

PLAY IT SAFE OR TAKE A CHANCE?: CHOOSING MUSIC FOR COMPETITION

Certified Music Judge Corinna Garriock discusses how to choose the right songs for your group

Now that the latest round of Regional competitions is over, many of you are in the throes of choosing music for your next competition cycle. I doubt there's anything more difficult in a quartet or chorus than choosing competition music that suits your personality, is within your skillset and represents the barbershop style well. What are the principles of choosing good barbershop material for contest? The following editorial was inspired by a spirited social media discussion on that very question.

Why are the SA Music Category rules so limiting?

What the Judging Category Description Book's SA Music Category section actually says is "Music, like art, never remains stagnant." It goes on to say, "A style generally evolves to a point that no longer resembles the original, and a new style emerges." Next it suggests, "While barbershop harmony has seen its own evolution, it is not intended that it will ever evolve into another musical style, be it a cappella or even four-part harmony. The characteristics that make the barbershop style of four-part harmony unique need to remain constant to set it apart from other forms of unaccompanied vocal music."

I think the above paragraph was carefully written to avoid saying that we cannot change the art form. Our mission as an organization (SA) is not to "preserve" barbershop. According to our mission statement, we are "committed to advancing the musical art form of barbershop harmony." Advancing! I interpret the Music Category statements above as, "There is room for barbershop to evolve, but our overall goal is that it remain a distinct art form and that the hallmarks be retained as we seek creative growth of the style."

So, what are the hallmarks of the barbershop style?

According to SA's Music Category they are as follows:

- **Song Form.** The song is constructed in 8-measure chunks. Melodic unity (ex. ABAC, ABAB, ABACA) and melodic variety are also key aspects of song form.
- **Arrangement Form.** The chorus is always present. Intro, verse, bridge, tag allow creativity in arrangement packaging but are optional.
- **Harmonization.** A predominance of Major Triads, Dominant Sevenths and Dominant Ninths will set up strong overtone patterns that ring. The remaining chords are used to accommodate the melody or for mood/color/flavor.

The melody is generally in the middle of the chord, the lowest voice sings a strong chord component, and all chords are complete with no tone omitted.

- **Harmonic Progressions.** We like a good variety of harmonies. We also look for harmonization that follows the implied harmony of the melody. Original harmonization is not rewarded if it obscures the melody such that the harmony becomes the message of the song and the melody is lost.
- **Voicings.** We expect voicings that reinforce the overtone pattern. If they are consistently weak (i.e. the bass is on the third, the melody is on top or other kinds of non-hallmark voicings), if weak voicings don't resolve to strong ones or if a variety of closed and open voicings are not utilized, the arrangement is weakened.
- **Creative Devices.** Swipes, Echoes, Solos, Patter, Bell Chords, Instrumental Effects, Modulations / Key Changes. These are the goodies of the barbershop style; however, all icing (embellishments) and no cake (syllabic/homo-rhythmic harmonization) makes for a sweet sing but might leave the listener with a stomach ache. The Music category defines creative devices as "musical devices used by the arranger to add musical interest or to achieve the continuity that would be provided by instrumental accompaniment." If the musical devices overwhelm the melody and the message, the song is weakened.

Is the Music Category only about what we sing?

Not at all! What you choose to sing is worth just 30% of your Music score. Your performance of the arrangement in the barbershop style is the other 70%. However, we don't parse how the arrangement affected your score vs. how you affected your score. It's simply a weighting—a guideline—to tell the music judge how much consideration to give an arrangement that may or may not demonstrate all of the hallmarks noted above. Once we layer the performer onto the song and arrangement, we are in the 70%. For example, an over-embellished piece in the hands of performers struggling for breath or trying to hold a tempo together is going to have a much more significant impact on the 70% than the same piece performed by a group with championship skills. We need a lot of insight into our own skillset to know what is going to sing well (we call that "Suitability" on the Music scoresheet), and we also need to have at least a basic understanding of the style to bring the music off the page effectively.

The lyrical content and intent of many contest songs are no longer relevant.

This is true. Many of the songs we sing are from a time when women were viewed in limited ways and before civil rights movements had taken hold in many societies. Do your research into song history before you choose. Parody lyrics are an option to update a song, but it is difficult to get publisher permission unless the song is in public domain. Even with word changes, some original messages are hard to un-hear, so consider that as well. [For more on choosing songs with appropriate lyrical content, see Corinna Garriock's article, "Music Category Scope and Weighting of Components" in the April 2016 issue of The Pitch Pipe and Elizabeth Davies' "Toward a More Inclusive Sweet Adelines" in the July 2018 issue.]

Why are we all singing the same songs?

We definitely have popular songs that get rolled out each year across the organization. Those working at C or low B levels are still learning the craft and developing vocal skills. They need strong vehicles to be successful. That is one reason you hear repeats.

"How Deep Is the Ocean?" "You Are My Sunshine" "If Ever I Would Leave You"...If you have the skills for these songs (they are difficult!), then sing them. Don't let a few points and a mention of "secondary chords" or "strophic form" stop you! You may benefit overall by choosing a song that you can relate to strongly or that showcases your skillset. It's a balancing act.

Here's another thing to keep in mind: The written word is powerful. We give you a written scoresheet that you can use to

review your performance and set goals for the coming season. That's the great part! The downside is that the written word is permanent. A single line of criticism can seem like a bigger message than it actually is. Try to keep the written word in perspective. Write to your judge if you have a concern, and they will reply to you with clarification.

What is Sweet Adelines International doing to bolster better contest content?

Getting material arranged is a good solution and depends on the initiative of the group and finding the right experienced help. Learning to arrange is helpful too. We hope that the new Arranger Certification Program will encourage beginner involvement in creating arrangements. The song writing contest SA recently ran was an attempt to stimulate an interest in original music, and it received a lot of entries. We hope to see more education and development in this area as well.

Personally, I'd love to see a flood of new arrangements on the contest stage, and I am happy to be "tested" as a music judge. Go forth and find new music to sing. Get it arranged. We need more arrangements for our organization's voices at all levels that are fresh, fun, relevant and from any era. Use the hallmarks as a guideline, and let's find (or write) those songs! 🎵

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What is life on
a high note?



It's the first time your voice blends into a magical ringing chord.

It's arranging a piece of music—and then hearing your arrangement sung for the first time onstage.

It's conversation after rehearsal and laughter in the bus on the way home from competition.

It's seeing your granddaughter welcomed into the chorus that has brought you so much joy.

It's all this and more.

It's what you give when you donate to Sweet Adelines International.

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