

# Circle Song Workshop

Aarhus Vocal Festival  
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## What is a circlesong?

Improvised piece of music  
Based on repetitive patterns.  
Often polyrhythmic or patterns correlate in a way that gives the piece a circle-like feeling.  
McFerrin style is conducted by a leader.



## Kristian Circle Song Flow

1. **Sing** (solo) - start a pattern give it to a group (SATB)
2. **Explore** the harmonic and melodic landscape around that pattern. Seek to play with the harmonies and rhythmic structures between your voice and the pattern.
3. **Build** a new patterns with something from your solo or make an interlock part by filling in the gaps in the first pattern. An interlock is like an engine - it is rhythmic distinct and it bites it's own tale.
4. **Refine**. Listen to the parts already there. Does your composition need a theme, a baseline, a interlock, a counterpoint, harmony? Fill it in.
5. **Arrange**. You may choose to arrange the song by muting or muting somebody out. Other signals may be used e.g. from the Soundpainting vocabulary. (Personally I like to stay away from too many strained arrangement methods, since it tends to be less musical than an inspired leader who makes his/her solo become the thread.)
6. **End** the song. Find an ending listen to your patterns and mute them out musically.

## Approach 1 - Bass, Engine, Theme, Harmony

*Bass:* Root notes - defines how the upperparts are interpreted harmonically.

*Engine:* A rhythmic strong figure that makes the circle song move onwards.

*Theme:* A distinct recognizable melodic phrase.

*Harmony:* A harmonization of one of the other patterns.

(Kristian Skårhøj)

## Approach 2 - Motor, Interlock, Counterpart, solo

*Motor:* An initial idea. (Any repeated phrase within a period goes)

*Interlock:* Rhythmic engine which bites it's own tale and fills in the gaps from the motor.

*Counterpart:* Something that makes a contrast to the existing phrases.

*Solo:* Soloist giving texture and context to the composition

(Rhiannon)

# Exercises and games

## Ah-Le-Le

See the appendix.

## One-Chaos-One

Free group improvisation. Everybody starts on the same pitch. After the pitch has settled each individual starts to explore their pitch. Explore the tone and sounds between vowels! After exploring that, they can move on to another and get around to explore all sounds, pitches and rhythms they like. The improvisation ends when everyone sings a unison pitch once again. It's a nice effect to have the group spread out in the room. I prefer doing this exercise with closed eyes.

*(Inspired by Rhiannon)*

## Free group improves with focus

When improvising, one can often become paralyzed by options. This exercise has the object to focus on specific parameters. The exercise works as One-Chaos-One but with the following restrictions:

### 1. Time (sing/listen)

Everybody sings the same pitch or they choose a personal pitch which they stick to. Each person should only be concerned about when to sing (contribute) and when to listen to the piece.

### 2. Dynamics

Still stick with one pitch. Explore the dynamics in that pitch. Explore vowels and the spaces between the vowels.

### 3. Rhythm

Still stick with one pitch. Explore rhythms. Explore syllables to make rhythms. Explore how to correlate with someone else's rhythm/grooves.

### 4. Melody

- a. Have the group share one common pitch. Each individual chooses one other pitch to use. Explore the possibilities of making music with these two pitches. Take into account the possibilities of Time, Dynamics and Rhythm.
- b. Still sharing one common pitch, each individual may choose 2 other pitches to use.
- c. Go on with a 3 or make it free.

*(Inspired by Sidsel Endresen & Bobby McFerrin)*

## Base jam

Make an appropriate amount of "bases" in the room e.g. with chairs. Each base has 3 singers attached to it, but start with 1. Make sure there are singers who do not have a base. Singers walk to a base and join a jam with the others. Each base only has room for 3 singers, whenever a 4th singer comes around, the singer who has been at the base longest must leave and find another base.

*(Kristian Skårhøj)*

### **Direct a sound**

Group stand in a circle. One person goes to the middle and directs/conducts a sound. The group interprets freely what the conductor wants. The conductor may also be dancing or acting with a distinct body language.

*(Kristian Skårhøj)*

### **Ama-ee-boo-oh-ee-ae**

Canon. See the music in the appendix.

### **Music Evolution**

Each person walks freely around the room and sings a repetitive pattern they make up. When two people meet they do “Rock-Paper-Scissors” and the winner wins over the other person. The loser learns the winner's pattern and they continue around the room as a singing tale until they meet another pattern. The winning group wins over the whole losers group. In the end there is only one pattern. Gather people in a circle and make a circle song out of that pattern.

*(Kristian Skårhøj)*



### **Altering the phrase**

When soloing or building new patterns you usually want to stay within the context of the music already there. This exercise practises that.

Make up a 1 measure phrase with a gibberish language and make it “the chorus”. Each person in the circle then takes a solo in every other measure. The task is to stay close to the original theme. Fx. use the same syllables, most of the same melodic idea - but alter it slightly.

*(Inspired by Rhiannon)*

### **Hand signals**

*Mmmung out parts:* Close fingers together and point them at your mouth. Un-mmmunging is a reversed gesture.

*(Kristian Skårhøj)*

# Ah le le

Unknown origin  
Notated by Kristian Skårhøj

*Call* *Response*

Ah - le - le qui - ta con - ga\_\_ Ah -

5  
-le - le mas a mas - sa\_\_

9  
Åh! ah-le Ih! ah-le Uh! ah-le Whah!

17  
Åh! Ah - le - le

Perform the lyrics with passion. Let it become gradually more and more wild.  
Tell it as if you were holding a secret. The movements are to be done at the same time.  
The New movement is introduces on measure 18.

1. Index finger turns around (As horizontal come here sign)
2. Open you hand upwards and move it in circles.
3. Both hands
4. Hands above head.
5. Get down on one knee while hands above head
6. Both knees, slam hands against floor (climax)
7. Go back through all the movements while saying "Ah"
8. End with "Ah le le" whispered.

The progression is subject to improvisations. Could go on for hours ...  
Invent your own things!!

# A-mah-ee-boo

Learned from Rhiannon 2011  
Notated by Kristian Skårhøj

A-mah - ee - boo - oh - ee - ae\_\_ A-mah - ee - boo - oh - ee - ae