

FREESTYLING

(How the starting of an acapella group led to a musical addiction: the joy of making an unexpectedly beautiful sound together.)

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THIS IS AN article about singing. It's about you singing. I am writing this because I want to encourage you to sing.

A few years ago my friend and I realised that we both loved singing but didn't do enough of it. So we started a weekly acapella group with just four members. After a year we invited others to join. We didn't insist on musical experience in fact some of our members had never sung before. Now the group has ballooned to around fifteen people.

Now, the reason I'm going to try to persuade you that you should start your own acapella group is because I believe that singing is the key to long life, a good figure, a stable temperament, increased intelligence, new friends, increased self-confidence, heightened sexual attractiveness, and a sense of humour. There! That got your attention. But it wasn't all made-up: a thirty-year study conducted in Scandinavia sought to discover which activities seemed to relate to a healthy and happy old age. Three stood out: camping, dancing and singing.

So what's so good about singing? Well, there are indeed physiological benefits: you use your lungs in a way that you probably don't for the rest of your day you breathe deeply and openly. And there are psychological benefits: singing aloud leaves you with a sense of levity and contentedness. And then there are what I would call 'civilisational benefits'. When you sing with a group of people you learn how to subsume yourself into a group consciousness because acapella singing is all about the immersion of the self into the community. That's one of the great feelings: to stop being me for a little while, and to become us. That way lies empathy; the great virtue.

SO HERE'S HOW it works. There are some drinks, some snacks, some sheets of lyrics and a strict starting time. We warm up a bit first for some reason now lost in history our warm-up consists of us singing the words "Oh Zimbabwe" and moving up the scale through two octaves just to get our vocal cords stretched. Then we start on the songs.

The choice of songs turns out to be critical. It can't just be songs that you like because a lot of those types of song are actually quite hard to negotiate. When we started we wanted to sing sophisticated things like 'Summertime'. But songs of that genre are tricky: everybody will know the lead melody, but the chordal progressions are complicated, so it's hard to harmonise spontaneously. Of course if you read music you could have all the harmony parts scored out and just read them off, but we don't read and anyway that isn't what we wanted to do. We wanted to sing freestyle, to allow it to be different every time we do it.

The songs that seem to work really well for us are those based around the basic chords of blues and rock and country music the same chords you hear at the beginning of 'Louie Louie' or 'Wild Thing'. Musicians call this chordal relationship I, IV, V 145. If the first chord is C, the others will be F and G. If the first chord is G, the others will be C and D. This apparently severe limitation doesn't reduce the repertoire significantly there are thousands of great songs written around that relationship, and millions more if you allow in a couple of other chords as well. And because the sequences are so ingrained in us, they invite easy harmonisation. Everyone can join in and sing something good without the risk of a catastrophic harmonic train-crash.

A second consideration is to choose songs that don't have big empty spaces between vocal lines. Unless you're natural doo-wop singers who fill the gaps with things like "dut doo-doo doo wah", those big spaces will remain. You want songs that are word-rich, and also vowel-rich because it's on the long vowels of a song such as 'Bring It On Home To Me' ("You know I'll alwaaaaays be your slaaaaaave"), that your harmonies can express themselves.

Acapella singing is not only about harmonisation of pitches: it has two other important dimensions. The first is rhythm: it's very thrilling when you all get the rhythm of something tight and sing it well together, so choose songs that are rhythmically interesting (for instance 'Cottonfields', 'Jailer Bring Me Water', 'Sixteen Tons'). The second is tone: to be able to hit exactly the same vowel sound at a number of different pitches seems unsurprising in concept but is beautiful when it happens.

Last thing: notice what key you like singing the song in. It helps when you come back to it. Just to know the starting note of the melody is sufficient.

IF I WERE asked to redesign the British educational system, I would start by insisting that group singing become a central part of the daily routine. I think it builds character and, more than anything else, it encourages a taste for co-operation with others. This seems to me about the most important thing a school could give you.

We have a simple rule in the group: we never perform for anyone else, and we never record ourselves. This apparently strange exclusion gives us the freedom to get it all wrong. The same should be true if this becomes, as I fantasise, a central part of the school curriculum: you will do this every day, and you will never be examined on it.

Submitted by: Craig Green, [CCLT 3 - 2006/7](#)

The above essay is from a wonderful issue of [RESURGENCE](#) Magazine that focuses on Music For Transformation!