

# SINGING CATEGORY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

One ingredient that clearly identifies barbershop music is its unique sound. It is the sound of barbershop that allows the transforming of a song into an emotional experience for the performer and audience. The best barbershop singing combines elements of technique and emotion to create an artistic result.

Barbershop singing shares elements of good singing with other forms of ensemble vocal music. Primarily, the listener expects to hear the pleasing effect of in-tune singing from voices that are free and resonant and that exhibit no signs of difficulties. The listener expects to hear the ensemble as a unit, free from distractions by individual differences of quality or delivery. The style of barbershop singing adds a distinctive element to these basics. Enhanced by the choice of harmonies, voicings, and voice relationships characteristic to barbershop, the ensemble sound can achieve a sound that feels greater than the sum of the parts. This reinforced sound has been described as "lock and ring" or the feeling of "expanded sound."

The "ring" of a barbershop chord will always be the hallmark of the style. Any listener to a barbershop performance expects to be thrilled by the sound of a ringing climax or awed by the purity and beauty of a soft and elegant expression of a song. Great opera singing is achieved by magnificent vocal technique used to create musical artistry. In the same sense great barbershop singing demands mastery of vocal and ensemble skills to create the breathtaking effects of barbershop musical artistry.

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The Singing judge evaluates the degree to which the performer achieves artistic singing in the barbershop style. This is accomplished through precise intonation, a high degree of vocal skill, and a high level of unity and consistency within the ensemble. Mastering these elements also creates a feeling of fullness, ring, and expansion of sound throughout the performance. When artistry is present, these elements are natural, unmanufactured, and free from apparent effort, allowing the performer to fully communicate and express the theme of the song.

### II. SINGING ELEMENTS

#### A. Intonation

1. Barbershop singers strive for more precise tuning than is possible with the fixed 12-tones-per-octave of the equally tempered scale of fixed-pitched instruments, such as the piano. Barbershop singers adjust pitches to achieve perfectly tuned chords, and yet sing a melodic line that remains true to the tonal center. Essentially, we use just intonation for harmonic tuning while remaining true to the established tonal center.
2. Melodic intonation refers to the system by which pitches are chosen for the melody of the song. The notes chosen by the melody singer may be at variance with the notes of any known scale. In actual practice, barbershop melody singers tend to use notes that preserve the tonal center while simultaneously serving the requirements of both melody and harmony. For unaccompanied solo melodies, musicians often choose Pythagorean scale tones, possibly because of the lift achieved from the very high third, sharpened fourth, sixth, and seventh degrees of the scale. However, when melodies are imbedded within the context of unaccompanied harmony, melody tones are adjusted to be compatible with the requirements for harmonic intonation.
3. Harmonic intonation refers to the pitches chosen by the non-melody singers. Good ear singers will naturally tune a harmonic interval to be free of beats — that is, in just intonation. Just intonation reinforces those harmonics (overtones) that are common between any two pitches, and creates combination tones (sum and difference tones) between any two pitches or harmonics. These added tones are the physical cause of barbershop chord “lock” and the expansion of sound. How well a chord “locks” is directly related to the accuracy of harmonic intonation.
4. Tonal center refers to the key feeling, or tonic, of the song. This key feeling should remain constant, clearly re-established through any modulation, for the duration of the song.
5. Maintaining precise harmonic intonation and melodic tonal center is the responsibility of all the singers in the ensemble. They all sense the forward progression of the harmony in addition to maintaining the tonal center. All singers, including the melody singer, tune to an anticipated melodic line that would maintain the tonal center. Singers of roots and fifths of chords own the greater responsibility to be in tune, both with the anticipated melody and the tonal center. Singers of thirds and sevenths of chords who are not on the melody will adjust their pitches to achieve justly in-tune chords.

