
Tips for Singing in Other Languages

- Find a “Language Coach”
- Understand the Context of the Song
- Know what you are singing about
- Learn the Pronunciation

Find a “Language Coach”

Ask your group if anyone is a native speaker of the language. If they are: great! They are your language coach! If not, ask the group if they know someone who is, or speak with cultural organizations in your community and invite a guest ‘coach’ to your rehearsal. This is an excellent way to engage with the community and culture and learn something new. If this person is unable to come to your rehearsal, ask if they would kindly record themselves speaking the text slowly and clearly. Share this recording with the group. Remember to thank and remunerate your guests accordingly.

Understand the Context of the Song

It is important to understand the context of the song culturally and historically. You need to be respectful and not appropriate the culture from which the song originates. Educate yourself. Do research. Have discussions with your group. You may discover that there are songs that are not appropriate for your group to sing, in which case, do not sing them. Consider contacting and engaging with cultural groups in your community.

Know what you are singing about

You will want to know what you are singing about. Spend some time talking about what the text means. A literal, word-for-word translation is useful to better understand the language and better tell the story of the text. Ask your in-house or external language coach to translate the text, word-for-word in person to allow for discussion.

Learn the Pronunciation

Use call-and-response to learn the pronunciation. Have your language coach speak the text slowly, phrase by phrase, and have the group echo it back. Allow time for questions. Some sounds and words will be much more difficult than others for non-native speakers. Concentrate first on vowel sounds, as vowels carry most of the singing voice, then work on any problem consonants. Encourage your language coach to listen to the group and give feedback. Consider also how some words when sung sound differently than when spoken. If your in-house language coach feels comfortable doing so, ask them to sing the phrase slowly so the group can hear the pronunciation in the context of the song. Repeat as needed until the group feels comfortable with the text.

SONGS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

What if someone chooses a song in a language that the majority of the group do not speak? Singing songs in other languages may seem daunting – but by taking the time to break it down into smaller parts you will find it isn’t difficult at all.

Here are some tips to help you sing songs in other languages with confidence and respect for the culture from which they come. By doing so, you and your group will discover a world of repertoire, and will develop a greater appreciation for other cultures, languages and ideas.