

# How to Teach Overtone Singing to Your Choir

Stuart Hinds



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In recent years, overtone singing has become more widely known and appreciated. Overtone singing is appearing in all kinds of musical genres and contexts, from punk rock to jazz, in movie and television soundtracks, and even in commercials. Choral music has been a major part of this trend. Initially, we heard small vocal ensembles directed by an overtone singing specialist/teacher, and several such groups are still active today. But overtone singing is also making a mark in mainstream choral literature. By now, most of us have heard an adventurous choir incorporate overtone singing into a performance at an ACDA convention or similar event.

This article is principally targeted at choir directors who are interested in using overtone singing with their choirs for the first time, or perhaps those who may have tried it in the past with mediocre results. The method presented here has been used many times by the author with students of all ages with excellent results. It is significantly different from the commonly used method taught by Sarah Hopkins and others, which the author jokingly refers to as the “meow” method. A lesson plan will be provided, including suggested warm-ups and descriptions and rationale for the exercises used in the six-step plan. Video files with demonstrations of the techniques used will be available for download on the Web site: [www.stuarthinds.com](http://www.stuarthinds.com).





# How to Teach Overtone Singing to Your Choir

In order to assure that the director reading this article receives the very best ideas and information available on the subject, the author has solicited the cooperation and input from several choir directors who have successfully used overtone singing with their choirs shown in the side bar.

It is hoped that our colleagues will take the plunge and give overtone singing a try. Using the techniques outlined in this article, a choir director can have every reason to expect success.

## Overtones and Overtone Singing

Before proceeding, a brief definition of overtones and their function in music is in order. Every musical note is actually a composite sound consisting of a fundamental tone, which is usually the pitch we perceive, combined with a number of additional pure tones above it called harmonics or overtones. These overtones are not normally heard individually, but they are important elements of the sound. The greater or lesser prominence (amplitude) of some of the overtones over the others determines the timbre, or tone color, of the note. It is the overtone structure, called the *spectrum*, which makes the sound of each voice or instrument unique and identifiable, and allows us to distinguish the sounds of the various musical instruments and also to recognize individual voices. The significance for singers is that overtones are the very basis of vowels, timbre, resonance, and intonation.

The term "overtone singing" refers to techniques that allow a singer to isolate one of the natural harmonic partials in the overtone series of a sung fundamental pitch, thus making audible two discrete pitches

## Consulting Directors

Peggy Dettwiler – Mansfield University (PA)

Emily Jones – Rummel Creek Elementary, Houston TX

Mark Lucas – University of Oklahoma

Jason Paulk – Eastern New Mexico University

Matthias Privler – Obertonchor München

Wolfgang Saus – European Overtone Choir, Aachener Obertonchor

Jan Stanek – alikvoťní sbor SPEKTRUM (overtone choir), Prague, Czech Republic

Z. Randall Stroope – Oklahoma State University

simultaneously. This phenomenon is accomplished by altering the shape of the vocal tract in the same way one uses vowels in speech or singing. In each of the traditional overtone-singing styles, the Tuvan, the Tibetan, and the Western, the singer typically creates a drone-based musical texture with a "melody" of overtones over an unchanging fundamental pitch.

Figure 1 provides a notated example of an overtone series on the fundamental pitch C. The interval pattern of the overtone series is always the same relative to the fundamental pitch. Remember that these are not the same as equal-tempered pitches: the octaves and fifths are "perfect" (beatless), the 5th partial is a big major third, and the 7th and 11th partials are much flatter. As you progress beyond the 12th partial, the intervals become progressively smaller.

Overtone singing is perfectly natural and safe for the voice when done properly. The only potential concern is for those who

practice Tuvan/Mongolian "throat singing" techniques in which muscular pressure may be applied in an attempt to suppress the fundamental in favor of the overtones. It is possible to produce overtones without any such stress, and teachers must carefully monitor their students to make sure no vocal abuse is taking place. All the vocal tract manipulations in overtone singing occur in the resonating areas of the vocal tract, not the phonating area. The types of vocal tract shaping used in overtone singing are the same as those used in traditional singing when changing vowels, registers, or timbre. None of the adjustments of the vocal tract used in overtone singing are inconsistent with good "open throat" singing.

It should be emphasized that anyone can learn to sing in this manner. The author firmly believes that any person who can breathe, phonate, and form vowels can perform overtone singing. The following story will illustrate this point.