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### | B. Vocal Quality

1. The three descriptors of good vocal production are: a) well supported; b) freely produced; and c) resonant. A resonant vocal tone that conveys the sensation of a single pitch, that is produced freely and without apparent stress by well-managed breath support, and that enhances (or at least does not detract from) the artistic impact of a song may be said to possess good quality.

a. Well supported: the dictionary defines support as a foundation or base for something. It also means to strengthen, reinforce, fortify, or sustain. Support may best be defined as breath management. Breath management (singing on the breath supplied by isometric involvement of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles) is prerequisite for producing a good tone.

b. Freely produced: tension or lack of free production can both be seen and heard. Tension can be caused by under- or over-support, forcing the muscles of the larynx also to undertake the task of breath management. Tension can be detected when the singer unnaturally manipulates the shoulders, jaw, tongue and laryngeal muscles to manufacture a sound. Virtually any muscle tension above the chest may interfere with the ability to resonate. Raucous, breathy, strident, nasal, husky, forced, swallowed, or other types of poor vocal qualities call attention to individual voices, rather than the ensemble.

c. Resonant: resonance is basically amplifying and reinforcing harmonics produced by the action of the vocal folds as the air from the lungs passes through the glottal opening. The singer enhances this raw sound through the use of the principal resonators, the throat and mouth. When breath is properly managed, extraneous tension eliminated, and the voice is resonant, the vocal tone will ring. Quality and quantity of ensemble ring are determined by both the quality of the ring in the individual singer's voice and its match with the other voices in the ensemble.

### 2. Additional Factors Affecting Vocal Quality

a. Vibrato is a normal phenomenon of proper breath management. In barbershop singing, some vibrato in the voice, especially the lead voice, can be very effective in enhancing the emotional content of the music. However, too high a vibrato rate or excessive pitch or volume variation will erode ensemble sound.

b. Tremolo is a rapid oscillation between two distinct pitches with accompanying loss of the sense of a central pitch. Lack of muscular coordination is a primary cause for tremolo. Tremolo is unacceptable in good singing.

c. Loud singing is often used in an attempt to generate a high degree of resonance and harmonic content. The ring in the sound can increase simply because the harmonics are also louder. However, achieving harmonic reinforcement should never be at the expense of vocal quality. Excessive volume introduces distortion and noise by reinforcing incompatible harmonics.

d. The potential for artistic singing is enhanced by the selection of music that reflects a quality singing range for each of the individual voices. Conversely, selecting a song that

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has a demanding tessitura, an angular melody, or difficult voice-leading can cause some, or all, of the singers to find it difficult to produce accurate tones in good vocal quality. Performers are encouraged to choose music that suits their capabilities and that features the strengths and minimizes the weaknesses of the ensemble. Since the Singing judge evaluates the overall vocal performance, there are no benefits in choosing difficult or easy music—only in choosing music that the ensemble can sing well.

### C. Unity

1. Unity describes the net effect of ensemble-unifying techniques. Most a cappella vocal forms utilize some of the following; the barbershop style utilizes all of them.

2. The ingredients of ensemble unity include matched word sounds and timbre, synchronization and precision, sound flow, and diction.

a. The resonant characteristics of the vocal tract determine an individual's voice timbre. The singer can control and change the shape of the vocal tract, thereby altering its resonant characteristics. Each vowel sound requires a unique positioning and shaping of the elements that affect resonance: the throat, mouth, tongue, jaw, and lips.

b. Subtle adjustments of the vocal tract are used to achieve matched word sounds. Each vowel sound exhibits a set of formant frequencies unique to that particular vowel. The singer can develop awareness and sensitivity to these formant frequencies, to enable the word sound match between voices to be finely tuned.

c. The untrained singer may experience a natural tendency for the vocal timbre to darken at lower pitches and volumes and brighten at higher pitches and volumes. This tendency is called migration. To achieve a wider range of uniformity, the singer may modify his vowel sounds at the extremes of his range by making subtle corrections in vowel sounds (formant frequencies) to create the impression to the listener that no change in timbre occurs throughout the singer's range. This is best achieved through proper vocal technique throughout the range, rather than artificially modifying the vowel sound.

