

How To (Really) Use A Learning Track

In order to get the most out of your Learning Tracks, you must train and condition yourself to use them correctly.

I know what you're thinking right now, "It's just a recording. You listen to it until you know your part. What's so tough about that?"

Well, we've all made mistakes using our Learning Tracks because we were in a hurry, we were distracted, or we just plain didn't know any better. But the worst offense is that we often hear without actually listening, call it good and then fake it on the risers.

There is a better way to use Learning Tracks; a way that will help you learn and retain more after just a couple of weeks than you currently can in months of effort. Impossible? Nope, you already have the tools, now you just need the will and the skill. First, let's look at the principles of good music learning.

INVEST IN YOUR OWN SUCCESS

Just like with any endeavor or activity, you must be willing to invest the time and effort it takes to succeed. To successfully use your Learning Tracks, you must be prepared to practice fifteen to thirty minutes per song, per day, without distraction; no buts, no whining, no lame excuses.

And forget about "finding" time; you must "commit" to the time you need each day to learn a new song. We're all busy. We all have families, doctor's appointments, homes, things that compete for our attention.

We aren't obligated to sing barbershop; we do it because we love to do it and want to do it. So if you really want to sing barbershop well, then you must choose to make time.

Getting that half hour per song isn't as hard as it may seem; it can be as simple as turning off the TV, putting down your phone, stop surfing You Tube or skipping the pre-game show and instead tuning in at kickoff, first pitch, tip-off, whatever.

Adding to your repertoire more quickly is a worthwhile investment in your enjoyment of our hobby and the improvement of our chorus.

USE ALL OF YOUR LEARNING MATERIALS

The Learning Tracks you use weren't intended to be used to the exclusion of other tools. It is very important, especially in the beginning, to use the sheet music as a reference while you listen to the learning tracks. More on that to follow.

Make sure you have all the tools you need to succeed. You need:

- Your learning tracks (of course),
- The sheet music,
- Some device to play the Learning Tracks
- Headphones or earbuds to work with the stereo nature of the Tracks
- Water to drink
- A No. 2 pencil to make notes.

Always use a pencil, because pencil marks can be erased. Using a pen permanently defaces your music, and not taking notes at all is just plain absurd, don't you agree?

- Optional: Something to generate pitch (keyboard, phone, pitch pipe, etc)
- Optional: Tonal Energy (TE) Tuner App for your phone to verify pitch.

ENGAGE ALL OF YOUR SENSES

You can learn music more quickly and completely if you engage more than just your sense of hearing. Use your sheet music as you listen to the learning track. It doesn't matter whether you can read music, just engage your eyes.

Trace the ups and downs of the notes with your index finger.

During up-tunes and easy-beat numbers, tap one hand with the other in time to the music to stimulate your sense of touch and internalize the rhythm.

The more stimuli you have attached to the music, the better you will absorb and retain the material.

LISTEN CRITICALLY AND ASK QUESTIONS

It's far better to understand a song than it is to simply remember your part. And to know the song through and through, you need to delve into the music and listen carefully rather than just hear it and repeat it.

Instead of conditioning ourselves to understand and appreciate the song as a whole, we're simply storing a collection of words and notes and then pressing the mental PLAY button to spit back the Learning Track. That's not enough.

That's where the No. 2 pencil comes in. Circle any part of the sheet music where something unexpected, interesting, or confusing happens in the recording.

Listen to the track again in anticipation of the parts you circled. Ask yourself questions like; why is that swipe there? Does everyone breathe at once, or do some voice parts carry over where someone else breathes. etc.?

ACCELERATE YOUR LEARNING

Assuming you will be learning one song at a time with an average play-length of three minutes per song, this program will take about 30 minutes a day.

Keep in mind you will need to apply the principles already discussed so far, and your results will depend on how faithfully you execute the plan as outlined.

You need to be patient enough to follow the program without cheating and skipping steps. It's amazing how frequently we try to rush ourselves or hasten progress, only to end up wasting more time and yielding unsatisfactory results.

Step 1 - No Singing

To start, actively listen to the Full Mix to get a feel for the whole song. Listen to this at least two times with your eyes (and mouth) closed.

Then, intently listen to it again with your sheet music in front of you and read along (eyes open, mouth still closed). Mark any parts that are unexpected or that you feel may prove troublesome to learn.

Listen once more to the Full Mix Track (no singing or humming...I know you're tempted) in anticipation of these marked parts, and afterward, ask yourself why they were surprising or seemed problematic.

