



A guide for BABS choruses on the inclusion of singers with hearing loss

As a disability, hearing loss is invisible. It takes many forms. It affects people of all ages. But because it often develops in older age there are likely to be people already in your club who've experienced some form of hearing loss. And because it can develop very gradually there may even be some singers who are unaware that their hearing is not what it once was.

So how is hearing loss defined?

According to the World Health Organisation's definition a person who is not able to hear as well as someone with normal hearing – hearing thresholds of 20 dB or better in both ears – is said to have hearing loss. Hearing loss may be mild, moderate, severe or profound. It can affect one ear or both ears and leads to difficulty in hearing conversational speech or loud sounds,

'Can people with hearing loss match pitch and blend with other singers?'

Some people hold the belief that those with hearing loss can't match pitch or blend with other singers. This might be the case for particular types of hearing loss but certainly not all.

To explain:

Hearing loss and singing.

- The 'standard' hearing test in the UK checks from 250Hz to 7kHz or 8kHz (7,000 or 8,000Hz).

- Middle C is 262Hz (i.e. just above the lowest frequency usually tested) and the top of the female Tenor range is around G5 (783Hz), so standard hearing tests will test hearing way above the normal singing frequency range.
- A diagnosis of high frequency hearing loss may mean that someone needs hearing aids in order to understand speech but it doesn't mean that they can't hear well enough in the frequency range where they need to match pitch and blend with other singers.
- Even so, the ends of some words and phrases can still pose challenges for some. One singer with hearing loss told us that unsynchronised 'ssss' sounds at the end of words were a very real problem and explained "Until I got my most recent set of hearing aids, which significantly improved my higher frequency hearing, I used to consciously avoid singing 's' at the end of words because I couldn't hear what others were singing."

The Onset of Hearing Loss

Many people are happy to acknowledge a loss of hearing, especially where others respond with a positive attitude and a willingness to help. But the stigma which still too often surrounds hearing loss can sometimes also lead to a reluctance from some people to acknowledge they have the condition. They may not even realise they have hearing loss until it starts causing 'issues'. For example, it might seem to them that others around them are 'mumbling' or 'speaking too quietly'. Even then, it can sometimes be difficult to acknowledge and actually seek help. If you do encounter situations like this try to be understanding and patient as the person concerned comes to terms with changing circumstances. For some there may also be a reluctance to use hearing aids in a way which wouldn't apply if they needed glasses. Perhaps it's because hearing aids are so often associated with getting older.

So what can we do to maximise the inclusion of our singers with hearing loss?

Be positive. Be aware and be prepared to do what you can to help in a variety of ways. Some people may be deaf in just one ear. Others may have lost some hearing in both ears. Be flexible and willing to be directed to where they can hear you best. When it comes to communication many people with hearing loss find they can use lip-reading to help follow a conversation. Try not to cover your mouth when speaking to someone with hearing loss. If you're asked to repeat something it's important not to get frustrated. Don't become distracted during the conversation and let your attention wander elsewhere. That will only make communication more

difficult between you. Position yourself where they can best hear you and if you're unsure don't be afraid to ask.

For those using hearing aids a loop system can be of advantage in a public space. But in some other spaces people with hearing loss might need assistance. For example, a lot of background noise during a rehearsal break or in the pub afterwards could prevent them from following a conversation. Do bear this in mind and be prepared for appropriate action – perhaps seek a quieter space.

Difficulty hearing a full conversation can itself tend towards a sense of isolation. If someone is really struggling you might think about perhaps offering to write things down on your phone or adapting your approach to communication in some other way.

On the Risers

As we've discovered a lot of people with hearing loss consciously or subconsciously rely on lip-reading to understand what people are saying, so it's important that everyone can see the MD's face clearly when they're speaking to the chorus. Here are a few tips for the MD:

- Face the chorus when you're speaking to them.
- Don't stand with a sunny window behind you as your face will be in shadow and people won't be able to see what you're saying.
- Don't put your hands or anything else in front of your mouth when speaking. ('Splendid' moustaches, not often seen in the barbershop world nowadays, can seriously obscure lip movements!)
- Make sure everyone has your full attention before speaking. People blink and sometimes look away momentarily. If they rely on lip reading, they might miss the first word or two of an instruction, e.g. "Leads only". Maybe consider preceding instructions with a 'throwaway' word or two, e.g. "OK", to make sure everyone has your full attention?

