

A Primer on How To Lead

*simple Common, Triple, and Compound time songs
for Denson Sacred Harp Singings*

Each time — Common, Triple, and Compound — has a characteristic arm movement that Sacred Harp singers are trained to recognize. If the leader doesn't use these movements, the class won't understand and the song will not be executed well.

“Leading is a conversation with the class.”—Paine Denson

2012
Mercer Island, Washington

This Beating Time Primer was created for the Leading Lesson presented at the 2012 Pacific NW Sacred Harp Singing Convention - Washington Session, authored by Karen Willard, Erik Schwab, David Wright, and Erika Wilson. Copies are freely available at the website for the Pacific NW Sacred Harp Singers, (<http://www.PNWSHS.org>), for download as PDF. Tom Malone's doctoral dissertation on the Rudiments provided some of the material used here and thanks are given for his permission to include it.

Glossary

Accent: Particular stress or emphasis on one part of a musical phrase, as governed by the mode of time and the poetic meter. This is the subject of a separate Lesson.

Beating The Rest(s): For a song that begins with a rest, a leader might decide to begin Beating Time at the beginning of the first measure, rather than to skip over the opening rest(s) and simply lift the hand for the first note of the song.

Beating Time: Downward and upward motions of the hand to keep everyone together in time. It indicates the leader’s desired speed, and the motion of the hand should always be distinct and regular.

Bringing In Parts: A graceful manner of turning toward different musical parts as they enter during fusing pieces. This is not required of a leader but is an art that is widely admired in the practice of those who do it well.

Courtesy: This is a type of cut-off at the end of a song where the leader, having ended as always with the hand up, sustains the final chord beyond its written length, and subtly closes or lowers the open hand as a signal for the singers to release the final chord. Provided it is not overdone, it is the mark of an elegant and accomplished leader.

Front Bench: Those sitting in the row of chairs closest to the center of the square. They, especially the tenor front bench, are expected to assist all leaders who need help setting and sustaining the rhythm of their songs, and to reflect the arm motions of the leader to the class behind and to the sides of the Leader. They also serve as the leaders of their section (always beginning the song on time and making their fusing entrances robustly) and through their ability to sing a song with their eyes off the printed page, make possible the synergy of a song particularly well-rendered.

Leader: The leader stands in the middle of the square, faces the tenors, and directs the class through the song by Beating Time. The song(s) chosen by the leader, as well as their verses, repeats and the tempo, are all considered part of their “Lesson.”

Lesson: Everything the leader does during their time in the middle of the square is called their “Lesson.”

Meter: In Sacred Harp, “meter” is an aspect of poetry, not rhythm or tempo. This is one of the differences of Sacred Harp from modern choral music. In Sacred Harp, rhythm and tempo are determined by the mode, which is indicated by the time signature. Meter is the subject of a separate Lesson.

Modes of Time: A system by which beating time, rhythm, speed, and accent in Sacred Harp are collectively governed. The seven modes of time (3 of Common, 2 of Triple, 2 of Compound) are each indicated by a Time Signature. The primary accent is always on the first beat in all modes of time. Each mode is bound to a particular speed. These speeds are not today observed in absolute terms, but the speeds of the modes are kept proportional to one another. 2/4 and 6/8 are the quickest, next comes 3/4, then 4/4 and 6/4, and the slowest are 2/2 and 3/2. The mode of a given song determines how the leader will move their hand and arm.

Time Signature: Numerals placed at the beginning of each song in the form of a fraction, which identify which mode of time the song is in. The top number indicates how many beats or divisions each measure has. The bottom number indicates what kind of note — half, quarter, eighth — is allocated one beat. Each Mode of Time has its identifying time signature and in the Sacred Harp, there are only seven possible time signatures:

	Common	Triple	Compound
First Mode	“two over two” 2/2	“three over two” 3/2	“six over four” 6/4
Second Mode	“four over four” 4/4	“three over four” 3/4	“six over eight” 6/8
Third Mode	“two over four” 2/4		

Common Time Songs 2/2, 4/4, and 2/4.

Beats

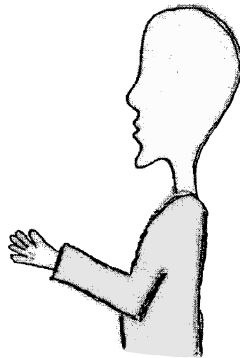
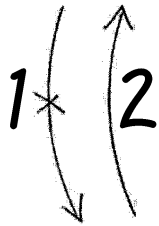
OLD HUNDRED. L.M.

