

SINGING CATEGORY

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I. INTRODUCTION

One ingredient that clearly identifies barbershop music is its unique sound. It is the sound of barbershop that allows the transforming of a song into an emotional experience for the performer and audience. The best barbershop singing combines elements of technique and emotion to create an artistic result.

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, exhibit no signs of difficulties, and are free from individual distractions.

When intonation, balance, vowel tuning, and freely produced tones are executed at a high level, the sound of the quartet or chorus can appear to be greater than the sum of the sound produced by the individual voices. We call this “expanded sound” or “expansion”. The terms "lock" and "ring" have also been used to describe the unique sound, even though their contemporary meanings have changed.

This presence of expansion will always be one of the hallmarks of the style. Chord selections, homorhythmic treatment, and efficient tone choices are driven by this stylistic element. Any listener to a barbershop performance expects to be thrilled by the sound of a ringing chord or awed by the purity and beauty of a soft and elegant expression of a song. Great barbershop singing demands mastery of vocal and ensemble skills to create the breathtaking effects of barbershop musical artistry.

The Singing judge evaluates the degree to which the performer achieves artistic singing in the barbershop style. Expanded and artistic singing is accomplished through precise intonation, a

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high degree of vocal skill that includes efficient tone production, and unified execution. Appropriate vocal expression completes the emotional delivery. Mastering these elements of good singing results in the unique sound that is barbershop harmony.

Below is a closer look at some key elements that contribute to successful vocal delivery in the barbershop style.

II. ELEMENTS OF SINGING

A. Intonation

1. Barbershop singers adjust pitches to achieve perfectly tuned chords, and yet sing a melodic line that remains true to the tonal center. 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. Essentially, just intonation is used for harmonic tuning while remaining true to the established tonal center.
2. Melodic intonation refers to the system by which pitches are chosen for the melody of the song. Barbershop melody singers tend to use notes that preserve the tonal center while simultaneously serving the requirements of both melody and harmony. Melody singers need to be aware of harmonic tuning as well as staying true to the tonal center.
3. Harmonic intonation refers to the pitches chosen primarily by the non-melody singers. Good ear singers will naturally tune a harmonic interval to be free of beats—that is, in just intonation. Just intonation reinforces those harmonics (overtones) that are common between any two pitches and creates combination tones (sum and difference tones) between any two pitches or harmonics. These added tones are the physical cause of barbershop chord “lock” and the expansion of sound. How well a chord “locks” is directly related to the accuracy of harmonic intonation.
4. Tonal center refers to the key feeling, or tonic, of the song. This key feeling should remain constant; maintaining precise harmonic intonation and melodic tonal center is the responsibility of all the singers in the ensemble. They all sense the forward progression of the harmony in addition to maintaining the tonal center. All singers, including the melody singer, tune to an anticipated melodic line that would maintain the tonal center. Singers of roots and fifths of chords own the greater responsibility to be in tune, both with the anticipated melody and the tonal center. Singers of thirds and sevenths of chords who are not on the melody will adjust their pitches to achieve justly in-tune chords.

B. Vocal Quality

1. The three descriptors of good vocal production are: well-supported, freely produced, and resonant. 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 (or at least does not detract from) the artistic impact of a song may be said to possess good quality.
 - a. Well-supported: Dictionaries define support as a foundation or base for something. Vocal support starts with proper alignment. A properly aligned body frame will reduce

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the stress and tension placed on other areas of the body, thus reducing tension in the voice. With a well-supported body frame, a singer may then focus on efficient breath management.

- b. Freely produced: healthy and consistent vocal fold closure is free from stress and tension. Virtually any unnecessary muscle tension may interfere with a freely produced tone, as could laryngeal position.
- c. Resonance: Vibrations that are created at the vocal folds pass into the vocal tract (the throat [pharynx], mouth [oral cavity] and nasal cavities) and are amplified or dampened by adjusting both the shape and position of the vocal tract and associated structures (soft palate, tongue, mouth cavity, lips). This process of filtering vocal sound, which affects the perception of the fundamental frequency and formants, is referred to as vocal resonance. While the quality and color (timbre) of a voice depend on the singer's ability to develop and use various vocal resonators, they should make healthy vocal choices which embrace and accentuate the best resonant qualities of their natural voice.

