

‘Coaching from Within’

The object of these notes is to examine the basic barbershop craft and presentation skills, which should form the basis of all quartet rehearsals. This will enable a quartet to derive a planned set of exercises, which can be pro-actively used within the quartet rehearsal to evaluate and improve their own performance. These notes would also be useful for anyone wishing to be a more effective ‘fifth ear’. (NB. What follows are ‘negative’ notes with ‘positive’ fixes.)

What are the problems? In which areas do problems occur which prevent the ‘ideal’ performance?
Who is the weakest link?

Common problems can be summarized as being in the following areas (in no particular order):

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| 1. Lyrics. | 2. Notes. |
| 3. Voice balance. | 4. Voice blend. |
| 5. Vocal Unity. | 6. Visual Unity. |
| 7. Emotional Unity | |

Identification of Specific problems:

Some problems will be relatively easy to detect. Others may require particular skills to identify. An essential, and very beneficial, requirement for *all* quartet members and ‘5th ears’ is to develop and improve their analytical listening skills. A few tips on how this may be achieved:

1. Take every advantage to listen to barbershop performances regularly and frequently.
2. When you listen, concentrate very hard on just exactly what you are hearing.
3. Try to hear each of the voice parts and tune your ears to them.
4. If possible have a copy of the music to hand.
5. Assess the voice quality of each part.
6. Does anything immediately strike you as good or suspect?
7. Initially concentrate on one aspect:
 - (a) Listen to attacks at the start of phrases (? synchronized)
 - (b) Listen to the releases at phrase ends (? synchronized)
 - (c) Can you hear any of the parts out of tune?
 - (d) Are chords sounding odd?
 - (e) Is there a voice or voices too prominent by volume and/or quality?
 - (f) Listen to the vowel matching – especially at sustained chords.
 - (g) Is there a legato style of singing – or is there some ‘chopping’?
8. Whilst not exhaustive, the above list does summarize many main points.
9. Always have a notebook with you to make notes of what you hear.
10. Why not copy the list out in your notebook as an aide memoir?
11. Initially don’t try to hear everything. Concentrate and focus on specific areas.
12. Try to build up an appreciation of what is good barbershop by listening to recorded singing.
13. Practice your listening skills whenever you are listening to recorded singing.

Finally – don’t be afraid to ask advice – your chorus CD or Music Team members will help.

But why do we need these skills?.....

EVERYTHING YOU DO MUST HAVE PURPOSE AND A MEANS OF TESTING THE SUCCESS OF THOSE OBJECTIVES!

Rehearsal time must be seen as precious. Therefore effective rehearsal must be a quartet’s prime objective. It’s no good doing exercises, warm ups, general song singing etc. if you are not prepared for learning and improvement.

It is a good idea to briefly discuss the craft required for a particular exercise. Then everybody knows what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it. Although concentration is of paramount importance you must take time to evaluate the result. The degree of success or failure will facilitate future training needs.

In preparing songs it is equally important to practice them in a structured way. Again, don’t just keep singing them through. Talk about specifics before you sing each song and always analyze the result. These discussions need not take a long time – of course, the more you do it the easier it becomes!

So we've had 'The What?' and 'The Why?' – now for 'The How?'

Lyrics:

1. Learn them thoroughly – write out and pin to door – record as spoken for in-car use.
2. Occasionally have one member drop out to check (with the music) that all is correct.

Notes:

1. Always check lead notes first by listening to him sing solo. Use the music – even if you don't 'read' music you can still improve your listening skills and follow the line to see if the notes go up or down!
2. Listen to other parts duetting with lead to check notes.
3. Occasionally get in a music reader to check for notes.
4. Don't always spend a lot of time correcting wrong notes if the problem can be solved by the individual going back to the 'teach tape', keyboard or whatever.
5. All quartet personnel must take absolute responsibility for quickly and accurately learning their part.

Balance:

1. Has anyone ever told you that one particular quartet member sings too loud? Can you hear someone singing too loud generally? Can your 5th ear assist in identifying a problem?
2. Have regard to the principles of the 'cone of sound'. Know where you fit volume wise.
3. Do certain chords sound 'wrong' even when the notes are right? Check the music and see if the chord requires balancing differently from the norm e.g. is it a 'Chinese' 7th, a ninth, a major 7th or maybe the voicing has the baritone on the root. These and other chords and voicings have balance implications. If you suspect a problem but don't know the answer then get help.

Blend:

1. A quartet is an ensemble, which means that they do what they do, together!
2. Everyone will appreciate the need for the four voices to blend together.
3. Clearly a major problem would be if one voice were very prominent. If so, then it is suggested you contact a 'singing' coach for advice.
4. Exercises for improving blend:
 - (a) Unison singing in duet – choose a simple song so that you don't have to think of the words or tune and pick a key that suits both voices. Use your ears to make sure that you do not sing louder than your partner and try to 'copy' the other voice. The remaining two should listen, learn, analyze and advise as necessary. Obviously ring the changes so that all parts get to duet with each other.
 - (b) Unison singing in trio – expand (a) above.
 - (c) Unison singing in quartet – get a 5th ear.
 - (d) Get 5th ear to listen specifically for blend when quartet is singing.
 - (e) Vowel matching – there are numerous exercises related to vowel matching. Build up your own but always follow these rules:
 - (i) Specify the objective of the exercise before starting
 - (ii) Identify and practice the target shape before singing
 - (iii) Use duet/trio method where appropriate
 - (iv) Use 5th ear if available
 - (v) Always review and evaluate success and repeat as necessary.

