Singing Choral Music: Choral Intonation

Donald Brinegar

VOICE

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About the Course

In this lesson, Donald Brinegar shares his invaluable insights on intonation for vocal ensembles. With practical advice and performance tested tips, you will discover new approaches to clear and concise tuning.

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If you have any corrections, comments, or critiques relating to this workbook, please send them to marek@tonebase.co. We strive to deliver the highest quality enrichment experience. Thank you!

Introduction

There are unique benefits to ensemble singing, one of which is that singing next to other great singers elevates your own singing.

Four things to keep in mind when approaching ensemble singing:

1. Keep the integrity of your technique.
2. Sing in the style of the music.
3. Accommodate the conductor as you're able to, through their expressive needs.
4. Think of the "halo" of the sound; instead of listening left and right and being influenced that way, listen to the accumulative sound of the whole ensemble.

Placement in the ensemble

Donald recommends placing the high and low voices in proximity and the middle voices separated, to encourage the middle voices to listen inside the ensemble and help support the treble voices.

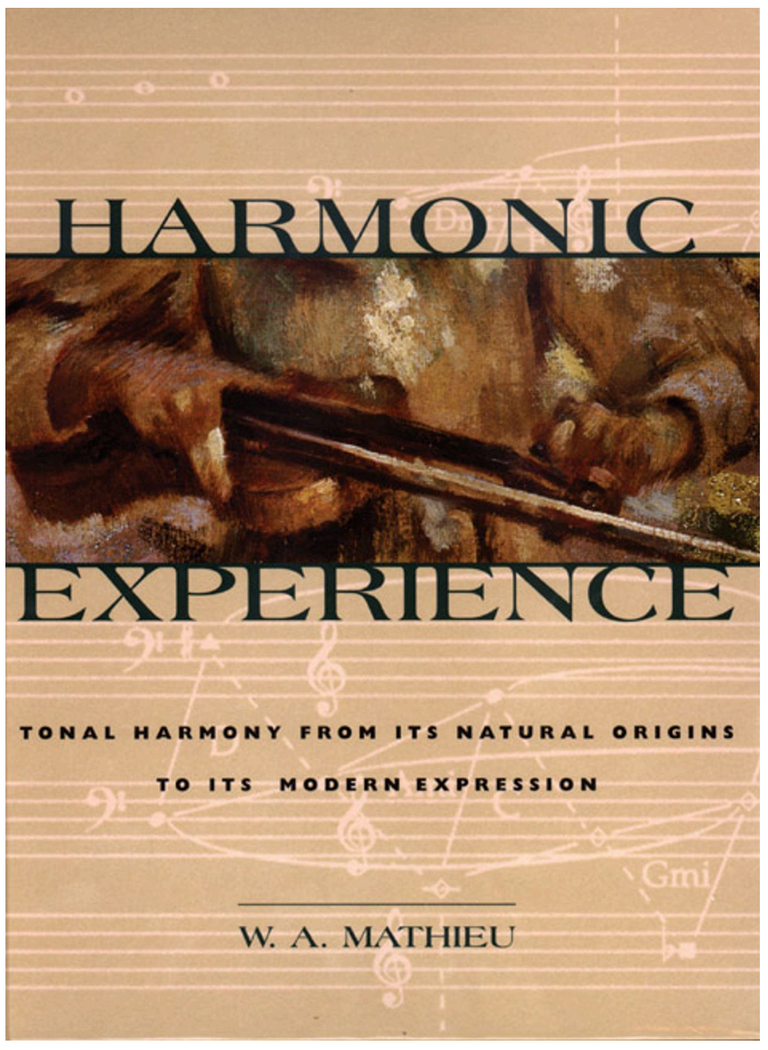
The sound anchor of the bass voices helps the treble voices, especially the sopranos, to float over top the way they are often asked to do in ensemble singing.

Microtonality

Attuning your ears to microtonality is a skill that will help you immensely in ensemble singing and choral intonation.

Equal Temperament is the standard of tuning of Western music and divides the octave into 12 equal half-steps. However, you have to tune your ears to hear that within that there are anomalies or things that we do by nature that don't agree with that. Many non-Western musical traditions, like traditional music from India, rely on Just Intonation, where intervals are based on whole number ratios that align with a more natural consonance.

W.A. Mathieu's book, Harmonic Experience, elaborates on these microtonalities and how it is useful to learn to tune based on the context of the tone



Temperament

Equal temperament tuning of keyboards did not become standard practice until about 1917. Knowing what tuning system a composer would have been accustomed to should influence your performance of their music.

Listen as Donald demonstrates how microtonal differences in how you sing a third and a fifth in relation to the piano's tuning can change how you experience the interval.

Fifths, partials, and tuning systems

Donald vocalizes all of his singers in open fifths to increase their awareness of the partials and harmonics in the overtone system. Follow along with Donald as he walks you through the multiples of the fundamental frequencies.