2. Additional factors affecting vocal quality:

- a. To achieve a more authentic performance, singers should maximize the most pleasing and artistic qualities of their individual voices. A singer should embrace the vocal qualities that are inherent and natural to the unique characteristics of that singer. While some concessions may be made in the interest of ensemble unity, these should not be at the expense of healthy singing.
- b. Singing at a high volume can make individual overtones louder. However, doing so can affect the quality of expansion (by enhancing unpleasant overtones) or even distort a singer's pitch. Singers should use caution when singing with great intensity to ensure they are making healthy vocal choices appropriate for their skill level.
- c. Performers are encouraged to choose music that suits their capabilities and that feature the strengths and minimizes the weaknesses of the ensemble. 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.
- d. In barbershop singing, some vibrato, especially within the lead voice, can be very effective in enhancing the emotional content of the music. However, too high a vibrato rate and/or excessive pitch fluctuation, will affect expansion and ensemble unity.
- e. Tremolo is a rapid oscillation between two distinct pitches with accompanying loss of the sense of a central pitch. Lack of muscular coordination is a primary cause for tremolo. Tremolo is unacceptable in good singing.

C. Unity

1. Unity describes the net effect of ensemble-unifying techniques. Most a cappella vocal forms utilize some of the following: matched word sounds and timbre, volume relationships (balance), synchronization and precision, sound flow, and diction.

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2. Word Sounds and Timbre

- a. The resonant characteristics of the vocal tract determine an individual's voice timbre. The singer can control and change the shape of the vocal tract, thereby altering its resonant characteristics. Each vowel sound requires a unique positioning and shaping of the elements that affect resonance: the throat, mouth, tongue, jaw, and lips.
- b. Subtle adjustments of the vocal tract are used to achieve matched word sounds. Each vowel sound exhibits a set of formant frequencies unique to that particular vowel. The singer can develop awareness and sensitivity to these formant frequencies, to enable the word-sound match between voices to be finely tuned.
- c. The untrained singer may experience a natural tendency for the vocal timbre to darken at lower pitches and volumes and brighten at higher pitches and volumes. This tendency is called migration. To achieve a wider range of uniformity, the singer may modify vowel sounds at the extremes of the singer's range by making subtle adjustments in vowel sounds (formant frequencies) to create the impression to the listener that no change in timbre occurs throughout the singer's range. This is best achieved through proper vocal technique throughout the range, rather than artificially modifying the vowel sound. When done correctly greater consistency in expansion can be achieved.

3. Volume Relationships (Balance)

- a. The basic perception of the barbershop ensemble is that of a melody singer with harmony accompaniment that is unified with the melody.
- b. The most consonant intervals are between notes whose frequencies may be expressed as ratios of small whole numbers. These include the unison (1:1), octave (2:1), perfect fifth (3:2), and perfect fourth (4:3). The less-consonant intervals have frequency ratios of relatively large numbers, such as the major third (5:4) and harmonic minor seventh (7:4). Notes of intervals that are most consonant should predominate over those that are less consonant as this can lead to improved expansion.
- c. Higher tones are easier to hear than lower tones. Thus, lower tones must be sung with more energy in order to be perceived as equal in volume to higher tones. Properly balanced tones are necessary for maximizing expansion.

4. Synchronization and precision

- a. Each syllable has a primary vowel sound, or target vowel. Anticipatory consonants or vowels may precede the primary vowel sound, and continuant consonants, vowels, or diphthongs may follow the primary vowel sound. For optimal synchronization the primary vowel sound should be fully realized on the pulse beat for that syllable. Normally, anticipatory sounds occur before the pulse beat, during time borrowed from the previous note, or breath. Pitch changes between primary vowel sounds should be executed together in all voices otherwise both intonation and expansion may suffer.
- b. Most of the singing time is spent sustaining the primary vowel sound, with the anticipatory and continuant sounds lengthened or shortened appropriately to create a natural diction. Primary vowel sound length, when compared to all other sounds, will

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be adjusted by the singer to effect changes of mood and expression. Synchronization execution by the ensemble enables consistent expansion.