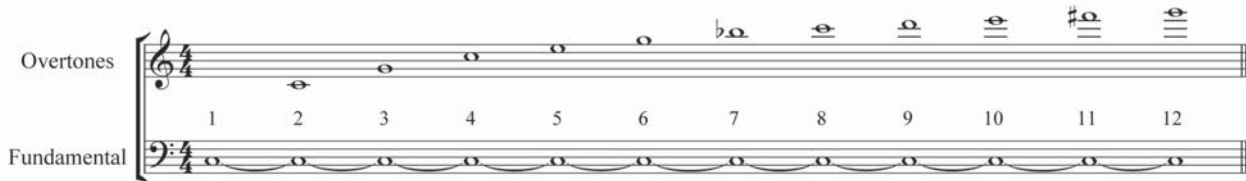


Figure 1. Notation of Overtone Series, Partial 1–12.



The author worked with Peggy Dettwiler and her choir at Mansfield University and their ACDA Student Chapter. Dettwiler has taught Hopkin's *Past Life Melodies* to her choirs on several occasions. She told me that due to an illness she suffered in the past that she was unable to move her lips and vocal tract in certain ways, and as a result, she was unable to sing overtones. She agreed to give it another try, however. After the lesson, when requested to demonstrate for the group, she did beautifully. Naturally, her students cheered enthusiastically! Peggy and her students reported trying both the method presented in this article and the conventional method, and they found this method worked better for them.

### Teaching Points

Working with overtone singing provides a director with opportunities for teaching in four general areas.

First, students would benefit from knowing a little of the history and ethnography of overtone singing. There are three generally recognized categories of music in which discrete overtones are produced: Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing, Tibetan Buddhist yang-style chant, and the so-called Western style of overtone singing, which is the technique we teach. Excellent information about all of these styles can be found in the Tongeren book listed in the bibliography, and the discography indicates the author's preferred recordings of these musics.

The second category includes coverage of the physics and mathematical basis of

overtones, with discussion of the natural harmonic series, the harmonic spectrum, and the function of overtones in music, especially singing. Each student should understand that overtones are the basis of vowels, timbre, resonance, and intonation.

The next category includes the use of overtone singing for improvements in normal singing, dealing particularly with effects on vocal resonance and the relationships between overtones, vowels, and timbre. Teaching overtone singing is an excellent way of reinforcing basic concepts in singing: breath control, clean phonation, open throat/soft palate lift, vocal tract shaping, resonance and focus, and beatless intonation. More important, it provides the director an invaluable opportunity to correct vocal faults in a student's normal voice. In particular, prob-

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lems of tension and forcing with lack of head resonance and unnecessary fatigue can be remedied using overtone-singing techniques. It is extremely difficult to find the time to monitor our students individually, but it is important to do so, making sure no vocal problems are escaping our notice.

On the subject of using overtone singing for improvements in a student's normal (modal) voice, this anecdote may be of interest. In a recent demonstration for an Acoustics class at Texas Tech University, one of the activities involved singing into a device that produced a graphic image of the overtone spectrum. The physics professor was amazed at the level of overtone amplitude that could be generated by a trained singer (not using overtone singing techniques). It was

explained to him that singers practice bringing out the overtones in their voices—that characteristic resonance or "ring" is one of the indications of a good singer. This incident may serve as a reminder to directors that in their choirs there are likely to be singers of the type mentioned hypothetically in the previous paragraph. The practice of overtone singing can help them find their head voices and learn to avoid the tensions and forcing that cause fatigue and hypo-resonant timbre in their singing.

The final teaching objective addresses the value of overtone singing for better musicianship in general, particularly in ear training. Overtone singing is a great way to work on intervals and intonation.

The following story provides an interest-

ing example of the use of overtone singing to improve intonation. The author was recently guest clinician for the Aachener Obertonchor of Aachen, Germany. One of the compositions we were working on was in D minor (actually, the Aeolian mode). In this work, the tenor part begins with an ascending leap from the tonic D up to B<sup>b</sup> a minor 6th higher. The tenor section sang this B<sup>b</sup> too high every time. Of course, one could simply tell them, "you are sharp," but how much better it would be for them to hear and internalize the difference. Since all the tenors could produce overtones, they were asked to begin by singing the tonic D as a fundamental while producing its 8th partial D3. They were then asked to sing the B<sup>b</sup> with its 5th partial, also D3. The singers could



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easily hear when the B<sup>b</sup> fundamental was at the proper pitch when the overtones of both fundamentals were in perfect unison. After a few repetitions of the progression D (8th) to B<sup>b</sup> (5th), they were able to sing the notes normally while retaining the proper intonation.