49



O come, loud anthems let us sing, Loud thanks to our Al-might-y King, For we our voi-ces high should raise, When our sal-va-tion's Rock we praise.

The top 2 tells 'how many' and the bottom 2 tells 'what kind' will fill a measure. So 2 half notes or equivalent will fill a measure.



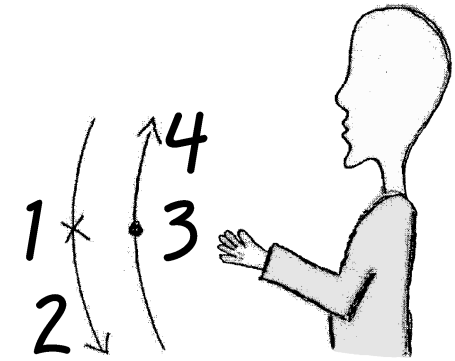
The 1st Mode of Common Time is 2/2: Enter the square and announce “**Number 49 on the top**”. Face the tenors for the entire duration of this song. Do not turn to look at the other parts. Assuming you choose to beat the opening rest, announce to the front bench tenors that you’ll “beat the opening rest.” Hold your arm slightly away from your body (to give the altos a chance to see what you’re doing, *though if the bass, tenor, and treble front benchers are all beating along with the leader, the altos will have no difficulty*), bent at the elbow and hand held up at about shoulder height. Your hand should be relaxed. Give a nod to the keyer to give the opening pitches. As you hear the class echoing back their opening notes, bring your forearm down for the first beat. For the 2nd beat you’ll bring your forearm and hand back up to the start position. Your forearm should never completely stop moving and your goal is smooth relaxed movement. This down-up motion between the shoulder and the waist is used for all three modes of Common Time.

This song has no repeats. The trick to getting the class to make a smooth transition between the end of the singing of the notes to the beginning of the verse is this: when you reach the last measure of the song, **Stop** (i.e. when you reach the end of the last measure, hold your arm & hand still, in the up position, and look squarely in the face of one of the front bench tenors). Then resume beating time for the words, including the rest at the start unless you’ve opted to start the song on the upbeat. In this case, when you’re ready to have the class go to the words, resume movement and you’ll have to drop your hand just a bit so you can sing as you lift your arm upwards to shoulder height.

The 3rd Mode of Common Time, 2/4, is led the same way as 2/2 (but accent is not identical), and 2/4’s tempo is close to 1.5 seconds per measure while 2/2’s tempo is about 3 seconds per measure. These 3 modes of Common Time are pronounced “two over two,” “four over four,” and “two over four.” 2/2 is the slowest of the three, 4/4’s tempo is at about 2.5 seconds per measure, and 2/4 is the quickest. The exact tempos for all modes of time vary by Sacred Harp region, but the speed relationship of the modes remains the same. The leader should exercise an informed discretion in selecting a tempo for their lesson.

Common Time Songs 2/2, 4/4, and 2/4 Concluded.

The 2nd Mode of Common Time is 4/4: "Number 107" has two verses and a 1st and 2nd ending if you choose to repeat the 2nd half of the song. Unlike #49t, singing begins immediately, with no opening rest. If you repeat, announce, "Let's sing both verses, repeating on the notes and verse two." You will make the transition from the last measure to the first measure just as in #49t. It is critical that you Do Not Stop your arm movement if you are using the 1st ending; and conversely that you DO stop and hold your hand in the air briefly at the end of singing the notes and after each verse, when not repeating. The experienced class members will be watching for this signal from you. Face the tenors throughout this song. "Bringing in the parts" is an intermediate/advanced level leading skill, and is not mandatory.



Beats



RUSSIA. L.M.

107

1. My spir - it looks to God a - lone, My rock and re - fuge is his throne,
 2. Trust Him, ye saints, in all your ways; Pour out your hearts be - fore his face.

This is the note altos sing rather than what's in the book for all appearances of this note in this song.

This is not a measure bar in this song; it is part of the repeat symbol.

The top 4 tells 'how many' and the bottom 4 tells 'what kind.' So 4 quarter notes or equivalent will fill a measure.

