

Ep #23: Harmony Singing Q & A

Can't
wait
to hear
you
with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Today's episode is about singing in harmony with other people. So if you're a speaker and not a singer at all, maybe you won't find this very interesting, and don't worry, I'll get back to you on a future episode.

I really want to talk today about all the things you can learn from singing with other people.

Many of my students are singing in choruses or in group environments, group harmony classes. And so I want to start with some frequently asked questions that I've received from them about their experience in those groups.

Question #1: The person next to me is really, really loud, and it's hard for me to hear myself. It's hard for me to know whether I'm singing the right notes because I can't hear myself over them. What do I do? How do I handle this situation in a way that I'm not going to make an enemy, right? This is a lovely person who's next to me, and they're just way too loud.

And so you have a couple of options. One of them is to put your hand over your ear that's closest to that person. And you'll notice that when you put your hand over both your ears right now, well, if you're in headphones, this won't work, but, at some time when you're talking or singing, put your hands over your ears and just notice how much differently you hear yourself.

Sometimes that's enough to be able to hear yourself well enough to know whether you're singing the right note, whether things are going well for you.

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And sometimes that's not enough. Sometimes people are even louder than that, that putting your hand over your ear, isn't going to be enough.

Before I go on, I want to say in a group singing situation, **when you put your hand over your ear, that is socially acceptable. That is polite behavior.** There is nothing wrong with that. You will see people in professional groups do that. You will see people in amateur groups do that.

It's kind of an international sign that “I, Singer, am taking care of myself right now. I'm working on something for myself. This isn't about anybody else in the room. I'm focused on me.”

Everybody around you, if they have any experience at all, will understand that. And if they don't have any experience, there are going to be people available who can normalize it for them, that this is not, you're not plugging your nose. Let me put it that way.

So don't feel awkward about putting your hands over your ears to hear yourself better. We've all done it and it works.

But when it doesn't work, when the person really is too loud for you, something you can say that's true, and I think not hurtful to the other person is,

“You're a really strong singer and I realize I'm letting you carry me along. And I want to challenge myself to sing the part, to not have so much help. So I'm going, (if it's possible for you to reseat yourself) I'm going to reseat myself. I'm going to sit over here where it's harder for me to hear you and challenge myself to hold my own part without your help. I hope that's okay. You're great. I just need to, I need to work on me and we can talk at the break if you want.”

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You know, get to know the person in another, you know, outside of the singing context, just in regular conversation.

A variation of that, if you're in a position where you can seat yourself on the edge of a group, so say you are singing, you're in a group that's singing three part harmony and you're in part one.

Can you seat yourself on the edge between part one and part two? Can you situate yourself so that you're closer to part two and have that more strongly in your ear than your own part?

And that's another thing you can say is “I, I really want to sit on an edge so that I can challenge myself. Do I really know this? Can I really hold my own against this other part?”

Now you may be feeling, “I don't know if I know my own part because I haven't heard myself because they're so damn loud!” And you might not be ready to be, you know, next to a different part. You just want to be able to hear yourself more clearly.

And then it's just a question of, you know, move around in the group as much as you can, to make space for yourself to be able to hear, hear yourself sing.

It's really common in these situations for a person to start over-singing.

Actually, you don't need somebody who's super loud next to you to over-sing. You can, you can do that all by your lonesome. That's just something that often happens in a group environment. We're with other people and we start pushing too hard.

Another question I get asked, Question #2, **How do I not over sing? How do I notice when I'm over singing, and how do I not do it?**

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It's going to vary from person to person, but one of, one of the first things you can check in with is your posture.

Often when we're over-singing, there is some craning in our neck that happens. We start to lean forward. You might become aware of extra tension in your upper body because you're trying to make something happen.

So that would be the first thing I would start to look for if you're not sure if you're over singing.

Well, how to tell if you're over singing: you're coming out of rehearsal and your voice is exhausted. If that's happening, you're probably over singing and that's not going to necessarily damage your voice forever. This isn't the end of the world.

If you sang too much at a rehearsal or too heavily at a rehearsal, go home, have some tea with lemon, maybe a little ginger. Rest. Watch some trashy TV. Don't talk to anybody, and you wake up the next morning and you're probably going to be fine.

It's really not the end of the world, but you know, it doesn't feel great, and if you can avoid doing it, that'd be the best, right?

So the first thing to check in with is your posture.

The second thing to check in with is how you're breathing. and maybe the best way to put that is, can you, in the course of the rehearsal, remind yourself to take a low and easy breath.

And if there are moments when the director is talking to another part of the chorus, or when you're not singing, to just become aware of a low, slow, easy breath.

