

CDSS Sings—Imagining “The Last Words of Copernicus”

by Jesse P. Karlsberg

“The Last Words of Copernicus” is a lively yet simple shape-note song sung a cappella in four-part harmony. Likely composed between 1859 and 1862, the song fuses the musical form of a late-eighteenth century New England fusing tune—in which different vocal parts enter in turn with rhythmically similar musical figures—with the spare harmonic flavor of a mid-nineteenth century southern campmeeting tune or revival spiritual. The curiously titled and unusually catchy song also exemplifies the imagination and musicality of its composer, then twenty-something Sarah Lancaster, a member of a talented West Georgia singing family with musical roots extending back to the court of the sixteenth and seventeenth century English monarchs. As much as any song contributed to *The Sacred Harp*, an 1844 Georgia shape-note tunebook used today by singers across the United States, Europe and beyond, “The Last Words of Copernicus” has captured the imagination of interested listeners. It achieved the widest circulation of all the recordings Alan Lomax made of Sacred Harp singing in the 1940s and 1950s, and it was sampled in Bruce Springsteen’s 2012 single “Death to My Hometown.”

Included as a three-part song in the 1870 fourth edition of *The Sacred Harp* (sans alto), “The Last Words of Copernicus” was first published in *The Organ*, a weekly newspaper “superintended” by Sacred Harp compiler and Hamilton, Georgia resident, Benjamin Franklin White. Lancaster chose to set her tune to the first two stanzas of a 1755 hymn text by Philip Doddridge, which glorified the “divine abode” of God where the “stars are but ... shining dust” and even the “refulgent” brilliance of the sun pales in comparison to “the Father of eternal light.”

Perhaps drawing on her finishing school education at Hamilton Female Seminary, and inspired by the hymn’s vivid celestial imagery, Sarah Lancaster associated these words with the sixteenth century astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, whose life was profiled in nineteenth century schoolbooks such as the McGuffey Readers. The title of her composition reimagines the words of this eighteenth century hymn as the dying remarks of the great astronomer, who lived from 1473–1543. As a creative act, Lancaster’s title stands alone among the songs she and her contemporaries contributed to *The Sacred Harp*. (1)

Perhaps the most instantly recognizable musical feature of “The Last Words of Copernicus” today was not in Lancaster’s original three-part

setting. The alto entrance to the song’s fusing section features a simple figure located at the moment in the song where the two highest parts drop out, leaving the altos singing exposed, with relish, at the top of their range. The song’s alto part—likely written by Alabama Sacred Harp composer Seaborn McDaniel Denson—first appeared in a 1911 edition of *The Sacred Harp* supervised by Atlanta, Georgia, singer Joseph Stephen James. The book was one of several early-twentieth century revisions of *The Sacred Harp* that added alto parts to songs and made other changes in response to contemporaneous musical trends.

“The Last Words of Copernicus” has been popular among singers as far back as records of Sacred Harp song-use extend. An analysis of the minutes of singings held over the past eighteen years shows the song to be the twenty-sixth most popular out of the five hundred fifty-four songs included in *The Sacred Harp*, 1991 Edition, the most recent revision of the tunebook. Analyses dating back to the mid-twentieth century show a similar degree of popularity. (2)

In 1959, immediately after portable stereo recorders became available, Alan Lomax, then working for the Library of Congress, set out on his now well known “Southern Journey” to document music across the U.S. South. He visited a Sacred Harp convention held at Corinth Church in Fyffe, in northeastern Alabama, where he recorded two full days of singing. “The Last Words of Copernicus” was one of two songs recorded during that trip included in a sampler album that comprised the first volume of Prestige’s Southern Journey series. When Rounder Records reissued Southern Journey in 1997, “The Last Words of Copernicus” was included in the sampler once more. (The entire recording of the 1959 convention is now available online through the Association for Cultural Equity Online Archive.) Perhaps because this particular recording was so accessible, a producer of Bruce Springsteen’s album *Wrecking Ball* (2012) included a sample of—you guessed it—the song’s alto fusing section entrance in a musical interlude that recurs throughout Springfield’s single “Death to My Hometown.”