- c. Precision inaccuracies can trigger other problems. Singers can avoid perceived intonation errors by starting their individual notes at the same time. With a focus on precision, singers can achieve uniformity of the pulse beat.

5. Sound flow

- a. Resonance should be carried through all voiced sounds. Stopping and starting the voice increases the opportunity for precision errors detracts from the continuous flow of the music and leads to inconsistent expansion.
- b. The use of staggered breathing by a chorus to avoid breaks in the flow is not typical of the barbershop quartet style. Ideally, phrases should not be excessively longer than those that could be sung by an individual in one well-managed breath. Overlapping (parts singing through while another part breathes) is acceptable. These techniques should only be employed in such a way as to not draw attention to the technique itself.

6. Diction and articulation

- a. Diction is the choice of word sounds, or pronunciation, as well as the clarity of word sounds, or enunciation. Word sounds include primary and secondary vowel sounds, diphthongs, triphthongs, and consonants. Proper articulation is appropriate execution of those sounds, usually free of regional dialects and intelligible to the listener.
- b. Singers think words and phrases but do not sing words *per se*. They strive to provide the audience with a collection of sounds that they decode into understandable words. Part of the singer's job is to determine all the sounds in a lyric line, ensure that the ensemble matches these word sounds, then execute those sounds in a way that allows the audience to easily decode the lyric and enjoy the ensemble's enhanced expansion.
- c. Proper diction characteristics are clarity, accuracy, ease, uniformity, and expressiveness. Vowels make up a majority of all the sounds in vocal music; they should be true to the words being sung. Natural use of consonants is also very important to diction, as they carry the meaning of the words. They should not be overemphasized, dropped, or substituted inappropriately to attempt better sound flow. Singing them correctly helps to carry the voice, focus it, enhance its loudness, and supply emotion.

D. Vocal Expression

1. 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.

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2. Vocal expression is the marriage between good vocal technique and sincere delivery within the context of the song's message. Singers should strive for technical proficiency across the ensemble while honoring the song's theme.
3. Some common approaches used to enhance expressive vocal quality are:
 - a. Enunciation - Diction appropriate to the song is necessary. This enables the listener to comprehend the words and maintain musical flow, so the listener's attention is drawn to the lyric's meaning and not to its execution. Enunciation can be used to help emulate certain feelings or emotions reflective of the song's lyric.
 - b. Articulation - Singers have a variety of tools at their disposal, from emphasizing consonants so words sound crisp, to delaying vowels so words sound slow or even muttered. There are often a variety of artistic choices to be made within the context of the song.
 - b. Word sounds - The execution of vowels and consonants, both in timing and in placement, affect the delivery of expressive lyrics. Word sounds can be used to influence the feeling of a song, for example slowing the words down to emulate patience or speeding up word sounds to emulate excitement. See section C (Unity) for details about word sound unification and synchronization across the ensemble.
 - c. Tone color / (Timbre) - The lyric of a song might suggest certain changes in vocal tone for different words or phrases, even possibly changing dramatically within one phrase for special effect. The choice might be different for an exciting mood than for a melancholy or dramatic one. Performers may even choose an exaggerated tone for parody or comedic results. Timbre can also influence clarity and expansion.
 - d. Inflection - Vocal lines that are embellished tastefully with inflections can enhance the emotional feeling and lyrical intent of the song.
 - e. Other techniques are limited only by the creativity of the performers.
4. For 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. Care should be taken not to overuse these devices to the point where they become the focal point, unless desired. 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.

E. Summary

Expanded and artistic singing is accomplished through precise intonation, a high degree of vocal skill that includes efficient tone production, and unified execution. Appropriate vocal expression completes the emotional delivery. Mastering these elements of good singing results in the unique sound that is barbershop harmony.

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III. SCORING

A. Scoring Methodology

1. The Singing judge evaluates the performance of each song for the level of mastery of the singing elements. The elements are:
 - Intonation
 - Vocal quality
 - Unity
 - Vocal expression

The judge assigns an overall rating based on an appraisal of the degree of achievement of vocal artistry in the barbershop style.

