

MISSION STATEMENT

Sweet Adelines International is a worldwide organization of women singers committed to advancing the musical art form of barbershop harmony through education and performance.

FOREWORD

Sweet Adelines International is a worldwide organization of women singers committed to advancing the musical art form of barbershop harmony through education and performance. The organization also provides for achievement through competition.

In keeping with its educational purpose and philosophy, Sweet Adelines International is committed to establishing and maintaining the very highest musical standards possible. To achieve these heights, as is true in any other form of music, technical proficiency must be developed. Of equal importance, however, is the performer's ability to use technique to project emotion through the music presented, to portray a story, and to create, through the artistry of song, a truly meaningful experience for both performer and audience.

The elements which, when combined to near perfection, enable the performer to achieve the ultimate are defined in the four judging categories. Each category supports the other three in such a manner that when a performance, as evaluated by the standards established for any one category, is completely flawless, the performance in the other three categories should be almost equally flawless. Conversely, when error is present in one category, it will usually affect a portion of at least one other category — and sometimes all three. Judges evaluate one performance, one entity that cannot be divided into four completely separate parts.

Very briefly: The sound judge evaluates vocal production, balance, blend, barbershop sound and the harmonic accuracy with which notes and chords are sung. The music judge evaluates the performance of the arrangement as well as the song and arrangement. The expression judge evaluates the artistic and synchronized delivery of musical language. The showmanship judge evaluates the degree of rapport established with the audience through the visual salesmanship of the musical product. Complete comprehension comes only with understanding the inter-relationships of all four categories.

The International Board of Directors of Sweet Adelines International has adopted the following definition of the barbershop style:

Four-part harmony, barbershop style, is a combination of several characteristics unique to this form of music, such as chord structure (arrangement), the cone-shaped sound, delivery and interpretation. These are integral factors that contribute to the "lock-and-ring" characteristics of singing in the barbershop style.

In competition, the contestant presenting the best musical performance of an arrangement written in the barbershop style should receive the highest total score. In the case of two contestants giving an equal musical performance, the contestant exhibiting more proficiency in the execution of the barbershop style should be awarded the highest score.

GUIDE TO VOCAL SKILLS

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GUIDE TO VOCAL SKILLS

INTRODUCTION

Vocal skills are an integral part of all aspects of the barbershop style, and all four judging categories are affected by the degree of proficiency in this area. The discussion of each category defines how vocal skills affect the fulfillment of the basic requirements of the four individual categories.

VOCAL PRODUCTION

Proper vocal production is the foundation upon which good sound is built. It is the first and foremost requisite to achieving unit sound. For the majority of our singers, the absence of good vocal production is the underlying cause of many vocal problems, including interrupted tone flow, balance problems, unmatched vowels, inaccurate intervals, lack of vocal coordination and the inability to sustain phrases, control a diversified range of dynamics and maintain pitch.

Although each voice has certain distinctive qualities, all well-produced voices share the following general characteristics:

- The voice has consistency, with a seemingly even tone quality from the lowest register to the highest.
- The voice has both ring, giving a sense of focus to the sound, and roundness, emanating from a throat that is open and free from tension.
- The voice has energy and words flow smoothly.
- The voice is free from tension and has warmth and color.
- The voice is flexible and capable of a wide variety of dynamics.

Individual Voice Parts

Given an understanding of basic vocal skills, each voice part has specific criteria for singing barbershop harmony.

Tenor: The tenor voice has a lightness of quality, an almost bell-like clarity and sufficient maturity of sound to complement the lower voices, particularly the lead voice. Since the tenor part is sung primarily above the lead, this voice must be capable of singing high notes with consistent quality and control. Though the tenor sings in a range comparable to that of a soprano, the tenor part is sung with a lighter vocal adjustment and with much less vibrato than that used to sing soprano. The average voice range for tenors is E above middle C to G in the second octave above middle C.

Lead: The lead voice generally carries the melody, so she must sing with musical authority. The ideal lead voice has clarity, brilliance, depth, maturity and a sense of style that sets her voice apart from the other three. She sings with a sufficient

amount of color to add interest to the tone but never so much as to distort the locked chord characteristic of the barbershop style. The lead sings in approximately the same range as an alto (G below middle C to D in the second octave above middle C). While much of her vocal authority comes from utilizing the lower chest register, she must be able to execute a smooth transition between the lower and the upper registers so that quality remains consistent between the extremes of her range. The lead voice should also be capable of a wide range of expressive dynamics.

Bass: The bass voice must also be able to sing with authority, for she provides the foundation for the barbershop sound. The barbershop arranger assists her by providing a strong chord tone, usually the root or the fifth. Although no comparable voice part exists in female choral music, the bass sings a range comparable to that used by a contralto or second alto (C below middle C to F above middle C). The bass voice must have a mellow, melodic quality, with sufficient weight to add the desirable bass timbre to the overall sound. She must be capable of sufficient volume and projection on the lowest tones so that her sound is not obscured by the higher voice parts. Her vocal quality must complement that of the lead voice.

