Albert Pinsonneault
ed. Michael Culloton

Intonation
choral exercises

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Praise for “Intonation:”

“These choral intonation exercises have been most beneficial to the choirs at the University of Maryland. Since making them a regular part of our warm up and rehearsal routines, our singers’ awareness and sensitivity to both vertical and horizontal tuning issues have increased substantially. They are now able to assume much greater individual responsibility for the success of the entire ensemble for precise and accurate intonation. There is good flexibility within the exercises and any choir, from beginning to advanced, can improve by using them. I recommend them most highly!”

Edward Maclary
Director of Choral Activities
School of Music
University of Maryland

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“I once heard a conductor tell a room full of other conductors that singers don’t conspire to sing out of tune, and that it’s our job to help them hear their purpose in a piece. This collection of exercises will increase your choir’s awareness of pitch and function within a chord, and their intonation will improve quickly! Here’s a bonus that I know to be true: your singers will enjoy singing these exercises, too!”

(The exercises are like gummy bear vitamins… great tasting medicine!!)

Michael Culloton
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Concordia Chapel Choir, Männerchor, Cantabile
Choral Intonation Exercises

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Choral Intonation Exercises
A Note to the Director

**Purpose**
Contained within this book are exercises designed to strengthen the intonation and listening skills of a choral ensemble and its members.

**Contents**
The exercises are organized in a graduated progression, moving from easier to more difficult. Various exercises concentrate on unison in a section or the entire ensemble, tuning consonant and dissonant intervals, tuning within functional harmony, alignment of vowels, and placement and intonation of various difficult intervals within a tonality.

**Utilization**
It is intended that one or a small number of these exercises be utilized at the end of vocal warm-ups, before moving on to the rehearsal of repertoire. The concentration and listening required to execute these exercises also brings a high level of focus to the ensemble prior to the rehearsal.

**Pedagogy**
Many choirs contain both individuals with advanced musicianship skills, and those who struggle to hear and replicate pitch with accuracy. Top choirs contain a higher percentage of advanced students while training choirs possess a lower percentage. Choirs at small institutions may contain an equal mix of both types. These exercises seek to strengthen listening and intonation skills of students of all abilities simultaneously. In addition, they strengthen one vital skill that cannot be practiced individually, fitting oneself into the texture of an ensemble.

This methodology is based on Edwin E. Gordon’s audiation theory. A musician must be able to first hear musical material in their mind before being able to produce that musical material with accuracy. These exercises seek to strengthen the ability of singers to anticipate their next sound, not only in pitch, but also vowel, dynamic, and timbre.

These exercises also seek to strengthen each singer’s understanding of tuning at an aural level. Too often blanket chords are used for intonation purposes and they are ultimately of limited usefulness. Perhaps the basses will become experts at tuning major triads when they are the root of the chord, but what about when we move beyond triads in root position? The exercises in this book understand that all members of the choir should be able to experience the pristine intonation of all intervals. Only after experiencing, hearing, and understanding good intonation can singers be expected to replicate it within repertoire.
Many of these exercises can be repeated throughout the course of the year, increasing in difficulty as the choir strengthens. A typical learning progression on a single exercise over the course of the year might follow this formula:

**Level 1:**
1) The first several repetitions (weeks) with an exercise it is sung without any sense of meter or tempo, resting on every note for several seconds and allowing for the singers to adjust their sound until a desired intonation is achieved. The pedagogy here is that the singer must first know what it sounds like to sing in tune before they can be expected to anticipate that sound. Conductors can use verbal feedback to adjust (e.g. tenors: you’re flat there), but also the singers should be encouraged to listen for the moment when the tuning “locks,” and conductors should not move forward until that is achieved.

**Level 2:**
2) The exercise may then be repeated with silence between each note or chord. The silence provides time for singers to anticipate internally (audiate) the next sound, rather than relying on muscle memory. The silence should be long enough (3-4 seconds) so that all singers are encouraged to audiate, otherwise only the best “leaders” will audiate and the remainder will try to enter behind and/or quickly adjust without premeditation.
3) The exercise may be set to a slow but steady tempo, forcing singers to quickly anticipate the next sound, and to enter in rhythm.

