

# POSITION PAPERS

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## I. MUSICAL COMPLEXITY/OVER-EMBELLISHMENT

### A. Introduction

This paper aims both to clarify the position of the Music Category regarding what complexity and over-embellishment are and to provide general guidelines for how they can be recognized and adjudicated in performances of songs other than parodies.

### B. Background

The Music Category respects the roots of our style in "ear" music and discourages performances that seem to be more a demonstration of arrangement devices than the performance of a song, which is defined by the melody, lyrics, rhythm, and implied harmony. At the same time, embellishment is a fundamental characteristic of the barbershop style, and relatively wide latitude is given to arrangers to embellish with a variety of devices, which help create musical interest, as well as provide for both unifying and contrasting thematic material.

Accordingly, the Music Category wishes to allow the arranger a reasonable degree of license and creativity in writing arrangements of varying levels of complexity, with varying approaches to

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thematic development that are suitable for contest use, while asserting that the primary theme must be based on musical elements: lyrics, rhythm, melody, harmony, or a combination of song elements.

### C. Policy

Arrangements that are overly complex or over-embellished are the result of a level of embellishment that:

1. Obscures the song itself. A guiding principle for defining the barbershop style is that “Embellishments ... should support and enhance the song” (Section 4, The Judging System, I.B.8, of this handbook). When this principle is compromised, the Music judge may no longer be hearing the song itself but rather a catalogue of ornamental devices that do not support the basic song elements.
2. Produces a musical texture that compromises the requirement that barbershop music is “characterized by consonant four-part chords for every melody note in a primarily homorhythmic texture” (The Judging System, I.A.1, of this handbook).
3. Alters the composer’s melody beyond the parameters described in the Music Category Description, III.C.4. (See Section 5 of this handbook.) In addition, performing ability is an integral part of adjudicating whether or not the arrangement is overly complex or over-embellished. The performers’ abilities influence the Music judge’s perception of the degree to which a particular song is or is not over-embellished. Given a song with a high number of embellishments, a group performing at the A level may be able to perform it in such a way that the embellishments do not overwhelm the song or performance. The same arrangement performed at the C level may create the perception that the song is over-embellished. The judging system recognizes and provides a basis for scoring these two performances differently under the Music Category Description, Section III, and Introduction. Performing ability notwithstanding, the Music score will be lowered for song performances that are inherently over-embellished and overly complex. Outside of parody performances, guiding principles for adjudicating complexity and over-embellishment are:
  - a. Barbershop performers may take great liberties with the rhythms of a song. However, the arrangement should not modify lyrics, melody, and implied harmony to the extent that the song itself gets lost. The guideline in III.C.4 stating that stylizations should result in “a passage suggestive of the original” may be compromised if two or more of these three elements are modified. In particular, rewriting the melody with different harmony for much of a repeated song section will likely result in a passage that is not suggestive of the original.
  - b. The main statement of a song is generally in the chorus of that song. Accordingly, the Music judge is prepared to accept more modification of a verse, even in the first statement, than of the chorus. Abridging a verse to make it an introduction to the chorus is acceptable as long as it is musically appropriate.

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- c. Extensions are acceptable at the end of a song section, provided they contain an even number of measures and are artistically appropriate.
- d. The Music judge will reduce a score for distracting melody alterations in proportion to their incidence and/or impact on the overall arrangement. It is understood that the Music judge can only become distracted by altered melodies when the judge definitely knows the correct melody.
- e. Regarding Music Category Description, III.C.4, it is understood that a repeated section usually means a verse or chorus, but sometimes the last A phrase within the first statement of an AABA section may be stylized effectively.
- f. The arranger is expected to use the composer's melody as the basis for harmonization and embellishment a song. Melodic alterations might be distracting, especially when the melody is well-known. Alterations that are made for the purpose of satisfying the standards of acceptable harmonic progressions and harmonic rhythm stated in II.4 are not permitted. Alterations are acceptable in the following circumstances:
  - (i) Minor melodic alterations may be made to enhance the potential for increased consonance and singability, as long as the notes that are changed are not essential to defining the character or shape of the melody.
  - (ii) When an alteration of the melody is commonly known and accepted.
  - (iii) When, in a repeated section (verse or chorus) of a song, the arrangement alters or stylizes the melody. Stylized segments may occur during repeats of a song section as long as the stylization results in a passage suggestive of the original. Alterations beyond these parameters will result in a lower Music score.

