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Singing In Tune

*by Fred King, international coach**(from Dundalk Md Charivari, Tom Wheatley, editor)*

[Freddie has agreed to share some of his coaching tips with us. The article below is the beginning of a series of sections dealing with singing in tune. Although the presentation was written from the standpoint of coaching, we should be able to apply it to ourselves, thus, in effect, becoming our own coaches.]

Chapter I

Perhaps one of the biggest problems faced by coaches is the quartet or chorus which continually or even occasionally sings out of tune. It is interesting to note that Brahms gave up directing a choral group of ladies in Hamburg, Germany, because they could not stay on pitch. This article will not attempt to deal with sharp singing. Even though sharp singing is an occasional problem, the overwhelming preponderance of tuning problems has to do with flatting.

Actually, there are two kinds of flatting problems. The first is where the voice parts stay in tune with each other, but the entire quartet or chorus flats uniformly from the starting pitch. The second is where the voice parts sing out of tune with one another as well as flatting the given pitch. What are some of the reasons singers tend to sing flat, and what can the coach do about them?

First of all, many singers fail to start on pitch. This is due to lack of attention. Each singer must learn to hear the correct pitch before he attempts to sing it. It is very important for the singers to learn to listen to each other. The greatest degree of pitch accuracy occurs when a singer develops a concept of the way his voice sounds to others, because it is then possible to tell when he is singing out of tune.

Once the quartet starts on pitch, insist that each member energize himself. Listless body attitudes will cause flatting. Correct posture is essential, but not enough. There is a vast difference between erect and alert. The singers must have a good mental attitude and look happy in order to sing in tune. If the quartet consistently flats, try raising the pitch one-half step or even a whole step. The added energy required to produce their voices may keep them on pitch.

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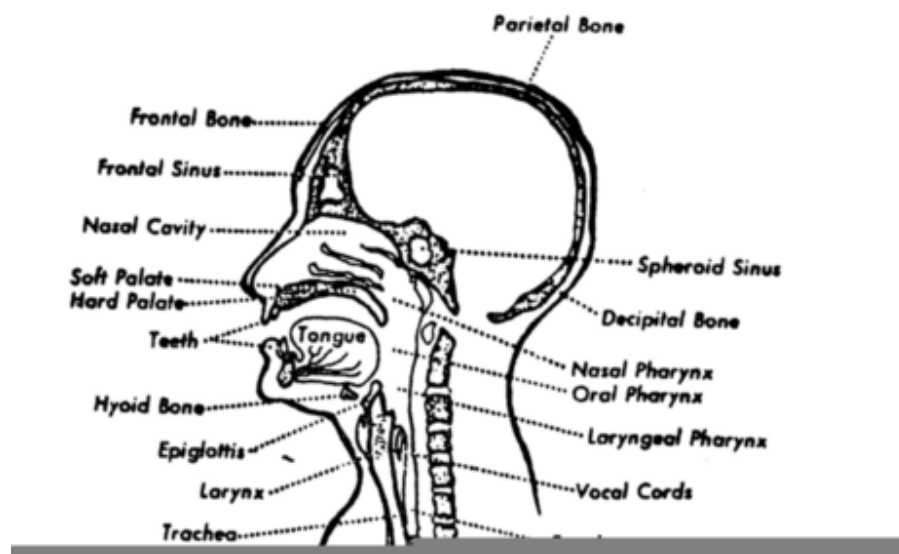
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(from Dundalk Md *Charivari*, Tom Wheatley, editor)

Chapter 2

Assuming the quartet started on pitch and energized enough to prevent flatting, let's go on to the next step. This is correct voice production. Incorrect tone quality and production can block the hearing so that a singer is unaware of singing flat. This is a real biggie in the inexperienced chorus or quartet man.