Microtonalists know a pitch "by its number address and feel", as Donald says. With so many variables among the systems in use during the time of Bach and Scarlatti, the context of a given tone and interval could vary wildly.

Donald points out that historical instruments, and tuning, are much friendlier to the human voice.

So why do we use the higher pitch today? To assist in projection in bigger concert halls.

Donald's pro tip: Your knowledge of tuning allows you to sing with a certain sense of intention.

The importance of reference pitches

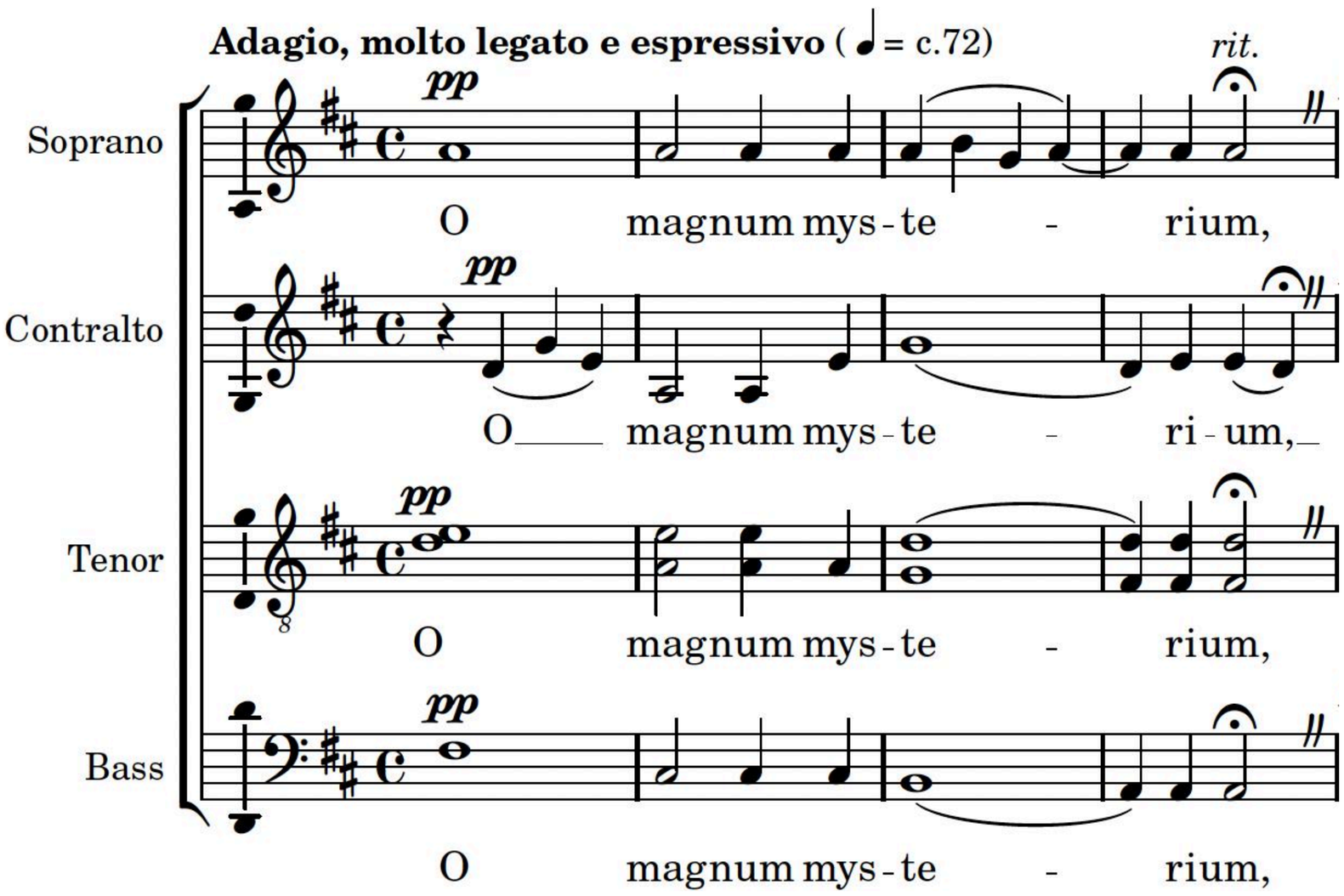
In the ensemble, we all need to agree on what pitch we are using as a reference for our tuning. Donald marks every chord in his scores with the reference pitch.

We're looking to match the vibratory nature of the influence of the reference pitch.

Awareness of the overtone series

Our ear parses the tuning of any sound as being in relation to the overtone series in order. The order in which you present the partials affects our ear's ability to tune.

Donald uses Lauridsen's O Magnum Mysterium as an example; notice how the piece creates the opportunity to continually renew the tuning against the reference pitch.



Listen to **Donald's ensemble** for an example of this work in action.

For more examples of how the brain assimilates pitch information, visit **Diana Deutsch**'s website.