Now listen to your Part-Predominant Track two or three times, following your part on the sheet music. Mark any taken breaths and especially places where there are NOT breaths you expected.

Listen twice to the Lead Track (if you aren't a Lead) to get a sense for the melody of the song.

Finish by listening (still not singing) to the Full Mix track again to put it all back together in your head.

Step 2 - Singing at "Volume Zero"

First, intently listen to the Full Mix twice without singing along.

Then switch to your Part-Predominant Track. Listen to the track six times (at least) while following along silently with the sheet music and focusing on your line. In your head, try to work through the sticking points you marked previously. Engage other senses by moving your index finger up and down with the notes.

To finish, listen twice more to your Part-Predominant Track and lip synch while reading the sheet music. Yes, I realize you haven't sung a note yet; it's all part of the plan.

Step 3 - Hum and Bugs

Listen to your Part-Predominant Track two or three times and lip synch with sheet music in hand. Trace notes in the air using your index finger.

Then, play it three times more and hum along (finally). Make sure you can hear the voice on the track over your own.

Go through it again, humming, but stopping on the troublesome notes or passages and work through each two or three times.

Finally, hum along with your part straight through. Are there fewer glitches?

Step 4 - Start “Chunking”

Begin by lip synching to your Part-Predominant twice.

Then start cutting the song into logical and workable “chunks”. Think: Introduction, Verse 1, Verse 2, Chorus, Key Change, Tag, etc. Pick a section to start with...it doesn’t have to be the beginning of the song. Make sure you start just before the section you are concentrating on and finish slightly after. You need to practice through these transitions so your “chunks” will overlap and fit together.

LISTEN (No singing) to your part in the “chunk” once or twice, focusing on the contours of the notes (ups and downs) and rhythms. Follow your sheet music and use your index finger to match the intervals.

Then try to sing along, circling spots you feel you may have made a mistake. Use the TE Tuner App to check your pitch accuracy on pick-ups, difficult interval jumps, posts, ends of phrases, difficult chords, etc

LISTEN again, checking for your trouble spots..

Sing along again. Check accuracy with your tuner app where necessary.

Repeat until you’ve got it. Don’t move on until you do. You may only get through one small section in this one session.

Before you quit, listen to the next chunk you plan to work on once or twice. Decide if you have enough time to LEARN the section in this practice.

Step 5, 6, 7, etc. - Keep on Chunking

Repeat the process in Step 4 as often as is necessary to feel confident on each chunk. Remember to put extra focus on the transitions from one chunk to the next.

Last Steps - Put It Together

LISTEN to your Part-Predominant and lip sync all the way through. Identify things that surprise you, as that would mean you were expecting to hear something different. If so, go back and review that chunk.

Try to write all the words on a separate piece of paper without looking at your printed music. If you have trouble, listen to the Full Mix while watching the words.

Then try writing them again without looking. Stay on this step until you are successful.

LISTEN to the Full Mix and lip sync the whole way through, thinking your part. Do you get lost, or lose your part at times? If so, you don't know it yet. Identify those spots/transitions and go over them again.

WEAN YOURSELF OFF OF THE LEARNING TRACK

Once you believe you know the song, you should be ready to fly on your own.

Singing the music in a quartet is the best way to firm up your knowledge of the music.

Before the chorus starts rehearsing the song, use your Part-Omitted Track (you can also remove the ear bud or turn off the channel with your part on your Part-Predominant Track) or get three other guys and sing that baby in a quartet. At this point, you're more used to hearing the song as a quartet number anyway. When you can get through the whole song a least three times, in a quartet (real or virtual), without losing your way, then you can say you have learned the song.

SHARPEN UP

To really solidify your harmony contribution to the chorus, listen to another part than your own in isolation and sing against it. If you are not a Lead, sing against the Lead (melody) part. If you are a Lead, singing a duet with the Bass part will be helpful. You can isolate their part using the appropriate channel of their Part-Predominant Track.

BRUSHING UP

Once the chorus starts singing the song together, things will change. Breath points will move, be added, or be removed. Tuning suggestions, vowel choices, and many other things will need to be marked. Have your pencil, and an eraser, and be ready to make those changes. Review the videos of previous rehearsals to catch and transcribe any dynamics and interpretations that you missed. It doesn't matter that it'll be different from the learning tracks, you don't need them anymore.