The first step in correcting the faulty tone is to have the singers open the resonators so that the tone will be supported by the breath. Let's backtrack a minute and talk about resonance and the location of the resonators. Resonance is the amplification and enrichment of a fundamental tone emanation from the larynx. The resonators are the pharynx, mouth and nasal cavities. (Some authorities also consider the apranasal sinuses, the trachea, the bronchi and the chest cavity to be part of the resonating system.) These are shown in Figure 1. They are located on each side and above the vocal cords (or more correctly vocal folds) and their job is to amplify the vibrations produced by the vocal cords, and to increase their intensity as they are projected from the larynx. The resonance cavities are divided into two classifications: fixed and adjustable. The nasal cavity is fixed, while the pharynx and the mouth are capable of special use. More on these will be covered in next month's installment.



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Chapter 3

The resonating cavities can be fully utilized only when the throat is relaxed, open and the upper throat arched in a high palate position. The mouth is best used as a resonance chamber when all the muscles, including the tongue, are relaxed and the cavity of the mouth is enlarged. The naso-pharynx and the nasal cavity are most effectively used when a slight opening between the oropharynx and the nasopharynx is maintained, thus allowing an extension of the vibrating column of air emanating from the larynx. The feeling involved in this is similar to yawning.

If the resonance is closed, muffled, nasal, or pinched, as the result of partially closed resonators, the singer will tend to flat. Let's take the first three areas covered and make up an expression which holds true to a great degree.

Alert Posture + Accurate Hearing + High Arched Tone Utilizing the Resonators = *No Flattening*

Next month, we'll get into more of the discussion of control aspects needed for good singing.

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Chapter 4

Breath control is certainly an important factor, and material is available to make it possible to learn or to teach how to breathe properly. It's important to avoid flatting in particular because it is necessary to keep an adequate supply of air exerting pressure against the vocal chords. Wasting breath initially by uncontrolled attacks at the beginning of phrases or taking too little breath causes the singer to run out of air before reaching the end of the phrase. This will result in flatting.

Singing softly seems to cause special problems for many singers. They have the tendency not to energize themselves sufficiently, thus permitting the pharynx to collapse, eliminating the resonance and destroying breath support. This results in a lowering of tone.

To control this, have the singer show his upper teeth slightly when singing softly. This helps take the weight off the voice. An elongated movement of the jaw should be minimized. On the other hand, singing loudly with too heavy a tone quality also leads to flatting, as will excessive vibrato and tremolo. These last two do not allow the other parts to tune to the problem voice.

A quartet or chorus that fails to embrace the basic balance rules of volume relationships as written up in the singing category and the Basic Barbershop Craft Manual will sometimes produce a rough or dissonant sound. This impedes the singers' ability to hear good tuning. The dissonance also may be perceived as being out of tune.

Next month, we will touch upon other causes of flatting. Remember, there's a test coming. Actually, the test is given each time we have a chance to sing together. Next month, we'll get into more of the discussion of control aspects needed for good singing.

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Chapter 5

In addition to the reasons covered in prior chapters, there are other causes of flatting. These are basically self-explanatory.

- Unless releases are precise and intensely vitalized, there will often be a slight drop in pitch.
- Slurring, scooping or approaching notes from below will result in flatting.
- Repeated notes in a phrase are often wrongly approached from below. This causes each succeeding note to be slightly lower in pitch.
- Faulty diction causes flatting.
- Attacking a singing consonant below the pitch of the following vowel, and then sliding up to it will produce flatting. The singable consonant must always be sung on the pitch of the following vowel. Particular attention must be paid to L, M and N.
- Insecurity in voice parts, guessing at notes and following rather than thinking for oneself will lead to flatting.
- Overlearning a selection (going stale) likewise leads to flatting.
- Having singers in the wrong voice part may cause them to sing out of tune.

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Chapter VI - External Causes of Flatting

In prior chapters we mostly addressed internal causes of flatting. There are also a number of external ones that contribute.

Humidity has a depressive effect and will cause the singer to flat because he is emotionally depressed and lacking in vitality.

