

The Shaker Leaf Song: Solving a Perplexing Puzzle

By Roger L. Hall

The Shakers are known for their simplicity of design, especially in their furniture and artifacts. This is also true of their drawings and songs. When they were discovered by Edward Deming and Faith Andrews in the 1930s, the drawings were unknown to the outside world, having been hidden away for many years by Shaker elders and eldersses. Unfortunately, by that time countless drawings had already been discarded by the Shakers. Why were they drawn in the first place? According to Edward Andrews,

Shaker literature is almost totally silent on the subject. In certain respects, the pictorial compositions seem to contradict the philosophy of the sect, which held that anything excessive, decorative, or fanciful was useless and superfluous and, therefore, contrary to the order. Indeed, much relating to the drawings is shrouded in mystery. It is clear, however, that under the surface of the disciplined, serene, and seemingly artless lives of the Shakers compelling forces were at work and became manifest in their mode of worship, particularly during the recurrent awakenings which marked the history of the movement.¹

Daniel Patterson, in his well-documented monograph on the subject, classified the drawings and related songs as spiritual gifts rather than as religious art.² His term is a useful way of classifying the Shaker drawings since most of them were inspirationally received from departed Shakers or visionary personages such as “Holy Mother Wisdom,” and copied down by scribes, many of whom were artistic young women who had a talent for drawing. In some cases these young Shaker sisters were skilled in making quilts or samplers. These Shaker scribes had a special function, as explained by Isaac N. Youngs:

The attendant spirit or guide would hold conversation with those present in the body, and ask, and answer questions thro’ the entranced one, as an instrument. Hence those under that influence were termed “instruments.”³

Beginning in the late 1830s and continuing for several decades afterwards, many of these “instruments” began to receive an abundance of “gifts,” in the form of drawings and songs, from the spirit world.

Unlike the Shakers, other communal societies did not usually include music as the central feature of their folk art. German groups, such as Ephrata Cloister, The Harmony Society, Zoar, and Amana used pictorial images such as highly ornamented lettering, flowers or birds in the borders of their music manuscripts.⁴ While the Shakers also used these images, they were apparently the only communal group to use music motifs in a prominent way in their drawings.

Three interconnected types of music motifs can be found in Shaker drawings: musical instruments, rhymed text, and music notation. Of these, musical instruments are the most commonly used. Most often these images have specific titles, such as “Trumpet of Wisdom” or “Harp of Joy.”⁵

The second type features poetry or song lyrics, which are usually placed below an image in the drawing and may refer to a specific musical instrument. One example is in a drawing titled “From Holy Mother Wisdom to Sarah Ann Standish,” dated July 15, 1847 and quoted here:

[Top left portion of the drawing]

*This is the little drum I beat,
To call saints & Angels to my seat,
And now it surely shall be thine,
To beat upon while here in time.*

[Top right portion of the drawing]

*I'll blow my trumpet thro' the land.
And Kings and Priests shall understand.
I am that God whose arm is love,
And sends forth judgments from above.*

Both verses are written neatly underneath the simple drawings of the corresponding musical instruments.⁶

Some Shaker songs incorporate the sounds of musical instruments without being included within a drawing, yet are similar to the poetic texts found in the drawings. One example is a gift song from Whitewater, Ohio by Archibald Meacham in 1843:

*Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye the trumpet
Toot toot toot.
It's Mother's Golden Trumpet,
It's Mother's Golden Trumpet,
It's Mother's Golden Trumpet,
Toot toot toot.
Mother is calling, she's calling,
Calling her children,
Toot, toot, toot.
She's calling, she's calling,
Calling her children
Under the banner of love.⁷*

The third and rarest type of drawing with a music motif has music notation included within the drawing. In keeping with their desire for simplicity, the Shakers developed an unusual but practical system of notation using the first seven letters of the alphabet rather than using conventional music notation. They called this the “letteral system.” Believed to be first developed by Abram Whitney at the Shirley community in Massachusetts, this alphabet notation began to spread during the 1820s and 1830s. It became the preferred notation and was used by most Shaker scribes for many decades, some continuing to use it until the late nineteenth century.⁸

It is possible that numerous drawings received by the Shakers included music notation, but it is difficult to estimate how many. Most Shaker drawings were received during the Era of Manifestations, also known as “Mother’s Work,” between the late 1830s and 1850s. Both Andrews and Patterson believe that many drawings were received during this time and then discarded when the Era of Manifestations had ended.

