

# SINGING CATEGORY

## I. SINGING CATEGORY OVERVIEW

Barbershop singing shares elements of good singing with other forms of ensemble vocal music. Primarily, the listener expects to hear the pleasing effect of in-tune singing from voices that are free and resonant and that exhibit no signs of difficulties. The listener expects to hear the ensemble as a unit, free from distractions by individual differences of quality or delivery. The style of barbershop singing adds a distinctive element to these basics with enhancement by the choice of harmonies, voicings, and voice relationships characteristic to barbershop, the ensemble sound can achieve a sound that feels greater than the sum of the parts.

The "ring" of a barbershop chord will always be the hallmark of the style. Any listener to a barbershop performance expects to be thrilled by the sound of a ringing climax or awed by the purity and beauty of a soft and elegant expression of a song. Great singing in any style is achieved by magnificent vocal technique used to create artistry. In the same sense great barbershop singing demands mastery of vocal and ensemble skills to create the breathtaking effects of barbershop musical artistry. Since the Singing judge evaluates the overall vocal performance, there are no benefits in choosing difficult or easy music—only in choosing music that the ensemble can sing well.

The Singing judge evaluates the degree to which the performer achieves artistic singing in the barbershop style. Artistic singing is accomplished through precise intonation, a high degree of vocal skill, a high level of unity /consistency within the ensemble, and appropriate vocal expression. Mastering these elements creates a fullness and expansion of sound, and when combined with expressive vocal skills will convey a feeling of genuine emotion to support the message of the song.

## II. SINGING CATEGORY ELEMENTS

The following five elements are evaluated by the Singing category judge:

1. Intonation
2. Vocal Quality
3. Unity
4. Expansion Quality
5. Vocal Expression

**Intonation:** Barbershop singers strive for more precise tuning than is possible with the fixed 12-tones-per-octave of the equally tempered scale of fixed-pitched instruments, such as the piano. Barbershop singers adjust pitches to achieve perfectly tuned chords, and yet sing a melodic line that remains true to the tonal center. Maintaining precise harmonic intonation and

melodic tonal center is the responsibility of all the singers in the ensemble. All singers, including the melody singer, tune to an anticipated melodic line that would maintain the tonal center.

**Vocal Quality:** The three descriptors of good vocal production are well supported; freely produced; and resonant. Support may best be defined as breath management. Breath management (singing on the breath supplied by isometric involvement of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles) is a prerequisite for producing a good tone. Tension or lack of free production can be caused a number of factors, but often related to improper breath management. A resonant vocal tone that conveys the sensation of a single pitch, that is produced freely and without apparent stress by well-managed breath support, and that enhances the artistic impact of a song may be said to possess good quality.

**Unity:** Unity describes the net effect of ensemble-unifying techniques. Most a cappella vocal forms utilize some of the following; the barbershop style utilizes all of them. The ingredients of ensemble unity include:

- Matched word sounds, timbre, and resonance
- Synchronization and precision
- Continuity of sound flow
- Uniformity of diction and articulation.

**Expansion Quality:** Expanded sound, sometimes called “lock and ring,” creates the aural impression that the composite ensemble sound contains more than the total sound the individual voices produce. The volume relationships (relative loudness of the tones being sung by each voice part at any moment) must be adjusted to produce optimum harmonic reinforcement. The Barbershop style by definition provides greater opportunities for the reinforcement of consonant overtones and the production of combination tones. Several factors contribute to this reinforcement.

- The melody is sung primarily within the chord rather than in the top voice.
- The chord must be in tune.
- There must be good vocal quality which promotes resonance and “ring” in the voice.
- The word sounds must be sung uniformly and the vowels should match.
- There must be good precision, which increases the proportion of time during which expansion can occur.

In essence, the better the quality of the individual and ensemble vocalization, the better the expansion quality.

**Vocal Expression:** Artistic barbershop singing must provide for flexibility in self-expression, to allow for a variety of vocal emotions as implied by the lyric and music. An important difference between a mechanical musical instrument and the vocal instrument is the ability for the singer to deliver a genuine emotional impact of the lyrics and notes, and thus fully communicate the message of song to the listener. Vocal expression involves the appropriate execution of various singing elements, when combined produce a personalized, meaningful expression of the song

that is greater than the sum of these elements. The following areas represent the most common approaches used to enhance an expressive vocal quality:

- enunciation and diction allowing the listener to understand the lyric's meaning
- appropriate and lyrical word sound execution
- tone color choices to enhance the meaning of the lyrics
- appropriate vocal inflections

In order for all these techniques to be artistic, they must effectively communicate the emotional content of the song. There is a natural correlation between the performer's command of vocal skill, their vocal expression, and the generation of emotion. Great vocal skill allows the performer to generate many subtle variations and levels of emotion with far less apparent effort, which adds to the message and believability. Performances come across as honest, sincere, and genuine when the execution of vocal expression is delivered in a transparent manner.

### **III. CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHORUSES**

The basic sound of barbershop is found in the quartet performance. Four voices achieving vocal artistry in the manner described above produce a sound unique to this art form. When one adds more singers to each part, a similar effect can be obtained but with significant differences. We have learned to recognize these differences and evaluate the chorus singing sound in its own unique form. The most obvious differences are that choruses can generate a larger quantity of sound than a quartet, as well as a greater ability to bury the problems of any individual singer. However, the judging of choruses emphasizes the quartet-like cleanliness of the sound, not the volume. Volume of sound will not, in itself, have a positive impact on the Singing judge. Some added differences which may impact the goal of a quartet like sound for choruses include:

- wrong notes sung by one or more singers
- more than four parts being sung on certain word sounds
- the perception of individual voices and/or vocal qualities
- the precision of the singers within sections

Choruses are expected to blend or even hide the differences of pitch, timbre and resonance between the singers more so than in a quartet. The net result can be less demand upon the individual singer while sustaining a unique and vital sound from the chorus. The vitality of sound still depends on the degree of agreement of voices within sections (parts), as well as the relationships between sections.