**Level 3:**
4) The exercise may then be set to a steady rhythm with the insertion of silence between pitches (e.g. changing a sequence of half notes into quarter note-quarter rest) forcing singers to quickly audiate without the help of muscle memory.
5) The exercise then may be adjusted for the inclusion of
   a. dynamic transitions: successive contrasting dynamics, adding a new element that singers will audiate
   b. new or exotic vowel sounds: e.g. inserting the Russian vowels that flummox the choir on “Bogoroditse Devo”
   c. more advanced intonation systems; e.g. practicing just intonation for a piece by Machaut

**Blend**
Vowels, placement of production, dynamic uniformity, vibrato rate, and timbral uniformity can all affect intonation, the separation between intonation and blend can become grey. These exercises will result in the creation of choral blend, however, they do not specify that blend. Throughout the execution of these exercises, conductors are encouraged to adjust pitch, vowel, dynamic uniformity, placement of production, and balance of sections or chords to their own taste. I can not specify exactly the quality of vowels, nor can I specify exactly when a minor third is in “tune,” for numerous
variations exist on both counts. Each conductor will have their own sense of vowels and intonation, as well as their own tolerance to ensemble uniformity, some desiring a highly homogenous “pristine” sound while others desire a more heterogeneous “colorful” sound.

Just as each conductor has their own ideal choral sound, the adjustments the conductor makes and encourages while working on these exercises with their ensemble will help steer the choir towards the conductor’s idea of blend and intonation.

**Execution**

1) These exercises should be sung a cappella. Allow the singers to make mistakes and adjustments themselves. This will help train them to listen to themselves and their ensemble instead of focusing their ear on the piano.

2) The exercises should be performed either very slowly, or out of time with the conductor directing every change of pitch. Slowness in execution allows for the singer to listen and make adjustments continuously, rather than simply relying on muscle memory.

3) Conductors should adjust pitch, vowel dynamic uniformity, unity of motion, and the quality of unisons and intonation to fit their tastes.

4) Many of these exercises are in the major and minor keys of B, C-sharp, and F-sharp. The sharp keys add a brightness that aids hearing intonation. The conductor should feel free to transpose any exercise to additional keys as they see fit.

5) For the purposes of this manual, the five latin vowels (spelled with English homophones) can be pronounced as such: Ah = [a], Ae = [ε], Ee = [I], Oh = [o], Oo = [u]. These vowels are only suggestions, and can be exchanged for any uniform sound or syllable that would benefit your ensemble.

**The Drone**

Many existing ensemble intonation guides invite the chorister to tune intervals with the piano, or to hone the ear through singing exercises in unison. In contrast, the method in this book often employs an exercise performed over a choral drone, allowing for two outcomes:

1) Singers on moving parts are training their ears to tune to other singers and not an outside instrument.

2) Singers intoning the drone naturally open their ears to listen to the moving lines, thus strengthening their ability to hear outside their own part.

**Memorization and Rote Learning**

A singer is best able to listen when not looking at a score. Many of the following exercises may be taught or explained without the singers needing to see notation. More complicated exercises may be memorized in order to achieve the best results.
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2: Unisons of Pitch and Vowel
from *Intonation*

*Sing with a pure and uniform vowel*

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

**Level 1:**

1) In turn, each section departs and returns to consonance by a prescribed interval (e.g. whole step, shown below). In departing they learn to tune their interval of departure (e.g. whole step). In returning to the choral unison their awareness of the unison increases.

2) In droning sections, their ears will naturally be drawn to the moving notes providing two outcomes. Their ears will be strengthened by listening to their own and another part simultaneously, and they will learn to discern for themselves when moving parts successfully tune departure intervals, and when they successfully rejoin the unison.

3) This exercise should first be conducted without a tempo, pausing to tune each passing pitch or interval.

**Level 2:**

1) The conductor may add other vowel sounds as desired or suggested by repertoire being rehearsed.

2) The conductor may conduct this exercise in a steady tempo, making the singers audiate more quickly, and in time.

**Level 3:**

1) Other intervals may be used, or patterns of intervals or scales. For example, departing up two whole steps and returning, down two whole steps and returning, or up and down a minor pentachord. Experimenting with modes may also prove valuable.
3: Perfect Pentachords

The choir may need music to sing this exercise.
Memorization encouraged.

Level 1:

1) In turn, each section departs and returns to a perfect fifth consonance by a prescribed pentachord (major or minor, but modal pentachords may be introduced as a more advanced technique). Singers learn to tune their scale degree interval within the context of the perfect fifth.
2) “Droning” singers ears will naturally be drawn to the moving lines, strengthening their listening skills.
3) This exercise should first be conducted without a tempo, pausing to tune each passing pitch or interval.
4) This exercise can be sung using solfege, numbers, text from repertoire, or a neutral vowel.

Take particular notice of the major (and minor) third scale degree (Mi/me). Compared to these intervals on the equal-tempered piano, the just minor third should be a bit wider (higher) and the major third shorter (lower). Both major and minor thirds are often sung flat. Use this exercise to encourage a strong sense of in-tune thirds, utilizing the context of the perfect fifth.

Level 2:

1) The conductor may add other vowel sounds as desired or as needed by repertoire demands.
2) The conductor may conduct this exercise in a steady tempo, making the singers audiate more quickly, and in time.