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If you're sitting down, can you feel your seat in your seat? Can you feel your feet on the floor? Can you take a moment to just come back to your own center? Away from the cacophony – beautiful, musical, but still, kind of cacophony that's been going on around you.

Come back to not trying to learn notes, not trying to do anything, just being lovely you, and breathing.

Remembering to do that several times in the course of a rehearsal can help you avoid that kind of vocal fatigue.

A third thing you can be aware of during the rehearsal is, what is your face doing? A couple of podcast episodes ago I talked about, um, how your face shape affects how you sound. It also affects how tired your voice gets.

Maybe you can hear right now, I'm just squishing my cheeks. I'm just putting my hands on my face and squishing my cheeks together. And so my pronunciation is getting a little funny, but I'm just relaxing my face.

And you can do this in the course of the rehearsal, just put your hands on your face, maybe on your forehead, too. See if you can relax your forehead. Sometimes our eyebrows get really invested in, in our singing. It's not a bad thing, but sometimes we can overdo it.

So just like gently massage your face and see, okay, how little effort can I exert here in my face? Can my face relax and my breath support system, my belly, my core abdominals, can they do more work?

And that, that's enough for you to think about. So I would start with those three things, not knowing you personally.

If you'd like to have a conversation about it, please visit my website and sign up for a free consultation. I'm happy to talk to you about what's going on with you over Zoom, no problem.

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There's an aspect of over singing in a rehearsal that doesn't have to do with how much sound is happening around you, like over-singing so that you can hear yourself.

But sometimes, a couple of my students have reported, they've noticed that they're over-singing in an attempt to change the people around them. They're hearing that the people around them are singing wrong notes, and so they are working really hard to sing very clearly the right note.

And that's resulting in a lot of vocal fatigue because there's, there's a lot of tension in that. You're not just singing notes, you're trying to change other people. And I've noticed trying to change other people really doesn't work, and it's a lot of effort.

So that's, I said there were three things, that's a fourth thing to consider: your psychological state, your mental well-being.

Are you trying to change the people around you? Are you frustrated by the temperature of the room? Is there some interpersonal dynamic that's going on that's just driving you crazy? Are you seated across from somebody who just keeps making really weird faces and it's really hard for you to concentrate?

Are you falling in love with somebody else in the group? That can make you tense. That can make it really hard to focus on the music and to focus on how you're using your body and to sing well if you're distracted by, whoo, just that beautiful person over there.

If that's going on, I would revel in it. I would say, don't try to fix that. Try to enjoy that for as long as you can.

It is a beautiful spring day.

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Okay, question #3: **I'm learning all of this great vocal technique in my lessons with you, Michèle, and I hear that my voice is stronger and louder than it used to be, and I go to chorus, and I am really worried about sticking out because that is the last thing I want to do is to stick out. What do I do? How am I supposed to sing in the chorus rehearsal, with this new voice that I'm finding?**

This is genuinely an awkward stage of life because most everybody in a group situation is not wanting to stick out.

Even the people who sing really well and don't have any issue being heard by anybody – you know, they've, they've sung solos, they're, they're totally comfortable with the fact that they sing and they have a nice voice and you know, that's not a problem for them –but in the group situation where you're trying to create a group sound, a common texture, nobody really wants to stick out.

The question is, who are you surrounded by?

In the San Francisco Opera Chorus, those chorus singers all have fabulous, huge voices. So yes, sometimes you can stick out because the color of your voice isn't matching with the rest of the group, but in terms of like absolute loudness and focus and vibrato and you know, all of those qualities, they're all on the same page, you know?

If you're in a more amateur group where some people have had voice lessons, other people haven't had any voice lessons at all, you may have defaulted to singing with a really soft, almost breathy tone in order to blend your voice in with those people around you.

And if you're now taking voice lessons with somebody like me, who's going to bust you on that breathy tone and teach your body to make a sound that's much more efficient, much more flexible, actually, in the end, a lot easier to negotiate, you're going to sound different in that

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group. You may stick out in comparison to the other voices around you and that can feel really awkward.

And what I want to say is, try to sing with your best technique whenever you're singing and let the chips fall where they may.

When you sing with a more focused tone that's more likely to be heard, you also have more control over that sound. You might not at first, you might not in the first year or two of finding it, but ultimately you will have more control over that sound.

And that will allow you to, you can make a loud sound or a softer sound, it's more malleable, and you will be able to blend better over time into a group environment with this new, focused, grounded sound.

And as your own voice develops, you may find that you outgrow the group you're in, vocally. Like, you may find that your voice won't blend there. Like, you can't plop an opera singer into a singer-songwriter circle where it's all folk singers and have that voice blend.

They can make their voice blend. It'll be a lot of work, but that opera singer is going to be using just a tiny percentage of their instrument. And after a while, when you're shrinking to fit those around you, it just doesn't feel good.

