



MORGAN FAULDS PIKE

▲ David Pike (l) and composer Kevin Siegfried at the meetinghouse (built 1792) in Canterbury Shaker Village, New Hampshire, USA

Gentle words, kindly spoken

Many readers will be familiar with 'Lord of the Dance', Sydney Carter's hymn to the Shaker tune 'Simple Gifts'. Yet how many know that Shaker songs represent the largest body of spiritual folk music in the USA? **David Pike** meets composer Kevin Siegfried, whose research has led him to seek a revival of the genre

The year was 1774. Enthused by a mystical revelation to their charismatic young leader Mother Ann Lee, nine members of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, commonly called Shakers, embarked from Liverpool on the ship *Mariah*. They were headed for America, fleeing contempt

and persecution, intent on spreading their unique message. The burgeoning sect had originated roughly 25 years earlier in and around Manchester, having branched off from a Quaker community there. Uniting dance and song, their spirited style of worship, which often involved spontaneous whirling, leaping, speaking and singing

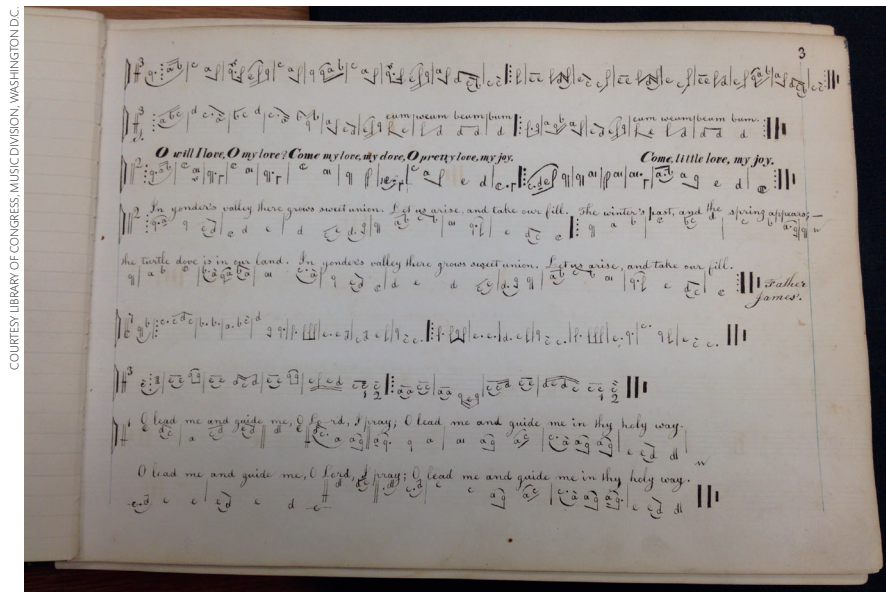
in tongues, even dropping to the floor as a manifestation of individual religious ecstasy, elicited the derisive sobriquet 'Shaking Quakers'. As their acknowledged leader, Mother Ann preached to her disciples, 'Put your hands to work and your hearts to God,' and once they disembarked in New York City on 6 August 1774, this is ▶

of the church and village hierarchy, women and men shared authority. A central tenet of their belief was that God was both female and male; a logical extension of that principle was that women and men were peers in the sight of God.

*Gentle words kindly spoken often soothe
the troubled mind,
While links of love are broken by words that
are unkind.*
(Polly M. Rupe, Pleasant Hill, KY ca. 1867)

Simply stated, the Shakers are the most enduring of the American utopian sects. Although only a handful remain today, Shakers have practised their faith in small communities without interruption for over 240 years since that small band of Believers settled in upstate New York. Throughout the 19th century they generally found acceptance. However, for their unorthodox worship practices, their strict adherence to celibacy, their unwavering policy of pacifism, and their forsaking of private property ownership, they were frequently ridiculed. Ironically, by the middle of the 20th century they had come to exemplify American ideals of religious faith, race and gender equality, resourcefulness, self-sufficiency, diligence, and artistry. They conceived a unique architectural style of simple and timeless beauty. They designed and built furniture that, for its clean lines and pure functionality, was unsurpassed in its day. For them, occupation and ‘doing’ were fundamental aspects of their salvation. For use in worship, they imagined countless dances of elaborate design. And they diligently wrote down thousands of songs in musical journals, many of which were ‘gifted’ in moments of spiritual inspiration. It is in these songs – words and melodies – that the visionary and inventive Shaker spirit found its loftiest expression.

