

# SINGING OUTDOORS



Whether it's a harvest festival, spring fete, summer celebration or winter carnival, opportunities to sing outdoors are a favorite for Sweet Adelines.

But singing outdoors can be a challenge. Venues are filled with distractions. Your audience may be seated on a rolling lawn of sound-absorbing grass or surrounding you in a concrete stadium bowl. Perhaps you're a strolling quartet of buskers, or an ensemble using the ocean as a backdrop as you perform on the boardwalk. Whatever the atmosphere, the keys, say the experts, are preparation, flexibility, and a sense of humor.

"If it isn't fun, if anyone is too serious about the performance, you can get yourself in trouble," says three-time quartet champion Kim Vaughn. "I think the most fun [performances] are ones where the little kids want to be a part of it, and I think you just allow them. Let them get up there. Have fun."

## THE EASIEST WAY TO HAVE FUN? BE READY FOR ANYTHING.

The first thing singers notice outside is the sound — or rather, the lack of it. With little help from the comfort of ceilings and walls indoors, sound outdoors goes up and out and...away. It may

feel like you're singing alone.

Kim warns that singers will have a hard time hearing each other and may be tempted to oversing to compensate.

"It's always best, in any environment, to sing your best voice at all times," cautions Kim. "You can't control the environment, and oversinging will not help."

For every member who tries to "save the ensemble," there may be others who are intimidated by their surroundings and hardly make any sound at all.

"This is where we need our singers to be leaders, not leaners. We have to know that we can depend on everyone in the chorus to do exactly what they do in rehearsal," Kim says. "We have to trust that everyone will do what they're supposed to do, that we are trained to sing our best voice, [and] we will sing the song the best way we can, no matter the circumstances."

To combat that sensation of singing by yourself, Kim recommends finding something solid for a backdrop. A wall, a structure, even a stand of trees will help focus the sound.

"The sound is going to dissipate immediately," she says. "It's just going to go everywhere all at once. If we can put ourselves with something solid behind us, even fabric, it's better than nothing at all."



## HAVE CONFIDENCE WHEN SINGING IN AN UNUSUAL SETTING.

That same solid preparation and understanding will give any ensemble confidence when singing in an unusual setting.

“Prepare as consistently as possible,” says Leslie Shoenhard, lead the International Champion Quartets, MAXX Factor and Signature Sound. “Be as prepared as possible. The more practiced you are, the more you believe in what you can do and how you can make your audience at ease with your singing. And that’s what it’s all about, making your audience comfortable and allowing them to feel and experience your message.”

Leslie and her quartet, MAXX Factor, sang the national anthem at Baltimore Orioles Major League Baseball games for 13 straight years until the pandemic halted their streak. The ballpark, with as many as 45,000 fans and a national radio and TV audience, presents a unique set of challenges.

“You have to remain focused on the barbershop blend you’re singing into, and the cup of the quartet,” Leslie says. “You also have a cameraman in your face the entire time as well as the HUGE scoreboard showing your faces [but a few] seconds behind” for ‘cut time,’ which allows the broadcast to remain on schedule. If

you can do your job and watch the screen, it’s a GREAT SHOW! It really shows you how your face, posture, and attitude are conveying to the audience.”

A pregame soundcheck out on the field will give you a chance to take in your surroundings and shake out the butterflies. Sound bouncing around the stadium and back into your face can throw off timing. While the soundcheck is more for the engineers than the singers, Leslie says it is helpful to hear the delay and feedback.

“It may be surprising that all you really hear is the quartet because you’re singing into dead space outside, except for the feedback,” she says. “Every ‘show’ is the same. You hear your quartet the same in an open field as you would on a stage in an auditorium. You never change the stance or your ear training... barbershop should always be sung using your ears.”

Outdoor performances also present obstacles such as sound systems and weather. Don’t hesitate to ask what kind of microphone has been provided. An omnidirectional mic, which picks up sound all around it, presents barbershop harmony with the best amplified blend and unity. A unidirectional mic picks up sound from the top of the microphone and from only one direction.

If the mic won't present her ensemble at its best, Kim sometimes will reserve it for emcee work alone.

The number of mics may dictate standing position; for example, with four mics Kim might have the ensemble stand in sections. With three, she might place section leaders around them and cup groups of singers around each mic. She also suggests placing a quartet in front, between the chorus and a single mic, to get more sound.

## KEEP THE PERFORMANCE UPBEAT AND MOVING.

"I would lean toward uptunes and midtempo songs," Kim says. "If you're going to do a ballad, [sing] a folk song or patriotic song, something very familiar to your audience, or a traditional song that everyone in your country knows. Then, people might just sing along with you. There is absolutely no reason not to do a singalong, as a matter of fact, it's a good idea."

And as for weather, well, Kim likes that narrow band of nice and nicer. "Weather extremes are really not very good for singers outside, and I would avoid them," she says.

Hydration, always essential for singers, becomes vital in hot and cold air alike, as both will dry voices out quickly.

## ALWAYS, MAINTAIN YOUR SENSE OF FUN.

A balmy summer evening under the lights might draw clouds of insects. A slight delay for pounding rain on the roof might give audience and performers alike a laugh. When your fans trudge through snow to see your show, by all means thank them and sing something tropical to warm them up.

"[Outdoor performances] aren't my favorite because of all the variables, but they often are the most fun because you can't take it all so seriously and crowds are more apt to respond," says Harmony On The Sound Chorus Master Director Karen Sweeters. "[One time,] we were singing in an outdoor pavilion. It was a great place, and we had a wonderful audience. We were on stage and could see this big storm coming in. The singing got faster...and faster...it was pretty hilarious."

Kim echoes Karen's levity.

"Don't take it too seriously, except for the singing. Sing well."

In these days of ubiquitous cell phone cameras, remember anyone could be recording and you never know when something will go viral.

"Maintain your sense of humor. Roll with it," says Kim. "I happen to believe that the best membership drive in the world is singing out and singing well, often. People are walking by and they want to be a part of it. Sing out. Sing well." 🎵

*Maggie Ryan sings bass with Greater Harrisburg Chorus (#19). She is a long-time contributor to The Pitch Pipe and served on the Editorial Review Board for 13 years.*

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## TO GET THE FEEL OF SINGING OUTDOORS AT A REHEARSAL:

"Get as far away from each other as you can in rehearsal, gradually. Stand in your normal position and then take a step away, and then do it again, and again until you have taken as much room as possible so that everyone still sings the same way. If it's possible, go outside, [or] into a bigger lobby, a bigger space and take up all the space." — Kim Vaughn

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## COVID AND OUTDOOR SINGING:

First and foremost, follow your national and local guidelines.

Harmony On The Sound Chorus [#1] held six parking lot rehearsals with director Karen Sweeters often leading from the flat bed of a truck. "We've had about six, and we are checking the weather for some nice winter days to see if we can sneak one or two in," she says. "Honestly, our singing outside fed the soul more than the ears! It was great to hear voices, to see each other, to direct and be directed — to see how well we knew (or didn't know) our newest songs. I had about 20 singers at each event. [We saw] many of the same singers, and yet we had people who dropped in, so we did have a variety. The core group of 12 was very dedicated. We also streamed on Facebook to our members who didn't feel comfortable singing with us (so they) could live through us and sing along." — Karen Sweeters