Level 3:

1) Other modal pentachords may be used, e.g. Lydian (#4) and Phrygian (♭2, ♭3).
3a: Perfect Pentachords (major)
from Intonation

Sing with a pure and uniform vowel or solfege

Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass

3b: Perfect Pentachords (minor)

Sing with a pure and uniform vowel or solfege

S
A
T
B

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4: Tuning the Major Mode

The choir does not need music to sing this exercise.

There are two exercises here.

Begin with the drone and the scale in unison/octaves (4a).

Once mastered add in the contrary motion of the scale (4b).

Level 1:
1) This exercise should first be conducted without a tempo, pausing to tune each pitch or interval.
2) Pay special attention to the quality of each interval in relation to the tonic drone. Look out especially for thirds, fifths, and sevenths.
3) Sing on solfege or a neutral syllable.

Level 2:
1) The conductor may add other vowel sounds as desired or needed by repertoire demands.
2) The conductor may conduct this exercise in a steady tempo, making the singers audiate more quickly and in time.

Level 3:
1) Insert silence in the moving (scale) line, thus requiring the fresh audiation of each note in relation to the drone.
2) In order to try this with mixed parts, simply count off (“1-2-3”) down the line, assign “1s” to drone, “2s” to perform the scale from high do descending, and “3s” to perform the scale from low do ascending, then rotate through twice so everyone performs every part.
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5: Tuning the Minor Mode

The choir does not need music to sing this exercise.

There are two exercises here.

Begin with the drone and the scale in unison/octaves (5a).

Once mastered add in the contrary motion of the scale (5b).

Level 1:
1) Very infrequently is a choir presented with a warm-up in minor.
   The natural minor scale presents some unique challenges, with its whole steps surrounding tonic. In 5b, the second-to-last set of pitches creates a sound with two adjacent whole steps, great preparation for the added-note harmonies often found in contemporary choral music.

2) This exercise is just like 4a and 4b, and should be executed as such.

Level 2:
1) This exercise can be repeated utilizing any mode. It is especially useful with chromatic and whole-tone scales.
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5b: Tuning the Minor Mode 2
from Intonation

Sing with solfege or a pure and uniform vowel

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6: Tuning Mi and Me

The choir may need music initially to sing this exercise.

**Level 1:**
1) This exercise moves straight into the troublesome major and minor third within the perfect fifth. Conduct initially without a tempo, allowing singers to adjust into clean intonation for the major third and minor third.

**Level 2:**
1) Have the droning voices hold, but add breaths or separation between the pitches of the moving parts so the singers must audiate their subsequent entrance into Mi, Me, or Do.

**Level 3:**
1) Give a steady tempo for the exercise, with separation between the pitches within the moving line. Do not sacrifice intonation in order to have steadiness of rhythm. If intonation suffers, slow the tempo or return to note-by-note conducting.

Take particular notice of the major (and minor) third scale degree (Mi/me). Compared to these intervals on the equal-tempered piano, the just minor third should be a bit wider (higher) and the major third shorter (lower). Both major and minor thirds are often sung flat. Use this exercise to encourage a strong sense of in-tune thirds, utilizing the context of the perfect fifth.
6: Tuning Mi and Me
from Intonation

Sing with solfege or a pure and uniform vowel.

The choir may need music initially to sing this exercise.

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7: Tuning Non-Chord Tones Within the Modes

The choir may need music initially to sing this exercise. Memorization encouraged.

Level 1:
1) The moving parts singing ascending and descending diatonic triads within the context of a tonic-dominant drone. The moving line will leap into diatonic pitches not part of the tonic triad. The singers will learn to tune all intervals in relation to the harmonic context.
2) Solfège is provided for the choir, but a neutral syllable may be used as desired.
3) Unlike earlier exercises, this one is best at a steady tempo. Begin quite slowly, and stop to fix out-of-tune intervals.

Level 2:
1) Have the droning voices hold, but add breaths or separation between the pitches of the moving parts so they must audiate their subsequent entrance.
7a: Tuning Non-Chord Tones Within the Major Mode

from *Intonation*

The choir may need music to sing this exercise. Memorization encouraged.

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7b: Tuning Non-Chord Tones Within the Minor Mode
from *Intonation*

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The choir may need music to sing this exercise. Memorization encouraged.
Notes on Exercises 8-18

The remaining exercises address various other ensemble and intonation difficulties, as noted by their title and brief notes.

All of the techniques from the previous exercises may be utilized to strengthen the subsequent exercises, including:

1) the substitution of text
2) adding or changing dynamics
3) adding rests or breaks in moving lines to force audiation
4) adding a steady tempo
5) altering the mode of the exercise, or transposing to a new key

Exercise #8 explores chromatic pitches within the perfect fifth.