This partial m. is only 1/4 full, going w/ the previous dotted 1/2 note or the 1st ending.

In all my fears, in all my straits, My soul on his sal - va - tion waits. waits.
 When help - ers fail and foes in - vade, God is our all suf - fi - cient aid. aid.

all my fears, in all my straits, My soul on his sal - va - tion waits. waits.
 help - ers fail and foes in - vade, God is our all suf - fi - cient aid. aid.

all my straits, My soul on his sal - va - tion waits, My soul on his sal - va - tion waits.
 foes in - vade, God is our all suf - fi - cient aid, God is our all suf - fi - cient aid.


This partial measure is only 3/4 of a full measure.

Skip this ending the 2nd time through the fugal section.

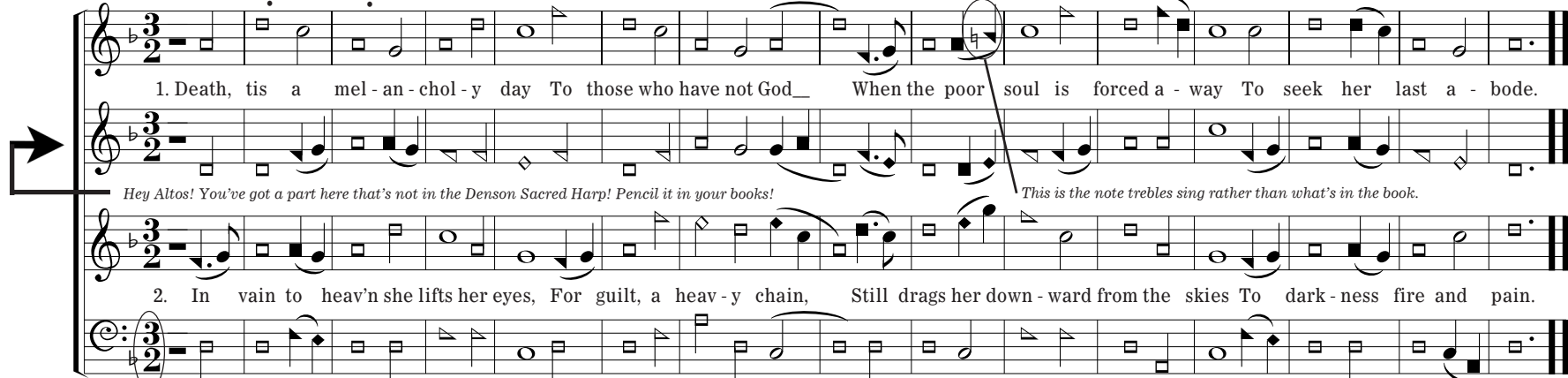
Triple Time Songs 3/2 and 3/4.

The 1st Mode of Triple Time, 3/2: Enter the square and announce “**Number 29 on the bottom**” and your verse choices.

This song has no repeats. The trick to getting the class to make a smooth transition between the end of the singing of the notes to the beginning of the first verse, and between verses is as outlined on page 4.

Beats 

TRIBULATION. C.M. 29



1. Death, tis a mel-an-chol-y day To those who have not God_ When the poor soul is forced a-way To seek her last a-bode.

Hey Altos! You've got a part here that's not in the Denson Sacred Harp! Pencil it in your books!

This is the note trebles sing rather than what's in the book.

2. In vain to heav'n she lifts her eyes, For guilt, a heav-y chain, Still drags her down-ward from the skies To dark-ness fire and pain.

The top 3 tells 'how many' and the bottom 2 tells 'what kind.' So 3 half notes will fill a measure, or any combination that adds up to 3 will complete a measure.

“The front benchers’ job is to make the leader look good regardless of his/her skills... they need to be servants and to assist the leader. All four front benches should be beating the time along with the leader.”—Judy Hauff

“If the front bench tenors will watch the leader’s mouth first and the arm second, they’ll have a better idea of what the inexperienced leader wants, and can reflect that to the other front benches.”—Karen Willard

Triple Time Songs 3/2 and 3/4 Concluded.



NEW BRITAIN. C.M.

This is the last 3rd of the measure, following the previous 1/2 note or the 1st ending.

Skip this measure if not repeating, or the 2nd time through on the repeat.

