

Characteristics of Strong Contest Music

Compiled by Carolyn Butler

1. Songs written in the first three decades of the twentieth century often work.
2. A typical song suitable for barbershop has:
 - 16 bar verse that sets up the song
 - 32 measure chorus
 - Typically the verse is not longer than the chorus
 - Verses do not have the musical climax or high point
 - The chorus DOES have the musical high point
3. Most common melody form: AABA
4. Another suitable melody form: ABABC
5. Not Suitable:
 - Songs that repeat the same melody line over and over are not suitable (For example: "Down in the Valley")
 - Through composed songs are not suitable.
 - Songs in languages other than English, art songs, patriotic songs, religious songs, military songs
6. Consider the note ranges:
 - The melody line easiest to sing stays within an octave plus one or two notes. (ninth or a tenth)
 - Melody lines with a wider range will require very high or very low chords.
 - Find the songs your chorus sings best in your current repertoire. Analyze why they work and look for songs that fit that description.
 - Match the demands of the music to the vocal proficiency of the sections in your chorus.
7. Consider the harmony:
 - Three very strong chords should dominate:
 - Major triad
 - Barbershop 7th
 - Barbershop 9th
 - The other 8 chords are used for variety and passing tones
8. Is there good opportunity for dynamic variance?
 - Choose a song where the contour of the melody and the chords provide a natural dynamic contrast.
 - Repetitive melodies that stay within the middle range are difficult choices.
 - Choose music where the arrangement makes use of open and closed voicings to achieve dynamic contrast.
9. Voice leading—Do the parts flow horizontally, making them more singable?
10. Lyrics—Are they meaningful? Do they have dramatic impact?
11. Vowels
 - Open sounds are easier to sing and resonate—ay, ah, oh
 - Closed sounds are more difficult—ih, eh, oo
 - Important words in the storyline should have open vowel sounds