

BEST PRACTICES FOR SACRED HARP KEYING

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1. The key's letter name is what determines its pitch.

- Don't worry about accidentals (A-flat is the same as A)
- Think of D as the lowest key, and C as the highest key.
- The most common keys are F major (= E minor) and A (major = minor)
- Some people recommend having a few reference songs, especially for those two keys. It's good to check yourself against recordings, especially recent all-digital recordings where there's no chance of pitch problems due to tape or record speed fluctuations.

2. Sound the key confidently and in a full voice.

- Singing in a full voice helps you judge the key more accurately. A note you sound tentatively or softly might feel higher in your voice than it really is, causing you to give a key that is too low.
- Sounding the key with confidence helps the class feel confident in the key. It also helps you to feel confident, which will help you key more accurately.
- If people are keying under their breath, ask them to stop. It's hard enough to pull the right key out of the air without being distracted by what you hear around the square.

3. Listen to the song on the notes, and don't be afraid to adjust.

- Pay particular attention to the high notes in the tenor and treble parts. They should be high enough to pop out, but not so high that they burn out the singers' voices.
- Don't worry too much about the basses or altos, even if they complain. Their parts are often awkwardly written.
- Especially at a practice singing when you're learning to key, it's better to adjust the key if you think you've made a mistake. Part of developing confidence in keying is having good judgment when you listen to the song on the notes.

4. Don't sound notes that aren't in the first chord.

- Often the first chord consists of just 1, or 1 and 3, or 1 and 5 -- don't sing the whole tonic triad in this case.
- The exception to this rule is when the tonic is not present in the first chord. Always sound the tonic.

5. Do sound every note in the first chord.

- Most keyers start with the tonic note, and end with the first note of the tenor part.
- If you're a man, give the alto note an octave below where they'll sing it. If it's a low note in the female register, you should sound it as a low note in your register. (Likewise, female keyers should give the bass note an octave above where they'll sing it.)

Exceptional openings

- 57 and 414 — major with fa-1, la-3, la-6
- 35 — same, but with la-6 on the bottom
- 378 and 399b — minor that opens on relative major

Exceptional keys (these are by no means all of them)

- 47b — not too high, especially if you're going to sing all the verses and take the repeat.
- 49b — goose it up to A; the trebles can take it and the tenor's written low.
- 79 — should be a nice high F
- 87 — in G
- 99 — take it up a half-step
- 105 — sing it in G
- 107 — should be in B minor
- 144 — this works fine in A, but it's better a bit higher.
- 147 — these songs both needs to go way up: sing 147t in E and 147b in a high D.
- 148 — sing it in B
- 162 — take it down to a high F unless the class is all warmed up
- 178, 179, 180, 181, 182 — none of these have any room on the top; err on the low side
- 186 — bring it up to E, or even a low F.
- 212 — written way too high; bring it down to B.
- 282 — lower by a step or so to accommodate the high note in the chorus.
- 288 — nice low E
- 290 — no higher than A, or the trebles will kill you
- 299 — take it up to F if the class is hot
- 312t — bump it all the way up to G
- 342 — low G at most, to make room for all the high notes
- 362 — take it down a hair
- 384 — only sing it in E if the class is hot; otherwise D
- 390 — closer to A
- 414 — down to a low F, or even E if the class is tired
- 436 — has a little room on the top end
- 448b — take this down a bit; most people prefer this song to sound and feel calming
- 452 — this must be sung in A if you don't want to die of boredom
- 474 and 475 — both have to be brought up a step
- 507 — in D, especially if you're going to sing the notes.
- 535 — bring up to F or even G (cf. 147 and 452)
- 551 — sing in G

SOME REFERENCE TUNES FOR KEYS

HIGH

39 SHARPSBURG. C.M.



160 TURN, SINNER, TURN. L.M.



31 NINETY-THIRD PSALM. S.M.



MED-HI

68 ORTONVILLE. C.M.



47 IDUMEA. S.M.



34 ST. THOMAS. S.M.



MED-LO

101 HOLY CITY. 6s, 7s.



39 DETROIT. C.M.

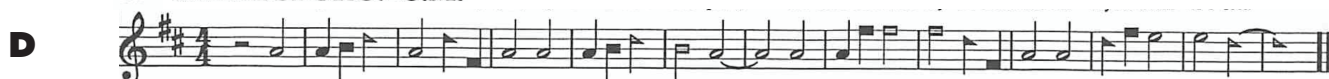


37 LIVERPOOL. C.M.



LOW

39 SHARPSBURG. C.M.



160 TURN, SINNER, TURN. L.M.



31 NINETY-THIRD PSALM. S.M.

