

## MULTIMEDIA REVIEW

*I'll Keep On Singing: The Southern Gospel Convention Tradition*. Stephen Shearon, executive producer and music director. Mary Nichols, video producer and editor. Middle Tennessee State University, 2010.

For many people, the term “shapenote singing” evokes the haunting sound of the modal linear counterpoint found in southern shapenote tunebooks of the nineteenth century such as the *Sacred Harp*. There is good reason for this association: In recent years, Sacred Harp singing has enjoyed renewed popularity, both as musical recreation and as the subject of an increasingly robust scholarship. Others who neither sing nor study the Sacred Harp style encountered it in the Civil War film *Cold Mountain* (2003) and the popular documentary aired on PBS in 2006 *Awake My Soul: The Story of the Sacred Harp*. At this point, the Sacred Harp style has become synonymous with the term “shapenote singing.” Unbeknownst to many, however, a plurality of shapenote musical traditions thrive in the United States, although they have received little of the academic and popular attention accorded to Sacred Harp singing. One of these shapenote traditions, Southern Gospel convention singing, is the subject of a new documentary, *I'll Keep On Singing: The Southern Gospel Convention Tradition*, coproduced by Stephen Shearon and Mary Nichols of the School of Music and the Department of Electronic Media Communications, respectively, at Middle Tennessee State University. The film contains the first footage and commentary available on the Southern Gospel convention singing tradition, which is associated primarily with amateur singers from white rural Baptist denominations in the South.

In the early twentieth century, all-day singing conventions were developed by the fledgling gospel shapenote industry to disseminate new music to rural singers eager to test the sight-reading skills they had learned in singing schools. This so-called convention music diverged stylistically from the shapenote style found in the *Sacred Harp* and other southern tunebooks of the early and mid-nineteenth century: It was characterized by a four-part texture, simple diatonic major harmonies, stride piano accompaniment, dotted rhythms, walking vocal bass lines, and frequent echoing between voice parts. (As the documentary illustrates, modern convention music continues to be composed in this style.) Soon publishers sent professional male quartets to the singing conventions to debut the latest shapenote gospel hits. By the 1940s quartets were stylistically and culturally elevated above the amateur convention singers, giving birth to the Southern Gospel music industry. As the Southern Gospel industry became increasingly professionalized in the twentieth century, the popularity of amateur convention singings waned. Despite the relative obscurity of the Southern Gospel singing convention tradition, one of its most iconic songs, “I'll Fly Away,” has become part of U.S. cultural memory. Currently, singing conventions take place several times a year in small towns across the South. Singers gather for a full day of sight-reading from new compilations of gospel songs written in seven-shape notation and published by a handful of gospel music publishers.

The fifty-four-minute film portrays the tradition's history and current state through interviews with gospel composers, singing school teachers and administrators, convention pianists, and shapenote publishers. The interviews are interspersed with contemporary and archival footage of singing schools and conventions. The footage was compiled and edited without scholarly commentary or a narrator; therefore, the perspectives mediated to the viewer are those of people deeply involved in the convention tradition. The film is organized topically rather than chronologically in segments lasting roughly four minutes. These segments center on the following subjects: a basic definition of "convention singing" as an event and as a musical style; the genre's relationship to the Sacred Harp tradition; contrasts between convention singing and the "praise and worship" music used in many contemporary churches; the relationship between gospel quartets and amateur convention singing; the role of convention music in church worship; and information on the publication, compositional, pedagogical, and pianistic aspects of the tradition. The segments conclude by examining the importance of community in the tradition and providing predictions about the future of convention singing.

A major strength of the film, facilitated by its topical organizational scheme, is its exploration of the interconnectedness of various social and historical elements of the tradition. For example, as the film shows, although convention singings and singing schools are separate institutions, they are musically and pedagogically symbiotic, and in earlier periods of history, both fed into church worship. Links between amateur convention singing and professional Southern Gospel quartet singing, as well as between convention singing and the Sacred Harp tradition, are also discussed with clarity via the thematic approach. The topical organization of the film foregrounds major themes articulated in interviews, including nostalgia for church worship once marked by four-part harmony and musical literacy, distaste for contemporary aesthetic movements in Protestant worship, keen awareness of the tradition's historical roots, and passion for transmitting the style of convention composing and singing to youth.

Also very successful is the film's clear demonstration of the distinctive stylistic characteristics of convention singing. Because the tradition is grounded in music literacy, much of the musical vocabulary used by interviewees to describe musical style will be familiar to music scholars and students. Additionally, subjects interviewed often provide aural examples of stylistic characteristics. One particularly illuminating segment features a convention pianist dissecting her approach to ornamentation, chord voicing, and rhythm. As she describes each element, she demonstrates it at the piano, making the discussion wonderfully clear.

The documentary's "no-frills" production style values lengthy interview segments over flashy graphics and impressive camera effects, allowing the subjects to speak for themselves in longer, more nuanced monologues. Thankfully, the documentary did not aim only for quotable "sound bites." The footage is carefully edited to clarify or elucidate issues raised in the interviews. Often, clips that illustrate points mentioned in interviews are incorporated immediately after the relevant discussion. Occasionally, dates are absent from captions of archival photographs or footage, but this flaw, from the pared-down production style, is minor and may have been due to a lack of available historical data. The DVD's two-page insert provides a

concise overview of the tradition's roots and musical style and describes how the film's producers became interested in the subject.

Southern Gospel music as a whole, including the convention tradition, has received relatively little scholarly attention aside from James Goff's *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (2001) and the essays contained in *More than Precious Memories: The Rhetoric of Southern Gospel* (2004). In documenting the "amateur" counterpart to professional Southern Gospel music, Shearon and Nichols have created an excellent and valuable multimedia contribution to the study of Southern Gospel music and U.S. sacred music as a whole. In my own undergraduate survey of Protestant music in the United States, I have successfully paired the film with excerpts from Goff's book so that students gain a comprehensive view of the historical development of both the professional and amateur streams of Southern Gospel music. The film might also be used to supplement classroom study of Sacred Harp singing so that students develop a broad awareness of the many stylistic tributaries that flow into the stream of shapenote music.

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