2. The Singing judge awards a score from 1-100 points per song. Judges weigh the performance of the particular song against their cumulative listening experience and assign the score accordingly. The score is relative to a theoretically perfect performance. Judges strive for objectivity in scoring, yet any assessment of the overall artistry naturally includes a subjective point of view.
3. Each performer is compared against the judge's base of listening experience, not against other performances in the same contest. Judges will note what elements influenced their score. More importantly, they will note significant ways to improve the performance.

B. Scoring Levels

1. The A level
 - a. A-level scores (81 to 100) are given to performances of the most consistent artistic barbershop singing. There are very few distractions owing to lack of singing skill; rather, the focus is primarily on expressive singing.
 - b. A typical performance earning a mid-range A score (87-93 points) features few, if any, intonation errors, excellent vocal quality, consistent unity, consistent expansion of sound, and an overall perception of vocal expression and artistry that transcends technique.
 - c. A performance at the upper range of A (94-100) would likely be a significant artistic experience for any listener, possibly transcending measurable elements to define its success. Performances in this range need not be flawless, as flawless performances can actually draw attention to the technique. Rather, the performance and experience are characterized more by the expressive artistic result and not the technique employed.
 - d. In a performance at the low end of the A range (81-86), an occasional technical distraction can occur. The performer may show great skill but the "technique is showing." The performer may be inconsistent, having phrases of higher A mixed with phrases of a lesser level.
 - e. The distinguishing difference between lower A and upper B levels is often the perception of artistry as the combination of great skills into one transparent whole.

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2. The B level

- a. B-level scores (61 to 80 points) are for performances that frequently show skills of artistic barbershop singing, mixed with more distractions or lack of artistic unity.
- b. A typical performance in the mid-range of B (67-73 points) is only occasionally out of tune, frequently exhibits good vocal quality, is often a unit, has infrequent interruptions in expansion of sound and has apparent use of vocal expression. The performance may even have a short duration of A-level quality.
- c. The upper range of the B scores (74-80) is for performances that may demonstrate great skill across most singing elements—but not the mastery of them. The performance will be technically sound yet will likely have some distractions. Artistic expression will be present, but with limited agreement across the ensemble.
- d. In the lower range of B performances (61-66), skill errors may provide significant distractions in some phrases, but most of the performance is still good. Intonation and vocal quality are slightly better than satisfactory. Expansion of sound is inconsistent.
- e. The difference between lower B and upper C levels is often a matter of consistency of skill and blending into an artistic unit.

3. The C level

- a. C-level scores (41 to 60 points) are for performances that demonstrate adequate skills, with some signs of artistry but with notable inconsistencies in performance.
- b. A typical performance in the mid-range of C (48-53) will have intonation problems. The vocal quality is satisfactory but not improper, and could be improved by basic vocal skills. Unity is impeded by word sound mismatches, faulty chord balancing, or even choice of material, and expansion of sound occurs as often as not. Some artistic moments would be evident.
- c. The upper range of C scores (54-60) is for performances that may be partly at the B level but show several distractions, inconsistencies, and inability to sustain the artistry.
- d. In the lower range of C performances (41-47), offensive intonation or vocal quality may be exhibited occasionally, and the perception of unity and expansion of sound is more infrequent.
- e. The difference between lower C and upper D levels is often that the C performance has acceptable quality and fewer unpleasant sounds.

4. The D level

- a. D-level scores (1 to 40 points) are for performances in which the elements of good singing are rarely heard. Poor (D-level) performances normally will be assessed a score of 40 instead of an exact score. Little is gained by an exact score in this range and specifics for improvement can be covered in the feedback session.
- b. The upper part of the D range is typified by performances that have rare moments of acceptable skills, which appear to be accidental or out of control of the performer.
- c. The middle part of the D range typically exhibits a major lack of vocal skill. Wrong notes may be prevalent. In-tune chords are rare. Vocal quality and tone color will most

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likely be poor or offensive. Dissonance is the norm. Individual voices will be consistently predominant, and the ensemble rarely sings as a unit.

