



# Imperfect Harmony: Singing Through Life's Sharps and Flats

*Stacy Horn*

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## **Imperfect Harmony: Singing Through Life's Sharps and Flats** Stacy Horn

Why do we sing? For Stacy Horn, singing in a community choir the Choral Society of Grace Church in New York is the one thing in her life that never fails to take her to a transcendent place and remind her that everything good is possible. She is not particularly religious and (she'll be the first to point out) her voice isn't exactly the stuff of legend, but like thousands of other amateur chorus members throughout this country and the world, singing with other people makes her happy. As Horn relates her funny and profound experiences as a choir member, she treats us to an eclectic history of group singing and the music that moves us, whether we're hearing it for the first time or the hundredth; the dramatic stories of conductors and composers; and discoveries from the new science of singing, including the remarkable physical benefits of song. Life can be hard, battles continue to rage all around us, and by midlife most of us have had our share of disappointments. Here is the unexpected story of one woman who nevertheless has found joy and strength in the weekly ritual of singing some of the greatest music humanity has ever produced.

## **Imperfect Harmony: Singing Through Life's Sharps and Flats Details**

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# From Reader Review *Imperfect Harmony: Singing Through Life's Sharps and Flats* for online ebook

## Julia says

This is an intimate look at what it's like to sing in a chorus. For musicians like me who love playing an instrument and listening to music (just not singing it), this was a real treat. Stacy Horn shares her knowledge and experiences as a member of the Choral Society of Grace Church in New York City. She seamlessly weaves personal and professional stories together in a charming memoir that more than once sent me to the internet to look up a piece of music. I learned so much about the dynamics of choral singing, the arrangement of vocalists - the intricate grouping and pairing of the vocals mesmerized me - and it helps me hear music in a whole new way. Not only did I buy a copy for myself, but I've given this book as a gift to friends and family members who love to sing. Part music memoir and part music lesson, this book will enthrall music lovers of all kinds.

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## Mayda says

*When you sing, you cannot be sad for long.* This quote from the book comes from a British study and sets the tone for this memoir. I was under the mistaken impression that this book would be about the author's experiences in church choirs. Not so! The author was fortunate enough to be part of the Choral Society of Grace Church, a chorus that rehearses in the church, but was not part of the services there. They were not learning anthems to sing every Sunday to enhance the worship experience; rather they perform three concerts a year. At first, they were a line item in the church's budget. Later, they were independent of even that. Still amateurs in the strict sense of the word, they were not only not paid, they had to pay dues to belong. However, in spite of the author's claims to be less than professional, their leadership and performances were quite professional. This book is filled fascinating music history, charming personal reminiscences, and interesting tidbits about music. While singing alone is fun, singing with others brings a certain kind of joy and accomplishment not found any other way. It is heartening to discover that it matters not if you are a true professional in an opera company or a fireman in a small town chorus or an untrained alto in a church choir: all can reap the benefits – emotional, mental and physical – of singing together with others. This memoir will undoubtedly find a place on the book shelf of musicians, but non-musicians will find it interesting as well.

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## Suzy says

I loved the prospect of this book: A sort of "Bowling Alone" memoir of Horn's experience of singing in a choir focusing on the meaning and importance of the choir membership to her well-being and that of all the other members. (Horn is an atheist who sings in a choir of well-established protestant church in NYC.) By her own admission, she is but an average singer, but she is avid about her long-standing stint in the choir. Horn writes in a very open, conversational manner, somewhat reminiscent of Anne LaMott. In fact, she bares her vulnerabilities to an extent that I found to be a bit wincy (even though--or because?--I could relate). She focuses variously on pieces sung by the choir and their history, composers, historical choruses/choirs, the science of music and the brain (quite interesting) and her own journey, as well as that of others. Much of the book has an academic tone quite natural to Horn I suspect. I had high expectations of *IH*, and for the most part I liked it well enough, but I did feel that her neurosis was at times distracting.

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## Monika says

Last week, I was browsing NetGalley for the very first time. I was so excited to find "Imperfect Harmony" by Stacy Horn. The subtitle and description grabbed me immediately; I had to read this book. I was thrilled to receive an email letting me know my request had been approved.