### 3. Synchronization and Precision

a. Each syllable has a primary vowel sound, or target vowel. Anticipatory consonants or vowels may precede the primary vowel sound, and continuant consonants, vowels, or diphthongs may follow the primary vowel sound. The primary vowel sound begins on the pulse beat for that syllable. Normally, anticipatory sounds occur before the pulse beat, during time borrowed from the previous note, or breath. Pitch changes between primary vowel sounds should be executed together in all voices.

b. Most of the singing time is spent sustaining the primary vowel sound, with the anticipatory and continuant sounds lengthened or shortened appropriately to create a natural diction. Primary vowel sound length, when compared to all other sounds, will be adjusted by the singer to effect changes of mood. These must be executed together by the ensemble.

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c. Precision inaccuracies can trigger other problems. When singers start their individual notes at different times, this can create a perceived intonation error. Lack of precision will make it virtually impossible to achieve uniformity of the pulse beat. Errors in volume relationships can become more obvious, affecting the expansion of sound.

### 4. Sound Flow

a. Lack of continuity of word sounds can adversely affect artistic singing. Resonance should be carried through all voiced sounds. Stopping and starting the voice increases the opportunity for precision errors and detracts from the continuous flow of the music.

b. The use of staggered breathing by a chorus to avoid breaks in the flow is not typical of the barbershop quartet style. Ideally, phrases should not be excessively longer than those that could be sung by an individual in one well-managed breath. Overlapping (parts singing through while another part breathes) is acceptable. These techniques should only be employed in such a way as to not draw attention to the technique itself.

### 5. Diction and Articulation

a. Diction is the choice of word sounds, or pronunciation, as well as the clarity of word sounds, or enunciation. Word sounds include primary and secondary vowel sounds, diphthongs, triphthongs, and consonants. Good articulation is appropriate execution of those sounds, usually free of regional dialects and intelligible to the listener.

b. When we sing, we think words and phrases but do not sing words per se. We sing sounds. We provide the audience with a collection of sounds that they decode into understandable words. Part of the singer's job is to determine all the sounds in a lyric line, then execute those sounds in a way that allows the audience to easily decode the lyric.

c. Good diction characteristics are clarity, accuracy, ease, uniformity, and expressiveness. Vowels make up a majority of all the sounds in vocal music; they should be true to the words being sung. Correct use of consonants is also very important to diction, as they carry the meaning of the words. They should not be overemphasized, dropped, or substituted inappropriately to attempt better sound flow. They must be sung correctly to carry the voice, focus it, enhance its loudness, and supply emotion. If the vowels are the flowing river of sound, the consonants are the banks (or, if poorly executed, the dams)

### D. Expansion Quality

1. Expanded sound, sometimes called "lock and ring," creates the impression that the composite ensemble sound contains more than the total sound the individual voices produce. This effect, though occurring in other styles of music, is significantly enhanced in barbershop singing. The style provides greater opportunities for the reinforcement of consonant overtones and the production of combination tones. Several factors contribute to this reinforcement other than the fact that the melody is sung primarily within the chord rather than in the top voice. The chord must be in tune. There must be good vocal quality that which promotes resonance and "ring" in the voice. The word sounds must be sung uniformly and

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the vowels should match. There must be good precision, which increases the proportion of time during which expansion can occur. The relative loudness of the tones must be adjusted to produce optimum harmonic reinforcement. In essence, the better the quality of the vocalization, the better the expansion quality.

2. There are certain guiding principles for defining the barbershop style. In particular, songs that do not adhere to the basic tenets of the barbershop style as defined in paragraph one of *Definition of the Barbershop Style*, Chapter 2 of this handbook, will not have the characteristic barbershop sound. Songs of this nature will affect the quality and quantity of “lock and ring” and expanded sound, and the Singing judge will evaluate this affect accordingly.