While it remains puzzling why some were discarded and some not, fortunately there are two drawings which have survived and contain music notation within a leaf design. These are termed leaf songs. Both were received in 1839 and were drawn within one month of each other. They are the only known examples of this type of leaf drawing with music. The first one was drawn by Mary Hazard, with a long spiritual message inside the leaf:

[Front side (with music)]

To my Sana Vince

This is golden leaf which was gathered from the Tree
of songs Mother Lucy sends this by Elder Sister Olive;
with her kind love and remembrance to Sister Molly B.--
Learned Nov. 28th 1839 Thanksgiving Day.

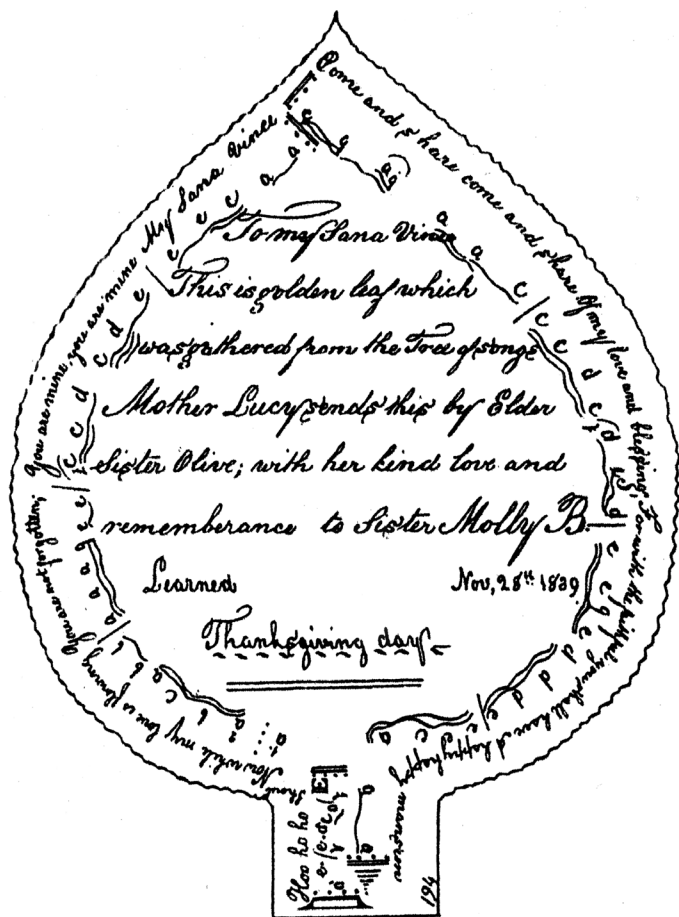


Fig. 1a. Leaf song (front side) in Shaker letteral notation, dated Nov. 28, 1839.

Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection.

Courtesy of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

[Back side (without music)]

*Mother Lucy said she thought it would please Molly to receive this leaf, and be able to see its form; and how completely the song borders the leaf. She says Molly likes to see pretty things, and the name of this leaf is, --
Emblem.⁹*

