

How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way Part 2: Harmony Below the Melody

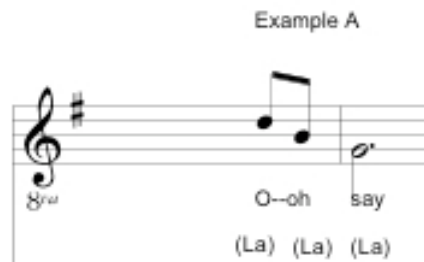
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If you're like most people who are learning to sing harmony by ear, you probably started by learning to find harmony above the melody. This is natural because of the way our ears work—it's easier to hear higher notes than lower ones, so high harmony is easier to figure out. But singing harmony *below* the melody is essential not only for trio singing, but for duets if you want to harmonize with someone whose voice is higher than yours. It's an especially valuable skill for men who sing with women. And above all, a good harmony below the melody sounds terrific, and is a lot of fun. Many vocalists say it's their favorite part to sing.

For those of you who like to learn by hearing as well as reading, this article goes with Disk Two of *How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way*. On this disk Keith Little, Don Share and I show you the easy way to figure out harmony below the melody intuitively, by ear. This article will give you a quick overview of the main points, but the most important thing, if you want to learn to harmonize intuitively, is to *practice* these techniques, either along with the CD, or with a friend.

Singing Down the Major Chord

To become a natural harmony singer, we need to be able to intuitively and easily sing the three notes of the major chord. In [Part One of this article](#), you learned how to use the first line of the Star Spangled Banner—"Oh say can you see"—to find the three notes of the major chord, and you practiced finding those notes in several keys (at least I hope you practiced!). In that part of the course, we were singing the notes going UP the chord. Now we can use the same song to practice singing the three notes of the major chord going DOWN the chord. Just play a G major chord on your guitar, piano, etc., and sing the three syllables at the very beginning of the Star Spangled Banner, "*O-oh say*." These are the same major chord notes we learned, but this time in a downward sequence. For folks who like to read music, this is shown in example A.



Why is it so important to be able to sing the major chord in a descending sequence? These three major chord notes are essential building blocks of harmony. If we want to easily find low harmonies, we need to train our ear to hear the *next lower chord note below a melody note*. So practice singing these descending chord notes in several different keys. If you get tired of singing "*Oh-oh say*," just sing "*la-la-la*," or any words you like.

Bumping Down to find Low Harmony Notes

Once you can easily sing major chord notes going down the chord, you're ready to start finding harmony below the melody. As we did with high harmony, we're going to learn to sing close or tight harmony, so we'll choose harmony notes as near as possible to the melody. And since most of the time, our harmony note will be one of the three chord notes, our technique is again straightforward. We'll find the nearest chord note below the melody note. Here's an exercise that will teach you how:

You'll need two voices, so get together with a singing buddy. Play a G chord on your guitar, piano or other instrument and keep playing that chord. One person sing any one of the three chord notes of that chord (just like you learned to do in part one of this article and on Disk One of *How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way*). Just sing the word "la" or if you prefer, choose any word you like.

Now, second person join in and sing the *exact same note*. This will be our melody note. Now, second person—*while first person keeps holding that melody note*—you move your note down until you’re on the *nearest chord note below* the first person’s note. The two of you will now be singing two different notes of the G chord, and you’ll hear how it makes the harmony. We call it “bumping down” to the harmony note. This is the same principle you learned when bumping up to find the high harmony, only this time you’re moving in the opposite direction.

Next, strum your G chord some more, but choose one of the other chord notes for your melody note (remember, a major chord has three chord notes). Person two start on this new melody note and bump down to the next chord note below it. And then do the same with the third chord note. After you practice this in G, try it in as many different keys as you can. Don’t forget to take turns, so you can both practice bumping down to the nearest chord note below the melody. Example B shows this exercise in written form.

Example B

Mel harmony below mel Mel harmony below mel Mel harmony below mel

La - a - a - a La - a - a - a La - a - a - a

Being able to “bump down” and sing the nearest chord note below the melody note is the secret to finding the baritone part in bluegrass music and to finding close, low harmony in folk, country, rock, blues, pop and swing music as well. Just remember that most of the time, our low harmony note is the *next lower note below the melody that’s in the chord that’s being played at that point in the song*.

Using Keywords To Jump Start Your Harmony to a Song

As you learned in Part One of this article, and on Disk One of the CD course, it’s easiest to work out harmony to a song by starting with the keywords. Remember that these are the long, held-out important words of a song, and they often occur on the downbeat of a measure. So when we figure out our low harmony to a song, especially when we’re doing it on the fly, the first thing we do is to find our harmony notes for these keywords. Let’s look at an example. Here is the country classic, Ashes of Love:

Ashes of love
Cold as ice

Here’s the first line with the *keywords* CAPITALIZED

ASH-es of LOVE

Example C shows the melody of that first line of the song, with the *keywords* in UPPER CASE and the harmony on the *keywords*.

Example C:
Keywords

ASH ----- es of LOVE

Once we’ve got the low harmony notes for our keywords, it’s much easier to fill in the rest of the words and then put our harmony part together. You can use the keyword technique to help you find the low harmony on all of the songs at the end of Disk 2 of *How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way*. You can also use this *keyword* method to make it easier to work out low harmony to all of your favorite songs.