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Harmonet Postings About "Pitch"

From: John Erickson
 Organization: Paradise Valley Cactus Chordsmen
 Subject: Re: Pitch

Gord, I must disagree with you. I am the director of a relatively small chorus, about 30 active members. I have been the director for about 18 months. When I started directing them, they had some pitch problems. But I believe the problem is that most barbershop singers are not aware of the problem notes. Oh, we all know about singing the third flat. Tenors get yelled at about that regularly. But the notes that need special attention are the 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th notes of the scale. Anytime a pitch problem is identified, it will be one of those notes, usually in the lead part. And that is how pitch is lost. By stopping and taking the time to identify the problem notes, the individual singer becomes aware of the problem and the solution. As a result, the Paradise Valley Cactus Chordsmen consistently keep the pitch on all of their songs. The singer just needs to be made aware of the intonation traps in the music. Sure, there are people who can't carry a tune in a bushel basket with handles and a lid, but we aren't talking about them. We are talking about barbershop singers, who generally are several cuts above the average. And it has been my experience that really accurate intonation awareness can be taught. It doesn't happen overnight, but it does happen.

John Erickson
 Director, PV Cactus Chordsmen

Gord Russell wrote:

For discussion: Most Directors are paranoid about their chorus's singing in pitch and rightly so. However I believe that, outside of fine tuning through singing with proper support etc etc, pitch cannot be taught. You either have it or you do not.....Gordy

The "Drone" Technique For Tuning

John Erickson, Director, PV Cactus Chordsmen, correctly states that the "problem tones" are the 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th of the scale. But John goes on to say that "stopping and

fixing the problem" will fix the overall intonation of the chorus. This does not work, because the singer usually is TOLD by the Director "sing higher" or "sing lower". What **does** work is "the drone" exercise. I presented it one time before on the H'net, but here it is again:

"The Drone", as I teach it, as taught to me by Ron Black.

When your quartet or chorus has tonal center problems, they can be cured quickly by a simple exercise known as "the drone". Here's how it works.

(1) Have your basses and baris sing "low do", or "one" (1), on an "ooo". Have the tenors sing an octave above on "ooo". Have them breathe as necessary, but make sure they sing the tone at a medium volume level -- loud enough to be heard, but not so loud so as to make it impossible to hear the rest of the drone singers.

(2) Have your lead section sing the offending phrase by themselves, and if **any** note is not **exactly** in tune to the tonal center, demonstrate the correct tonality, and have them sing it again. Keep this up until the entire phrase is perfectly in tune to the tonal center. Remember: every single note, and every interval must be **perfect**.

(3) Immediately have everyone sing 4-part-harmony on the offending phrase. Comment on how the tonal center has permeated the room, and how it is almost impossible to sing in any other key but the one that has been droned into their ears for the last 10-20 minutes.

Important note: DO NOT consult a pitch pipe or piano even once after this exercise has begun. Allow the singers to establish "do" for themselves.

This has worked wonders for every quartet and chorus with which I have coached. Enjoy!

Brent Graham

Legacy (EVG Div IV Champs) - Bari

Cascade Chorus (EVG Div IV Champs) - Dir

Praise For The "Drone" Technique

After having heard about the drone exercise on the Harmonet, I decided to try it with my chorus. I can tell you, it really does work! We used it on one of our old standards that had been slipping into the proverbial tuning black hole. After using this exercise and getting the verse perfectly in tune, everyone was saying, "So THAT'S what it's supposed to sound like!!" We then proceeded to sing the entire song. Funny thing was that their new sensitivity to singing in tune to the tonal centre carried through the entire song, and it had more energy than it had previously had in a long time, because they could hear everything locking and tuning. Now, whenever there seems to be a lack of vocal energy in the group or things are just not locking, I pull out this exercise and it usually will turn things around.

Thanks, Brent, for teaching us this tool that was passed on to you. THAT'S why I still read the Harmonet!

Yours in harmony,
Chris Arnold
Baritone, Contagious
<http://www.contagious-quartet.com> Director,
Kitchener-Waterloo Twin City Harmonizers
Asst. Dir., Toronto Northern Lights
District VP, Music and Performance
CDWI Trainer

Another Opinion About Pitch

All these suggestions for staying on pitch are great ... but exercizes in futility if the chorus/quartet doesn't:

- 1) Have the proper stance.
- 2) Have the proper support
- 3) Have the proper *lift!!!*

... and the most common reason for flatting: "Muscle-ing" the notes ... singing from the throat instead of the head. Remember the old Ali adage: "FLOAT like a butterfly ... sting like a bee." Same thing applies to singing. FLOAT 'em ... don't muscle 'em.

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