

Difficulty Factors: Women's Barbershop Arrangements

Vicki Uhr

- 1. Range for each voice part** - be sure it falls into the "comfort zone". Here are the average ranges for each part:
 - Lead: Bb below middle C to Bb above middle C
 - Bass: Eb below middle C to F/G above middle C
 - Bari: B below middle C to Bb above middle C
 - Tenor: E above middle C to F above C prime.The larger the chorus, the wider variety of vocal ranges, you can stretch those limits a bit, especially on low end lead and low end bass.
- 2. Smoothness of the melody line.** Avoid wide interval jumps in the lead part, particularly in uptunes where the line must be executed quickly. We expect the bass part to jump around, but again it will work better in uptunes if there's not too much of it. Ballads are more flexible. The wide interval jumps make tuning, tempo and synchronization errors more probable.
- 3. Spread voicings** (two octave type chords). They are beautiful and we like a few spread chords here and there for variety and balance, but too many are difficult to balance and to sing with strength. Example of a challenging song due to spread chords is "That Old Quartet of Mine."
- 4. Check the baritone line in relation to the lead line.** You don't want to see the bari predominantly above the lead throughout a song. For best barbershop balance (cone) they should be below the lead or a mixture of above/below.
- 5. Breathing places.** As obvious as this sounds it can be a problem - we see it more often in uptunes. Be sure the arrangement is structured so that the singer gets natural places to breathe.
- 6. Voice leading.** Sing through each part line separately. Any given part line should flow smoothly and be reasonably easy for the singer to hear and execute. Baritones usually can handle what other parts would consider "illogical" intervals - it's characteristic of their part, and they can hear it.
- 7. Energy requirements.** Any arrangement that pushes the current vocal skills of the singing group will be difficult for them. This is especially true of uptune medleys.
- 8. The key of the song.** Some keys are just more difficult; anything arranged in "C" for example. The most easily sung keys for our singers' voices are Ab, Bb, Eb and F.
- 9. Key Changes.** While exciting to the structure of an arrangement, they do present challenges! Look for easy key changes - where the leads stay on the same note throughout the change, for example - until the group is capable of handling more difficult transitions.
- 10. Accidentals.** The more sharps or flats that occur outside of the key signature of the song the more difficult the piece of music. This doesn't mean you should avoid a piece of music with a few accidentals, but if the paper is peppered with them, take another look.
- 11. Lyrics.** Look for singable vowels and consonants. Some consonants are executed easily and will carry a tone - "m, n, l". Others stop the sound - "t, k, ch," etc. "S" sounds are notorious for creating synch problems. The more stopper consonants there are in a song, especially in fast-moving passages, the more difficult it will be for the group to perform well. You should also look for open vowel sounds on target chords, such as the ends of phrases and any notes that will be held. "Ah" and "oh" vowels are great. "Ee" and "ooh" sounds are harder to sing with quality, especially on high-voiced chords; it is also hard to sing them loudly.

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING COMPETITION MUSIC

1. Song should have an easy, singable melody within one or two notes of an octave range. Implied harmony is strong barbershop: major triad, barbershop (dominant) seventh, and dominant ninth chords. A sprinkling of secondary chords in passing spots adds interest. Phrase endings, points of resolution, and emphasis words should have strong chords.
2. Arrangement should be within CONTROLLABLE singing range. Under stress, both the dynamic and note ranges of the performer tend to shrink.
3. Check chords. Do they enhance the lyrics? Are they within the controllable singing range of the chorus or quartet?
4. Are there interesting lyrics, particularly if the song is a ballad? Lyrics in an uptune should be fairly easy to articulate while sung at a fast pace.
5. Is the arrangement creative? Are there interesting swipes with the right chord voicings to aid you in your interpretation? Look for other interesting embellishments, keeping in mind your group's capabilities.
6. Check for logical spots to breathe without breaking up thoughts or interrupting the forward flow of the song. Would eliminating one chord of a pick-up or changing it to an eighth note instead of a quarter note leave more space for a breath?
7. Does the introduction set up the story line? Is it creative enough to set the mood and musical scene? Is the tag strong enough to finish the song in a dramatic and exciting way?
8. Is there a musical and lyrical high point? Do they occur simultaneously? If not, does the tag finish the story and leave the audience emotionally satisfied?
9. If a key change is utilized, are the chord progressions logical and easy to hear? Common tones sung in the same voice part during chord progressions are the easiest to hear and tune.
10. Check the time signature. If the song is a ballad, make sure your ad lib (rubato) style of presentation still maintains the basic framework of rhythm. If the song is an up-tempo, be sure it stays in strict tempo for most of the song. Change tempo only for a logical musical reason, NOT to accommodate poor breath habits!
11. If the song is a medley, does it have a basic theme? Is it logical and musically satisfying, with a feeling of continuity and unity?

