

## Vocal Education Series

### **Part 15: The Art of In-Tune Singing**

By René Torres

A lot of talk and time is spent on the subject of “in-tune” singing. No barbershopper has ever escaped the constructive criticism of a chorus director, section leader or coach, when he says, “You’re out of tune!” At the beginning of your “career” hobby, your reaction to this statement was probably one borne out of ignorance and lack of knowledge about the term. It may very well be that as you progressed in the hobby - and probably after repeated warnings - a slow realization that sometimes you were OK, and sometimes not, made you more and more aware of the tuning problem. But have you ever stopped to really give it a thought? What is really meant by in-tune singing?

Typically, singing in tune means that you are accurate as to the tonal center of a song. If a song is in the key of C, for example, then everything about the song revolves around that note, unless there is a deliberate key change. Simplistically, the tonal center of a song is the note back to which the song always returns. It means that you sing the notes exactly as they are written, keeping the tone fidelity as it was meant to be by the composer.

This is easier said than done because of a peculiar characteristic of the average human ear. This characteristic is commonly called “relative pitch.” To be a singer, it is necessary to be able to hear a note and then sing it exactly as you hear it. It is not necessary for a singer to be able to name the note, although people gifted with what is called *absolute* pitch can indeed do so. But it is important to sing it exactly as you hear it. What makes this task difficult is that the human brain does not distinguish between very close pitches until they are enough apart to register a difference. One person can sing a C that is slightly above the frequency of the “basic” note, and another one can sing it slightly below that frequency. If you hear them sing the note separately, they might sound the same. It is not until they are a significant distance apart that they become distinguishable as two notes. As an example, there can be a great deal of variation between a C note that is perceived as C sharp and one that is perceived as a C flat (or B in this case). This poses a problem for singers that sing without musical accompaniment. With a musical instrument behind you, there is a constant reminder of what is the proper tone to sing, because the instrument keeps you on track (one hopes). Singing solo means that you have to keep that tonal center in your head, and stay faithful to it throughout the song. It is a harder task.

Things get even more complicated when you are singing a note that is part of a four-part chord, such as a song being sung with three other people, or three other parts. Each singer has his own idea of the tonal center and is trying to keep faithful to it. If each singer has a slightly different frequency in mind as the “center,” then the overall effect does not produce the desired harmonic effect. To further complicate matters, listening to other parts different than your own may cause you to want to drift from your initial idea of the center. You may get pulled up slightly, or more often, you get pulled down in order for your ear and brain to feel that the chord is right. The net result is usually a gradual collective lowering of the pitch as you sing, and when you finish, you are surprised to learn that you are in another key! Since the singing of a note is a matter of vibration of your vocal chords to create the pitch, a lapse of attention tends to create a small relaxation of the support you are giving the tone, and the result is a lowering of the frequency. Trying to adjust, so as to tune to the other parts, also usually results in a lowering of the pitch,

resulting in the out-of-tune situation. Rarely do adjustments result in an increase in pitch, although they do occur occasionally.

For those with a little more musical training, you may feel that the explanation above is a little simplistic. It makes no distinction between fixed pitches (such as that produced by a piano, for example) and pitches under what is called *just intonation*, which is a continuously variable tone capability, such as that produced by a violin or the human voice. That discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this article. Here, we will look at the primary steps necessary to sing in tune.

First, you need to train your ear to understand and assimilate the relationship between various notes as they revolve around a given tonal center. A good exercise for this is to take a pitch for a song you know, preferably a simple one with no key changes, and then sing a portion of it solo. Then blow the pitch again to see if you are still “there.” Do this with more and more of the song, until you can consistently stay faithful to the tonal center.

Next, try singing in unison with three other parts. You will see that things get a little more difficult, because now eight ears and four brains have to agree on what are the correct pitches. Do this OFTEN. A ballad helps, as it is easier to “tune” one note at a time. This will develop your *melodic* tuning ability, which is staying faithful to the melody, as it were.

Once you are comfortable with unison singing, start some duetting with the lead and another part. Once comfortable with this, put the four parts together. After a while you will notice that you have to make some adjustments to the pitch to keep the parts properly in tune to each other. This leads to proper *harmonic* tuning, which is being in tune *within the chord*. A good coach helps, because sometimes you are too involved in the song, and you need a fifth set of ears to put it all together.

Nothing can substitute for practice, practice, and more practice. Remember that it is not enough to be harmonically accurate and make a chord ring, but you have to have the melodic accuracy as well so as not to vary from the tonal center. As you progress with your singing abilities, you will tend to be able to “feel” what is the right pitch, and hopefully stay consistent. Remember...PRACTICE!