

THE CHOIR TEST

NOTE: If you are easily offended, do not read this page. This is just for laughs, and is dedicated to hard-working choir members everywhere!

The Young Person's Guide To The Choir

In any choir, there are four voice parts: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Sometimes these are divided into first and second within each part, prompting endless jokes about first and second basses. There are also various other parts such as baritone, countertenor, contralto, mezzo-soprano, etc., but these are mostly used by people who are either soloists, or belong to some excessively hotshot classical a cappella group (this applies especially to countertenors), or are trying to make excuses for not really fitting into any of the regular voice parts, so we will ignore them for now.

Each voice part sings in a different range, and each one has a very different personality. You may ask, "Why should singing different notes make people act differently?" and indeed this is a mysterious question and has not been adequately studied, especially since scientists who study musicians tend to be musicians themselves and have all the peculiar complexes that go with being tenors, French horn players, timpanists, or whatever. However, this is beside the point; the fact remains that the four voice parts can be easily distinguished, and I will now explain how:

THE SOPRANOS are the ones who sing the highest, and because of this they think they rule the world. They have longer hair, fancier jewelry, and swishier skirts than anyone else, and they consider themselves insulted if they are not allowed to go at least to a high F in every movement of any given piece. When they reach the high notes, they hold them for at least half again as long as the composer and/or conductor requires, and then complain that their throats are killing them and that the composer and conductor are sadists. Sopranos have varied attitudes toward the other sections of the chorus, though they consider all of them inferior. Altos are to sopranos rather like second violins to first violins; nice to harmonize with, but not really necessary. All sopranos have a secret feeling that the altos could drop out and the piece would sound essentially the same, and they don't understand why anybody would sing in that range in the first place - it's so boring. Tenors, on the other hand, can be very nice to have around; besides their flirtation possibilities (it is a well-known fact that sopranos never flirt with basses), sopranos like to sing duets with tenors because all the tenors are doing is working very hard to sing in a low-to-medium soprano range, while the sopranos are up there in the stratosphere showing off. To sopranos, basses are the scum of the earth - they sing too darn loud, are useless to tune to because they're down in that low, low range, and there has to be something wrong with anyone who sings in the F clef, anyway.

THE ALTOS are the salt of the earth--in their opinion, at least. Altos are unassuming people, who would wear jeans to concerts if they were allowed to. Altos are in a unique position in the chorus in that they are unable to complain about having to sing either very high or very low, and they know that all the other sections think their parts are pitifully easy. But the altos know otherwise. They know that while the sopranos are screeching away on a high A, they are being forced to sing elaborate passages full of sharps and flats and tricks of rhythm,

and nobody is noticing because the sopranos are singing too loud (and the basses usually are too). Altos get a deep, secret pleasure out of conspiring together to tune the sopranos flat. Altos have an innate distrust of tenors, because the tenors sing in almost the same range and think they sound better. They like the basses, and enjoy singing duets with them, because the basses just sound like a rumble anyway, and it's the only time the altos can really be heard. The altos' other complaint is that there are always too many of them and so they never get to sing really loud.

THE TENORS are spoiled. That's all there is to it. For one thing, there are never enough of them, and choir directors would rather sell their souls than let a halfway decent tenor quit, while they're always ready to unload a few altos at half price. And then, for some reason, the few tenors there are always really good--it's one of those annoying facts of life. So it's no wonder that tenors always get swollen heads; after all, who else can make sopranos swoon? The one thing that can make tenors insecure is the accusation (usually by the basses) that anyone singing that high couldn't possibly be a real man. In their usual perverse fashion, the tenors never acknowledge this, but just complain louder about the composer being a sadist and making them sing so darn high. Tenors have a love-hate relationship with the conductor, too, because the conductor is always telling them to sing louder because there are so few of them. No conductor in recorded history has ever asked for less tenor in a forte passage. Tenors feel threatened in some way by all the other sections: the sopranos because they can hit those incredibly high notes; the altos because they have no trouble singing the notes the tenors kill themselves for; and the basses because, although they can't sing anything above an E, they sing it loud enough to drown the tenors out. Of course, the tenors would rather die than admit any of this. It is a little-known fact that tenors move their eyebrows more than anyone else while singing.

THE BASSES sing the lowest of anybody. This basically explains everything. They are solid, dependable people, and have more facial hair than anybody else. The basses feel perpetually unappreciated, but they have a deep conviction that they are actually the most important part (a view endorsed by musicologists, but certainly not by sopranos or tenors), despite the fact that they have the most boring part of anybody and often sing the same note (or in endless fifths) for an entire page. They compensate for this by singing as loudly as they can get away with, and most basses are tuba players at heart. Basses are the only section that can regularly complain about how low their part is, and they make horrible faces when trying to hit very low notes. Basses are charitable people, but their charity does not extend so far as tenors -- Basses hate tuning to the tenors more than almost anything else. Basses like altos, except when they have duets and the altos get the good part. As for the sopranos, they are simply in an alternative universe that the basses don't understand at all. They can't imagine why anybody would ever want to sing that high and sound that bad when they make mistakes. When a bass makes a mistake, the other three parts will cover him, and he can continue on his merry way, knowing that sometime, somehow, he will end up at the root of the chord.