The difference doesn't have to be that great, right? As you grow, as your voice grows, you are going to outgrow some environments. And that's, that's okay.

It can be sad. It can be frustrating. It can feel like a loss. And you becoming more yourself, your voice becoming more present in the world – that's a win for all of us.

Keep going, keep going.

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Okay, but say you're still in the group. **Your own voice is changing. You hear that you might be sticking out a little bit. What do you do? How do you manage that?**

Come back to yourself. Feel your seat in your seat, your feet on the floor. A good, centered, easy, low breath. Sing with as much ease as you can find, and really focus on your technique.

Most directors want to be working with a group of people who produce a solid vocal tone – something that's uniform, something that has a core to it.

It's really difficult to tune a group of voices who are all uniformly breathy. It's just hard to tune those voices. So your new voice and its growing, might feel it's like some kind of adolescent stage, is probably very welcomed by the director.

But rather than shrinking and not singing as well as you could, sing as well as you can and know that there might be feedback for you. Notice how the director is conducting the group.

And if you get a sense from the director, if there is one, if you're getting a sense that the director thinks you should be doing something differently, go ahead and ask them.

Not in the middle of the rehearsal, but like either before the next rehearsal or at a break or something and just say, “hey, you know, I’m taking some voice lessons and is my voice sticking out in a way that it could really be blended better? And can you help me understand how to do that?”

You might not need to talk to the director at all. I mean, it might become clear as you focus on singing as well as you can, that that's really, that's really all you can do. I am asking you to sit with a certain amount of discomfort with a certain amount of not-knowing.

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Because it's scary and uncomfortable when we show up fully, when we show up with our best technique, when we show up really wanting to make a contribution and really focusing on how we can do that in our own best way.

Most of the time when you do that, you're going to feel a little uncomfortable. You're going to feel more physically comfortable in your own body because you're using your body well.

But you'll feel, you may very well feel psychologically, socially uncomfortable because you're taking up space in the world and you're unabashedly being yourself.

Not without sensitivity to those around you. This isn't license to ignore the dynamic markings in the piece of music if you're in a group that's using sheet music, or, you know, to ignore the instructions from the director that we want this part to be quiet and we want this part to be loud, we want this part to be brassy, and we want this part to be spooky.

You still have to try to figure out how to make that work in your own voice, but with your good technique. And I would say nine out of ten directors are going to be really happy you're in the group that they're conducting.

I realize now that I've gotten into this topic, there is so much more that I could say about it, so maybe there will be another harmony episode in future.

But, by way of summing up, things that harmony singing can teach you: by learning to hold your own part, you really learn how to be yourself in a group; how to hear what it is that you're supposed to do and how it compares with what part two, part three, part four, five, six, seven, however many other parts there are, what those other people are supposed to be doing; and to really be aware of your center, hold your

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own in a flexible, sensitive way – sensitive to the fact that there, there are other people around you. there's a group sound that's asking to be made and how you fit into that. But you can only fit into that if you're really present at the same time.

Maybe it's counterintuitive, but in order to dissolve into a beautiful harmony, you need to be fully awake and present to your own body, your own skills, your own voice.

I think it's one of the most fun things in the whole world to do.

And maybe that's all that I've been talking about this episode – being aware of your posture, being aware of your center, being aware of who, where you are in space and what is helpful to you and what's a hindrance, and making adjustments as you need.

It really is time to think about yourself and how you can be the best musician you can be, the best team player you can be.

I wish everybody had to sing in a chorus every week. If I could prescribe something for the planet, it would be everybody has to sing in harmony every week. I think we'd all be kinder. I think we'd all be more thoughtful. The world would sound amazing if we did that.

Lest you think this is just all personal growth work on your own part. The other thing you can learn from singing in a group with other people is how much we need each other.

One of the things I really missed when the world shut down in 2020, was the sound of other voices, was the feeling of other voices around me.

And I couldn't have told you before the shutdown, that that would be my problem. I didn't realize how much comfort I took from being around other people singing, from feeling those voices resonating through my own body.

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And so the process of singing in a group with other people, even as you're very aware of yourself. When you can relax into that soft awareness of other voices and let the sound wash over and through you, it's profoundly healing.

It can wash away so many worries, partly because when you're singing in harmony, you really have to focus on what it is that you're doing and there, you probably don't have bandwidth to be worrying about all the things you were worrying about before you stepped into that room.

But just that experience of feeling that you're not alone, that you're engaged in a group project, that everybody in the room matters.

All of those voices are needed and important. and when we're singing all together, how beautiful they are.

So it's a lot of awareness. It's a lot of compassion. It's a lot of forgiveness for yourself, and there's a huge payoff in comfort and connection and music.

Thanks so much for listening.

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