Professionally, I'm an instrumentalist, not a singer. I'm in the flute section of a symphony, I work as a church pianist, I teach private lessons, and I play chamber music, weddings, and other gigs. The church choir where I work is small, and often there aren't enough altos to carry the part. So in the past year or so, I've tried my best to help from the piano whenever I can, singing along with my amateur-but-nice-enough voice; and I've discovered that I love to sing! So it was interesting to read *Imperfect Harmony* from the perspective of a professional in classical music, yet also as a (very) amateur singer.

Horn's experiences in the Choral Society of Grace Church are vividly brought to life in her book. I often felt that I was right there in the room, in the choir, having the very same experiences. She seamlessly and naturally interlaces music history with her stories. Before I knew it, I realized I'd just read pages of - gasp! - music history, and didn't find one bit of it dry. I couldn't stop turning the pages. I wish my own college music history texts had been as captivating. Horn also does a wonderful job describing more advanced musical concepts in layman's terms, which helps to keep the book accessible to all music lovers. She cites studies that give insight into why singing feels so good and how it affects us emotionally and physiologically. Even with the inclusion of history, a bit of music theory, and science, the flow of her words is never once broken. The reading never felt bogged down.

I cried while reading stories about how song came forth, often spontaneously, out of moments of deep grief to help carry people through. I laughed while reading some of the interactions between choir members, especially the "where to sit" and "someone's in my chair" antics. I texted my soprano best friend during that chapter and asked her, "Do you all have assigned seats in Choral Society?" She replied with, "No... but no one better ever sit in my chair!" I highlighted on my Nook like mad, taking special note of the many thought-provoking quotes by famous composers, conductors, and music educators; gems of knowledge and experience that I'm sure I'll pass on to my own music students.

*Imperfect Harmony* inspired me to listen more often, too. More often than I care to admit, I find myself listening to music out of necessity: I'll soon be performing the piece and need to study the score, or I have a student learning a piece and I need to get to know it again. Horn's honest and heartfelt appreciation of each piece highlighted in the book compelled me to find recordings of each, put them in one playlist, and simply take in the music. We professionals forget to do that at times.

I have a few friends who will be receiving this book as a gift when it is released (April 9, 2013, Algonquin Books). If you love to sing with others...actually, disregard "to sing." If you love making music with others, you will love this book.

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## Claire says

This book really 'spoke' to me! A beautifully written account of a woman's 30+ year career of singing with

the Choral Society of Grace Church in New York. She captures so many of the feelings I have with singing in a choir- the struggles, challenges, but most of all the joy coming together as a group to create beautiful music. The author takes us through a journey of some of the greatest choral music ever written, while also providing great insight into the history of music, singing groups, conductors and composers. I found the part about Eric Whitacre's 'Virtual Choir' extremely moving, and I have to say that his pieces are some of the most beautiful I have ever sung (have had the pleasure of singing 4 of his works in choir!) Anyone who has ever been in choir, or who has thought about being in choir, or even is curious to know why I find it so addictive and pleasurable, read this book! So many great passages about the joys of singing, why it makes you feel good, and also much about the great health benefits!

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## **Angela Risner says**

Stacy Horn is a writer by trade, but has found a secondary home in the Choral Society of Grace Church for the past 30 years. She doesn't dream of stealing the scene with a solo nor does she desire to one day conduct the choir. She simply enjoys coming together with fellow music lovers and singing.

Having sung in choirs from my early childhood through young adulthood, I loved her observations about the music, the feelings, and yes, how first sopranos feel about the rest of the choir. I didn't always enjoy my time in the choir; I hated waiting around while the rest of the choir learned their parts. I had the melody most of the time, so I had the easiest part to learn. Plus, I was a vocal performance major in college - I wanted to sing my operatic arias by myself! But we had to be in a performance ensemble and at that time, choir was it. Ohhh, the drama of youth!

I remember the hard work that went into preparing for each performance. We practiced 4 days a week. We toured during Spring Break. We sang in just about every language - from Latin to Japanese to Swedish to Swahili. It was a big commitment. I do enjoy listening to choirs now, though, and even go back to my college for some of their concerts (Capital University Chapel Choir - who took two gold medals home in the 2012 World Choir Games.) I'm happy to be in the audience, enjoying the fruits of their labor.

Some of the pieces Horn writes about I've sung; others were new to me and I enjoyed learning about them. I also enjoyed her research into the effects of singing on our moods, our brains, even our character. I found it interesting that many in her choir enjoyed singing with accompaniment over a capella singing, which is what I always preferred.

