

CONTESTABILITY? SUITABILITY? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? (WHY DO I CARE?)

An explanation by Certified Music Judge Lynda Kever

The Music Category seems to be one of the mystery categories. Just when you think you have it figured out, another element pops up that seems to be different than you thought. One purpose of the Music Category is to conform our contest music to a certain set of principles and characteristics that make our songs ring best in our voices. Another purpose of the category is to delineate elements of the barbershop song and arrangement that we singers can focus on and perfect to help bring our storytelling to life. Appropriately viewed, the Music Category is a tool for us to use to be successful in contest and to connect with our audiences.

Two of the most effective tools in the Music Category toolkit, and perhaps two of the more confusing, are contestability and suitability. Though they may seem to be interchangeable, they are not, and each serves a distinct function in helping us to perform at our best. A brief explanation of contestability and suitability may bring some clarity.

In an article from the July 2019 issue of *The Pitch Pipe*, Corinna Garriock gave us a clear explanation of what is required for a song and arrangement to be contestable. (Warning: Baritone moment ahead!) For purposes of this discussion, some basics: a contestable song has a 32- or 40-bar chorus with a recognizable and consistent form (ABAB, ABCA, AABA, etc.), a singable, memorable melody, and implied harmonies that lend themselves to a predominance of barbershop 7th and dominant 9th chords. Your ear will likely tell you if the song will “barbershop” well; familiar chord progressions and a comforting pattern in the rhythms of the phrases SOUND like barbershop to us.

What makes an arrangement contestable?

Once the song has been determined to be appropriate to put into the barbershop style, the arranger must keep these things in mind: any measures added for intros, tags, or bridges must

be some multiple of four; there must be a predominance of Big Three chords (major triad, dominant 7th, dominant 9th); and the arranger must add well-chosen embellishments. There should not be too many embellishments or too much “vocal gymnastics,” or the arrangement begins to be more about the skill of the singer than about the message of the song. There must also be a musical high point, a meaningful message, and congruence between the lyrical and musical high point.

(Okay. Non-baritones can rejoin us now.) It is possible to have a weak song and a strong arrangement, or a strong song with a weak arrangement. The two are separate entities. You will find the judge’s commentary on the song and arrangement at the top left of your music category scoresheet. You may see comments such as “strong contest choice” or “an okay song, though not strong as so many secondary harmonies are required. The arranger has done her best to get as much barbershop in as possible.”

So far so good. Now, let’s look at the space at the bottom left of your music category scoresheet where it says “suitability.” You may have comments like, “good choices for you” or “Outside your skill set today.”

What makes an arrangement “suitable”

This analysis depends more upon the quartet or chorus than upon the chart itself. To determine whether a piece is suitable for your group, you’ll want to examine a variety of factors. When considering a chart, these factors should be applied more stringently to a quartet than to a chorus, as there is room inside a chorus to “give and take” to make the best use of all singers’ voices. Even so, don’t neglect the analysis for a chorus; in most cases, a section will not rely upon just one voice, but in our smaller choruses, we may have one- or two-voice sections. In that instance, treat the analysis as you would for a quartet.



- **Check the ranges in each part.** The chart is not suitable if it puts any singer outside her most comfortable, best quality singing range. You likely know whether your chorus or quartet sings “high and tight” best or “rich and mellow.” Your examination should also include whether the dynamics required by the chart can be sung with ease by each singer through the entire arrangement. If one quartet singer cannot manage that high loud measure because of its position in her range, don’t choose that chart. You want to showcase your ensemble’s best skills, not just show off one particular voice. (Leads, this is a hint: Just because you love the song, if it’s wrong for your cohorts, don’t compete with it!)
- **Check to determine whether the song is backbeat or downbeat.** If you are a downbeat ensemble, you will do yourself no favors by choosing a song that requires a firm backbeat until that skill is in your “bag of tricks.” (You know which type you are.)
- **Look at the lyrics of the song.** Does it contain racially or culturally insensitive lyrics? Is it appropriate for your group? If you are no longer of high school or college age, it is likely incongruous for your ensemble to sing *Last Night On The Back Porch*. Conversely, if you are a young group, your performance of *That Summer When We Were Young* will likely not be believable, as you still ARE young.
- **Similarly, if your quartet name is high-energy, you will likely want to choose mostly high-energy material, rather than loading your repertoire with swing tunes and ballads.** Or, for example, if your quartet name is Nice 'n' Easy, a driving uptune like *Toot, Toot Tootsie* would be jarring to the audience. Congruence is an element of suitability.

- **Be mindful of the types of chords that appear in the arrangement.** If you are a new ensemble starting out, or an ensemble that hasn’t yet achieved B- score, you likely should not perform a song with loads of minor chords or chromatics in it, as these are tuning traps and may not be easily and competently managed by your group yet.

- **Look at the vowels of the song.** Most of us ring chords best on tall, open vowels (think *Fire*, *My Heart’s On Fire*). If your skill set does not yet allow you to ring chords on an “O” vowel or an “E” vowel, be sure that your intro and tag ends on a vowel you have mastered, rather than one that shows your unfinished work. This is another factor in your suitability determination.

These are not the only elements that affect suitability, but they are some of the larger ones. If you still aren’t certain, check with your director or a music judge to help with the determination.

As you can see, both contestability and suitability are important in choosing the best song for your ensemble, both for public performance and for contest. With a little additional investigative work before learning a new song, you’ll be using the tools provided by the music category to give yourself a better chance at success — which is the whole point. Happy singing! 🎵

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