

Harmony in Folk Music

Some musings

It has been said that you need your ear and brain to sing. They're even more important than what your voice box does in producing the sound you want. So listening closely to what you're singing is important as well as to what others are singing. It's good to dissect the sounds you hear in a vocal group if you want to learn.

Harmony singing should be quite relaxed, not pretentious and should only enhance the story being told or the feel of the piece.

By necessity, a choir, full of several voices, has to have some discipline, which usually means following the conductor and what's on the score. And staying with your own group of fellow singers, altos etc.

But folk singing tends to be with a small number of singers. Perhaps there will be just one or two singers with the melody and a couple singing harmony. This support singing should just add to the overall effect and not distract the audience. So it shouldn't be too loud and should often be employed after the main tune has been embedded with the audience. Often it's only used just for the chorus. And if you have a choice, it's better to have more basses than sops - often the bass notes need volume whereas a sop can more easily soar above everyone else.

Harmony can be just a simple drone all the way through, or perhaps two or three notes. Support from bass singers often just employs a small range of notes

Humming is usually very acceptable whereas do do etc doesn't fit so well these days. And the accompaniment of a guitar can help you pick up some notes in the chords you can follow.

Simple folk music often has someone singing a third above the melody line. (Just two whole notes above) This becomes so natural that many people don't realise it's happening. It might simply mimic the melody line by going up and down together. But of course people will often vary this and perhaps extend out a note or a phrase to add variety.

A counter melody can also be fun. It's a different melody but one that blends well musically with the main tune. But it should probably only be done if it makes sense with the theme of the song. For example a duet of a dispute between a woman and a man might have different stories to tell with different melodies.

With only a few singers in a group you are more exposed - you can't hide behind other singers. But you do have a lot more control on what you'd like to do.

Harmonising can be great fun, and can sometimes be easier on your vocal chords - you might more easily manage to keep the range of notes within your comfort zone.

And some groups just enjoy the harmonising so much that they don't employ words at all when singing - they're more like a small instrument band.

You can often make up a harmony as you go along - doing it by ear. If you sense roughly where the song is heading you can often find a suitable note. And if you do hit something wrong, try moving off it, but not necessarily with undue haste. Make it sound as if you meant a momentary clash! And moving up or down quickly in a run can sometimes make it easier to hide your mistakes!

Using Sheet Music

Now I'll look at sheet music for the song Four Strong winds.

Four Strong Winds

Con moto

7

11

In the first score I've shown the melody on the lower clef with appropriate chords. On the upper clef I've put in the notes making up the chord, 1st, 3rd, 5th and 8th. (Tonic, subdominant, dominant and octave)

Generally you can sing harmony using any of these notes, other than the same one as the melody. It's usually best to follow the ups and downs of the melody line rather than going counter to it. Remember you shouldn't grab the attention too much so as to take away from the main song or confuse people aurally. Choosing a limited range of notes you sing can help in this regard, and of course it makes it easier on the harmonizer. As you're free to choose from several notes, you can more easily find the vocal range you're comfortable with.

Con moto

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In the next pdf I've chosen one harmony line from some of the notes in the chords as discussed. You can listen to it in the mp3 file.

Next I've put up a simple song Ah Poor Bird.

The image shows a musical score for a song titled 'Ah Poor Bird'. It consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Flute' and contains a melody line. The bottom staff contains a harmony line. Both staves are in 4/4 time and have a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are written below the bottom staff: 'Ah poor bird take your flight up a bove the sorr ow of this dark night'. The melody starts on a middle C and goes up to a D, while the harmony starts on a B-flat and goes down to an A.

The bottom line is the melody and the top line, marked flute, is a harmony part. You can hear this on the mp3. As I've mentioned, it's best to start singing the melody so that this gets embedded with the listener and subsequently introduce the harmony. Notice that in the first bar, the harmony goes down as the melody goes up. This is ok occasionally, and depends on the feel of the music you would like. Notice also that the middle note is exactly the same, and that's ok for a passing note. The melody can easily be sung as a round and then the harmony might be introduced.

For both these songs, once you've got the melody and simple harmony in your head, you can start playing around with them. You can add a few embellishments or runs, if appropriate. And remember, silence can be golden!

For a small group of singers, you probably don't want a conductor, but one of you can give hand movements if you need to have everyone singing together and not have a scatter gun effect. Looking at the other singers really helps with this. And if you can find another person just to listen to you and give independent advice about the balance etc, that should be really helpful.

Enjoy it.

Ken

Singing in harmony has a long history:

Giraldus Cambrensis writing c 1200AD (translated from latin)' the Britons do not sing their tunes in unison, like the inhabitants of other countries, but in different parts. so that when a company of singers meets to sing, as is usual in this country, as many different parts are heard as there are singers....in the northern parts of the country, beyond the Humber and on the borders of Yorkshire, the inhabitants make use of a similar kind of symphonious harmony in singing, but with only two differences or varieties of tone and voice, the one murmuring the under part, the other singing the upper in a manner equally soft and pleasing.

Listen to the mp3 files:

- [Four Strong Winds](#)
- [Ah Poor Bird](#)