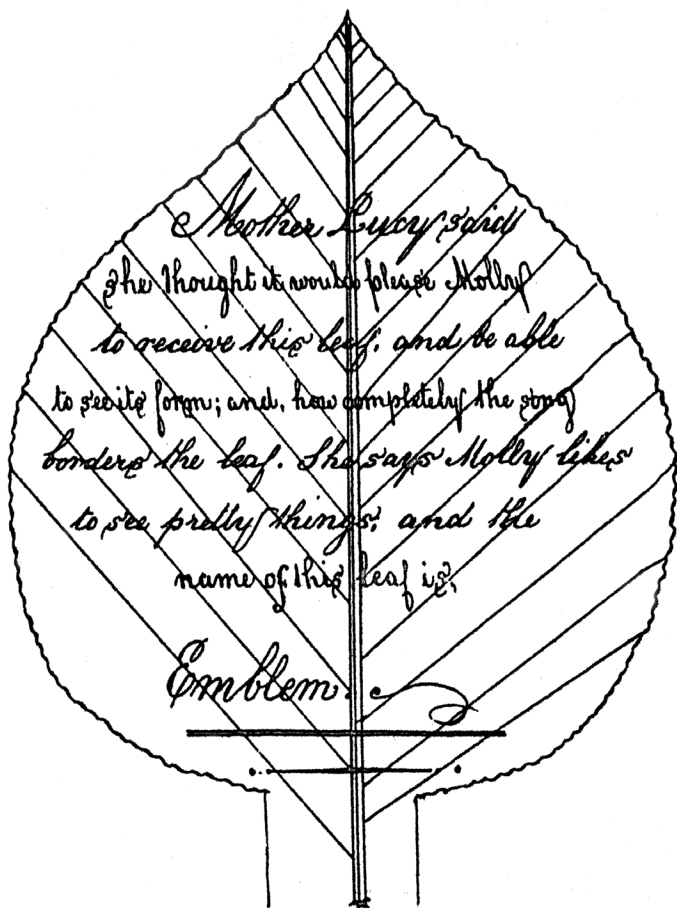


Fig. 1b. Leaf song (back side) in Shaker letter notation, dated Nov. 28, 1839.

Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection.

Courtesy of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

It is possible that “Sister Molly B” mentioned in the message was Molly Bennet (1782-1870) from the Lebanon Shaker community in New York.

The second leaf song, which I first wrote about in an article twenty-five years ago,¹⁰ has the more unusual design. What appears to be the earliest of four variants of this leaf song comes with the following annotation:

*Learned from a leaf given by S.[Sister] Anna Cogswel [Cogswell]
to S.[Sister] Sally Lewis. Dec 28th 1839*

This message from Sister Anna was obviously from the spirit world since she had died ten years earlier at Hancock, Massachusetts.¹¹ Sister Sally Lewis is named as the instrument through which the message was received. This leaf song, dated December 28, 1839 [see Fig. 2], was recorded in a music manuscript from the Second Order of the Church Family at Mount Lebanon.¹²

Three other manuscripts from the same community contain variants of this leaf song.¹³ Patterson quotes from the most complete one, which was from the hand of Rhoda Blake and is found in a manuscript titled “A Collection of Anthems and Spiritual Songs,” begun on January 1, 1840:¹⁴

*Leart from a leaf that Sister Anna Cogswell, brought decbr 28th for
Sisr SL The leaf was placed in a cup with a flower upon the top
of it, & a song written upon it. Sister Anna said, if Sally doubted
the present, she might give it to some one, and they should learn the
song—Learned Jany 6th 1840.¹⁵*

Of the two remaining manuscripts, one is dated January 16, 1840, and a third one is not dated. The undated one states it was “Seen & learn’d by Abigail Croman [Crossman].”

We come now to the question of how this leaf song is to be read. Actually it presents an intriguing puzzle as to how the words and music fit together. Unlike most Shaker spirituals which were written down in one single horizontal line, like conventional music, this song was copied around the border and inside the leaf. At first glance it seems to follow no logical pattern. Fortunately, Sally Lewis has placed symbols at the beginning and end of each line of music which point to a solution.

To solve the puzzle we need to trace the path of the song. It begins in the lower left stem of the leaf with the words: “O SEE this pretty leaf and the little flower.” It then continues along the leaf’s border to the lower right side of the stem. At this point there is a symbol [#] which appears again

at the top center of the leaf. From that point we move down vertically on these words: "Tis all around, Up and down." Following this phrase is a different symbol [+], which indicates the next line: "Thro' the middle and all over." This is appropriately placed in the middle of the leaf. A third symbol [plus sign with a dot in each corner] appears at the end of that phrase, directing us to the top horizontal line which begins with: "Mother's Love." The second and fourth horizontal lines—skipping the third one which has already been used—complete the remainder of the song.