*How blest are the souls who walk in pure
Wisdom,
Whose feet are well-planted in virtue’s fair
soil,
Who cheerfully work in Mother’s pure
garden,
And for her Rich Blessings do willingly toil.*
(Brother William, Canterbury,
New Hampshire 1847)



▲ *In Yonder Valley* in Shaker letteral notation (above) and in staff notation (r), as published in Siegfried’s arrangement

American composer Kevin Siegfried is a pre-eminent scholar of Shaker music. His first encounter with Shaker songs came in 1995 during a visit to the Shaker village at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. Two years later he began arranging Shaker songs for choir, and his first collection was published in 1998. I caught up with Siegfried recently near his home in Andover, Massachusetts, and asked him what it was that first drew him to the Shakers: ‘My first introduction to Shaker music came through reading E.D. Andrews’s 1940 book *The Gift to be Simple*. My subsequent visits to the Pleasant Hill community made me realise, here was an opportunity to open a window on a little-known, yet enormously significant, branch of American folk culture.’ With over 10,000 songs in existence, Siegfried goes on to explain, Shaker music represents the largest body of spiritual folksong in this country’s history, yet most of it is hidden in archives. The early Shakers, seeking separation from the world, avoided all harmony and instrumental accompaniment in their music. As a result, the early Shaker songs display an almost chant-like sense of musical line. The Shakers created their own ‘letteral’ music notation to record these unique, unfettered songs [see above], whose melodies are ‘full of

imagination and pleasing to sing – they draw people in.’

What is it that Siegfried hopes to accomplish with his SATB arrangements? ‘My goal in arranging these Shaker melodies for choirs has been to make them accessible and useful in modern concert and worship settings, to move the songs from historical curiosities to living musical settings. If they help raise awareness of this overlooked tradition of American music, that’s all the better. There’s a Shaker proverb that says “Don’t make something unless it is both necessary and useful; but if it is both necessary and useful, don’t hesitate to make it beautiful.” To my ear, these songs reveal a unique, other-worldly ▶

SHAKER MUSIC

◀ beauty. Arranging them for performance in contemporary times brings functionality to them again.' Though firmly based on the traditional tunes and texts, Siegfried's lovely, compelling arrangements have a surprising freshness that speaks to our time. The music feels grounded and organic rather than 'composed'.

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be.*

*(Elder Joseph Brackett,
Alfred, Maine 1848)*

When a contemporary composer sets about arranging music that is on a par with folk music, isn't there a danger of making something that is essentially simple, over-complicated? Siegfried explains: 'As a composer and arranger, my approach to these songs grows out of an intense involvement with the material, rather than a preconceived idea rooted in my own particular musical style. It's a process of dialogue with the traditional material, and there's an aesthetic involved in it. I want to maintain the simplicity and directness of the original unison melodies. When adding harmony, I try to create counterpoint that feels like it is coming from a similar place.

What motivates me is a respect for the original songs.' As I listen to Siegfried talk, I realise that his approach indeed embodies the quintessential Shaker ideals of humility and self-restraint.

Lay me low, lay me low.

Where the Lord can find me,

Where the Lord can own me,

Where the Lord can bless me.

*(Addah Z. Potter, New Lebanon,
New York c.1838)*

Last year, Siegfried was commissioned by Washington D.C.'s Capitol Hill Chorale, where he has been composer-in-residence

SHAKER-INSPIRED RESOURCES

PUBLICATIONS

Angel of Light – Cantata

Sop. solo, SATB unacc.

Siegfried Publishing KS.047: prices and ordering info at kevinsiegfried.com

I Hunger and Thirst

Sop. solo, SATB unacc.

G. Schirmer HL.50600426, US\$1.95

Available in the UK from musicroom.com: bit.ly/27s4QZy

Shaker Harmony

Choral series, published by Siegfried Publishing: prices and ordering info at kevinsiegfried.com; perusal copies available on request.