Top Ten Reasons for Being a Soprano

1. The rest of the choir exists just to make you look good.
2. You can entertain your friends by breaking their wineglasses.
3. Can you name an opera where an alto got the man?
4. When sopranos want to sing in the shower, they know the tune.
5. It's not like you are ever going to sing the alto part by accident.
6. Great costumes - like the hat with the horns on it.
7. How many world famous altos can you name?
8. When the fat lady sings, she's usually singing soprano.
9. When you get tired of singing the tune, you can sing the descant.
10. You can sing along with Michael Jackson.

Top Ten Reasons for Being an Alto

1. You get really good at singing E flat.
2. You get to sing the same note for 12 consecutive measures.
3. You don't really need to warm up to sing 12 consecutive bars of E-flat.
4. If the choir really stinks, it's unlikely the altos will be blamed.
5. You have lots of time to chat during soprano solos.
6. You get to pretend that you are better than the sopranos, because everybody knows that women only sing soprano so they don't have to learn to read music.

7. You can sometimes find part time work singing tenor.
8. Altos get all the great intervals.
9. When the sopranos are holding some outrageously high note at the end of a song, the altos always get the last words.
10. When the altos miss a note, nobody gets hurt.

Top Ten Reasons for Being a Tenor

1. Tenors get high - without drugs.
2. Name a musical where the bass got the girl.
3. You can show the sopranos how it SHOULD be sung.
4. Did you ever hear of anyone paying \$1000 for a ticket to see 'The Three Basses?'
5. Who needs brains when you've got resonance?
6. Tenors never have to waste time looking through the self-improvement section of the bookstore.
7. You get to sing along with John Denver singing "Aye Calypso."
8. When you get really good at falsetto, you can make tons of money doing voice-overs for cartoon characters.
9. Gregorian chant was practically invented for tenors. Nobody invented a genre for basses.
10. You can entertain your friends by impersonating Julia Child.

Top Ten Reasons for Being a Bass

1. You don't have to tighten your shorts to reach your note.
2. You don't have to worry about a woman stealing your job.
3. Or a preadolescent boy stealing your job.
4. Action heroes are always basses. That is - if they ever sang, they would sing bass.
5. You get great memorable lyrics like bop, bop, bop, bop.
6. If the singing job doesn't work out, there's always broadcasting.
7. You never need to learn to read the treble clef.
8. If you get a cold, so what.
9. For fun, you can sing at the bottom of your range and fool people into thinking there's an earthquake.
10. If you belch while you're singing, the audience just thinks it is part of the score.

JUST FOR FUN: In order to measure your level of proficiency as a choir member, the following test has been carefully developed by experts. Read and reflect on each situation and then select the option that will enhance the quality of the experience.

1. You are entering the choir loft on Sunday morning and suddenly trip and fall down. You should:

- a. Assume a kneeling position and break into fervent prayer.
- b. Pretend that you've had a heart attack.
- c. Crawl into the nearest chair.
- d. Crawl quietly out of the church.

2. You are a soprano and count incorrectly. As a result you boom out a high "C" one measure too soon. You should:

- a. Slide into an inspired "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing."
- b. Look triumphant and hold on to the note.
- c. Stop abruptly in mid squawk but keep your lips moving.
- d. Sink to the floor in shame.

3. After all those long hard choir rehearsals, you show up twenty minutes late for the

Christmas musical. You should:

- a. Climb quietly into the back row of the choir.
- b. Enter pretending to be a soundman checking cables and then suddenly slip yourself into the choir.
- c. Turn the lights out in the church and slip into the choir during the blackout.
- d. Read M. Stephen's pamphlet "Techniques for Tardy Appearances."

4. While singing, you discover you have only one page of a two page hymn. You should:

- a. Hum for your life.
- b. Sing "watermelon, watermelon, watermelon."
- c. Try to get another hymnal out of the choir rack with your feet.
- d. Sing the first page over again.

5. Inevitably that dreaded big sneeze occurs toward the end of the choir special. You should:

- a. As you sneeze, come down hard on your neighbor's foot to create a diversion.
- b. Try to make it harmonize.
- c. Sneeze into the hair of the choir member in front of you to muffle the noise.
- d. Sink to the floor in shame.

SCORING:

Count the number of A's, B's, C's, and D's you checked and find your proficiency rating below:

4 or more A's...there is nothing more you need to know to be a first rate choir member.

4 or more B's...your church choir reflexes are fully developed and you should do well in choir.

4 or more C's...your church choral experience is spotty but your team spirit is on target. You will be an asset to most any choir.

4 or more D's...it is recommended you take soccer or group therapy counseling.