Exercises #9, #16, and #17 present common intonation problems within moving harmonies, specifically the tuning of the third and seventh scale degree (#9) and chromatic ascending lines in harmony (#16 and #17).

Exercise #10 strengthens intonation of pure intervals without a drone, and with both parts moving into each dyad.

Exercises #11 and #13 work the audiation of perfect fifths and fourths.

Exercise #12 helps navigate diphthongs in a controlled manner.

Exercise #14 moves in eight-part harmony derived from only four parts. The singers must learn to balance each harmony.

Exercise #15 teaches the aural understanding of suspensions as dissonant tension resolving into consonance.

Exercise #18 provides the choir a rhythmic warm-up with simple harmonies.
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9: Tuning Within Changing Harmonies

from *Intonation*

Common intonation challenges are presented within each voice part:
Tendency tones (3rds and 7ths of tetrachord), and non-chord tones.

**Sing with a pure and uniform vowel**

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10: Expanding and Contracting into Consonance
from Intonation

Chromatic motion in two parts toward diatonic intervals

Sing with a pure and uniform vowel

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13a: Fourths in Audiation

from *Intonation*

Encourage singers to quickly align both vowel and pitch.
Examine the quality of the onset.
Singers will learn to mentally anticipate interval and vowel.
Encourage uniformity and purity of vowel throughout (no diphthongs).
Portamento on "Oh" vowel.

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13b: Fourths in Audiation

*same notes as above.

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14: Finding Balance in Harmony
from Intonation

Beginning 8-Part Singing with only 4 Parts. (S1=T1, S2=T2, A1=B1, A2=B2)

Sing with a pure and uniform vowel
The musical material repeats in the second stanza with added suspensions. Encourage the singers to listen to the way their dissonance resolves into consonance.

_Sing with a pure and uniform vowel_

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16a: Sharpening the Bass, Tempering the Soprano
from Intonation

The bass voice rises chromatically while the soprano navigates
tendency tones (3rds and 7ths of the tetrachord).

Sing with a pure and uniform vowel

16b: Sharpening the Alto, Tempering the Tenor

The alto voice rises chromatically while the tenor navigates
tendency tones (3rds and 7ths of the tetrachord).

Sing with a pure and uniform vowel
Encouraging a long and steady crescendo, utilize whatever syllable, vowel, and/or accent desired.

Sing with a pure and uniform vowel
poco a poco cresc. throughout

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18: Rhythmic Arpeggiations
from Intonation

Andante

For perusal purposes only. Do not copy.
Encourage resonant and sustained singing.
Practice mixed breathing to achieve a seamless line.
May be sung on neutral syllable or text (e.g. "alleluia").
Entrances should be inconspicuous, like adding a subtle additional organ stop.

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Albert Pinsonneault

Conductor Albert Pinsonneault (PEN-son-oh) is Associate Director of Choral Organizations at the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University, where he directs the University Singers and teaches graduate choral literature. Dr. Pinsonneault is also Artistic Director of the Madison Choral Project, a professional chamber choir in Madison, Wisconsin. Their work has been hailed as “a bundle of pure bliss, unaccompanied choral sound at its most beautiful,” by Madison’s Isthmus newspaper. Additionally, he is Artistic Director of the Madison Chamber Choir, and was formerly Assistant Conductor of the Madison Symphony Chorus and Associate Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at Edgewood College.

A native of St. Paul, Minnesota, he attended St. Olaf College and the University of Minnesota before completing his doctoral study at the College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) of the University of Cincinnati. His conducting teachers include Anton Armstrong, Earl Rivers, Kathy Saltzman Romey, Richard Sparks, Dale Warland, and Richard Westenburg.

Works for mixed voices from Graphite:

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- Jocelyn Hagen: GP - H003 I Lift Up My Eyes (Psalm 121) SSAT, a cappella
- Jocelyn Hagen: GP - H004 O Come, O Come Emmanuel SATB, SATB soli, a cappella
- Will Lopes: GP - L002 Tutakwenda SATB, opt. solo, percussion
- Will Lopes: GP - L003 Celebrai SATB, a cappella
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- Joshua Shank: GP - S001 Color Madrigals (cycle) SATB, a cappella
- Timothy C. Takach: GP - T001 ‘Twas in the Moon of Wintertime SATB, a cappella
- Timothy C. Takach: GP - T002 A Sign of Day to Come SATB, a cappella
- Timothy C. Takach: GP - T010 Neither Angels, Nor Demons, Nor Powers SSATBB, a cappella
- Dale Warland: GP - W001 Always Singing SATB div, a cappella
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