

Background Vocals in Worship: Good Practices

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Background Singing

Be a Servant

The #1 way to lead is to serve. This is not just an action but a state-of-mind - a perspective on our place and our roles. A humble heart is one capable of leading with confidence but also capable of being a team-player and a small part in the bigger picture.

Warming Up

Make it a priority to learn vocal warm-ups before singing in rehearsal or for a service. This will only strengthen your vocal abilities and give you longevity as a singer. Techniques for warming up are different for every singer, find one that suits you best. Arpeggios, scales, mouth and breath exercises, singing in lower keys, etc. Don't over-sing in rehearsal and tire yourself out. Make sure you can properly hear yourself so that you do not over-sing and damage your vocal cords.

Dynamics

Sometimes all a vocal melody or a song needs is the proper swelling between notes and words that enhances the content of the song. Knowing when and how to swell smoothly and evenly can strengthen the impact a song has on the listener or participant. As a song rises and falls, so should your vocals. As your leader's vocals swell dynamically, so should yours. Breathiness and volume require vocal control and stamina which requires time and practice.

Vocal Matching

Listen to your leader and the style in which they sing on each song. Mimic their style. If your leader isn't using vibrato, don't use vibrato. If they are using vibrato, don't use vibrato - it can be distracting in the mix. Avoid singing with your nose or your throat, use breath support from your diaphragm to create a softer tone that blends well underneath a lead vocalist. A nasal-y or throaty voice has a harsh timbre and tone that can be distracting in the mix as a background, supporting vocalist.

Blending (Hard Consonants)

As a backing vocalist, your main goal is to blend with and support the lead singer and make him/her sound amazing. Pay attention to the words and phrases you are singing in every song and soften your consonants so that you do not stand out - when everyone sings a "T" or "S" sound in a song a fraction of a second off from one another, it sounds like a stutter and can be distracting. Let the lead singer sing the consonants boldly, you sing your consonants softly or maybe even not at all...

Changing English

Sit down with a pen and the lyrics to the song. Highlight the phrases you will sing with the lead singer and then cross out the letters in each word you don't need to sing. It will almost end up sounding like a different language but it's a crucial step in supporting and blending with your lead singer.

Choice Words and Phrases

As stated above, you don't need to sing every word, letter or phrase. Look at the content of the song and enhance the impact of the content on the listener or participant by singing along with the phrases that carry the most weight lyrically and melodically. Give the song space, let it breathe by allowing for moments where only one vocalist is heard in the mix.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Proper preparation prevents poor performance. The better you know the song, the more confidence you will lead the congregation with and the easier it will be to follow your leader. Try to memorize the lyrics so you do not have to rely on the confidence monitors.

Good Following

Watch your leader with your eyes. Get to know their non-verbal idiosyncrasies as a vocalist and musician. Watch their mouths and learn to anticipate where your leader is going - get to know their non-verbal cues.

Hearing Harmonies

It doesn't happen overnight. It takes years of ear-training and practice. Everybody has their favorite band, listen to a couple songs repeatedly and focus on the different singers and learn to sing along with each one. Over time you will naturally begin to hear and pick up the

different parts that make up a choral arrangement. If you are an instrumentalist, play the chords and listen to the notes in each chord - what you should be singing is usually in the chord and a 3rd above or below the melody - this is especially true of contemporary worship music.

Proper Mic Technique

The banana vs. the lollipop. Listen to your sound engineers - they know what they're talking about.

Worship Leading

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Performance vs. Leading

In a performance the audience is listening, when leading worship the audience is participating. During a performance go bananas and have fun. When leading, sing it straight, be followable. Annunciate, limit your runs and noodles, leave space for the song to live and breathe...

Leaving Space

Worship is an emotional and thought-provoking spiritual experience that requires space and time to process. For example, at the end of a song, allow the instruments to take over the mix, back off your mic and allow those you are leading the chance to decompress and soak in the moment, the lyrics, and the experience. Don't rush, instead, learn to be comfortable with silence.

Awareness

...of the Holy Spirit, of your surroundings, of your team, of your congregation, of your pastor, of the song, of the worship set, of the message. Be aware so that you can lead within the context of the moment. Have the humility enough to know when to step back but the boldness to know when to step up.

Don't Be Lazy

Learn to enunciate with taste and style - you can sing straight, be understood and still have style.

Be Yourself

Be yourself - find *your* style. Try not to fall into a trap of mimicking the recordings or your favorite singers. Be authentic and genuine instead of a carbon copy of a recording everyone's already heard. Focus on your strengths and work off of those, build those. Someone else's strengths may not be yours so don't worry about them, worry about yourself.

Connecting with the Congregation

Look around at those you are leading. Smile, keep your eyes open and make eye contact or forehead contact. It's important that those you are leading don't feel alienated or feel like you don't care that they are present. Closing your eyes makes you look like you are focused on Jesus, which is a good thing, but it can also shut out those you are trying to lead. Try to find a balance.

Give Yourself Credit

There are a lot of new techniques here to consider - try them, you might surprise yourself and discover strengths you never knew you had or areas you need to grow in that you were unaware of before.