## II. FEMALE IMPERSONATION

In 1993 the Contest and Judging rules underwent significant revisions, including the elimination of a specific prohibition against female impersonation. It should be noted, however, that the elimination of this prohibition in no way was intended to imply that female impersonation is now generally acceptable as a performance option. Rather, it is a matter of taste. Under the current Contest and Judging System, the matter of taste is subjective and is adjudicated in the Performance Category. Female impersonation may be either offensive or entertaining, depending on many subjective factors.

The current contest rules recognize that it may be possible for a performance utilizing female impersonation to be staged in an inoffensive and tasteful manner. Performers should be aware, however, that our society in general, and therefore many Performance judges, has become sensitive to performances that may be offensive to some or many women. The use of female impersonation, therefore, represents a heightened level of risk in terms of the scoring of such a performance.

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Risks are usually taken for the purpose of generating a reward. Some enhancement to the impact of a performance is possible through the clever, tasteful use of female impersonation. On the other hand, it is possible for a severe problem to occur, whereby a poor performance could result in a low quality score (as low as 1), audience scorn, and even damage to the overall mission of promoting barbershop singing to the general public.

### III. TASTE

Performances containing bad taste, or which could be considered offensive, are not common in Barbershop contests. Performers are usually aware of the need to have positive audience engagement.

The test of whether a performance is distasteful or offensive is whether, in whole or in part, it would be offensive to today's audiences or society in general.

The Performance judge will assess whether the performance's impact offends contemporary society's standards of cultural currency and sensitivity. These rare performances may range from inadvertent offense to a complete disregard for the potential impact on the audience. Judicial discretion in analyzing these situations is paramount, and judges draw on their own life experience as well as their judicial education and training.

Performances that are considered in poor taste will be subject to penalty up to and including forfeiture by the Performance judge(s). In cases where there is not clear intent to be distasteful the judge may afford the benefit of the doubt to the performer.

If a performance raises questions or could meet the above criteria, the Performance panel will conference to discuss a possible action. (For guidelines see Performance Category Description, Chapter 6 of the *Contest and Judging Handbook*, Section II.I.1.b.)

### IV. OBSCURE LYRICS

The first responsibility of any art form is to communicate. The use of obscure lyrics can make it difficult to carry out that responsibility and therefore may interfere with the delivery of emotional impact to the audience. This can conceivably result in a lower Performance score.

The audience should not have to work hard to clearly understand the message being communicated by a barbershop performance. Consider the following lyric lines: "The sky isn't blue for a red rosy hue is there in the air today" or "I was jealous and hurt, when your lips kissed a rose, or your eyes from my own chanced to stray." In isolation, with one of this type of line at a time the audience could probably glean the message and could be convinced by the surrounding material that their guess was accurate. But too much of this type of lyric would leave most barbershop audiences frustrated. An example of a song whose lyrics get in the way of communication is "Send in the Clowns." This song's obscure lyrics require a highly skilled performer to effectively communicate the meaning of this song to the typical audience.

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The heartfelt performance is not just an attitude or emotion of a song or theme, but rather the lyrics must contribute to generating human emotions in the listener. If either the emotions or the words are unclear, obscure, or ambiguous, heartfelt delivery is affected, which will generally result in a lower-scoring performance.

Notwithstanding the above, there is nothing inherently wrong with folksy, artsy, or poetic songs. They can be magnificent, thought-provoking and emotional works of art. Many of these songs are not, however, typical of the material we have come to understand as "barbershop." The Contest & Judging System has a stated responsibility to preserve the barbershop style; therefore, contestants should choose material with lyrics they can effectively communicate on its first performance.

### V. PATRIOTIC AND RELIGIOUS PERFORMANCES

#### A. Patriotic Performances

References to national pride or the military are generally acceptable in contest. The rule violation would come into play in a performance where the theme is primarily extoling a particular national government. Examples include performances of national anthems or similar songs (for example, O Canada, God Bless America, or I'm Proud to Be an American). Such songs shall be considered primarily patriotic, and that song's scores would be subject to a penalty up to and including forfeiture by the Performance judge.

