

Above The Pipe: How Never To Sing Flat Again

Jim Henry IES 2008

Supreme importance is placed on our ability to sing in tune with one another and to the tonal center. It is this all-too-rare quality that separates the great ensembles from the merely good ones. The first step toward accomplishing this task is mastering the elements of posture, breath support, and phonation. But that isn't the whole secret. Excellent tuning is also a function of the following:

1. Internalizing the tonal center while you sing—Try to develop a sense of where *do* is at all times. It is all too common for ensembles to flat a song. The moment that occurs all energy is sapped from the performance and any hope they had of truly connecting with the audience is lost. Try this: in the middle of rehearsing a song, stop everything and have the singers sing *do*. After a while this will become quite easy to do.
2. Never hum the pitch when it is given to you. It just tightens you up and keeps you and your peers from being able to properly audiate the pitch with the inner ear (i.e., hear it in your mind).
3. Hearing and performing gradations of pitch between the half notes of the piano—You are not a piano. The half step is not the smallest interval you can sing. Like a violin or trombone you can slide from one note to another, sounding countless incremental pitches along the way. Singing “in the cracks” is an important skill to develop. We have all become accustomed to singing with the piano. The trouble is the piano uses a tuning system called equal temperament, which allows it to play in any key, but also renders it slightly out of tune. We will tend to use just intonation, whose intervals are made up of simpler ratios, and therefore more consonant (and thus more in tune) than most equally tempered intervals.
4. Hearing the “lock” of a perfectly tuned chord—When a chord is perfectly tuned, you will hear several overtones above the chord. The more in tune you are the more overtones you will achieve. When the overtones are strongly present you will get a palpable sense that the chord has completely gelled or locked. This is what we are striving for at all times.
5. Matching vowels with one another. What makes one vowel sound different than another? When you sing a note, you are not only singing that fundamental pitch, but also countless frequencies—called *partials*—above that pitch. Some you might be able to hear and many will extend above your range of hearing. The way you shape your mouth for each vowel inhibits some of these frequencies and brings out others. Each of these patterns of partials results in a different vowel sound. For that reason two people can sing the same fundamental pitch, but if their vowels aren't matched (that is, if the partials that create those vowels aren't lined up) they will be out of tune with one another. If that is true of only two people, imagine the damage that an entire ensemble can do if they aren't matching vowels. On the good side, however, when the entire ensemble is matching vowels the partials will be so dramatically reinforced that the overtones will be screaming.
6. Balancing the chords properly—In general the ensemble should be balanced like a pyramid, with the bass as the strongest voice and the tenor as the lightest. This, too, will reinforce the partials and help us to tune.
7. Harmonizing with the other sections—Many unskilled singers learn their part and sing it without any regard as to how it harmonizes with the other parts. To really tune you must always be globally aware: keep your ears open and slot your notes into the ensemble sound.
8. Approaching pitches from above. NEVER scoop up to a note. This is not only true of entrances but also ascending and descending notes within the phrase. Developing this habit (and it takes a good deal of conscious effort to do so) will keep the spin in your voice and help you to stay on the high side of every note.
9. Avoiding flat traps:
 - Repeated notes—each successive note must be sung an “onion skin” (extremely thin margin) higher.
 - Returning to a note—again each time you sing it, you should do so an onion skin higher.
 - Scale degrees 2, 3, and 6. Show me an ensemble that can sing scale degrees 2, 3, and 6 in tune and I'll show you a ensemble that never goes flat.
10. Being “anti-gravity” in everything we do—Gravity will pull our pitch down along with everything else. It is the enemy and we will fight it. We will stand tall, lift our chest, lift our cheekbones, lift our soft palate, lift our lips off our teeth, and even lift our eyebrows slightly when we sing. We will never let our voices get heavy. Instead we will place our voices high and forward, and spin the notes out on a steady column of warm air. The piano's note won't be good enough for us. We will strive to make it sound slightly dull to our tonal center.