### 3. Volume Relationships

a. Each voice produces a complex tone whose harmonics have frequencies that are whole-number multiples of a fundamental frequency. When the intervals between tones are such that their relatively low-numbered harmonics overlay or match one another, the resultant sound is consonant.

b. The most consonant intervals are between notes whose frequencies may be expressed as ratios of small whole numbers. These include the unison (1:1), octave (2:1), perfect fifth (3:2), and perfect fourth (4:3). The less-consonant intervals have frequency ratios of relatively large numbers, such as the major third (5:4) and harmonic minor seventh (7:4). Notes of intervals that are most consonant should predominate over those that are less consonant.

c. The general principle about less-consonant intervals applies to the melody singer as well as harmony singers. The melody should always be loud enough to be clearly heard. The song should not be lost in the chords, nor should it be a melody accompanied by a trio. In the special case of a lead solo, or for embellishments such as patter, the melody line should balance the harmony parts equally and as a unit.

d. Higher tones are easier to hear than lower tones. Thus, lower tones must be sung with more energy in order to be perceived as equal in volume to higher tones.

e. The basic perception of the barbershop ensemble is that of a melody singer with harmony accompaniment that is totally unified with the melody. A useful concept for harmony singers is to “sing through the lead,” with careful attention to his execution of the song.

f. Some guidelines for volume relationships are:

(i) The root and the fifth of the chord should predominate, as long as the melody line is easily distinguishable.

(ii) Thirds, sixths, sevenths, and ninths should be somewhat softer, in relation to the root and fifth.

(iii) Half-diminished chords should be balanced with the perfect interval (fourth, fifth, or octave) predominant. Some find a more consonant sound is achieved when the lowest minor third, if it exists, is emphasized.

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(iv) Tones of fully diminished and augmented chords are usually balanced with all tones equal in volume. Some find a more consonant sound is achieved when a slight emphasis is given to the second lowest note of the chord.

(v) Ninth chords, and other chords with missing notes, should be balanced with the root or fifth predominant and the other voice parts in equal balance. Some find a more consonant sound is achieved when the third of the chord is also emphasized.

### E. Artistry

1. Artistry is more than a mastery of technique. Artistry may be described as a unification of technique and expression into a transparent whole.
2. As a singer's craft improves and skills are mastered, the listener may be impressed with the skills themselves. Great artistry is achieved when the unified skills blend into each other and cease to be obvious to the listener, and serve only as a means to deliver the emotional impact of the song.
3. All forms of music create opportunities for the artist to demonstrate great skills. Barbershop singing is no exception. Delivering the song's message through a well-crafted melody, achieving a perfectly tuned and balanced ringing chord, or executing an elegant pianissimo, are examples. Good artistry recognizes the difference between skill for skill's sake and skill for the music's sake.
4. Artistic barbershop singing must provide for flexibility in self-expression, to allow for a variety of vocal emotions. Choices of tone color and vocal texture are some of the singer's best tools for creating the mood of the song. The choice might be different for an exciting mood than for a melancholy mood. The lyric of a song might suggest changes in vocal texture for different phrases, even possibly changing dramatically within one phrase for special effect. Performers may choose an exaggerated color for parody or comedic results.
5. Other expressive techniques include vowel sound duration, diphthong and singable consonant timing, inflection, and enunciation. Although precise diction is necessary to enable the listener to comprehend the words, the singer should use the word sounds in such a way that the listener's attention is drawn to the lyric's meaning and not its execution.
6. In order for all these techniques to be artistic, they must effectively communicate the emotional content of the song. There is a natural correlation between the performer's command of vocal skill, their vocal expression, and the generation of emotion. Performances that are perceived by the audience to be "from the heart" come across as honest, sincere, and genuine. A lack of vocal skill or improper expression distracts the audience. Conversely, great vocal skill allows the performer to generate many subtle variations and levels of emotion, which adds to the believability.

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### III. SCORING

#### A. Scoring Methodology

1. The Singing judge evaluates the performance of each song for the level of mastery of the singing elements. The elements are:

- Intonation
- Vocal Quality
- Unity
- Expansion
- Artistry

The judge assigns an overall rating based on an appraisal of the degree of achievement of vocal artistry in the barbershop style.