Baritone: The baritone voice provides the important fourth tone of the chord and must be flexible in vocal quality. She sings in approximately the same range as the lead (G below middle C to B above middle C) but with less authority. In most arrangements she sings in the lower portion of her range more frequently than in the upper. Although consistency of quality between upper and lower registers is always desirable, it is less important here than in the lead voice, for the baritone actually sings with what appears to be two voices. When her position in the chord is below the lead, she sings with a depth of tone that fills the gap between lead and bass; when her position in the chord is above the lead, her quality becomes more like that of the tenor. Vocal flexibility and appropriate handling of the intricacies of the baritone part play an important role in achieving the lock-and-ring characteristic of the barbershop sound.

Vibrato

Acoustically, vocal vibrato is a fluctuation in pitch, intensity and timbre — a perfectly normal phenomenon — which is the result of the intermittent supply of nerve energy to the vocal mechanism. Although vibrato is an identifiable characteristic of a well-produced tone, it is not a predominant characteristic of barbershop sound. The total absence of vibrato almost always results in a colorless, lifeless, edgy sound that lacks the full, rich, resonant ring inherent in a well-produced tone. However, when the sound is properly produced, the lead singer can regulate the amount of vibrato in the voice to give authoritative, lyrical beauty and color to the melody without adding so much vibrato that blend is destroyed. The other voices will sing clear tones, controlling vibrato to the point that it is almost imperceptible to the average listener.

Within the limited duration of a performance, a judge cannot be expected to identify the cause of an undesirable vibrato. However, it is the sound judge's responsibility to recognize that such a condition exists and to assess the degree to which that condition

has a detrimental effect upon the performance. Since locked chords are an identifiable characteristic of barbershop sound, vibrato that impairs that lock cannot be rewarded. Generally speaking, the quality that results from a desirable, natural vibrato should be outstanding; the vibrato itself should not.

VOCAL REGISTERS AND BARBERSHOP SINGING

The cone is generally used to demonstrate the shape of the desired balance of barbershop sound. However, it can also be a good visual example of the vocal adjustment required of each singer as she sings through the range of her voice part. In general, all tones below middle C, sung by any voice part, are produced by using the vocal cord adjustment for the lower register. At higher pitches within the octave between middle C and the C above, the upper register is gradually mixed with the lower, lightening the quality and allowing tones to remain free and musical. Tones above the C above middle C are produced by using the vocal cord adjustment for the upper register. These generalizations apply to tones of moderate volume, properly produced. An increase in volume generally requires more assistance from the lower mechanism; a decrease in volume generally requires less assistance from the lower and more from the upper.

The singer needs to understand the five elements of vocal production discussed in the sound category (see section II-A, pages 2-5), since coordination of the smooth transition between the two vocal registers cannot otherwise be achieved. The singer who is unable to make this smooth transition because of faulty production or lack of vocal development generally forces up the lower register to a point where the pharyngeal muscles constrict the throat in an attempt to form a resonating cavity for the desired tone. When muscles are fully constricted, the voice "breaks," whereupon a weakened upper register takes over. This break is actually a forced relaxation of the incorrect muscular adjustment.

A significant difference between female barbershop music and other types of female choral music is the manner in which the lower, or chest, register is used in singing the three lower voice parts. Even the tenor may occasionally need to use the chest register for lower tones or to achieve higher volume levels.

FREQUENT PROBLEMS IN VOCAL PRODUCTION

Knowing and understanding the fundamentals of singing is much easier than actually putting them into practice. Improvement in vocal production requires consistent work in the right direction over a period of time.

Voices that are not correctly produced lack the ring that is naturally inherent in a properly produced voice and are characterized by such varying, undesirable qualities as:

- a. Dark or covered sounds: Indicates a lack of head resonance, a closed soft palate or a high tongue position that alters the shape of the resonating cavity, damping out high frequencies.
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- b. Thin or shallow voices like a glee club: Indicate improper resonance, a lack of chest resonance, a lack of maturity or a mouth that is not sufficiently opened.
- c. Strained voices: Result from a constricted throat created by forcing the lower register too high, by closed soft palate or by tension in the jaw.
- d. Breathy tones: Characterized by fuzziness, hoarseness, lack of focus and clarity; indicate poor coordination of the vocal and breathing mechanisms, improper resonance or an unhealthy condition of the vocal cords.
- e. Vibrato: While vibrato is a natural and desirable characteristic of a healthy voice, confusion arises when other, undesirable conditions are termed “vibrato.” One such condition is “tremolo,” which has been defined as an abnormal pulsation of the voice marked by a perceptible variation in pitch due to lack of proper coordination of the vocal mechanism, because of incorrect use of the breath or unnatural physical tension. Tremolo can result from tension in the jaw or in the muscles of the throat or larynx, from a fluttering of the epiglottis, from the fluctuating changes in the size and shape of the resonating cavities, from singing with too heavy an adjustment, from muscular weakness, from improper breathing habits or from nervousness.

It should be understood that these are merely examples of the vocal problems most often encountered. The possible causes are just that — possible reasons that the problem exists. It must be remembered that each individual voice is a unique entity, bringing with it its own strengths and weaknesses. There can be no substitute for actual experience in working with voices to obtain firsthand knowledge of the many possible vocal production problems and to discover the infinite variety of methods by which these problems can be overcome.