As Sacred Harp singing has spread internationally in the early twenty-first century, Lancaster’s imaginative naming of “The Last Words of Copernicus” has proved serendipitous. In Poland, where groups in Warsaw and Poznan have sung from *The Sacred Harp* since 2008, singers have taken a

special interest in the song, whose Polish namesake is a national hero. The local groups have sung the song to celebrate Copernicus's birthday, and it remains a favorite tune year-round. In 2009, the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) proposed the name "Copernicum" for a recently discovered chemical element. The element's atomic number, 112, is the same as the page number for "The Last Words of Copernicus" in *The Sacred Harp*. A coincidence? Probably. Efforts at bringing Lancaster's composition to the attention of a representative from IUPAC are still underway.

The story of "The Last Words of Copernicus" exemplifies the unexpected twists and turns a song may take across its history of publication and performance. A product of the enigmatic imagination of its composer, with some added punch thanks to the later addition of an alto part, "The Last Words of Copernicus" is, above all, great fun to sing. So try it out!

Endnotes

(1) Other contributors to *The Sacred Harp* named songs after fellow singers (e.g. "Rees," "White," "Dumas"), meaningful places ("Alabama," "Corinth," "Abbeville"), or their associated hymn texts (e.g. "Bound for Canaan," "Holy Manna," "Loving-Kindness").

(2) In one of these earlier studies, another song of Lancaster's, titled "Sardis," emerged as the most popular of all the tunes in *The Sacred Harp*—sung at four out of every five singings.

References

1. Association for Cultural Equity Online Archive: Southern U.S. 1959 and 1960, Fyffe, AL. Recorded by Alan Lomax. <http://research.culturalequity.org/rc-b2/get-audio-ix.do?ix=recording&id=326&idType=sessionId&sortBy=abc>.
2. Bealle, John. *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997.
3. McGraw, Hugh W., et al., eds. *The Sacred Harp*, 1991 Edition. Carrollton, GA: Sacred Harp Publishing Company, 1991.
4. Springsteen, Bruce. *Wrecking Ball*. Columbia Records, 2012.
5. Steel, David Warren with Richard Hulan. *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

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His article, "Come Sound His Praise Abroad"—Sacred Harp Singing Across Europe," was in the CDSS News, Winter 2012-2013.

Web Extras

Links to these web extras will be with the online version of this article at <http://www.cdss.org/cdss-news.html> in early December. Well worth a listen!

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNifUi9JQqs>

Siblings Justyna Orlikowska and Olgierd Orlikowski lead "The Last Words of Copernicus" at the second Ireland Sacred Harp Convention, Aula Maxima, Cork, Ireland, Saturday, March 3, 2012. Polish Sacred Harp singers have taken a special interest in the song, the text of which was reimagined by its composer Sarah Lancaster as the dying words of the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus.

2. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UASyS-jUKKI>

Bruce Springsteen's 2012 single "Death to My Hometown," off the album *Wrecking Ball* (Columbia Records, 2012). The song samples the lively alto entrance to the fusing section of "The Last Words of Copernicus" from a 1959 recording by Alan Lomax.

3. <http://research.culturalequity.org/rc-b2/get-audio-detailed-recording.do?recordingId=4577>

Velma Johnson leads "The Last Words of Copernicus" during the fifty-sixth annual convention of the United Sacred Harp Musical Association, Corinth Church, Fyffe, Alabama, Sunday, September 13, 1959. Alan Lomax, who recorded the convention, described the song as "good music" and the rendition as "vigorous" in his notes on the session.

Sacred-harp singing oftens pops up at our summer programs, sometimes scheduled, sometimes not. See our class descriptions after January 1, 2014 at <http://www.cdss.org/programs.html>.

The Last Words of Copernicus. C.M.D.

Music by Sarah Lancaster, ca. 1859–1862 (tenor, bass, and treble) and
Seaborn McDaniel Denson, 1911 (alto).
Words by Philip Doddridge, 1755.

Ye golden lamps of heav'n farewell, With all your feeble light; Farewell thou ever changing moon, Pale

empress of the night. And thou refulgent orb of day, In brighter flames arrayed;

orb of day, In brighter flames arrayed; My soul which springs beyond thy sphere, No more demands thy aid. aid.

Tune typeset by Jesse P. Karlsberg