I LOVE TO RING 'EM": SUBLIME INTONATION AND HOW TO ACHIEVE IT

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Supreme importance is placed on our ability to sing in tune with one another and to the tonal center. It is this all-too-rare quality that separates the great ensembles from the merely good ones. The first step toward accomplishing this task is mastering the elements of posture, breath support, and phonation. But that isn't the whole secret. Excellent tuning is also a function of the following (and more):

1. Internalizing the tonal center while you sing. Try to develop a sense of where *do* is at all times. It is all too common for choirs to flat a song. The moment that occurs all energy is sapped from the performance and any hope they had of fully connecting with the audience is lost. It will not happen in this choir. The tonal center will never leave our inner ear.
2. Never hum the pitch when it is given to you. It just tightens you up and keeps you and your colleagues from being able to properly audiate the pitch with the "inner ear."
3. Hearing and performing gradations of pitch *between* the keys of the piano. You are not a piano. The half step is not the smallest interval you can sing. Like a violin or trombone you can slide from one note to another, sounding countless incremental pitches along the way. Singing "in the cracks" is an important skill to develop. We have all become accustomed to singing with the piano. The trouble is, the piano uses a tuning system called equal temperament, which allows it to play in any key, but also renders it slightly out of tune. We will tend to use just intonation, whose intervals are made up of simpler ratios, and therefore more consonant (and thus more in tune) than most equally tempered intervals.
4. Hearing the "lock" of a perfectly tuned chord. When a chord is perfectly tuned, you will hear several overtones above the chord. The more in tune you are the more overtones you will achieve. When the overtones are strongly present you will get a palpable sense that the chord has completely gelled or locked. This is what we are striving for at all times.
5. Matching vowels with one another. What makes one vowel sound different than another? When you sing a note, you are not only singing that fundamental pitch, but also countless frequencies—called *partials*—above that pitch. Some you might be able to hear, but many will extend above your range of hearing. The way you shape the various parts of your throat and mouth inhibits some of these frequencies and brings out others. Each of these patterns of partials results in a different vowel sound. For that reason, two people can sing the same fundamental pitch, but if their vowels aren't matched (that is, if the partials that create those vowels aren't lined up) they will be out of tune with one another. If that is true of only two people, imagine the damage that an entire choir can do if they aren't matching vowels. On the good side, however, when the entire choir *is* matching vowels, the partials will be so dramatically reinforced that the overtones will be screaming.
6. Balancing the chords properly—Generally speaking, the stronger intervals (the ones with the smaller ratios: particularly the perfect 5th of the chord should be brought out. This, too, will reinforce the partials and help us to tune.
7. Harmonizing with the other sections. Many unskilled chorus singers learn their part and sing it without any regard as to how it harmonizes with the other parts. To really tune you must always be globally aware. Keep your ears open and slot your notes into the ensemble sound.
8. Approaching pitches from above. NEVER scoop up to a note unless it is for a particular musical effect. This is not only true of entrances (see "Initiating the Tone" above) but also ascending and descending notes within the phrase. Developing this habit (and it takes a good deal of conscious effort to do so) will keep the spin in your voice and help you to stay on the high side of every note.
9. Overcoming "flat traps":
    - Repeated notes—each successive note must be sung an onion skin higher. (Onion skins are extremely thin, to the point that you can almost see through them.)
    - Returning to a note—again each time you sing it, you should do so an onion skin higher.
    - Scale degrees 3, and 6. Show me a choir than can sing scale degrees 3, and 6 in tune and I'll show you a great choir.
10. Being "anti-gravity" in everything we do. Gravity will pull our pitch down, along with everything else – our cheekbones, our eyes, our soft palate, our upper lip, our body alignment, etc. It is the enemy, and we will fight it. We will stand tall, lift our sternum, lift our cheekbones, lift our soft palate, lift our lips off our teeth, and even lift our eyebrows slightly when we sing. We will never let our voices get heavy. Instead, we will place our voices spacious, high, and forward, and spin the notes out on a steady column of warm air. The piano's note won't be good enough for us. We will strive to make it sound slightly dull to our tonal center.