

Assessing Tempo in Practice: Analyzing the Correspondence of Sacred Harp Tempos to Historical Guidelines Using a Tempo Estimator

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This study applies a tempo estimation system to recordings of Sacred Harp songs to analyze how tempos selected by practitioners of a decentralized music culture correspond to historical prescriptive instructions for appropriate tempos. Sacred Harp is a cappella singing from an eponymous shape-note tunebook published in 1844. Singers take turns leading songs and have discretion over tempo. Pedagogical introductions in shape-note tunebooks and their precursors since the eighteenth century analyzed by Allen Britton (1949) and Phil Perrin (1968) frequently “indicated an exact tempo” for each “mood of time,” a classification corresponding with time signature. The 1844 Sacred Harp prescribed tempos in seconds per measure for each of the book’s seven moods, though as Britton noted, “whether or not the exact tempos ascribed to the various signs was strictly observed in practice we cannot tell” (239). A 1911 revision to the book’s introduction removed these instructions. Conventional wisdom among singers holds that tempos have increased during the twentieth century. Results from running a customized tempo estimation system on recordings of 3,890 songs confirms contemporary singers sing songs in three moods of time much faster, yet indicates they typically adhere to the previously prescribed tempos for the four other moods of time. Results also reveal quantitative and qualitative differences in variations from average tempos for the different moods of time.