45

The 3 tells 'how many' and the 4 tells 'what kind.' So 3 quarter notes or equivalent will fill a measure.

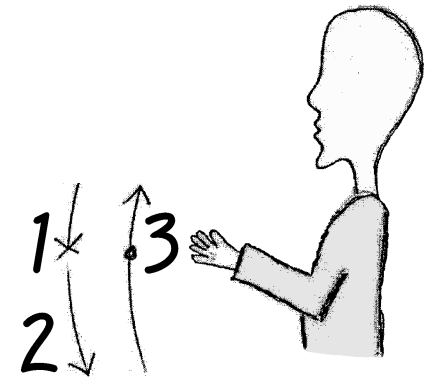
This is not a measure bar in this song; it is part of the repeat symbol.

This partial measure is only 2/3 of a full measure.

These two modes of Triple Time, 3/2 and 3/4, are pronounced “three over two,” and “three over four.” 3/2 is slower, at about 3 seconds per measure, than 3/4, at about 2 seconds per measure. The same arm movement is used for both. Despite the greater distance travelled by the arm for the 3rd beat, that beat is equal in duration to the other two — move your arm faster going up.

The 2nd Mode of Triple Time, 3/4: “45 on the top” has 5 verses and a 1st and 2nd ending (if you choose to repeat the 2nd half of the song). It begins after a half rest. At an all-day singing, pick only two verses with a repeat on the notes and the last of your verse choices, or 3 verses with no repeats.

It is critical that you Do Not Stop Your Arm Movement when you are using the 1st ending; and conversely, that you DO stop and hold your hand in the air briefly at the end of singing the notes and after each verse, when you do not take the repeat.



Your hand and arm will move down, down, up for each measure. Beat 1 is half-way down, beat 2 is at the bottom and beat 3 is at the top.

Compound Time Songs 6/4 and 6/8.

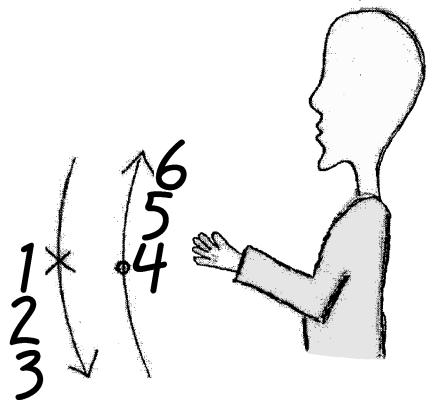
146 Accent beats | | | HALLELUJAH. C.M. This is not a measure bar. William Walker, 1835.

1. And let this fee - ble bo - dy fail, And let it faint and die; And I'll sing hal - le - lu - jah, And
My soul shall quit this mourn - ful vale, And soar to worlds on high.

rief, give ease or pain, Take life or friends a - way, And I'll sing hal - le - lu - jah, And
nd them all a - gain, In that e - ter - nal day.

you'll sing hal - le - lu - jah, And we'll all sing hal - le - lu - jah, When we ar - rive at home. home.

you'll sing hal - le - lu - jah, And we'll all sing hal - le - lu - jah, When we ar - rive at home. home.



The 1st Mode of Compound Time, 6/4: Enter the square and announce “**Number 146.**” At an all-day singing, request the class to sing no more than two verses of this song (first and last have been printed here, as merely a suggestion). Start singing as you bring your arm up. The leader should “feel” that Compound Time is different from Common Time, with a bit of a lilt about it. When learning it, some teachers suggest letting the hand fall while saying “one, two, three.” Wait a moment and raise it up while saying “four, five, six.” Gradually join the two halves until all is smooth and regular. (In the 1991 Denson Sacred Harp, the 2nd ending is missing. If you choose to repeat the 2nd half of #146, then treat what is printed in the book as the 1st ending that it is, and when you’re ready to sing the 2nd ending, act as if that last measure looked like the 2nd ending here.)

Compound Time Songs 6/4 and 6/8 Concluded.

Accent
beats



LEANDER. C.M.D.

71

Tennessee Harmony, 1818.

1. My soul forsakes her vain delight, And bids the world fare-well, Base as the dirt be - neath thy feet, And mis-chiev-ous as hell.

acious earth That suits my soul's de- sire; To boundless joy and sol - id mirth My no - bler thoughts aspire.

