

Do You Have A Vocal Identity Crisis?

This column is for singers who come to Sacred Harp with experience singing in choirs, choruses, or other groups, even if it was back when the mighty stegosaurus ruled the plains. If you were an alto back then, maybe you figure you should sing alto in Sacred Harp; other parts likewise. But you might actually be singing the wrong part for your voice and pleasure.

Maybe if we called the tenor part “lead,” as many Southerners do, or even “the melody,” people wouldn’t figure they needed a set of pipes like Pavarotti to sing it—or, for that matter, a beard. Women can sing it in their high or low register, or jump from high to low and back again like certain people. And men—just remember, we sing most tunes at least a step below where they’re written. Sure, you see some guys turning purple and throwing their heads way back on the higher tenor notes, but think about it: if you look and sound like a walrus in distress on the low notes of the bass part, you would probably have a better time singing tenor, and your fellow singers will thank you for it.

We Yankees have a lot of fake basses who rightly belong in the tenor section. You guys would have more fun over there (the part is more interesting, after all). Somehow, though, a few Northerners have developed this macho bass mystique that the older traditional Southern singers thankfully are lacking. Now, if you are a true bass, I say God bless you and come sit near the altos where I can hear you. If you’re really a baritone, try singing tenor and see if you like it. And if you are on that bench because you think it’s more manly than singing one of the higher parts, where your voice naturally falls—well, get over it. Be your true self even if it takes you over to the treble section, where you can really show vocal courage.

You sopranos may have gravitated toward the treble section when you heard someone mention “high harmony,” or when you heard a beckoning shriek from a certain side of the room. But have you tried singing the tenor part in your usual high register? And guys, maybe you sang tenor back

in your choral days, or with a choir now—but if you’re a First Tenor, you should check out the treble part sometime. And if you’re shooting blanks every time the notes go above the staff, it’s off to the bass section with you.

I’d like to address the altos for a moment, for at any big singing you can see dozens of newcomers asking to sit in the alto section because they *always* sang alto. Some choral directors (especially of the high-school variety) banish to alto purgatory any girl or woman who can’t do a passable Kiri Te Kanawa imitation on a high A. You may not be a true alto—you might just have a limited vocal range. Even if not, consider the peculiarities of altodom in Sacred Harp.

The Sacred Harp alto sound is completely different from that of—well, any music *this* alto has ever sung or heard. The good news: we rarely go as high as even the simplest choral alto part. But you must leave your Marlene Dietrich impersonation at home. Sacred Harp altos do not go for thrilling, sultry, rounded low tones. It’s more like grinding, wailing, ear-shattering low tones. One of the peculiarities of Sacred Harp is its characteristically piercing chest-voice alto (diplomatically called “having an edge to it”); if you sound sultry singing STRATFIELD, honey, you are definitely doing something wrong.

The most important thing to remember is: Sacred Harp should be fun. If you’re uncomfortable singing a part, or bored, or just curious—move around. You can always go back! If you feel that moving to another section would be silly since you’ve just started to learn your part to some of the songs—well, don’t do anything traumatic, but realize that you’re not really doing yourself a favor by staying put. If you know you’re in the right part, great. Even so, try sitting in the tenor section sometime (if you’re usually on one of the other parts) just so you can hear the melodies and how the other parts, including yours, fit together. Then you can slink back to your usual section, wiser. —Lisa Grayson