Some favorite moments:

- As long as I'm singing, though, it's as if I'm inhabiting another reality. I become temporarily suspended in a world where everything bad is bearable, and everything good feels possible.
- Because for the past few decades, as boyfriends come and go, jobs come and go, cats live and die, a stay in rehab when I was thirty, depression, broken engagements, and the deaths of those I love, there has always been this: The Choral Society of Grace Church.
- Life is hard, battles of all kinds continue to rage around us, and disappointments accumulate. But singing is the one thing in my life that never fails to take me to where disenchantment is almost nonexistent and feeling good is pretty much guaranteed.
- She worried that she'd be "the only Jew singing about Jesus," but quickly discovered that beliefs and faith within the choir were all over the religious/nonreligious map.
- "The wonderful thing about the amateur chorus," the conductor Robert Shaw once said, "is that nobody can buy its attendance at rehearsals, or the sweat, eyestrain and fatigue that go along with the glow; and nobody

but the most purposive and creative of music minds - from Bach in both directions - can invite and sustain its devotion."

- If it were up to the choir, solos would be greatly shortened or eliminated entirely. There are exceptions, and if the soloists are brilliant, it's not quite so tedious a wait, but for the most part solos are a barely tolerated side-trip while we wait for the good parts, Us.
- In other words: life is hard, singing is heartening. And singing with other people, in particular.
- How are we supposed to count this? It's in seven. Is that even rhythmically allowed?
- I've been a soprano 1 for my entire choral life. That's the part that sings the highest notes, the best notes, and the best part of the best notes: the melody. I loved being a soprano 1. It also made me feel proud. I was on top. Number one. But when I finally found my name, it was under the column for soprano 2s, the part that sings beneath the soprano 1s. I'd been demoted.
- The best notes secured for themselves, they were completely oblivious to my misery. They barely paid attention to what the rest of the choir had to do. I knew, because I used to be one of them. As far as they were concerned the rest of us sang some insignificant notes that they passed by on their way to the beautiful, soaring top. Why did all the other people in the choir even bother coming?
- Singing had punctuated all the best moments of my life. And created them.
- "Four voice parts," John once said, "four personality disorders."
- While it sometimes feels as if religion only separates people, the music brings us together.
- Ralph Vaughan Williams once said, to a group of school children, "Music will enable you to see past facts to the very essence of things in a way which science cannot do. The arts are the means by which we can look through the magic casements and see what lies beyond."
- Almost every study of singing I've read comes to the same conclusions: singing feels great and it's good for you. It decreases feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Singing also makes you smarter. Children who sing in choirs get better grades, according to a 2009 study by Chorus America. Choristers are also nicer. They were found to volunteer more than the general public and to give more money to charity.
- Regarding harmony, one study indicated that harmonization activated the section of the brain referred to as Brodmann's area 38, which is one of the parts of the brain that is affected earliest by Alzheimer's disease.
- "You won't have any instruments to bail you out," John repeatedly warned us. All we had was each other. But that was what would save us, he tried to tell us. "No matter how much you practice," he told us, "no singer in the room can sing choral music on their own. You need each other."

Highly recommend.

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## **Melody says**

I picked this up (free at ALA Midwinter) because one of my dearest friends is a singer in a choir, and my son also sang when he was in high school. I enjoyed parts of this very much. I loved Horn's descriptions of what it is like to sing, how the feelings one has when creating music are different from (and probably superior to) the feelings one gets when listening to music. I really enjoyed her discussions of various pieces of music, and the music history in general. I didn't like the memoir parts nearly so well. 2.5

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## **Laura says**

It's all about the blend. I've always known that; felt it. There is a unique joy in combining your voice with those of others. Stacy Horn shares her motivations, doubts, frustrations and happiness on the path to choral

harmony. Included are the history and science of musicology. The book left me even more enthused about singing weekly in an ensemble.

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## **Kate H says**

I loved this. I would have given it 5 stars but for one problem: the book is divided up into chapters, some of which reference musical pieces which are then described in great detail. If you are a general reader, or even a choral singer with limited knowledge of choral pieces (i.e. me), it is hard to fully understand what Horn is talking about. Fortunately, there is Spotify and I used it to look up some of the pieces and listen to them.