Poor ventilation, stale air and extreme heat all cause chorus flatting. To counteract, the singer must use extra vitality. He should select quick moving, cheerful songs in major keys, breathe deeply and maintain an excellent posture. An extra measure of director enthusiasm will help under such conditions.

"Dead" auditoriums cause flatting. This can be overcome by speeding the tempo slightly. In a "live" place, slow it down a little.

Programming two or more numbers in the same or related keys immediately together can cause some degree of tonal deafness, resulting in flatting.

Sometimes a slight speeding up of tempo on the slower numbers will eliminate a tendency to go flat.

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Chapter VII - Song effects considerations

If you are coaching or involved with a chorus that tends to go flat, here are some things you can look for in the composition of the song.

- Most choruses sing more in tune when they are singing major keys, rather than in minor ones. This infers that accustomed hearing affects pitch since we are used to hearing and singing in major keys. Therefore, it is a good idea to have a chorus vocalize in minor keys as well as in the major ones.
- If the chorus has pitch difficulties, avoid pieces filled with chromatic progressions. Stick to the diatonic scale.
- If the vowels in the text are predominantly EH, IH, or EE, this may contribute to flatting since many choruses and quartets control these vowels poorly.
- If the tessitura (average range of the melodic line or voice part) of one or more parts lies consistently in its high register, this could cause flatting.
- The tessitura of one or more of the voice parts that fall consistently in the "break" area will cause flatting. Singers sometimes have only one area of two or three tones that are sung off-pitch habitually. This is most frequent on the several notes just below the break.
- Melodies that descend and suddenly turn upward are harder to keep in tune.
- Intervals that are repeated in sequence tend to lose their proper interval relationship in a short time.
- Many diphthong combinations can cause flatting.

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Chapter VIII Interval adjustment considerations

Because we sing unaccompanied, we don't sing on the equal-tempered scale that the piano uses. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust the pitch to tune the chords accurately. If one part is out of tune, check to see if the proper adjustments are being made of the degree of the scale.

- The major 2nd must be sung higher than the piano.
- The major 3rd is raised even more.
- The perfect 4th is sung flatter than the piano sounds. As a result, the actual interval between the raised 3rd and the flatted 4th winds up being very small.
- The perfect 5th is sung only slightly higher than the piano.
- The major 6th is raised much above the piano.
- The major 7th is raised above the piano and is very close to the 8th.
- Flats are lower than enharmonic sharps. Any accidental in a song calls for more treatment than the same sign in the signature would.

Whole steps are usually spaced too close together when singing the ascending scale and too wide when descending. The same is true for half steps to an even greater degree. Vocalizing on whole tone scales and chromatic scales is very good practice. Vocalizing from half steps up to octaves slowly on "lah" will also improve the problem. Wide intervals and chromatics passages are easy targets for flating.

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Chapter IX - Final discussions

A few more intervals and melodic progressions that are harder to sing in pitch are:

- 4th and 5th degree of a minor scale.
- 3rd 6th and 7th steps of chords.
- Augmented step (6th to 7th) of the minor scale.
- Leading tones, particularly for the lead and baritone.
- 7th scale step, particularly in modulation.

Singing a sustained note against a melody line that is descending. The sustained note will usually try to follow the descending part. The mental concept of moving upward against the descending scale will correct this.

Violent or abrupt changes from *pp* to *ff* or vice versa may affect the pitch.

Maintaining an accurate pitch is an ideal to hold before the singers you are coaching. Express proper gratification when it is achieved, providing the sing is satisfactory in other aspects. An occasional and moderate departure from true pitch is not a catastrophe. It is inherent in the amateur barbershop singer. It will happen, hopefully as the exception rather than the rule, so always try to remind your quartets and choruses that it's very rare that an audience or judging panel will react positively to a performance that is flat or out of tune.

Since poor intonation can be heard by most listeners and since there are so many reasons for a singer to either flat, sharp or otherwise deviate from the tonal center, a good and responsible coach will keep this subject in focus as a priority. He will become intimate with concepts and techniques of in-tune singing.

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