

Difficulty Factors: Women's Barbershop Arrangements

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1. Range for each voice part - be sure it falls into the "comfort zone".
Here are the average ranges for each part:
Lead: B \flat below middle C to B \flat above middle C
Bass: E \flat below middle C to F/G above middle C
Bari: B below middle C to B \flat 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 baritone 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 A \flat , B \flat , E \flat 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.

12. Creativity
 - Composers supply creativity in the well-constructed song.
 - Look for opportunities for syncopation and other rhythmic interest
 - Be aware of your strengths. Choose the creative effects that you do well. Show off your strengths.
 - Involve the audience. Know that the judges are part of that audience and want the same response.
13. The introduction and the tag
 - A good contest barbershop song has a smashing introduction that sets the scene for the song. It's your first impression that counts!
 - The lasting impression is in the dynamic tag.
 - The arranger creates both and can tailor, if necessary the intro and tag to suit your chorus' needs. Use intros and tags that are in the good vocal singing range of your chorus so they can be performed well under stress.
14. The climax or high point—all successful contest songs have one! The best occur when the melody's high point, the harmony's most thrilling chord and the lyric's most dramatic point all occur simultaneously.

Some pointers

- Medleys can be fun but may have pitfalls. Too many songs in a medley make it fragmented and create difficulty in the overall form of the presentation.
- Parodies on songs other than those in the public domain must have permission of the composer and the copyright owner. Many times these permissions, if granted, do not extend to video rights. Start your permission-seeking many months before contest! These inquiries take time!
- Disney-owned songs will not be included in any international videotapes. Disney does not grant permission for this use. (Many songs that did not come from a Disney movie or production may still be owned by Disney. Check with headquarters if this is a concern for you and your chorus.)
- Check the Sweet Adelines International website for music reviews and difficulty ratings of the music on the published music list.
- You can submit sheet music to the music services department for consideration by the Published Music Review Committee. They will rate its likelihood for potential sales. If it is recommended, the Music Arrangements Coordinator will assign it to an arranger.
- Contact headquarters with questions about specific arrangements. The Director of Education can retrieve any music available at headquarters (from the published music list or the "Contact International" list) and talk it through, play you sections or answer your questions.
- Have your chorus buy a new music subscription. The titles are coming through much more quickly and there is good new music to select.
- Seek advice from your regular coach before making your final contest selections.