Other ways MDs can support people with hearing loss:

- Some peoples' hearing loss and/or the way their hearing aids are configured may mean that some positions on the stack may be 'better' than others, especially when it comes to hearing their own voice and not being drowned out by the voices around them. For example, someone with profound high frequency hearing loss may not be comfortable with a Tenor singing behind them because their voice might sound over-amplified and they might not be able to hear the other singers around them.

- It's therefore really important that people with hearing loss feel encouraged to speak up if they're uncomfortable or struggling where they're standing and that they are allowed to try out different stack positions to learn where they can have a better hearing experience and sing confidently.

And in the break - Breaks in rehearsals are often an opportunity to have a good chat with chorus friends. Someone with hearing loss might find it challenging to take part in those conversations because of the background noise, so may just 'sit out' until the singing resumes. They might be quite happy doing that (Concentrating on listening can be quite hard work, so it could be a welcome break) but they might feel isolated from the other chorus members and would appreciate someone coming to have a 1:1 chat with them.

In general – If you're addressing a fellow singer who has hearing loss please make sure you have their attention before talking to them. Depending on the situation, simply saying their name may be enough but if that doesn't work, a light tap on the shoulder or arm would be acceptable to most people. If someone misses the first few words of a comment because they don't realise you're talking to them, they may totally misunderstand what you're saying or may not have a clue what you're talking about.'

Making teach tracks more hearing loss user-friendly

People with certain types of hearing loss can sometimes struggle to learn songs from the teach tracks provided. When this happens they may simply 'walk away' because learning the songs is 'just too difficult'.

Others will simply "struggle on" - embarrassed to talk about their difficulties and wrongly believing that no help is available.

The experience of one BABS member with hearing loss.

Most hearing aid (HA) users will have Bluetooth-enabled HAs (they're now widely provided by the NHS). This enables HA users to stream stereo tracks into their HAs, just like earbuds.

Using my own hearing loss as an example, when listening to part-predominant (part left or part right) tracks:

- I like to have my part in my right (better) ear and the other 3 parts in my left ear.

- The other 3 parts track is often too quiet to hear in my left ear, so that needs to be amplified.
- It can sometimes be useful for people (including those with good hearing), to have tracks slowed down to make the learning process easier.

These are really simple adjustments to make and take just a few minutes (e.g. using Audacity) but they make teach tracks much more accessible. It's widely acknowledged that 'listening' can be quite hard work for people with hearing loss because of the extra energy it takes, so anything that makes 'listening' easier is very welcome.

It's also worth noting that because high frequency loss reduces speech clarity, people with deteriorating high frequency hearing may start to struggle to learn song lyrics by listening to teach tracks. If that's the way they've 'always learnt songs', it's possible they may think this is a memory issue, rather than a hearing issue, and they may need encouragement to refer to the sheet music to help with lyric learning. However, this is something that some people can be quite reluctant to do because they 'don't read music'.

Try to remain sensitive to the needs of your fellow singers and, if you can, find work-rounds to help with difficulties they may be having. It'll pay dividends when it comes to recruitment and retention of members for your club.

In conclusion

Many people with hearing loss enjoy singing, sing well and with a range of help and support they make a valuable contribution to the life of their clubs. As with all singers it is vital their needs are addressed in an open, honest and positive fashion. The best way to deal with issues which might arise is to seek solutions through discussion with the person concerned and MDs, music team members and the club's DEI&B rep should be ready and approachable.

For future reference it's always useful to keep notes of how situations were handled and the solutions found.

Details of the law regarding clubs and DEI&B can be found in our first paper on Sight Loss. We're hoping in future to include

a link to a more general page on the topic.

For now we hope this paper has been of help. If you have any further questions or comments please contact the DEI&B team.

Further Reading

On deafness and hearing loss

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss#:~:text=People%20who%20are%20hard%20of,use%20sign%20language%20for%20communication>

On Communication

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3678307/>

On Diversity, Equality, Including and Belonging.

<https://careadvice.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/information-and-advice/why-is-equality-diversity-important/>