### Considerations before Beginning

The first consideration before teaching overtone singing to a choir is the director's security with the technique. Even if a clinician is hired to do a workshop session with the choir; the director must still do all the follow-up and should have some idea of what is going wrong if a student has difficulty. This might be a good summer break or semester break project. You could take a lesson or participate in a workshop. Then, it is not that hard to find a few minutes here and there to get in a little practice: in the shower; driving; waiting for an appointment or for your kettle to boil. You will be amazed at how well you can do in a couple of weeks with just a few minutes of practice a day.

Directors need to have an idea of their students' prior experience and knowledge in order to create effective lessons/rehearsals. At the very least, the students should have a good understanding of overtones and their function in music, especially in singing. The author recommends a fifty-minute lesson to get started with the technique (a sample lesson plan follows) and a few minutes daily thereafter for practicing the technique and extending the knowledge to vocal and ear training exercises that support the literature you are currently studying.

There may also be some psychological issues. You may encounter a student who has fear of trying something new and requires reassurance. It is more likely that you will have a voice-major express concern about possible vocal abuse or report that the studio teacher has concerns relative to possible incompatibility of overtone singing techniques with the student's objectives in the studio. On this point, you must assure them that there is nothing in overtone singing technique that is inconsistent with proper singing as we teach it. The most important thing the director can do is help students avoid frustration if they are not immediately

successful bringing out overtones. Encourage them to be patient, and keep reminding them that forcing will not help.

### Suggested Warm-ups and Exercises

It is always a good idea to select warm-up exercises and vocalizes that will prepare the singers for the type of singing they are about



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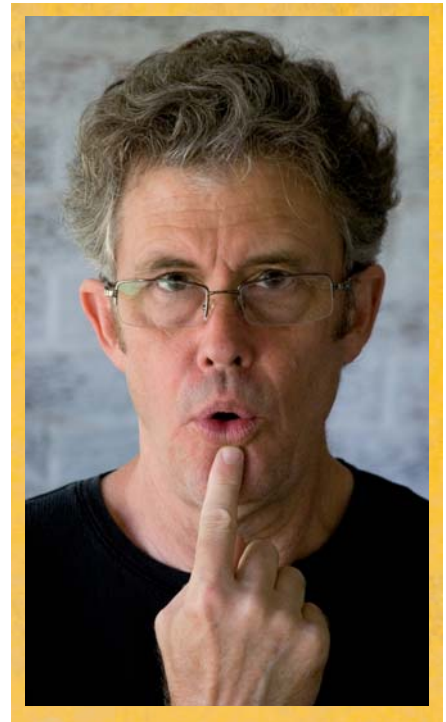


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# How to Teach Overtone Singing to Your Choir

Photo 1



*Use the index finger to insure that the jaw stays lowered, even on closed vowels.*



Figure 2



Figure 3

to rehearse. In preparation for activities with overtone singing, one should select exercises that reinforce pharyngeal enlargement and soft palate lifting without tension and encourage the focus of energy in the soft palate area for strong head resonance. The author typically uses the following exercises with these objectives in mind.

In the exercise, shown in Figure 2, inhaling helps the singer to experience the open throat and feeling of relaxation in the vocal tract as the jaw lowers. The open vowel with aspirate attack maintains the open feeling for phonation. To finish the exercise, the singer should concentrate on maintaining that open space inside even as the lips round and the opening narrows to form the progressively

smaller vowels. The tongue and jaw remain low and the lips do all the work. It might be useful to have the singers place an index finger between the chin and lower lip to verify that the jaw remains dropped as the vowels become smaller (Photo 1).

Sustaining the /ng/, as in Figure 3, emphasizes the focus of energy in the soft palate area, increasing mask resonance. Jason Paulk reports using /ng/ on sustained pitches, then proceeding from the /ng/ into various vowel formations to achieve the overtones. Jason writes, the great thing about using the /ng/ is that singers feel their palates lift when going to the vowel.

