

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 tuning 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 the 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.

*addendum 2018: Check lyrics for cultural sensitivity.

CHECKLIST FOR MUSIC SELECTION: April 1997(Bailey, Diamond, Gooch, McNeill, Barrows)

Rate the following from 1-5 with 1 being weak and 5 being strong.

Song Title: _____

- _____ Interesting melody line?
- _____ Each voice part performing in her optimal range most of the time?
- _____ Lead? _____ Bass? _____ Baritone? _____ Tenor? _____
- _____ Smooth/singable part lines for Lead? _____ Bass? _____ Bari? _____ Tenor? _____
- _____ Strong musical climax? (Ballad lyrics create tension for emotional impact leading to a strong musical/lyrical climax?)
- _____ Strong intro. that sets up the story line?
- _____ Strong tag that reinforces the ending?
- _____ Good potential for dynamics?
- _____ Effective tempo possibilities?
- _____ Potential for effective choreography?
- _____ Few or simple key challenges?
- _____ Clear message/tells all interesting story?
- _____ Message appropriate to the performing group?
- _____ Physical/energy demands match the chorus'/quartets' abilities?
- _____ Rhythmic and dynamic patterns match those of the words?
- _____ Rise and fall of the melody fits the story told in the lyrics?
- _____ Embellishments add interest but do not hinder the performance?
- _____ Challenges in the voice parts match strengths of the chorus/quartet?
- _____ Chord voicings strong?
- _____ Strong barbershop flavor? (Chord progressions create interesting and varied harmony appropriate to the barbershop style?)

Use in Repertoire:

- _____ Contest ballad?
- _____ Contest uptune?
- _____ Show opener?
- _____ Show theme related?
- _____ Show finale?
- _____ Swing ballad?
- _____ Comedy/variety?
- _____ Heavy ballad?
- _____ Driving uptune?
- _____ Choreography/staging showcase?
- _____ Solo?
- _____ Signature song?

Special Considerations:

- _____ Projected length of learning time?
- _____ Coaching/extra staging time needs?

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:
 - A. 16 bar verse that sets up the song
 - B. 32 measure chorus
 - C. Typically the verse is no longer than the chorus
 - D. Verses do not have the musical climax or high point
 - E. 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
 - *Songs that are inappropriate or offensive
6. Consider the note ranges:
 - The melody line easiest to sing stays within ml 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

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 occurs when the melody's high point, the harmony's most thrilling chord and the lyric's most dramatic point all occur simultaneously.