shape notes. But why are they ... shaped like that?

“The shapes refer to the syllable that you're supposed to sing,” Bath explained. “It's an older version of the ‘do, re, mi’ system that we all learn, but it just uses fa, so and la.”

As intimidating as all the funny-looking notes might seem, the system is actually designed to make reading music easier, not harder. And the Margaretville singing school is proof that it works.

“The tune books have a section called



‘Rudiments,’” Bath explained, “which are a sort of all-in-one textbook of learning how to read music. And it turns out, lo and behold, they actually work.”

Bath saw the magic happen for the first time last year, when he and Ben Fenton hosted their first singing school, in Roxbury.

“It was actually astounding to me,” Bath confessed. “There is a certain alchemy to it; the minute we tried it, it just clicked. All the technology is there.”

“It blew my little pea brain away,” Fenton said. “It's such a different way of teaching music but, my God, it works!”

And yet, until the local singing school got underway, this tried-and-true method had largely been sitting on the shelf for the past 50 or so years.

“Back in the day, itinerant teachers would come around and do these two-week-long singing schools,” Fenton explained. “But it really kind of died out in the 1950s and 60s. When we did the first (singing school),

it got picked up by somebody involved in the Fasola community” — which is what the “don't call them shape notes” people call themselves — “and suddenly there was this national conversation online about this little singing school in Roxbury. It was unbelievable.”

Todd Pascarella of Fleischmanns didn't know anything about a national controversy when he first heard about singing school. He just knew that his friend, Ben Fenton, had this cool idea.

“My wife was into it, so I stayed home and watched the kids while she went to singing school, and she had a great time,” explained Pascarella, who is the mayor of Fleischmanns and president of a local energy company. When Fenton held a second singing school in Fleischmanns, “it was my turn,” Pascarella said. And since then, the couple has been hooked.

“We've both been singing almost every week at the River Run in Fleischmanns with

Ben,” Pascarella said. “We drag the kids out and everybody gets together and has fun.”

What's so fun about it? The best way to understand the pull of Sacred Harp singing, Pascarella says, is to experience it firsthand.

“You have to come check it out to really understand it. It's hard to describe the sound, but it's kind of like old-time pop gospel,” explained Pascarella, who has played in several bands, including a bluegrass group. “The harmony singing — it's not intricate, it's not over-the-top, but it's just nice. It adds another layer of sweetness to the music or, in some songs, a layer of darkness.”

For some people, the pull of this time-worn music is immediate. But sometimes it has to grow on you.

“We are friend with Ben (Fenton), and he basically browbeat us into trying (Sacred Harp singing) because he was starting the school, and he actually wanted us to cover it,” explained Julia Reischel, who with her wife, Lissa Harris, runs the Watershed Post news website out of New Kingston. “I was a total skeptic.”

But at a potluck to celebrate the end of singing school, Reischel had her “aha” moment. Standing in the sanctuary of a Fleischmanns church with her 5-year-old daughter, Reischel was awestruck by the power of the singing emanating from the floor below.

“There was rumbling noise from the basement,” Reischel recalled. “It's really loud, shaking the whole church, from beneath us. It was like standing next to an organ; or like being inside of a large fish or a whale.”

That, Reischel said, was the moment she got hooked.

“I would find myself coming home from singing and wanting to do more of it, in this kind of peevish way,” she explained. “It gets its hooks into you.”

And as much as she enjoys the “ratchety, jerky” sound of the music, which she compared to “an old-timey car jolting,” there's something else there, too, that speaks to her.

“I do it definitely, at least partially, for



Singing School

The next Sacred Harp singing school will be March 31 through April 4 at the Catskill Mountain Artisans Guild at 76 Main St. in Delhi.

The school meets from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, with a potluck and community singing from 5:30 to 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 5. Cost is \$35, which includes a copy of the Sacred Harp tunebook. For information or to register, contact Ben Fenton at (845) 254-4884 or benjaminfenton@gmail.com.

the spiritual *oomph* I get out of it. And it is oomph. It totally gives you that thing that you are looking for; that feeling of transcendence in community. You take a whole bunch of people who are ratchety and weird-sounding, and then suddenly you're all ratchety and weird-sounding together, but there's something more there, too. It becomes beautiful."

If Reischel was a reluctant convert to Sacred Harp singing, Harris was a willing acolyte. The Sacred Harp songs on the "Cold Mountain" soundtrack had been an introduction to the sound, and "I totally fell in love right away," Harris said.

And while the Christian hymns of the Sacred Harp were familiar to Harris, the act of singing it brought out a connection to a completely different spiritual tradition that she hadn't anticipated.

"When I was growing up, my mom was a devotee at an ashram in South Fallburg, and part of the practice is to do these very repetitive chants that would go on for a half hour or an hour," Harris explained. "(Sacred Harp singing) was more like that



than I had expected. It was a really physical experience, and it felt kind of familiar to me. It's the only time in Western sacred music that I've encountered something that felt that way, so that was cool."

While Harris has a singing background, she said one of the things about Sacred Harp singing that's appealing is how egalitarian it is.

"People come in with all kinds of self-consciousness about whether they can sing well, but the whole point of this is, it's not about performance; it's not about who's singing the prettiest," she noted.

"Pretty" isn't usually a word associated with Sacred Harp singing and, Ben Bath says, that's OK.

"Singing loudly is an integral part of this," he explained. "Not screaming, but strong singing. Full singing. The collective sound makes it easier for everyone to sing. It makes the music explode, but no one's straining their voices to do it."

And in doing so, Bath and Fenton explained, Sacred Harp singers gain access to the sort of musical experience usually reserved for virtuosos.

"It's a way for people that are nonmu-

sicians, who don't have a music background, to have an experience that, unless you're a trained chamber musician, you're never going to have," Ben Fenton explained.

For anyone still wondering if Sacred Harp singing is for them, Todd Pascarella had this to say:

"If you have any interest whatsoever, that's enough. There's no reason not to come check it out," he urged. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do something like this."