Some popular titles for SATB unacc.

from *Shaker Harmony*:

'Angels of Heaven' (KS.007-08)

'Come to Zion' (KS.007-10)

'Cords of Love' (KS.007-11)

'Followers of the Lamb' (KS.007-06)

'Gentle Words' (KS.007-12)

'The Humble Heart' (KS.007-14)

'In Yonder Valley' (KS.007-03)

'Prayer for the Captive' (KS.007-04)

'Simple Gifts' (KS.007-16)

Shaker Songs

Includes: 'Peace', 'Love is Little', 'Heavenly Display', 'Lay Me Low', and 'Benediction'.

SATB, unacc. Published by Earthsongs (ES.S-102) US\$1.85

SSAA, unacc. Published by Earthsongs (ES.S-329) \$2.05

RECORDINGS

(All three recordings are in the Gothic Catalog: gothic-catalog.com.)

Gentle Words: Shaker Songs

arr. Kevin Siegfried

The Tudor Choir / Doug Fullington (dir)

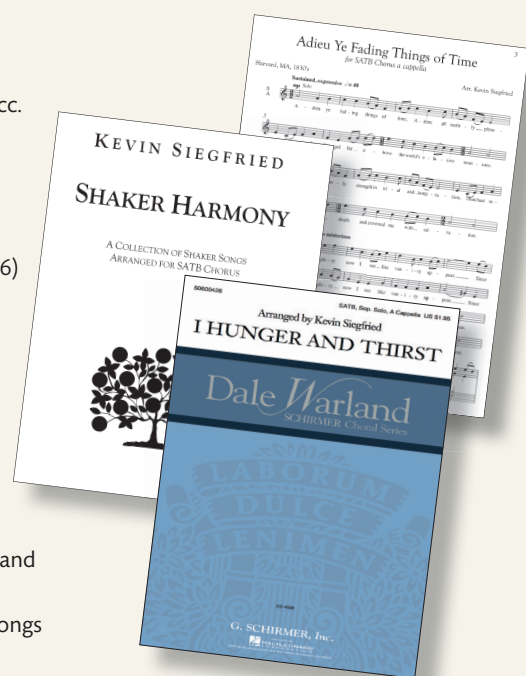
Loft Recordings LRCD-1041

Harvest Home: Songs From the Heart

The Dale Warland Singers /

Dale Warland (dir)

Gothic Records G-49243



Simple Gifts

The Tudor Choir / Doug Fullington (dir)

Gothic Records G-49265

FREE AUDIO DOWNLOAD

I Hunger and Thirst

The Byrd Ensemble /

Markdavin Obenza (dir)

bit.ly/1WmrG13

Recommended Audio Link

'Lay Me Low' from *Shaker Songs*

The Dale Warland Singers /

Dale Warland (dir)

bit.ly/1OPoOBS



▲ Siegfried: 'Shaker music was a revelation'

since 2014, to compose a cantata on Shaker themes. *'Angel of Light'* is a free interpretation of music from a distinct decade of Shaker history known as the "Era of Manifestations". During this time, from 1837 to 1847, Shaker communities were caught up in a wave of intense spiritualism. It was a time of great productivity and featured an unparalleled outpouring of songs, the majority of which were "gifted" to individual Shakers in moments of spiritual ecstasy. Rhapsodic and visionary, the music from this period is unlike any other music from the time. In fact, I think you would have to go back to Hildegard to find anything similar. It's really an American mysticism. The texts move seamlessly between English and the tongues of angels and foreign spirits.' [see page 38]

Summing up, Siegfried says, 'In my music, I've always been drawn to the rhythms and sounds of the human voice, to the purity of chant. Discovering Shaker music was, for me, a revelation. It's an American art form, extensive in range and vast in repertoire, awaiting a voice to bring it forward to today's audience.' kevinsiegfried.com ■

*With my blessing I have blessed you,
O my children!
With my comfort I have comforted you;
Yea, with my love I have loved you.
Vo o' vo nee; O har'ka e' on a se'.
(from Canterbury, New Hampshire 1841)*

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www.choirandorgan.com