

LEARNING A SONG

While there are many ways to learn music, some methods are more effective than others. When it comes to part singing, how you go about learning an arrangement will certainly affect the quality of your performance.

In a cappella singing, barbershop specifically, tuning, that is the locking and ringing of chords, is a hallmark of the style. How you go about learning a piece will have a considerable impact on how well you stay in key and how well you tune chords.

There are three things that affect tuning: 1) Pitch 2) Volume/Balance 3) Color. Of course, learning pitches is actually the easy part. Fine tuning the pitch in a chord requires proper balance (volume relationships between parts) and lastly, color matching. In the past we called color matching, vowel matching. Vowel matching gets you in the “ballpark”, but true intonation in chord-singing comes from the matching of resonance and vocal color. It is possible to lock and ring chords while actually singing different vowels, if the resonance and color of such vowels are “complimentary”, that is, work together to help the ear “tune”.

The method I have developed and teach has 3 simple steps. 1) Pitches 2) Word-Sounds 3) Integration.

If you learn the pitches of your part on “Loo” or “Doo”, you will accomplish some very important things that you would not accomplish if you had just plunged ahead the old way, attempting to learn notes and words at the same time.

Our brain is actually a big tape recorder. If you learn pitches first on “Doo”, some very interesting things begin to happen. First, there is nothing else for the brain to focus on other than the pitches and pitch patters. There are no words, no changes from vowel to vowel, no changes in color or resonance, no consonants. Because we use the same sound over and over “doo”, we can sort of forget about it and focus on the pitches and pitch patterns. It is all those “other things” which complicate the learning process and which invariably cause us to go out of tune in very short order if they are attempted in the early learning stages, or not applied with considerable skill.

If given a chance to focus on a single task, the brain will actually record the pitches and they will remain in memory in the subconscious. A few times through the song, listening to a part tape that has no words, just the pitch sung with “Doo” is the simplest and easiest way for the subconscious to “record” the pitches of the song. If there are a few tricky places, just spend a little more time listening and “doo”-ing those places.

After a few times through on “doo”, the pitches are recorded in the subconscious. How do we know this? At first you have to trust, because it is difficult to accept the presence of things that we are not aware of. But that fact will soon be made clear enough. The next step is 2) word-sounds. To begin to master the flow of word sounds, we use a method called “silent audiation”. That is the process of “mouthing” the word sounds, the

vowels, the consonants, the “m’s and n’s” as if you were performing the song. BUT...you make no singing sound. It is more than just saying the words silently, it is actually singing without making sound. You breathe, articulate consonants, form vowels shapes, keep the throat open, lift the palate, arch the tongue forward, place in the mask, i.e., all the things you would do when you sing, but you make no sound. So steps 1 and 2 are “doo”-ing pitches and “silent audiation”. You can do these steps, separately over and over, until you are ready to move to the last step. By doing so, you will lay excellent ground work for the final step...integration.

Before talking about integration, a word on “silent audiation” is in order. The purpose of this activity is actually to train the vocal muscles to memorize the flow and positions of the word sounds, while actually hearing the pitch in your head. What makes one song different from another is the combination of pitches and how the phonetics flow. The elements of the performance are always the same. The same 12 pitches are used, maybe in a different key; words are comprised of the same vowels and consonants. What is different is the order. That is what makes each song unique. So learning the order of events is 90% of the learning process. “Silent audiation” allows one to focus exclusively on the order of “events”, from shape to shape, so that the muscles learn the vocal movements and learn to anticipate these movements as the pitches and word-sounds flow along.

By doing this silently, it gives your brain a chance to associate the subconscious pitch with the muscle movement. That is very important, so I will say it again:

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Every vowel and its duration of sound is therefore associated with a pitch. If we hear it or can imagine it, the vocal mechanism will go through the process of prepare to sing. When we actually engage the mind and say, “Sing”, the shape, if practiced, will be there and the pitch, if previously reviewed (with doo), will associate itself with the shape (i.e the vowel).

Lanny Bansham, Olympic Sharp-Shooter, the first to score a perfect 400 (all bullseyes) and to win the Olympic gold medal was unable to go to the practice range to shoot 6 weeks before the Olympics. So to keep in shape, he practiced the motions of shooting “bulls-eyes” without firing a shot. He steadied himself, cleared his mind, aimed, squeezed the trigger, and imagined the perfect shot, every time. In that 6 week period he never even fired a rifle. At the Olympics, he just repeated what he had practiced “silently” before. Such is the nature of the mind, use of imagery, and training the muscle-memory.

At first, you can practice word-sound flow listening to the pitches from our learning CD, but eventually you will want to do “silent audiation” and attempt to hear the sounds of the pitches in your head. That’s the “audiation” part...hearing in your head. As you practice, you will discover it is not that difficult. You have to use your imagination and memory, but the “doo” activity will provide a very strong experience from which to draw.

The integration part will actually be quite simple now. The pitches have been recorded in the subconscious. The muscle memory has been trained to shape and flow through the word sounds. As you now start to sing, you shouldn't be surprised to find the notes come booming forth from your subconscious as they are associated with the space and shapes of the vowels that you have already practiced.

I have watched many a singer struggle with poor learning habits; they often say "I may be slow, but this is the way I learn." Too often they discover they learned many places incorrectly or sing many notes out of tune. The fact is that learning a song is not so much about learning notes and words, as it is giving the pitches a "place to be heard". This method does just that.

It is my experience that singers using this method, learn faster and more accurately. They maintain tonal center and sing more chords in tune. Please take advantage of our learning CDs that use computer-accurate tone generation on a "Doo Voice" sound that works in concert with this learning method. And, please let us know if this method has been helpful to you with a testimonial.

Harmony Singers....a special tip for you.

Spend as much time at first listening to the lead part as well as your own. It's right there on your learning CD as well. Ultimately, your harmony part is tuned to the "anticipated" melody line. So, you need to know where the lead is going. (Of course, it helps if the lead actually "gets there").

Don't learn your part as melody from note to note. A harmony part sung "independently" from the melody will tend to sound out of tune. "Doo" the pitches so that you learn the note patterns. And practice "silent audiation" to get the muscle-memory activated. But then the integration process for you is one of listening to the melody as you sing your harmony part and allowing your ear to make the fine-tuning adjustments. On the Learning CD, when you are ready, flip the balance to the right speaker all the way, so that you can't hear your part in the left speaker. Then listen and sing along with the other three and you'll get some good experience in tuning.

Have Fun Singing...Have More Fun Singing in Tune!

Jay Giallombardo