

DIFFICULTY FACTORS IN WOMEN'S BARBERSHOP ARRANGEMENTS

By Vicki Uhr

1. Range for each voice part . Be sure it falls into the "comfort zone".

Here are the average ranges for each part:

Lead: B-flat below middle C to B-flat above middle C

Bass: E-flat below middle C to F/G above middle C

Bari: A below middle C to B-flat above middle C

Tenor: E above middle C to F above C prime.

The larger the chorus, the wider variety of vocal ranges, you can stretch those limits a bit, especially on low end lead and low end bass.

2. Smoothness of the melody line. Avoid wide interval jumps in the lead part, particularly in uptunes where the line must be executed quickly. We expect the bass part to jump around, but again, it will work better in uptunes if there's not too much of it. Ballads are more flexible. The wide interval jumps make tuning, tempo and synchronization errors more probable.

3. Spread voicings (two octave type chords). They are beautiful and we like a few spread chords here and there for variety and balance, but too many are difficult to balance and to sing with strength. Example of a challenging song due to spread chords is "That Old Quartet of Mine."

4. Baritone line in relation to the lead line. You don't want to see the baritone predominantly above the lead throughout a song. For best barbershop balance (cone) they should be below the lead or a mixture of above/below.

5. Breathing places. As obvious as this sounds, it can be a problem. We see it more often in uptunes. Be sure the arrangement is structured so that the singer gets natural places to breathe.

6. Voice leading. Sing through each part line separately. Any given part line should flow smoothly and be reasonably easy for the singer to hear and execute. Baritones usually can handle what other parts would consider "illogical" intervals; it's characteristic of their part, and they can usually hear it.

7. Energy requirements. Any arrangement that pushes the current vocal skills of the singing group will be difficult for them. This is especially true of uptune medleys.

8. The key of the song. Some keys are just more difficult; anything arranged in "C" for example. The most easily sung keys for our singers' voices are A-flat, B-flat, E-flat and F.

9. Key Changes. While exciting to the structure of an arrangement, they do present challenges! Look for easy key changes where the leads stay on the same note throughout the change, for example - until the group is capable of handling more difficult transitions.

10. Accidentals. The more sharps or flats that occur outside of the key signature of the song, the more difficult the piece of music. This doesn't mean you should avoid a piece of music with a few accidentals, but if the paper is peppered with them, take another look.

11. Lyrics. Look for singable vowels and consonants. Some consonants are executed easily and will carry a tone - "m, n, l". Others stop the sound - "t, k, ch," etc. "S" sounds are notorious for creating synch problems. The more stopper consonants there are in a song, especially in fast-moving passages, the more difficult it will be for the group to perform well. You should also look for open vowel sounds on target chords, such as the ends of phrases and any notes that will be held. "Ah" and "oh" vowels are great. "Ee" and "ooh" sounds are harder to sing with quality, especially on high-voiced chords; it is also hard to sing them loudly.

Competition Folio Teaching Notes

The Competition Folio "Read Me First – General Learning/Teaching Notes" are a great place to start when learning how to evaluate music. At the beginning of each folio, there are points to consider as well as an explanation of how these elements affect the song choice. After each song, an analysis is done using these concepts to highlight areas that may need special attention in the learning process. Below is a list of some of the elements that are considered. More thorough explanations of each can be found in the Competition Folios.

Accidentals/groupings of accidentals – need special attention for accuracy

Patterns in vocal lines – patterns or breaks in pattern assist in memorization

Vocal line swapping – vocal line remains strong and well tuned as parts swap notes.

Tenor above the lead (X above the staff) – reminds singers to adjust balance

Enharmonic – notes of the same pitch with different name (G-flat = A-sharp)

Same note throughout a measure – note may be the same, but the chord may change

Posting a note – spin the sound upward to maintain pitch

Hook – may have different emphasis each time it's sung

Ascending vocal lines – resonance must be maintained and adjusted as singer moves through various registers

Descending vocal lines – maintain forward focus as the line descends

Half or whole step rock – special attention for tuning

Embellishments – enhance emotional content of the lyrics

Glissando – sliding from one pitch to another

Phrase planning/meter – maintaining meter while planning ad lib delivery

Song structure – understanding the music to build a story within the phrase plan

Rhyme patterns – helps to understand the intent of the lyrical message

Character of sound – use of vocal techniques to convey characterization

Sing the punctuation – consider punctuation when phrase planning

Conjunctions – consider emotional meaning of the connecting words

Breath timing – use breaths as a means to enhance story-telling

EFFECT OF MUSIC SELECTION ON THE FOUR CATEGORIES
Excerpted from JUDGING CATEGORY DESCRIPTION BOOK (JCDB) - Sec. HI-A

The selection of music plays a significant role in the sound category in that the degree of the performer's overall vocal skills must match the demands of the musical composition and its delivery. Accuracy, especially in the areas of correctly tuned intervals, synchronization, and blend, can only be achieved when the singer can apply the vocal instrument to the music chosen with consistent support, open resonance, energy and freedom. Further, the elements of artistic sound can be addressed only after the performer has met the vocal requirements inherent within the music at all extremes of tempo, ranges, and dynamics.

The music judge evaluates the relative suitability of the song/arrangement to the chorus or quartet. She considers the vocal capabilities of the ensemble and the skill demonstrated in performing the arrangement. The singers must be able to execute the part lines accurately and demonstrate vocal ranges sufficient to handle the extreme highs and lows while remaining in balance (see sound category). The performer also needs to demonstrate sufficient vocal energy, support and musical stamina to handle the phrasing, dynamics and musical characterization required to convey the interpretive plan effectively.

As discussed in the music category, the choice of music appropriate to the skill level of the performer affects the performer's ability to convey the interpretative plan (expression category) effectively. If the level of difficulty is too high, the performer may be unable to perform the song in a sincere, competent fashion, thus creating a barrier to real emotional communication. When the listener is presented with distractions from a musical, unified presentation, the message can be lost.

Additionally, when the music selected is performed in such a manner that the skills of the performing group are challenged (e.g. a tempo that is too fast), the efforts at artistic elements cannot be fully rewarded by the expression judge. Music that presents opportunities to demonstrate the abilities of the group and is performed in a manner that showcases those capabilities will most likely result in a successful, emotionally satisfying performance.

The selection of music in the showmanship category is a key ingredient to creating onstage magic that will captivate and entertain an audience. Music must be chosen that highlights the groups' vocal skills while allowing their unique personality to shine through as they perform. Careful consideration of the story, emotion and point of view of the songs' lyrics is necessary to ensure that the ensemble can embody the attitude and character of the song they are singing.

Age demographic, group size, ability to perform with energy, characterization and the physical expression needed to bring the song to life are vitally important to the success of the performance.