This rule does not prohibit the use of songs of an historical national nature, or general characterization of any nation. There is a wealth of contest-worthy material that falls into the acceptable range, such as Yankee Doodle Dandy, My Old Kentucky Home, Over There, If There'd Never Been an Ireland and many more.

The rule also does not prohibit the use of satire, or other comedic political material or manner of performance.

The Performance judge, in determining the application of this rule, will assess whether a typical audience would reasonably determine a song as performed to be primarily patriotic.

#### B. Religious Performances

References to God, religion or prayer are acceptable as long as the performance is not primarily focused on extoling a deity. Many songs refer to elements of religion or prayer without the focus being primarily religious. These can be work or struggle songs, many rhythm, dance, show vehicles or those alluding to a "revival". Examples include Get Happy, Blow Gabriel Blow, Wind Beneath My Wings, You Raise Me up, etc.

The test of whether or not a song or performance is primarily religious is not based on religious language or whether a song is published in a hymnal. Many secular songs are often utilized because of their message of uplift and spirituality offering hope and encouragement to all people,

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some of which allude to positive values and the impact of a power greater than ourselves, while not meeting the guideline of being primarily focused on extolling a deity.

The Performance judge will always be guided by the principle of primary focus and the likely impact of the performance of the song in its entirety on the audience. Where there is reasonable doubt that a performance would meet the criteria of being primarily religious, benefit must go to the performer and no penalty is justified. Otherwise the Performance judge shall apply a penalty, up to and including forfeiture. (For guidelines see Performance Category Description, Chapter 6 of the *Contest and Judging Handbook*, Section II.I.1.a.)

### VI. SCORING DIFFERENCES AMONG JUDGES

The Contest and Judging System adopted by the Society in 1993 has moved the judging of contestants toward an evaluation of the artistic impact of a performance on the audience, as opposed to an analysis of the craft of creating effects. Therefore, the judge's individual perspectives have become more relevant, since the judge not only represents, but is a part of, the audience.

The audience that the judge represents may be defined as a mature, musically astute, experienced barbershop audience, whose primary focus is being entertained in the barbershop style. Any attempt to define all of the terms in the preceding sentence would be inappropriate, as it would run contrary to the natural diversity that exists within audiences and among judges.

Whereas scoring differences in the past may have reflected differing opinions on the technical effectiveness with which a performance was delivered, under the current judging system, differences among judges may now reflect the differing emotional impacts upon the judges that performances may have created.

Since each judge, like each member of the audience, has different life experiences and personal backgrounds, some performances may create differing types and levels of impact upon different judges and therefore be reflected in their scoring. For example, a performance intended to be a tribute to Jimmy Durante may not have as much impact on a thirty-year-old judge as on an older judge who can relate to having actually seen Durante's performances. Such a performance would have a similarly diverse impact on the audience, because of the age spectrum that exists. Many other examples could be given, but this same principle affects performances that include inside jokes, period material, or any other performance that has, as part of its content, an attribute not universally understood or appreciated by the audience.

Performing material or using a style of delivery that invites a mixed reaction among audience members relative to taste, empathy, comprehension, relevance, or some other facet, also invites the chance of a mixed reaction on the part of the judges. It is natural that this mixed reaction may be reflected in scoring, as it should be.

Certainly, the Performance Category intends to reward creativity in both concepts and delivery of concepts, but that creativity must "connect" with, and be appreciated by, the audience and the judges, to have emotional impact. Obviously, those performances that are universally enjoyed by

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all members of the audience will also have the best chance of being uniformly appreciated by all of the judges. Such performances will lessen the chances of divergent scoring.

If divergent scoring is to be minimized, the responsibility rests both with the judges and the contestants. Judges must accept training on category standards and agree to implement that training to the best of their ability. Contestants must work their craft and artistic skills toward the goal of reaching every member of the audience to the greatest degree possible.

