

SOUND AND EXPRESSION – A STRONG RELATIONSHIP

(A review of the Zoom class for Reg. 16 on 10/17/20)

By Dale Syverson

The Big Picture: Learn how to read your score sheets.

Every category has a *hierarchy* of importance: read this from left to right. Consider what's in the left column of each category to be the foundation – or the “bones”/structure – to guide you to success in the other column(s).

You will generally see *levels of comments* on both parts of your judging sheet - - both the header and the body of the score sheet. If you look at enough score sheets you will begin to see the way that judges use adjectives to describe your performance as well as to guide their decision of their final score for each song, e.g., for vocal skills: emerging, developing, good, skillful, commanding, masterful.

As your performance skills improve, you'll find that judges' comments move overall from criticism to encouragement to praise. Every judge has to find her own range of descriptive words so that she can make accurate and concise assessment of what she is hearing and do it quickly. After all, your performance is only 3 – 7 minutes long. She will examine her use of adjectives in the header as well as in her “story” of your ongoing performance in the body of the score sheet to help guide her to the correct score for each song.

The “tie that binds” **all four categories** is *vocal skills*. Our overall success is driven and supported by the best possible execution of our vocal skills by every singer as well as the ensemble as a whole. Now, let's move on to some specifics of the relationship between the Sound Category and the Expression Category.

POINTS OF CONNECTION:

Vocal Skills

Sound: This is the primary concern of this category. The skills in this area are primary and highest in the hierarchy of the category. (Make special note of the fact that it is NOT the Sound Judge's job to adjudicate vocal production as such. Rather, she's tasked with determining the level of vocal skill executed by the singer/ensemble *in the creation of a barbershop sound*.)

Expression: This is the most important foundational element of this category under Technical Elements. Made obvious by its position in the hierarchy of the category, the success of everything else is dependent on the degree of success when it comes to vocal skills.

In both categories, success in this area drives and supports the development of skills and successful execution of all following elements in each of the four categories.

Synchronization

Sound: This is an element that is dependent on the successful execution of the elements above it: notes, intervals, chords, tuning/intonation, section/part accuracy. (A nod to the Music Category: chords that are not vertically aligned – *in synch* – cannot achieve the tuning that the Sound Judge is looking for and...

Expression: ...the synchronization/unity that the Expression Judge is looking for. Every element of what we do, from notes and accurate intervals to smooth delivery of a vocal line (aka: legato) feeds into success in this area.

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POINTS OF CONNECTION (cont.):

Articulation

Sound: ...ideally the relaxed and efficient use and movement of these elements (e.g., tongue, lips, jaw, etc.) is an element of vocal skills that feeds directly into and is related to ...

Expression: ...enunciation (ultimately providing lyric clarity to the listener) and to lyric flow. Advancing your skills in this area also plays directly into smooth phrase delivery and forward motion.

Breathing

Sound: Here's another skill *very* high in the category hierarchy of importance. Its position of overall importance makes it elemental to the success of everything that follows and begins with the creation of breath-to-tone execution.

Expression: It's hard to separate lyric flow, phrasing movement and pacing and forward motion from the importance of breath skills development. As a judge in this category, I can determine scoring level in this area by awareness of the need for and execution of skilled and varied breath timing within the phrasing plan. The higher the skill level...the better the storytelling.

Dynamic Flexibility

Sound: This is an element that is high in the category hierarchy and highly dependent on all of the elements in the header that precede it. The most important elements for success here are breath support and breath management.

Expression: Dynamics both appropriate to and compatible with both the music and the lyrics are desired here. Success here elevates both the phrasing and the forward motion.

Another thought about dynamics: Improve your ability to execute dynamics by including softs on *any* vocal exercise as it goes up in pitch. Suggestion: Do the exercise as they are used to doing it; do it again practicing softer dynamics as the pitch ascends. Remember that singers tend to add volume as they ascend in pitch with the result that they never seem to get around to developing the finesse skill of singing softly in the upper 1/3 of their range. This applies to all four parts.

Resonation

Sound: Note that it is both listed in the Vocal Skills column and listed *after* "breathing" in that column, since resonance is dependent on how the air moves as well as how it is shaped and positioned.

Expression: Although not listed as such in this category, a lack of resonance can cause distortion of a vowel sound, rendering it impossible to either "match" or even synchronize.

A few more thoughts about dynamics and resonance:

* How an ensemble is taught, and experiences resonance usually begins with a technical description, often leading to the use of numbered designations – 1 to 5 or 1 to 10. This technique will work until the ensemble is skilled enough to move into the arena of artistic execution of their dynamics by using resonance, which is a more skilled use of the movement of the air. At that point, I'd recommend using more descriptive than technical language that will support the use of vocal freedom.

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A few more thoughts about dynamics and resonance (cont.):

* Artistic use of dynamics must include the skillful use of breath timing. One helpful way I've heard it described that might help in your decision-making is to "sing the punctuation". In other words, you'll find actual punctuation in the lyrics of most songs. This can be used as a guide to choose the pacing of your breathing to complement the overall pacing of the phrase movement. For example, a comma might suggest the use of a shorter/quicker breath than a period might suggest.

* Consider that dynamics need not be limited to the constraints of being completed within one phrase – or from one breath to the very next. When the music and lyrics present the opportunity, consider using a *transitional dynamic* (crescendo or decrescendo) that moves across a breath and thereby connects the phrase/thought before the breath to the phrase/thought that follows. Skillful execution of this particular technique is certainly advanced and fully dependent on all of the essential and foundational skills discussed above in both categories.

Some suggestions for growth in these categories:

* Use your Zoom window like a mirror. Make sure you can see yourself clearly, which requires proximity to the screen and adequate lighting.

Zoom Exercise #1: Watch for a "lifted countenance" ...that lift that is usually described as elevating the area around the mouth using a sensation of elevation that moves upward through the cheeks and goes past the outside corner of the eyes, while the lower lip and jaw area are simultaneously relaxed, enabling efficient articulation. Achieving this is meant to support and finish the lift of the soft palate. By the way, successful execution of this results in a "twofer" ...you make two judges happy. In this case, the Sound Judges hears the "smile in your sound" – that also usually adds to the creation of more overtones – and the Showmanship Judge sees a genuinely engaged and pleasant face. (I personally love twofers.) Additionally, be alert for the lengthening/drawing down of the upper lip when singing. This results in a dark/covered sound and usually a distortion of the shape (resonance) of your sound as well as the vowel being sung.

Zoom Exercise #2: As you sing, watch for excessive jaw movement. The goal is not to stiffen the jaw muscles to lessen the movement, but to relax them and allow them to be used efficiently & effectively.

Moving/traveling sound exercise: Using five successive "la's" on the same pitch, holding your hand (palm facing you) in front of your face (a few inches from your mouth), sing la-la-la-la-la while simultaneously moving your hand up and down with each la. Then move your hand away from you (with the sensation of your sound attached to your palm) while singing the la's. Hopefully, you'll experience really good breath-to-tone movement resulting in an elevated execution of legato technique. After going back and forth between stationary la's and moving la's, try singing a couple of phrases of any song or vocal line...stationary using the syllables and moving using the breath-to-tone "connection" to your palm. Remember, if you run out of the first arm your using to move your sound, your other arm is always "available".

One last thought for all singers: You are a wonderful work in progress. Remember that you've been given an incredible instrument. Now it's totally up to you how skillful you become using that instrument.

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