



The New Harp Of Columbia, Restored Ed

By MI Swan, Wh Swan

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In the small towns and rural areas of early America, church-sponsored “singing schools” proliferated as a way of both improving congregational singing and drawing communities together. Congregants attending these schools were taught a form of musical notation in which the notes were assigned different shapes to indicate variations in pitch—a method that worked well with singers having little understanding of standard musical notation. These schools eventually became major social events that drew hundreds of attendees, and today countless enthusiasts carry on the shape-note tradition.

The New Harp of Columbia, originally published in Knoxville in 1867, was a shape-note tunebook used in East Tennessee singing schools. It was based on an even earlier publication, The Harp of Columbia (1848). In 1978, the University of Tennessee Press published a facsimile edition of The New Harp with an introduction by Dorothy D. Horn, Ron Petersen, and Candra Phillips that detailed the history of shape-note singing as well as the story of the tunebook itself and its original compilers, W. H. Swan and M. L. Swan. That edition went out of print in 1999. Now, for this “restored edition” of the tunebook, the Press has reprinted not only the full text of its 1978 facsimile edition but has included additional tunes that were part of the original 1848 Harp of Columbia. A few verses to some songs favored by contemporary singers have also been added, and a new foreword by Larry Olszewski and Bruce Wheeler brings the story of the tunebook and its users up to date.

Included in the book are old psalm and hymn tunes, anthems, fuguing pieces, and folk hymns—a total of more than two hundred pieces that represent a fascinating slice of Americana. As a reviewer for the Journal of Church Music noted of the 1978 facsimile: “[The book is] a worthwhile addition to any church musician’s library, especially those interested in the development of American sacred music over the past two centuries.” This publication marks a significant new step in preserving an important musical tradition.



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