### VII. MUSIC CATEGORY PROCESS FOR STYLE PROBLEMS

The Music Category uses its email forum to discuss style issues. We have a standing rule that music judges report style problems from recent contests to the category, which then holds a discussion. Factors include the relationship between performance and current category wording, matters of degree, appropriate amount of effect of the problem on adjudicated score, and any aspects of natural style evolution that may exist. The forum discussions keep Music judges current on the state of our thinking about style, and the category will continue to use this process as an integral component of our style guardianship role.

The progression typically follows this pattern:

- A. Questionable material is heard in contest. In real time, Music judges decide to what extent the material affects the performance and score.
- B. The performance becomes the subject of discussion, initiated either by a panel judge or an outside query, and is brought to the attention of the Category Specialist.
- C. The Category Specialist initiates an internal discussion of the performance and the style issues involved. All sides of the issue are openly discussed in the Music Category forum.
- D. A consensus is reached (if possible) on how this and similar material should be handled in the future.
- E. Individual judges align their adjudication to the Category consensus, with the understanding that this is the expected reaction when hearing this or similar material in future contests.

### VIII. FREQUENCY OF THE BARBERSHOP 7<sup>TH</sup> CHORD

One of the defining hallmarks of the barbershop style is the barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> chord (major-minor 7<sup>th</sup> (1-3-5-<sup>b</sup> 7)). The previous Arrangement (ARR) Category description stated that arrangements should have a minimum of 33% barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> chords by duration (at first it was 35% and later lowered to 33%). The Music Category Description continued this legacy requirement. The percentage was derived by taking arrangements that were considered solid barbershop and counting the frequency of 7<sup>th</sup> chords to the total number of beats. The Music Category accepts a wider spectrum of songs for competition arranged in the barbershop style than the Arrangement Category did. Most of them still met this criterion. However, there were a number of songs that fell short of this requirement, even though the songs were clearly and solidly barbershop. Barbershop singers and audiences accepted them as

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barbershop. Judging these songs against this criterion created discrepancies in application as well as incorrectly assessing the true count of 7<sup>th</sup> chords. As a result, this criterion is no longer appropriate to assess stylistic suitability.

The Music judge listens to the musicality of the performance through the filter of the barbershop style. The Music judge is in a position to address performance issues that are generated by the elements of the song and/or arrangement that may be stylistically weak. Through this, the intent of featuring the hallmark of the barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> chord is maintained without a need to quantify the actual count.

At the heart of the barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> chord is the tritone interval (augmented fourth). In a barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> chord, the tritone is the interval between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and flatted 7<sup>th</sup> (b7). We find this relationship not only in the barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> chord but also in the traditional 9<sup>th</sup> chords used in barbershop (1-<sup>b</sup> 7-2-3, 5-<sup>b</sup> 7-2-3 of scale tones) as well as other chords such as the half-diminished 7<sup>th</sup> (1-<sup>b</sup> 3-<sup>b</sup> 5-<sup>b</sup> 7). The role of the tritone is critical in barbershop. Songs that feature circle-of-fifths movement exhibit what is known as tritonal movement, which creates energy and tension. As a result, these songs will have a high frequency of barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> chords and provide the characteristic sound of barbershop.

Arrangements that have fewer barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> chords could result in several performance deficiencies. Arrangements that feature more minor triads and minor 7<sup>th</sup> chords could exhibit a lower consonance level. Quartets/choruses that do not possess high levels of tuning will have more problems and the score will likely be lower than an arrangement with a higher 7<sup>th</sup> count. Arrangements that do not have high circle-of-fifths motion will have less built-in tension. Quartets/choruses will have to work harder in order to overcome this weakness in the music. Delivery and thematic development will likely be lower, affecting both Music and Performance scores. From an audience perspective, arrangements that are low in 7<sup>th</sup> chord count may not be as appealing as songs that are higher in 7<sup>th</sup> chord count.

As the Music judge listens to a song/arrangement that is low in barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> chords, the judge will make a decision as to whether the arrangement is still characteristic of the barbershop style. Does it still create musical tension? Does it still provide opportunities for lock and ring? If it does, then it is acceptable. Arrangements that do not provide for these attributes will likely result in a lower Music score, and the Music judge will identify the weakness of a low barbershop 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> chord count as part of the reason.