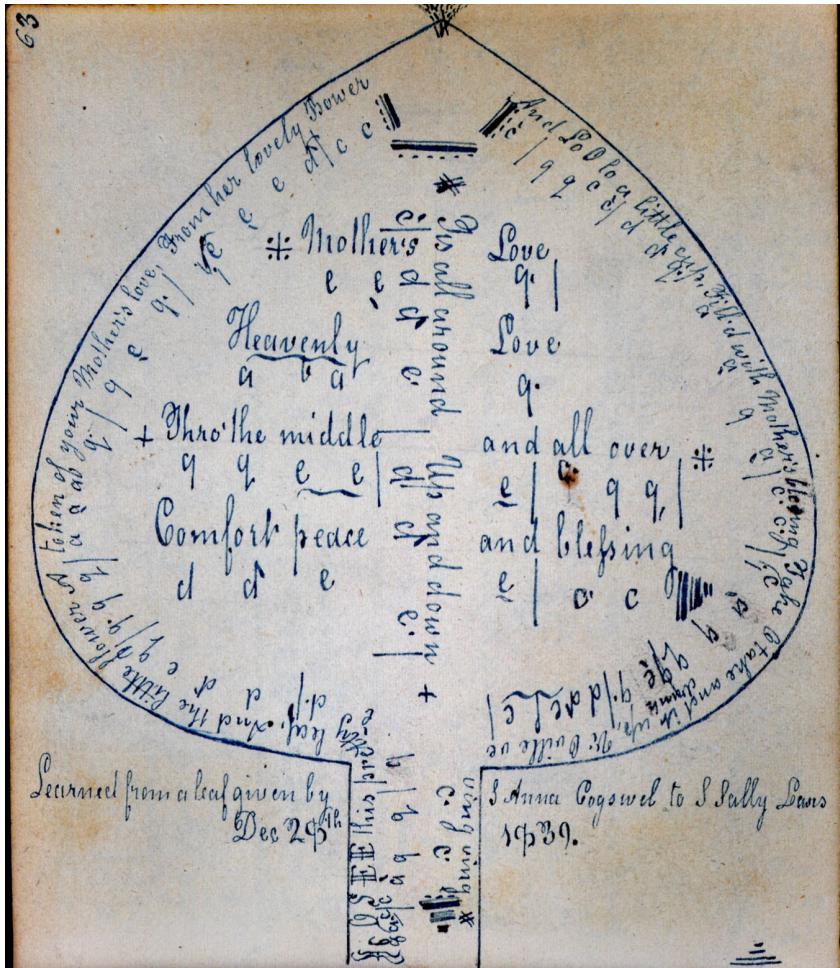


Fig. 2. Second leaf song in letter notation, dated Dec. 28th 1839.
 Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection
 Courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society

This clever design featuring words and music illustrates how a gift drawing can be both inspirational and ingenious. The song's last line explains the purpose of this gift drawing. This leaf song was sent by a departed soul to provide comfort, peace, and blessing to the living.

Leaf Song

Lebanon, New York
Church Family, Second Order

[Original tune a third lower in key of C]

Edited by Roger Hall

O ____ S - E - E this pret - ty leaf And the lit - tle flow - er, A

5 to - ken of your Moth - er's love From her love - ly Bow - er. And

10 Lo O lo a lit - tle cup, Fill'd with Moth - er's bless - ing, Take O take and

15 drink it up, Vi O vil - le vo ving ving. Tis all a - round,

20 Up and down, Thro' the mid - dle and all o - ver, Moth - er's love Heav - en - ly Love,

25 Com - fort peace and bless - ing.

Citation: "Learned from a leaf given by S.[Sister] Anna Cogswel to S.[Sister] Sally Lewis Dec. 28th 1839."

Fig. 3. Edited version of the Dec. 28, 1839 leaf song.

Notes

¹ Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere: A Study in Shaker Religious Art* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1969), 4.

² Daniel W. Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song* (Sabbathday Lake, Maine: The United Society of Shakers, 1983), xi-xii.

³ *A Concise View of the Church of God and of Christ, on Earth* (New Lebanon, New York, 1856). This important church history of over 500 pages was written by Isaac N. Youngs and later abbreviated. See Glendyne R. Wergland, *One Shaker Life: Isaac Newton Youngs, 1793-1865* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 182.