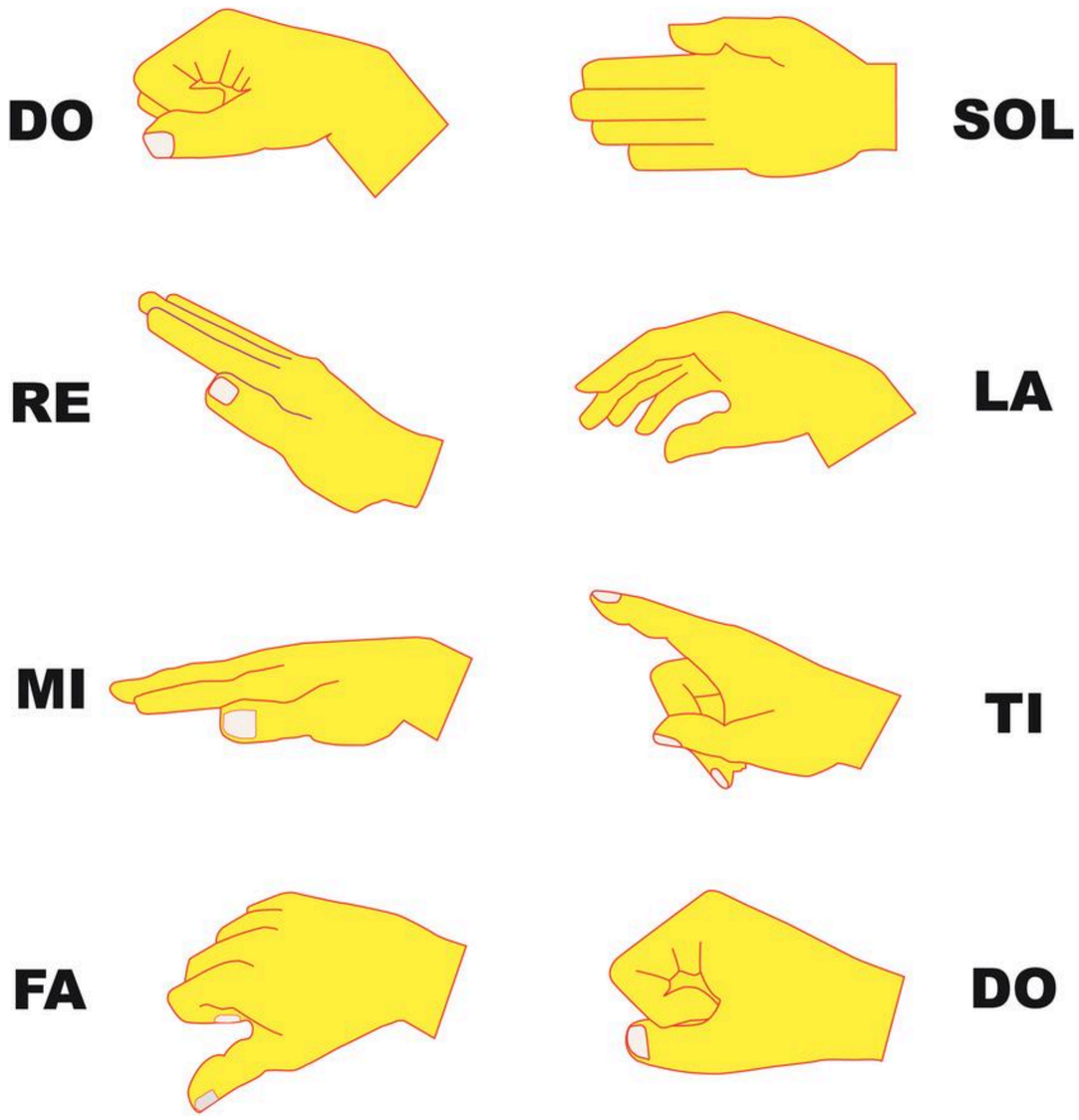
Donald's pro tip: Have your accompanist give pitches to your ensemble not in score order but in overtone order. It will help them sing more in tune naturally.

In Western music, we employ the overtones of the second partial, the third partial, and the fifth partial, and all chords are based on perfect fifths and major thirds.

Knowing that the overtonal context changes how we hear tonality, is an important tool in your toolbox as you tune your ensemble.

Curwen-Glover hand signs

Notice how these signs help us in tuning as they visually reference the relationships between the partials.



Intervals of reflection and partner tones

Singers will pick off the overtones that are intuitive to them, so be sure to contextualize them properly.

Donald explains that singers should learn to sing in the scale they're singing in. Modes are simply perfect fifth adjustments of the overtones.

Droning can be a helpful tool to help tune your ensembles and prevent pitch drift. How do you know you're doing it right? When the notes seem like they are being drawn together.

Donald's pro tip: Learning more than one tuning system will benefit your singing, and will sweeten the sound of your group.

For further learning, check out Donald's book, *Pitch Perfect: A Theory and Practice of Choral Intonation*.