Essentials Skills for Singing Harmony by Ear

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Have you ever noticed how some singers can add harmony to a song, even the first time they hear it, without needing anyone to teach them their part and without stopping to analyze the music? For them, harmony seems to come naturally—it’s almost as though they have some kind of Harmony Autopilot. But viewed from the outside, it can seem like a mystery—how do these people know what notes to sing? Singing harmony like this, on-the-fly, improvising our part as we go along, is the one of most exciting and fun things to do in vocal music. So let’s start learning how.

For those of you who like to learn by hearing as well as reading, this article goes with Disk One of How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way. On this disk Keith Little, Don Share and I show you the easy way to figure out harmony above the melody intuitively, by ear. This article will give you a quick overview of the main points, but remember—reading about harmony singing can’t substitute for practice!

Three Notes Every Harmony Singer Should Know

To become a natural harmony singer, we need to be able to intuitively sing the three notes of the major chord. The good news is that you probably already know these notes. Play a G chord on your guitar (or banjo, mandolin, piano, etc.) and sing the first line of the Star Spangled Banner. “Oh say can you see…” For folks who like to read music, this is shown in example A.

Example A

Your notes on the words, “say, can, you” are the three notes of the major chord. Now play the G chord again, but just sing “say, can, you.” Sing this a few times, and memorize the notes. Next, sing the same notes again, but this time, sing the syllable “la” instead of the words. Example B shows these three important notes.

Example B

Now, play an A chord and do this same thing in the key of A. Sing the three chord notes in this new key. Next, play major chords in a variety of different keys and sing the three chord notes in each key. This exercise will help train your ear and voice to find these three essential notes quickly and easily.

How We Use These Three Important Notes

Why is this so important? It’s because when we sing harmony, we’re adding notes above and below the melody of a song. And in many styles of music including folk, bluegrass, gospel, country, rock and pop, 90% of
the time or more, our harmony note is one of the three notes of the major chord. So the better you can hear and sing these chord notes, the easier it will be to find your harmony part to any song. These three major chord notes are essential building blocks of harmony. Sometimes intuitive harmony singers don’t realize how often their harmony note is one of the three chord notes. They may just say, “I’m singing the note that sounds right.” But whether or not they realize it, most of the time they’re singing one of the three chord notes.

**The Easy Way to Find Harmony Above a Melody: The Bump-Up Method**

So let’s start figuring out harmony above the melody. We’re going to learn to sing close, or tight, harmony, so we’ll choose notes as close as possible to the melody. In bluegrass music this is called the tenor part. And since our harmony note is usually one of the three chord notes, our technique is pretty straightforward. We’ll learn to intuitively sing the nearest chord note above the melody note. Here’s an exercise that will teach you how:

We’ll need two voices, so get together with a singing buddy.

**Step 1)** Play a G chord on your guitar, piano or other instrument and keep playing that chord, over and over. One person sing any one of the three chord notes of that chord, just like you learned to do earlier. Just sing the word “La” or choose any word you like.

**Step 2)** Now, second person join in and sing the **exact same note**. This will be our melody note.

**Step 3)** Here’s the fun part: Second person—while first person keeps holding that melody note—you move your note up until you’re on the **nearest chord note above** the first person. The two of you will now be singing two different notes of the G chord, and you’ll hear how it makes the harmony. We call it “bumping up” to the harmony note.

**Step 4)** Next, strum your G chord some more, but choose one of the other chord notes for your melody note (remember each major chord has three chord notes). Person two start on this new melody note and bump up to the next chord note above it. And then do the same with the third chord note. After you practice this in G, try it in as many different keys as you can. Don’t forget to take turns, so you can both practice bumping up to the nearest chord note above the melody note. Example C shows this exercise in written form.

Being able to bump up and sing the nearest chord note above the melody is the secret to finding high harmony in because most of the time, our high harmony note is the **next higher note above the melody that’s in the chord being played at that point in the song.**

**Using Keywords To Jump Start Your Harmony**

Here is a technique that natural, intuitive, harmony singers use all the time, often without realizing it. In any song, certain words, and the notes that we sing on those words, are more important than others. These are usually the words and notes that we hold out the longest and often they come on a downbeat. In our course, *How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way,* we call these important words “keywords.”

Let’s look at an example. Here are the first two lines of the traditional folk classic, All the Good Times Are Past and Gone

All the good times are past and gone
All the good times are o’er
Here are those lines with the *keywords* CAPITALIZED
ALL the good TIMES are PAST and GONE
ALL the good TIMES are O’ER

The example below shows the melody of the first line of the song, with the *keywords* in UPPER CASE.

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**ALL the good TIMES are PAST and GONE**

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**How to Find High Harmony to a Song**

When we figure out our harmony to a song, especially when we’re doing it on the fly, the first thing we do is to find our harmony notes for these *keywords*. Example E shows the melody and harmony for the *keywords* for the first line of *All the Good Times*.

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**ALL TIMES PAST GONE**

Once we’ve got the harmony for our *keywords*, it’s easy to fill in the rest of the words and then put it all together. Much of the time on these fill-in notes, we can stay on the note we chose for the previous keyword.

So next time you listen to some ace harmony singers working out a new song, notice how they start by getting the harmony notes on the *keywords*. Then each time the chorus comes around, they fill in the more of the fill-in words until they’ve got harmony for the whole song worked out.

You can use these two techniques, *bumping up* and *keywords*, to figure out the high (or bluegrass tenor) harmony to your favorite songs, so grab your songbook (or iPad) and give it a try.

In our next article, *Taking the Mystery Out of Harmony Below the Melody*, I’ll explain how to find harmony below the melody of a song. In bluegrass music, this is called the baritone part. And to take your harmony singing to the next level, check out our newest release, *Switch On Your Harmony Autopilot*.

And as always, feel free to [contact us](#) if you have questions or if we can help you with your harmony singing!