

HARMONIZING WITH OTHER SINGERS

BY JEANNIE DEVA

For those of you already singing in or desiring to sing in a group with other voices, here is some information and tips on this fun but often challenging setting.

No matter how many other singers are in the group, there is, of course going to be a melody. Sometimes the arrangement moves this melody from one singer or chorus section to another, and many times the melody is sung by only one singer or, for example in a chorus, is sung only by the soprano section.

All the other parts are harmony parts. The harmony parts can be considered melodies as well, but as they are not the lead melodic line, they support what is thought of as the melody.

Support and Blend

The key to singing harmony is:

- 1) Consistency:** Staying on your pitch and not wandering to or towards notes being sung by someone of another part.
- 2) Rhythm:** Singing your words in exactly the same rhythm as the other parts
- 3) Pronunciation:** The way you pronounce your words must sound the same as the others in the group.
- 4) Volume and Dynamics:** The harmony part must not overshadow the lead melody. When singing in a choir or chorus, think of yourself as many voices (those singing the same part as you) so that your volume is in unison. All dynamics; louder and softer, must be done as a unit.

5) Blend: The watchword is “blend.” Singing harmony is not your time to show your unique attributes as a singer; it is not your time to “stand out in the crowd.” It’s all about blending with the other singers and through sound, presenting a unified tonality.

Elements of a Good Blend

To blend well means to combine elements such as phrasing, tone, pronunciation, volume, rhythm, dynamics, pitch and intonation into a unified whole.

MATCH WORDS ...

Ragged entrances and exits to words make backup singers sound unprofessional. Each word sung as an ensemble must match up rhythmically. This is true whether you’re singing in unison (all singing the same notes) or in harmony (each singing complementary notes with each other).

PHRASING CHOICES ...

Phrasing choices should sound natural, make emotional sense and work rhythmically with the instrumental parts and lead vocalist. For the optimum backup blend, each singer’s rhythmic phrasing should be identical. Listen for and decide on mutual rhythms for each word and syllable so that they synchronize. And be sure to end each phrase in perfect synchronicity.

MATCH TONE ...

For the best blend, you must work on matching your tone to one another. Tone refers to the quality or characteristic sound of your voice. This is influenced by how your voice resonates and how you work with resonance. Individual vocal qualities such as nasality, vibrato, brightness, or darkness, should complement — not stand out — from the other singers.

MATCH PRONUNCIATION ...

Pronunciation can vary from one person to the next. Contrasting pronunciations between two or more singers can cause sloppy

rhythms, problems with intonation, and a lack of agreement due to clashing styles.

INTONATION ...

A good vocal blend includes matching pitch accuracy, otherwise known as good intonation. Poor intonation in backup vocals can be devastating to the entire sound of the band. Matching the way you each pronounce and sound out the vowel of each syllable can help unify tuning.

Sometimes it can be helpful to sing against a drone (a sustained single-pitch accompaniment that uses the root note of the chord over which you're singing) to tune each pitch; you can also practice tuning pitch as a group by singing rubato (out of time and slowly) and without accompaniment.

SUSTAIN VOWELS ...

Any words that are sustained should be, as a rule, sustained on the vowel not the ending consonant. Many singers close off on the consonant too soon. If this occurs while still sustaining the note, it will change your vocal tone. If not done intentionally, chances are you may sound strained and/or go off pitch.

BALANCE VOLUME ...

Volume should be balanced behind that of the lead singer. Crescendos (a rise in volume) and diminuendos (a lowering or lessening of volume) on specified words or phrases should happen simultaneously and smoothly.

Practice Tip: Practice by sustaining an “ah,” “ee,” or “oo” while slowly increasing then decreasing the volume. Try this with your other backup singers in unison and with harmonies as well as during individual practice.

FINDING YOUR NOTE

Sometimes it can be difficult to hear your pitch when singing harmonies, especially in a backup group of three or more voices.

Additionally, trying to blend by listening to all the other voices at once can sometimes be confusing and throw you off.

If you're singing in a choir/chorus: listen to someone standing next to you who you know to be a strong harmony singer and work to blend your voice to theirs.

If you're singing backup for a lead singer: Match your voice to the lead, while thinking of your vocal as a supportive sound to theirs.

[Excerpted from Jeannie Deva's digital eBook: "Singer's Guide to Powerful Performances" found in all digital reader stores such as iBookstore, iTunes, Sony Reader, Nook (Amazon), and much, much more!]

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