Unfortunately, I was disappointed in some of the pieces that Horn raved about--I think what she wrote about was the experience of singing the pieces and really getting to know them. If I just listen to an ancient German requiem, I'm not getting the same feeling that she describes.

But here's where the book excels: in its description of singing with a choir, not so much being in choir with people as a social activity, but actually singing in harmony with a group of people, I agree--it is one of life's greatest pleasures. And Horn devotes a fascinating section where she explains what happens, scientifically, when we sing in harmony, listen to harmony, or even think about music.

I had thought about this months ago, when I was watching an old Bing Crosby movie, "Going My Way," where Bing rounds up all the bad kids in the neighborhood and transforms them into a Catholic choir. It's hokey and contrived--but when the boys sing, I get shivers up and down my spine, which now thanks to the internet, and this book, I realize are surges of dopamine.

Although I am getting on in years, Horn also points out that there are plenty of "choir geeks" of all ages out there. And perhaps the greatest geek, as well as the most talented, forward-thinking, youngest and best looking is Eric Whitacre! I didn't even think of his pieces as in the same group with Beethoven's masses...but Horn is right on: his works are shiver inducing-pieces of incredible music and the concept of a "virtual choir" is unbelievable. If you think you're not into choir music, go to YouTube immediately and look him up.

On another note, I was sorry that Horn wrote about the sadness in her personal life--not sad that she wrote about it, but sad that she was sad: she is truly talented and this book made me very happy.

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## **John says**

I sing in a choir. My wife doesn't. I was only on page 42 of this book when I said to her, "If you ever want to know why I love singing in choir so much - read this book!"

This book is the best expression I've read of the joy of singing together in groups. I laughed out loud repeatedly, I shivered with shared experience. Throughout, I kept thinking to myself, "I know exactly what she means!"

Her descriptions of the physical effects - the visceral sensation - of singing harmony are especially powerful.

If I have one fault to pick with this book, it's that it feels a bit too fragmentary overall. In her "Prelude", Ms.

Horn states that she intended this book to be an eclectic collection of stories from her experience, stories from the history of choral singing and its music, and what surprisingly little we know about the science of singing.

So criticizing this book for being "fragmentary" isn't really fair. And the through-line for all of it is the joy and wonder of choral singing, and all the gifts it gives to those who participate.

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### **Gail says**

As one who sings in an auditioned volunteer choir, this book hits all the right notes!!! I am completely swept up by the melodic phrases, the history of choral societies and the humility that is achieved by singing.

I hope there is an encore and repeat performance!

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### **Barbara says**

I love to sing and envy Stacy Horn's experience of singing under the guidance of a conductor whose rigorous approach to his task I admire without reservation. She has interesting things to say about works her impressive choir has performed. The thrill of part singing is beautifully described (with references to the neuroscience that helps explain all the delight).

I am recommending this inspiring book to chorister friends (the Kindle edition is going for AU \$1.44).

I'm taking off a star because of the (nice) author's self-absorption and humourlessness.

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### **Becky says**

First: typos. More than one. Yikes. Second: as more a collection of short stories than anything else, the book never seemed to me to strike the right balance between personal experience and connection to the rich history of choral tradition. The honest personal reflection seemed a bit too honest and, at times, narcissistic. More often than not, the personal stories detracted from best parts of the book, which are the interviews with composers or experts and the impressive amount of history and context for each piece. My favorite chapter, by far, is on Lauridsen's O Magnum, perhaps because I love the song so much, but I also think the tone in that chapter was the most natural and unaffected. In all, it's a decent book. The perspective of a non-believer who almost exclusively sings religious music was interesting and insightful.

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### **Jacqueline Masumian says**

Here's why this book deserves a 5-star rating (Amazing). It's amazing that someone could write a book about choral singing that is so much fun and so interesting! When I bought the book, I was expecting something dry about how to be a better choral singer. But what I got was a reminder of the joy and fun of standing next to other singers and making beautiful harmony. As a choral singer, I found the book delightful.



Stacy Horn provides a fascinating narrative about choral pieces she has sung and the excitement and joy she receives from them. Her prose is excellent with a clear authorial voice. Her enthusiasm for choral singing and love of music permeate the book and inspire the reader to learn more about the pieces she describes and to more fully appreciate the choral experience.