The top 6 tells 'how many,' and the bottom 8 tells 'what kind.' So six 8th notes or equivalent will fill a measure.

This is not a measure bar.

This is the last 6th of the preceding measure, or of the 1st ending.

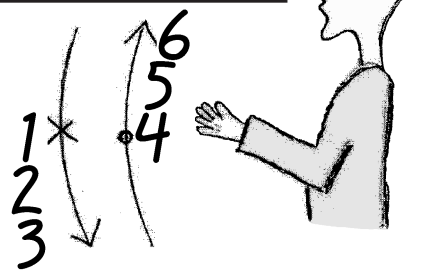
No longer will I ask your love, Nor seek your friendship more; The happiness that I ap- prove, Is not with- in your pow'r. pow'r.

O, for the pinions of a dove To mount the heav'n- ly road; There shall I share my Savior's love, There shall I dwell with God. God.

This partial measure is 5/6 of a full measure.

Skip this measure if not repeating, or the 2nd time through on the repeat.

Your hand and arm will move Down, Up for each measure, as you beat time.



The 2nd Mode of Compound Time, 6/8: Give a nod to the keyer to give the opening pitches. As you hear the class echoing back their opening notes, whether you include the rests or not, do not jump the gun on when to start singing. This song, and there are others like it, doesn't begin until the last 6th of the measure. You sing just before your arm starts down at the beginning of the 2nd measure. (Which is why most beginning leaders opt to beat the rests on songs like this.) The second half of the song is repeated (using the 1st ending) or not, (always skipping the 1st ending), at your option.

These two modes are pronounced "six over eight," and "six over four." 6/8 is quicker, at 1.5 seconds per measure, than 6/4, at 2.5 seconds per measure. A very very slight pause at the bottom of the arm movement can be seen in some experienced leaders, in both modes.

In Summary...

- 1) Have your song choice ready, and be aware of any options you will be expected to exercise (which verses, optional repeats, etc.) before you enter the square.
- 2) If you want to lead a song that is new to you, practice it before leading it at a convention or all-day singing, especially if the song is little used (unfamiliar) as the class might be relying on *you* to help them sing it effectively.
- 3) Announce your song and choices in a firm loud voice aimed at the Tenor front bench.
- 4) Face the tenors. Turning and bringing in the parts on fusing tunes is an intermediate skill not covered here. (Besides, seeing leaders' faces other than when getting the cue for their fusing entrance scares the altos.)
- 5) Stand in the middle of the square, not on the toes of the singers on any of the front benches.
- 6) Make sure your triple time arm movements are just down, down, up with no forward or backward movement of your arm. You're not pitching a baseball.
- 7) Most of your arm movement should be from your elbow, not your shoulder.
- 8) If the lowest point of your hand movement comes barely below your waist, you won't be tempted to swing your arm behind you. This saves the song from slowing down, and saves you from attack by the alto whose face you just knuckled.
- 9) Keep your upper body straight — no bending at the waist — and head up. Someday you'll also be able to smile at a singer in the second row.
- 10) At the end of the song, keep moving your arm if you are taking the repeat; stop moving if you're not. Say "Thank you" and leave the square.

"The leader's job is to help the class get the most out of the song spiritually and musically; the leader is not a performer; it's not really about you."—David Ivey

"I love dancing but there's a time and a place. The middle of the square is not the place." You should, though, "Strive for graceful movements."—Shelbie Sheppard

"Leading is about what you can do to help the class sing a song."—2006 Camp Fasola

"Practice leading in front of your mirror."—Joyce Walton

"Practice leading in the square at your monthly 2-hr singings."—Karen Willard

"Don't forget to check the back of your skirt or the front of your trousers just before entering the square."—Shelbie Sheppard

"Leading is equal parts confidence and humility."—David Ivey

"When the front bench tenors ask you what verses you want to lead, they are really saying 'which one or two' do you want?"—Jeff Sheppard

Videos of all-day singings are a good resource. Bill Windom (his contact info is in the back of the big Minutes Book) has a very large library of DVD recordings of traditional southern singings. Call for pricing; say which singing you're after (search for his name in the online minutes to see where he's been). You can also search YouTube for "Sacred Harp," "Shape-note singing," etc. Look for leaders who are good role models. Then practice imitating their movements as you sing along.