⁴ C. Kurt Dewhurst, Betty MacDowell, Marsha MacDowell, *Religious Folk Art in America: Reflections of Faith* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), 48-51. The communal societies discussed are the Shakers, the Harmonists, the Zoarites, the Mormons, and Bishop Hill.

⁵ Andrews, Fig 8. Title: "A Present from Holy Mother to Brother John C." 1848. Andrews does not identify the scribe or community. Patterson attributes this drawing to Polly Reed and dates it September 7, 1848 in *Gift Drawing*, 84.

⁶ Andrews, Fig 9. See also Patterson, 65. He credits the design framework to Sister Sarah Bates, the doves to Sister Miranda Barber, the stars and songbirds to Sister Polly Reed. The drum and trumpet images were most likely drawn by Sister Miranda.

⁷ Mitzie Collins and Colleen Liggett, compilers, *Joy of Angels: Shaker Spirituals for Christmas and the New Year* (Rochester, New York: Sampler Records Ltd., 1995), 4, 50. This song was received from the spirit world in June 1843; transcribed and edited by Roger Hall.

⁸ Harold E. Cook, *Shaker Music: A Manifestation of American Folk Culture* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1973), 83. Also Roger L. Hall, *The Shaker Letteral System: A Practical Approach to Music Notation* (master's thesis, State University of New York, Binghamton, 1972), 18-27.

⁹ Andrews, Fig 4. The leaf song also appears in Edwin Deming Andrews, *The Gift to be Simple: Songs, Dances and Rituals of the American Shakers* (1940; repr.: New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), Fig. 6. See also Patterson, 71, 73.

¹⁰ *The Shaker Messenger* (Spring 1982), 10-11 (Shaker Song Series No. 3: "Mother's Love"). Also discussed in Roger L. Hall, "Simple Gifts: Musical elements in Shaker spirit drawings," *The New York-Pennsylvania Collector* (June 1984), 1-2B. This article is based on a paper titled, "Musical Iconography in Shaker Folk Drawings," read at the Museum of American Folk Art Symposium in New York, N.Y. in 1984: *Reflections of Faith*.

¹¹ Anna Cogswell was born in 1761 and died in 1829. In *Gift Drawing and Gift Song*, Daniel Patterson listed twenty-one drawings originating at Hancock.

¹² The manuscript is found in The Western Reserve Historical Society Shaker

Collection, SM 316, p. 63. It is listed in Daniel W. Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual* (1979; repr.: New York: Dover Publications, 2000), Checklist of Shaker Song Manuscripts, L-211, 510. The leaf song is reproduced in Harold E. Cook, *Shaker Music: A Manifestation of American Folk Culture* (Bucknell University Press, 1973), 109.

¹³ Patterson, *Gift Drawing* 11

¹⁴ Patterson, *Gift Drawing* 90.

¹⁵ Patterson, *Gift Drawing* 89.

Appendix

Four Shaker manuscripts (all found at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio) contain variations of the same leaf song.

1. [1839, Dec. 28] – “O SEE this pretty leaf...Sent to Sister Sally Lewis from Anna Cogswel Seen & learn’d by Abigail Croman [sic]...Selected and transcribed by Elizabeth Terressa Lannuier.” WRHS, SM 318

2. 1839, Dec. 28 – “O SEE this pretty leaf...Learned from a leaf given by S. Anna Cogswel to S Sally Lewis Dec 28th 1839.” WRHS, SM 316

3. [1839, Dec. 28] – “O SEE this pretty leaf...leart [learned] Jan. 6, 1840...Began to be written January 1st 1840. Rhoda Blake.” WRHS, SM 218

4. [1839], Dec. 28 “O SEE this pretty leaf...Learn’t [Learned] from a leaf that Sister Anna Cogswell bro’t Decr 28 for Sally L. The leaf was plac’d in a little white cup, with a flower upon the top of it, and a song written in it. Learn’t Janry [January] 16th 1840.” WRHS, SM 169

Source: Daniel W. Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song: A Study of Two Forms of Shaker Inspiration* (Sabbathday Lake, Maine: The United Society of Shakers, 1983), 90.