

Vocal Education Series

Part 16: Don't Be a Hero

By René Torres

Looking up the word “hero” revealed eight synonyms associated with good behavior. The more common ones identified were: brave man, super man, conqueror and idol. You have to admit that these qualities, while very good in and of themselves, are not exactly related to singing. However, words like male protagonist, male lead, and leading actor are closer to what you might want to emulate as a singer. But notice that they refer to *solo* actions (protagonist, lead, leading) not to something that you would want to emulate in a chorus setting.

So it would seem that being a hero is not something that would be greeted with great enthusiasm if you do it while singing in a chorus. A chorus, in order to make its own expanded sound, needs to have a blend and balance of voices. It needs singers with voices that are exquisitely controlled so as to add to the blend, not subtract from it. When you sing like a hero, i.e., sticking out and piercing through the sound, the entire section suffers and, consequently, the entire chorus exhibits just that much less musical excellence.

Many chorus singers don't realize that sometimes singing softer makes the group sound louder. At first that may sound like a contradiction, but it really isn't. Remember hearing those high school bands at Friday night games with their instruments blaring, each trying to outdo the other? The name of the game was LOUD, mostly because so many instruments were blasting away and competing with each other. Yes, it was loud, but was it pleasing to the ear?

I'm sure you are aware that sound waves interact with each other. They can reinforce or they can cancel each other. Just like ripples on a pond, each singer's voice interacts with all of his neighbors' voices, and the result is a composite heard by the audience.

Sometimes a situation may occur where you actually are singing louder than you realize, and that can happen when there are several out-of-tune singers around you. By someone being out of tune, some of his or her emitted frequencies can cancel out what you hear. The result is that you sense that you have brought back the volume, and you compensate by singing louder still. This is not a good idea. A good rule of thumb is to sing just below the level at which you hear yourself. This is not easy, because you have to not only know what you are singing and know it perfectly, but you have to know it so well and be so confident as to sing it with little if any auditory feedback. This takes practice, dedication, and commitment to the task. A commitment, that starts when you first see the music, continues through rehearsals, warm-ups and coaching sessions, and doesn't end until you have sung it for the last time. It is especially intense just before and during a performance (whether that performance be in rehearsal or before an audience.)

When everybody is exactly in tune in a chorus section, the sound that comes forth is reinforced so well that, even if you don't sing as loud, the wall of sound is incredible. Just ask anybody standing in front of the chorus when you really do it right. In other words, *intensity* is more closely linked to in-tune singing than it is to loudness. Again using the pond-ripple analogy, it is as if every stone is falling in the same spot, and the consequent one set of ripples is awesome! Better yet, since all stones are contributing to reinforce the same ripple, each individual stone does not have to be thrown so hard.

It all boils down to understanding the high level of excellence expected of each individual in a chorus, performing to that level all the time, and honing your craft until it becomes second nature. Old good habits are just as easy to keep and as hard to break as bad ones. So why bother to learn bad ones? Make up your mind to reinforce the "collective sound" and throw your stones in the same spot together.

By the way, did you notice that at the beginning of this article I mentioned that there were *eight* synonyms for "hero?" Did you also notice that I said that one of them was probably a good quality? Did you count them and see that I only mentioned seven? You thought I had forgotten about that eighth synonym, right? Actually, I saved it for last. I did that because after what I have said, you probably have realized that being a hero, as defined so far, is not a good idea. The last synonym, however, is very important. Every member of the chorus needs to exhibit this "heroic" quality without exception. What is that synonym? CHAMPION!