Even though the nasal passages are closed off via soft palate lifting during overtone singing, the nasals in the exercise shown in Figure 4 help the singer place the focus of energy in the area of the soft palate for maximum resonance (amplitude

of overtones). In the second part, maintain the large pharynx and form the /i/ and /u/ vowels with tongue action, using lots of lip rounding on both vowels. The mouth opening for the vowels /i/ and /u/ is the same size, so the jaw and lips should remain rather still, letting the tongue do the work. Maintain lip rounding (normal for /u/) for both vowels throughout the exercise.

Matthias Privler also offered some suggestions for warm-ups: use the hands and fingers to actually touch areas of attention.

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Figure 4



## Discography

*Tuva: Voices from the Center of Asia*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40017.

*Tuva, Among the Spirits: Sound, Music, and Nature in Sakha and Tuva*, Smithsonian Folkways CD 40452.

*Tibetan Buddhism: The Ritual Orchestra and Chants*, Nonesuch H-72071.

Sarah Hopkins - *Sarah Hopkins Rehearses Past Life Melodies*, St. Peters Chorale, Toowong, Qld: Morton Music, MM3001.

Stuart Hinds – *Harmonx*, CD available from the composer: [www.stuarthinds.com](http://www.stuarthinds.com).

He recommends putting the hands on the face with the fingers softly in the temporomandibular joint and the base of the hand on the chin to feel the space on both sides while gently pulling the mandible down into a yawn position. In that position, he leads his singers in connected breathing exercises to support the opening of the vocal tract. Matthias also suggests that touching the resonance areas with the hands to feel the vibrations helps to “open” the voice. He also uses exercises with nasals, and adds the use of /v/ (in German, “w”) for a physical feeling like blowing into a comb, and a voiced “sch” (German) or /s/ to increase resonance.

### Overtone Singing Exercises

Before beginning the actual overtone singing exercises, it is important that the director make the following two points, and periodically to remind the singers of these points throughout the lesson. First, remember that overtone singing is essentially the same as normal singing with open throat and head resonance. Second, tension should be avoided. Putting pressure on throat or vocal tract muscles will not help bring out overtones. The technique we are teaching is not like Tuvan throatsinging in which pressure is applied in order to suppress the fundamental. If any singer appears to be doing anything unnatural or stressful, it is probably not correct.

As the singers experiment with the techniques, encourage them to make any vocal tract adjustments very subtle, using fine movements of the tongue, and be sure that they are not straining or forcing. The students should sing with a strong *mezzo forte* dynamic to ensure adequate breath support. Monitor them constantly and give numerous reminders to maintain lip round-

Photo 2



*Use hands on cheeks to keep the lips from spreading horizontally.*

ing at all times—do not let the lips spread horizontally.

The overtone singing lesson that follows uses six sequential steps to guide the singer through the types of vocal tract positioning and adjustments that are required in order to bring out vocal overtones. Successful completion of these exercises will prepare the singer to perform most choral works that call for overtone singing. Video files of the author demonstrating these techniques can be downloaded on the Web site: [www.stuarthinds.com](http://www.stuarthinds.com)

### Step 1

Have the singers inhale to open the throat and drop the jaw, as if they are about to yawn. Then, round the lips into an /u/ position and make them protrude a bit, feeling the cheeks become slightly concave against the teeth and jaws.

### Step 2

Maintain the vocal tract position from step 1 and, without moving the lips, make unvoiced ascending and descending *portamento* shapes like the sound of blowing wind, /u/ ~ /i/ ~ /u/ ~ /i/, with /u/ producing the lowest pitch and /i/ producing the highest pitch. Use the tongue only; keep the lips rounded in a rather small opening as for an /u/ vowel throughout the exercise on all vowels. Increase the pitch range of the *portamenti* as far as possible both high and low and make the transition between /u/ and /i/ as smooth as possible. Feel what the tongue is doing—the mid to back part of the tongue rises as the pitch ascends and lowers as the pitch descends. The tongue movement used to create this effect is the same as that required for overtone singing. Have the singers use hands on the cheeks to ensure that the lips remain rounded and slightly protruded (photo 2).