CONTEST SONGS for C and C+ Choruses

Note: These songs are also appropriate for higher scoring choruses and for quartets. The list is not intended to recommend these song choices over others; it only lists several contest appropriate selections that have been performed successfully by choruses at this level.

UPTUNES:

Back In Those Days Gone By
Bring Back Those Horse and Buggy Days
By the Beautiful Sea
Ev'ry Street's a Boulevard in Old New York
Everybody's Crazy Over Dixie
Floatin' Down to Cotton Town
Give 'Em a Show They'll Never Forget
He's a Devil in His Own Home Town
Tomorrow (I'll Be In My Dixie Home)
I'm Sitting On Top of the World
Oh, How We Roared in the Twenties
The Showboat Came to Town
Take Me Back to the 1920's

BALLADS

All By Myself
April Showers
Chase the Rain Away
Grandmother's Love Letters
I Tried to Forget You in Vain
Just a Baby's Prayer at Twilight
Memories in Vain
That Wonderful Mother of Mine
When I Leave the World Behind
You Can Have Every Light on Broadway

(Compiled by Marge Bailey with the disclaimer that this is only one music judge's opinion. The songs still must be performed well to score well—regardless of how well the arrangement is written!)

SONG TROUBLE-SPOTS

1. **Lead Line is much more than an octave in range.** When this occurs, vocal production problems become much more likely, as well as balance problems in the harmony parts. Harmony inaccuracies are probable.
2. **Jumpy, hard-to-sing melody.** If the lead part is difficult to sing and sing in tune, the other parts will have trouble also.
3. **Melody line transfers.** When this occurs, leads are called upon to sing a harmony part as well as balance differently. The whole balance structure is changed, and inaccuracies can result.
4. **Implied harmony is non-barbershop.** A song ideal for barbershop harmony must call for strong chords with strong voicings. Some songs were not designed for a barbershop setting and have to be manipulated to fit our style. The integrity of the song is lost.
5. **Weak bass line.** Barbershop style chords allow the bass part to sing strong components of the chords, mostly roots and fifths. Any other note of the chord is considered weak and should only be sung for smooth horizontal moving of the part or in passing chords that are leading to stronger voicings.
6. **Monotonous melody line calling for the same chord progressions.** Songs with this problem call for much interpretive skill from the performer. Much time has to be spent to analyze dynamic contrast to add variety.
7. **Any part out of range.** (Particularly lead or bass) This causes many vocal production, balance and harmony accuracy problems.
8. **Chromatic runs, bell chords, key changes and patter.** These arranging tools lend interest and excitement to songs but cause problems for the unwary performer in synchronization, vowel matching and harmony accuracy.
9. **Many lead-ins or pick-up notes for lead or bass.** Can cause synchronization and rhythm problems.
10. **Consistent illogical intervals in any part.** Causes tuning problems.
11. **Unnecessary chord changes.** Elaborate chord progressions without thought for the lyrics or smooth horizontal movement of parts will be difficult to sing.
12. **Over-arranged.** Too many or too complicated swipes which trip up the performer or leave no place to breathe will make the performance sound frantic, messy or breathless. (What seems over-arranged for one person may be handled quite well by another.)

The best arrangements are fairly EASY TO SING. A “trouble spot” that shows up during the first three rehearsals will probably continue to be a trouble spot if the fault lies in the song and/or arrangement.