



MUSIC SELECTION MADE EASY

BY JAN MEYER

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE PERFECT SONG. IT'S ABOUT THE
PERFECT FIT.

TIPS FOR CHORUSES AND QUARTETS

Music selection made "easy" is our dream. The reality is that finding the music that best fits the image, personality and skill set of a vocal ensemble may be among the most difficult and time-consuming tasks we face.

The success and satisfaction your chorus or quartet enjoys, not just in your contest experience, but in your weekly rehearsals and community performances, depends on choosing music you will eagerly sing for a very long time.

Chances are, if you ask your fellow singers to name their favorite selection from your repertoire, many will choose the same song. It is likely to be one that rests well within their comfort zone but also has some "show-off" spots for each voice part. It has a message singers love to convey to their audiences. It is a song that evokes a strong emotional reaction for the singer and the listener, whether it is laughter, tears, the urge to jump up and dance, or a swell of patriotic pride or religious fervor.

Finding these special songs is not easy! The 1999 International Champion Quartet SIGNATURE SOUND taught a memorable class on music selection at an international education symposium years ago. These women are singers whose outstanding vocal skills allowed them to consider most anything a creative arranger could throw at them. Yet they described ordering stacks of music, singing through them and discarding most before they found the small number of arrangements that perfectly fit their own unique sound and personality.

Then there is the added pressure of choosing music for contest! Music judges are often asked, "How will this score as a contest song?" The answer we must give is, "It all depends on how well you sing it." While that may sound flippant, it is obvious that the strongest on-paper arrangement sung poorly will score poorly. Conversely, contests are sometimes won by highly skilled singers whose material may be somewhat marginal as barbershop harmony vehicles. It is never wise to choose a song simply because "The Amazing Harmonizers" won with it. They may have won *in spite of it* because their vocal skills were far superior to their competitors'.

The Judging Category Description Book's (JCDB) Music Category section spells out very specific guidelines for a strong barbershop vehicle and is the standard for evaluating the strength

director and quartet should have a copy and refer to it often! (Note: the JCDB is available for purchase or for online viewing at no charge. Visit the international sales section at www.sweetadelines.com.)

Directors often ask judges, arrangers and coaches to recommend specific music for their chorus or quartet. While we are happy to make some general suggestions, and may even have a list of sample songs at various skill levels, every group is unique in its skill set and personality. The task of choosing music must rest with the director and his/her music team. If music theory is not your strongest area of expertise, you are wise to cultivate a partnership with a chorus member or local music teacher who can help you evaluate the musical "facts" in the arrangements you are considering.

How to begin? First, take an honest assessment of your singer's musical skills and limitations:

- What is the extreme pitch range for each singer?
- What is the comfortable, stage-worthy range for each singer?
- Where is their register break?
- What are their best and worst vowels?
- What is their breath capability?
- How do they handle jumpy part lines, odd intervals, fast-moving lyrics?
- If you ask them to move to the music, do they move on the downbeat or the backbeat?

All of these considerations are vital to know when you embark on searching for music that best suits your singers. If most of your basses cannot sing below a low E \flat with quality, you are wise to choose an arrangement that never goes below F for them. If most of your baritones have an awkward register break at G, do not choose a song that requires them to "live" in that area. If the "o" vowel is problematic for your chorus, do not choose *What'll I Do*.

It seems obvious but many times, we think that if we just work hard enough, our singers will be able to overcome any obstacle. It is wise to heed the often-heard advice, "Show us what your singer can do well, not what they can almost do."

Next, look at the image and personality of your chorus or quartet. What one word would you use to describe the overall

consideration. Women of any age may be assertive, sensual, sweet, exuberant, friendly, humorous, shy, flirtatious, sophisticated or sassy—any number of personalities! A well-rounded repertoire will include a mix of these different styles, but there are probably one or two that your chorus can portray with a natural ease and others that are just not a comfortable fit.

Then comes the hard work—I mean fun!—of looking over stacks of music to find the ones that will best suit your singers' skills and personality. Check the Sweet Adelines website (sweetadelines.com/resources) for the list of music published by the organization. It is an often overlooked but valuable source of well-arranged, singer-friendly and affordable music. The website also has a separate listing of "arranged music" and preview copies of these arrangements can be ordered. Of course, you can contact individual arrangers for their lists; arrangers' policies vary regarding preview copies. You'll also find arrangers under sweetadelines.com/resources.

Do not try to accomplish these tasks alone! Enlist the help of your music staff to evaluate a number of arrangements, keeping the chorus-specific considerations mentioned above in mind. Sing through the likely candidates; even though it may be a very rough run-through, it will give you a good idea of how readily your singers will be able to learn the song.

We often hear the advice, "Sing music that is well within the skill level of your singers," but many of us do not have a clear understanding of what makes an arrangement easy or difficult.

A simple arrangement might be characterized by such aspects as:

- A melody line with limited interval sizes
- Limited tempo requirements
- No key changes
- A strong but simple structure
- Limited embellishments
- A preponderance of the "big three" chords (major triad, dominant 7th and dominant 9th)

Other hallmarks of songs that will be fairly easy to learn:

- Part lines well within the singers' comfort zones
- Part lines that remain on unaltered tones of the scale (limited number of accidentals)
- A frequent return to the major triad of the keynote

Song and arrangement "red flags" that will increase the difficulty level of a song include:

- A melody line requiring larger interval jumps
- Spread voicings
- Key changes, medleys, variations in structure
- Elaborate embellishments, rangy and jumpy part lines
- Melody transfers between parts
- Abundance of accidentals
- Lots of chord changes
- Melody line that lives on the third scale step
- Chromatic part lines, tricky rhythms
- Prevalence of secondary chords (chords other than the "big

- Harmonics that rarely return to the major triad of the keynote
- Wordy passages or an abundance of hard consonants
- Tag "hangers" that are in the voice part's register break or are beyond breath capabilities

Wow! That is a lot to consider, isn't it? And it will take a lot of time to go over arrangements with this kind of detail, won't it? Yes! However, consider how much time we might spend working on music that does not suit our chorus or quartet, only to discard the song after weeks of frustrating rehearsals that leave the director and the singers discouraged.

There is no "perfect song." Every song is likely to contain challenging elements. The key is to find the ones that best fit the unique talents and limitations of your singers.

Music selection made easy? Hmm—probably not. However, the time you spend carefully evaluating arrangements with your music team will be valuable education for everyone involved, and the process will get smoother and easier each time you do it. Best of luck!



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- New folios and learning media; easy, medium and hard-levels of competition materials; an array of CDs and DVDs for entertainment and education.

About the Author

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