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## Step 3

In the same position, bring up the tongue to form /n/. The sides of the tongue touch the inside of the upper teeth and the tip of the tongue touches the palate. Sing /n/ - /i/ on a medium-low fundamental pitch, lowering the tip of the tongue only slightly for the vowel, and hear the high-pitched sound that is produced at the onset of the vowel. That is your first overtone! This exercise uses the nasal consonant for the same purpose as the warm-up exercises above, to feel the intensity of focus in the soft palate area. Try to bring out the overtone more strongly by trying some subtle shaping adjustments with the tongue, using focus, not force. Remember that the focus of energy is at the soft palate and not in the throat and that the lips must remain rounded at all times. Keep reminding the students that their attention should be on the space between the tongue and the soft palate, and that re-shaping of the tongue creates the proper vocal tract size and shape to bring out any particular overtone.

We begin with the /i/ vowel and high-pitched overtones because that places the vibratory energy in the correct location, in the soft palate area, even for those students who have little head resonance to begin with. Another reason for using higher overtones is that they are initially easier to hear.

In large groups, the singers may have

## Photo 3



*"Dumbo ears" help singers hear themselves when singing in a large group.*

trouble hearing themselves individually. In that case, have them use their "Dumbo ears," cupping the hands behind their ears with

palms facing forward. This gesture allows singers to hear their own singing over the other singers in the room.

## Step 4

When the first overtone on /i/ is sounding clearly, try lowering the tongue a little more to generate lower-pitched overtones. Remember the tongue exercise from step 2 and keep the same type of tongue movement. Some singers have used vowels similar to the word "near" because the /r/ helps with the necessary lip rounding, but the use of /r/ is not the best in the long run for aesthetic reasons. The author prefers to have students think of the progression as "we" ~ "you" with extreme elongation of the /w/ and /y/ ("we" is used for ascending overtone-series *glissandi* and "you" for descending *glissandi*). Again, make sure to maintain lip rounding throughout.

At this point in the lesson, it is good to give the students some time for guided practice by themselves. One method is to have the students spread out around the room, facing the wall for good feedback and using their "Dumbo ears." As they practice Steps 3 and 4 on their own, the director can move around the room observing and listening to each singer individually. In particular, look for any signs of vocal abuse and make sure each student is maintaining the proper vocal tract position with lip rounding. Another common problem is an inadequate focus of energy in the soft palate area, which can be caused by too "throaty" a sound or as a result of poor breath support. Encourage the throaty singers to continue to use the nasal /n/ at the onset and concentrate on feeling vibration in the soft palate area. Ask the singer with inadequate breath support to sing a strong *forte* dynamic with consistent breath pressure throughout, again concentrating on energy at the soft palate.

After a few minutes of individual practice, have the students return to the group. Ask for volunteers to demonstrate for the group and offer praise for their efforts. The students like to know how their efforts to produce overtones compare with those of their colleagues, and a little bit of competition will make them want to practice more. The final steps can be given as homework and used



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in subsequent rehearsals/lessons.

### Step 5

Make ascending and descending *glissandi* on the overtone series. Have each singer try to extend the range of sounding overtones both higher and lower. Then slow it down and try to hear the individual partials, moving from *glissando* to *arpeggio*. Review the tongue exercise (Step 2) as necessary. Repeat on different fundamental pitches, higher and lower.

### Step 6

Try to hold and sustain a particular overtone, then sing one partial higher or lower and return to the first one. Improvise little melodies of overtones. If you have any students who are not very successful at first, ask them to practice in the following way on their own at home. Have them sing alone in a quiet place with lots of reverberation (a tiled bathroom is a good choice). Ask them to assume the vocal tract position learned in the lesson and sing on the lowest-pitched fundamental they can produce with focus and relaxation. Eliminate the nasal onset and sing /i/ ~ /3/ ~ /i/ ~ /3/ back and forth, listening carefully to the timbre change (timbre is the result of overtones), starting at a *p* dynamic, then increase to *mf*.

Using the techniques outlined in this article, every director can expect to have success teaching overtone singing to a choir. The author has used this approach on many

occasions with singers of all ages and levels of experience, and most singers are able to produce vocal overtones after just a few minutes of practice.

Of course, any of these activities can be adapted to fit a director's teaching style and preferences. The author particularly wants to encourage directors to continue to use overtone singing even after the selected work has been performed. Overtone singing

can be used for warm-up exercises targeting head resonance and vowels, for activities in intonation and ear training, and in exercises designed to support objectives in the literature you are currently rehearsing.



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