

All I Want to do is Sing Alto

If you have ever been part of a vocal group—and even if you haven't—you will enjoy this tongue-in-cheek look at the various personalities that make up a community of singers.

The dreaded scenario plays over and over like a bad rerun throughout my life . . .

It's the day of the audition. Adrenaline surges through my body. I try to slow my shallow breathing as I shakily make my way to that little curve in the piano where I feel safe and happy. The pianist expertly weaves notes around me in a semi-circle of sound I put on like a warm sweater, and then I joyfully join in. The solo goes swimmingly. My auditioners smile (sometimes). Then, the next scene sends me spiraling downward into a pit of despair. They test my range.

"I'm sorry, dear, but you are not an alto."

My campaign to get back into the alto section begins yet again.

I've been in dozens of vocal groups, and I'm here to tell you that each section has a unique persona. Wearing the badge of "alto" does not simply describe a vocal range. It's a personality, a lifestyle choice, a calling. We're not messing around here.

Basses are the anchors. They plant themselves in the back of the room and provide a constant low buzz of bear-like growls. They rarely sit up straight and tend to glare at the conductor under furrowed brows with a fair amount of distrust. However, don't let these dissidents fool you. They'll root you to your chair when they unite in sound. As a group they exude a sort of bravado that says, "The rest of you peons would be completely lost without us holding you in the right key."

Tenors remind me of a bunch of gallant Robin Hoods. They launch bright arrows of sound into the air with zero fear. Of all the sections, they are the least afraid to go for it. Sometimes this comes back to bite them in the butt, but they'll recover and fight another day. Tenors also pay attention. As a group, they tend to sit on the edge of their chairs, eager to launch another bunch of arrows when the time is right. They attack the music. I've also noticed an alarming number of them are golfers. Coincidence?

Sopranos are divas. (I've tried to fake the diva thing, and it's impossible. I don't have that gene.) Sopranos know they're the queens of the ball, and they love it. They get the melody and the money notes, and they relish their sparkling moments in the spotlight. When there is a pause in the music, they are also the most likely to talk. Wait! Let me revise that statement. They are the most likely to get caught talking. Their shimmering voices end up painting big targets on their foreheads when the conductor sends an evil eye across the crowd.

Now for my beloved altos. We're the rocks. We don't often get the glory, and that's cool. We're a little like basses, because we can mumble sarcastic comments throughout a rehearsal that only those within our section will hear. We feign indifference, but we care enough to pay attention to the music and arrive and depart on time and usually on pitch. We know we're the glue that holds the choir together, and the twinkle in our eyes shows you we know you need us.

We love the way low notes buzz in our section and melt everyone around us in a golden lava sound.

I rest my case. I simply can't make it as a soprano. I have a few high notes a day, but my heart is with my sisters in the alto section.

Recently, the choir director banished me to the soprano section yet again, just when I thought I was safe. I watched him take a mental count of the group, and I knew my days were numbered. Without a word he waved me over to the other side with a solemn look that said, "Don't mess with me—walk."

I sputtered a sarcastic comment about having to go over to the dark side that was unfortunately overheard by the front row of sopranos. Not a great way to make friends. They were pretty forgiving, though.

Now, I consider myself a poser. I have a rough time blending when the notes go above the staff. I can't do anything less than triple forte when we're singing in the rafters, and that only works for about one in ten pieces of music. A true alto at heart, I would rather die than stick out, so I am now a part-time lip sync artist. I sing along until the notes reach strangled-cat range, and then I mouth the words. The conductor asks for a little more sound from the sopranos, and I respond with wilder lip movements. I'm probably not fooling anyone, but luckily we have a strong soprano section. They don't need me.

The truth is, as much as I like the divas, I'm out of place. I feel like a pigeon in a flock of peacocks. Maybe someday our fearless leader will listen to my pleas and realize that I'm in a foreign country over there. It gives me a headache singing that high.

I want to go home. My sisters are calling.

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Kelly Jo Eldredge and her husband, Eric L. Mott, own and operate a freelance writing business called 4 Cats, Ink. They live near Denver, Colorado with their four cats, all of which run for cover when Kelly sings. Their first coauthored book, *We Met at Starbucks: A Love Story*, was recently published and is available on numerous websites and in select bookstores.

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