



Burlington, Vermont's lively band of singers

**Social Band's Vermont Composers Project
Workshop Offering**

**Demystifying Choral Composition:
The Example of the Shape-Note Tradition**

One of the cornerstones of Social Band's repertoire is the American "singing school" or "shape note" tradition. A striking feature of this style, which flourished in New England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was that so many of the best-loved tunes from that repertoire were written by people who had demanding "day jobs" – as innkeepers, coopers, farmers, ministers, etc. Somehow, these plain folk acquired the skills to write satisfying four-part choral pieces.

How did this happen? It was through the efforts of itinerant singing school "masters" who came to town for several weeks, teaching the skills necessary to sing the songs well. By spreading musical literacy and singing recently-composed tunes, these masters gave people the tools they needed to make their own songs. Now, in the 21st century, Social Band is looking to this choral heritage for inspiration. We have designed a workshop that we hope will lay the groundwork for an outpouring of songs from people who consider themselves musical, but have rarely, if ever, tried their hand at composition.

With this end in mind, Social Band has designed a 1½ to 2 hour workshop to accompany our Vermont Composers Project. In the first part of the workshop, we will give participants a taste of the singing school experience by teaching one or two "shape note" songs, and briefly analyzing how the songs were – and can still be – written. In addition, a composer who has worked in this tradition will describe how he or she approaches writing in this style. In the second part, one of the Project composers will discuss how he or she wrote their piece for Social Band. Participants will get a glimpse into the process of writing in another of the many musical languages represented in the project.

The goal of this event is for participants to leave the workshop with a greater understanding of the step-by-step processes that are involved in choral composition. It is Social Band's hope that by demystifying the composition process and by laying a foundation for experimentation, participants will be inspired to move from appreciating music to its actual creation.