Vocal Unity:

1. Listen to lead delivery of the melody line. It must be consistently repeatable time and time again if the other three are to attain a matched performance. Leads should practice in private for hours on end to achieve the consistency demanded. Duetting on repertoire will give a verifiable result. So will trio work. So will quartetting – especially if 5th ear available.
2. Practice attacks. Listen hard. Utilize ‘breath’ cue where appropriate. Have 5th ear listen specifically.
3. Practice releases. Again listen hard and concentrate on actual or underlying rhythm if present. Avoid conducting.
4. Practice by tapping the beat on each other for rhythmic unity. (You could also clap or use a metronome).
5. Concentrate on developing and maintaining a consistent legato style. When doing exercises for other reasons add in a mention of legato and review success.
6. Identify the use of rubato and speech cadence, and diction and word stress/emphasis in the lead line delivery as per your plan. Speaking the song will help focus on these issues. Once identified you and your 5th ear can listen out.
7. Unison exercises as previously described are always useful. They allow full concentration on the object of the exercise without the complexities of harmony song singing.

Visual Unity:

1. The object here is to look like a quartet (ensemble). This doesn’t just mean matching underwear!
2. Develop a good singing posture and work out how best to arrange the four of you so that you look like a unit. Frequently check how you look by use of full-length mirrors, shop windows, 5th ears, wives, mothers, girlfriends etc.
3. Plan your visual interpretation of each song and write it down. Review your delivery of the visual plan as appropriate. Whether free moves or planned choreography it is invaluable to practice two on two facing each other – you should then aim to ‘mirror’ exactly your opposite number where appropriate. Ring the partnership changes and aim to copy every movement however small. You obviously won’t achieve 100% success but basic agreement on body language gives a command of the stage in performance and unity of purpose to create a more powerful impact. This exercise is important and could seriously increase your score (no guarantee implied!).
4. Visual unity is also a mental thing. Get used to working together in a relaxed but purposeful fashion. Audiences (and Judges) will recognize the appropriate body language of unity.

Emotional unity:

1. Clearly linked with vocal and visual unity – all three are ‘opposite halves of the same coin’ (?).
2. Derive and write down an emotional plan for each song, which appropriately helps establish and develop the theme.
3. You must fully commit to the planned emotions.
4. Then practice performance in the ‘two on two, facing each other’ mode as in visual unity.
5. Focus on the way your partner facially expresses the planned emotion, listen to sound of his voice quality as it expresses the emotion. Consider his overall body stance and body language. Ring the partner changes then discuss and agree common points and work towards greater unity.
6. As always keep reviewing and reminding.

Audio/Visual Practice Techniques:

1. If you have audio and/or videotapes of your past performances don’t leave them in a drawer – they are invaluable! If you don’t then record your own! Try for the best in audio recording and playback and get someone to video you making sure you get a variety of shots, which must include close up individual face shots.
2. See previous ‘analytical listening’ skills and evaluate your performance. As intimated previously, try to structure your analysis and write down the results.
3. *Audio analysis is particularly good for assessing the dynamic plan.*
4. Don’t try to do everything all at once. Individual quartet members can do a bit on their own and report back.
5. Try and detect the emotional plan from an audio recording. If you can then you’re getting there.
6. Analyze video for a natural, comfortable, relaxed, confident style and deportment. Look at body and eye focus. The faces are the key indicators of honesty and believability. Does anything/anyone visually distract?
7. Don’t just do it once. Build these techniques into your rehearsal plan.
8. Why not send a tape to a coach or Judge for their comments. (I should ask them first though)

AND FINALLY.....

1. The object of these notes has been to focus on the need to use your rehearsal time in the most effective way. This is achieved by planning and incorporating methods and exercises, which address the basic needs of all quartets.
2. So why not write a plan for rehearsals – list all of the exercises you use and what they are for, identify areas where additional work is required and above all keep records to ensure that no area remains forgotten and under rehearsed. A simple checklist is a necessity.
3. Talk about the methodology and objectives for each exercise before singing and always review the results of an exercise.
4. Wherever possible use a member of the quartet to drop out and analyze. Analysis is as important as practice – make time for it.
5. Try and get a 5th ear. When you ask someone to help, be firm in telling them what you expect and how far they can go. You can of course have several 5th ears on a panel. Tip – only use them one at a time!
6. Try and get some coaching and if possible your own coach. Your CD will often be your first approach.

AND FINALLY, FINALLY.....

Coaching from within can be extremely valuable and rewarding but BEWARE! Criticizing your fellow singers can be very upsetting for them – not all people can take criticism easily! To avoid fighting and general unhappiness (which is of course self defeating) you must discuss and agree the parameters and methodology of your approach.

A final tip – if after a few times you've raised a particular issue with one specific member in the same session and clearly he is not getting the message or hacking the fix – for goodness sake let it go (for now!) and move on!

Nick Frampton
Presentation Judge

NB. There are numerous sources of information available. The SPEBSQSA has a large range of material. In particular you should obtain or have access to the book 'Improving Vocal Technique through the Warm Up'. Competing quartets should become conversant with the Judging Category Descriptions available on this website. The site also contains a directory of Judges, many of who are also available to coach.