- d. The lower part of the D range is almost never encountered. A significant performance error, such as poor pitch-taking or nerves, could reduce an otherwise mid-D performance to the lower end.
- e. Performances in this range usually occur because of a lack of skill, nerves, lack of knowledge, neglect, intentional focus on non-singing aspects of the performance, or significant lack of preparation.

C. Use of the Score Sheet

- 1. The scale and box are reminders of the judging ranges and the concept of the overall effect. Many may want to circle or flag a range on the scale, or a particularly appropriate phrase in the box, and use arrows down to a written comment below.
- 2. The element list is a selected list of ideas to circle or check off for later comments. Consider it to be for reference; it can serve as an abbreviation list for comments as well.
- 3. During the performance, the judge will identify only two or three of the most significant elements of the performance and several "fixes" for any of these elements. The judge will also point out where in the performance the best singing occurred and why, thereby giving the performer a chance to relate to the good experience firsthand.
- 4. The Singing judge will determine, through practice, how much detail is necessary to trigger recollection of the performance and focus on the major items. Flaws in the smallest sense are not relevant; the judge will be looking at the broader perspective. The judge will find elements of the performance that, if changed, would most significantly result in improvement.
- 5. The highest scores will be earned by performances solidly within the barbershop style that offer the greatest opportunity to create stylistic and artistic singing.
- 6. The final score is first written in the box on the scoring form (CJ-28) and then copied onto the judging form (CJ-25) in the box in the lower right corner.

D. Differences between Quartet and Chorus

- 1. 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.
- 2. Choruses are more able to blend, or even hide, the differences of pitch and timbre between the singers than is possible in quartets. 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.

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- a. Wrong notes and more than four parts in a chorus performance have a muddy effect on the whole ensemble, or, at its worst, depart from the barbershop style. This results in lower scores.
- b. The perception of a unit sound requires that individual voices not be heard. In a quartet, each person retains their own recognizable voice, whereas in a chorus, no individual tone color should be discernible.
- c. Precision of the chorus takes on a new challenge as there are more possibilities for error. The preparation of the singers, as well as the skill of the chorus director, greatly affects this aspect.
- d. Larger choruses can generate a larger quantity of sound than smaller ones, as well as a greater ability to bury the problems of any individual. 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.

E. Penalties Up To and Including Forfeiture

1. Singing judges are solely responsible for adjudicating Article X of the Contest Rules. Any penalty or forfeiture by a Singing judge would be as a result of a violation of Article X.B. of the Contest Rules.
 - a. Article X.B. prohibits contestants from using their own electronic amplification, but does permit limited, brief, and relevant sound effects or electronic means of pitch taking. It also prohibits the use of recorded music or speaking, as well as use of technology to enhance the performance electronically. Violation of Article X.B. may result in penalties up to and including forfeiture.
2. The Singing judge declares forfeiture by awarding a score of zero. When a penalty or forfeiture of score has been applied, the judge should note the reason for such on the judging form on the line: "Penalties: _____ Reason: _____" and on the appropriate line of the penalty grid on the scoring form.
3. All penalties of five or more points will be notated on the scoring slip. The judge will indicate the net score with penalty applied as the total score as well as the amount of penalty/penalties and applicable rule provision for the penalty. Any Singing judge wishing to apply a penalty of five or more points in total should first conference with the other Singing judges and the judges must agree to the level of rule violation but not discuss the actual points or the performance score.

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IV. INTEGRATION WITH OTHER CATEGORIES

The Performance category is principally responsible for evaluating entertainment value in a barbershop performance, which includes visual and vocal elements. The sound created by highly artistic singing can positively enhance the overall emotional effect of a performance. Conversely, elements of the sound that are not of good quality (such as tuning) could diminish the overall effect of the performance. Vocal expression is important to the Performance category as well, as entertainment value and emotional context can be enhanced with this element.

While the Singing category evaluates the technical and qualitative aspects of the performer's sound, these factors also affect the Musicality category in determining the level of consonance, consonant harmony being the primary hallmark of the barbershop style. Singing that suffers from poor synchronization, intonation, or vocal quality, or other sound problems will also negatively impact such music areas as thematic development, delivery, and execution.