This book is a must-read for not only choral singers but for choral conductors, as well. For that matter, anyone who appreciates choral music would enjoy it. There are interesting anecdotes about specific pieces and many tidbits about the history of choral singing and the role of the conductor. Stacy Horn's work is a pleasure to read.

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## Laysee says

The merry month of May was not merry for me. I lost my singing voice to a tenacious upper respiratory tract infection, which meant I was not able to be at my usual Thursday evening choir rehearsals, often the high point of my workweek. I was delighted therefore to be immersed in the world of choral music and choristers' experience so rapturously captured in Stacy Horn's **Imperfect Harmony**. Horn's foray into musicology, history of choral societies in America, background of composers and their masterpieces, and the science of neural rapport is enlivened by personal anecdotes, some of which I found moving.

In 1982, during one of the lowest points of her life, Stacy Horn successfully auditioned and started to sing with the Choral Society of Grace Church (a volunteer community choir) in downtown New York. Of this experience, she said, *"When I first joined the choir I was only looking to soothe a broken heart. Instead, I found something that invariably transcends every misfortune I've faced and makes me happy. Every week, music dependably and effectively silenced my roulette wheel of worry and self/doubt, and that is not a small thing. Nor is it the only thing."* The power of music to bring comfort and healing is also evident in the recovery effort in New York in the aftermath of 9/11. Horn reported that a soot-covered rescue worker started to sing and later volunteer musicians showed up daily to play instruments or to sing.

Horn, who claims to have a mediocre voice, wrote unabashedly and honestly about her humbling experience singing under the baton of an accomplished but very exacting music director. I was thrilled to recognize in her description of the choral society at Grace Church the idiosyncrasies and antics of choir behavior that, to my knowledge, no one has written about. Knowing where to sit in a choir can be a challenge to a new chorister. Horn said, *"Finding a seat of any kind, however, has become a delicate and sometimes dangerously fraught operation."* Choristers tend to be quite territorial about where they sit at a rehearsal and woe betide the newbie who plonks himself or herself in the wrong chair. Familiar, too, are the insecurities that surface when choristers are sometimes asked to sing a lower voice part. A Soprano 1 may feel diminished or 'demoted' if, for one program, she is told to sing Soprano 2. Laughable behavior but they are real! I love reading how Horn marked her music – 'Bliss Ahead' – to prepare herself for a section of the music she was looking forward to singing.

**Imperfect Harmony** is well researched. Horn introduces the reader to the great choral works and life of eminent composers (Johannes Brahms, George Frideric Handel, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Josef Haydn) and more recent composers (Franz Xaver Biebl, Leonard Bernstein, Morten Lauridsen, Eric Whitacre). I learned that Handel's Messiah was composed in twenty-four days! Having recently sung Bernstein's Chichester Psalms, I understood her frustration with the insane time signatures (*'How are we supposed to count this? It's in seven. And then in ten!!'*) and the hard work that went into rehearsals before what sounded strange and dissonant became harmonious and heavenly. Horn also wrote extensively about the benefits of choral singing

that are informed by the latest scientific research. Joining a choir enhances neuroplasticity because music increases gray matter and the number and strength of neural connections in the brain. Singing also reduces stress, which can aid in healing and can improve the immune response. It is encouraging to know that *‘Finally, when all other memories are gone, victims of Alzheimer’s are still able to sing songs from their long distant youth. Music is the last thing to go.’*

What impressed me most of all is how music transcends faith and religion in its ability to reach the human soul. Interestingly enough, composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams and John Rutter have composed some of the most glorious sacred music ever written despite the fact that they do not embrace the Christian faith. Horn herself is an atheist and yet sacred music moves her deeply and connects her both to herself and humanity at large. Perhaps, music originates in the heavenly realms and is the language of angels.

Renown choral conductor Robert Shaw says that *‘the basic premise of music-making is unity - and unanimity - and, in its nonliturgical sense, communion.’* The beauty of harmony brings about an astonishing communion among those who make music together. Few things, in my experience, bring such certain and irresistible joy. **Imperfect Harmony** is a book that hits all the right notes and will resonate with music lovers and especially individuals who sing or have sung in choirs or choral groups.

Special thanks to Winston, my singing pal and gifted duet partner, who knows this is my cup of tea.

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