2. The Singing judge awards a score from 1-100 points per song. He weighs the performance of the particular song against his cumulative listening experience and assigns the score accordingly. The score is relative to a theoretically perfect performance. The judge strives for objectivity in his scoring, yet his assessment of artistry naturally includes a subjective point of view.

3. Each performer is compared against the judge's base of listening experience, not against other performances in the same contest. Judges will note what elements influenced their score. More importantly, they will note significant ways to improve the performance.

#### B. Scoring Levels

##### 1. The A level

a. A-level scores (81 to 100) are given to performances of the most consistent artistic barbershop singing. There are very few distractions owing to lack of singing skill; rather, the focus is primarily on artistry.

b. A typical performance earning a mid-range A score (around 90 points) features few, if any, intonation errors, excellent vocal quality, consistent unity, consistent expansion of sound, and an overall perception of expression and artistry that transcends technique.

c. A performance at the upper range of A would likely be a rare and significant artistic experience for any listener, possibly transcending measurable elements to define its success. Performances in this range need not be flawless, as flawless performances can actually draw attention to the technique. Rather, there is no perception of technique, only the artistic result.

d. In a performance at the low end of the A range, an occasional technical distraction can occur. The performer may show great skill but the "technique is showing." The performer may be inconsistent, having phrases of higher A mixed with phrases of a lesser level.

e. The distinguishing difference between A and B levels is often the perception of artistry as the combination of great skills into one transparent whole.

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### 2. The B level

- a. B-level scores (61 to 80) are for performances that frequently show skills of artistic barbershop singing, mixed with more distractions or lack of artistic unity.
- b. A typical performance in the mid-range of B (around 70 points) is only occasionally out of tune, frequently exhibits good vocal quality, is often a unit, has infrequent interruptions in expansion of sound and has some artistry.
- c. The upper range of B scores is for performances that do not have any substantial breakdown in artistry, but minor distractions occur. Some part of the performance may be at the A level, but other parts show lack of skill or a breakdown in the overall artistry.
- d. In the lower range of B performances, skill errors may provide significant distractions in some phrases, but most of the performance is still good. The performance may have a short duration of A-level quality. Intonation and vocal quality are better than satisfactory. Expansion of sound is inconsistent.
- e. The difference between B and C levels is often a matter of consistency of skill and blending into an artistic unit.

### 3. The C level

- a. C-level scores (41 to 60) are for performances that demonstrate adequate skills, with some signs of artistry but with notable inconsistencies in performance.
- b. A typical performance in the mid-range of C (around 50) will have intonation problems. The vocal quality is satisfactory and not improper and could be improved by basic vocal skills. Unity is impeded by word sound mismatches, faulty chord balancing, or even choice of material, and expansion of sound occurs as often as not. Some artistic moments would be evident.
- c. The upper range of C scores is for performances that may be partly at the B level but show many distractions, inconsistencies, and inability to sustain the artistry.
- d. In the lower range of C performances, offensive intonation or vocal quality may be exhibited occasionally, and the perception of unity and expansion of sound is infrequent.
- e. The difference between C and D levels is often that the C performance has acceptable quality and few unpleasant sounds.

### 4. The D level

- a. D-level scores (1 to 40) are for performances in which the elements of good singing are rarely heard.
- b. A typical performance in the mid-range of D scores (around 20) exhibits a major lack of vocal skill. Wrong notes may be prevalent. In-tune chords are rare. Vocal quality and tone color will most likely be poor or offensive. Dissonance is the norm. Individual voices will be consistently predominant, and the ensemble rarely sings as a unit.

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- c. The upper range of D scores is for performances that have rare moments of good skills, which appear to be accidental or out of control of the performer.
- d. The lower range of D scores is almost never encountered. A significant performance error, such as poor pitch-taking or nerves, could reduce an otherwise mid-D performance to the lower end.
- e. Performances in this range usually occur because of a lack of skill, nerves, lack of knowledge, neglect, intentional focus on non-singing aspects of the performance, or significant lack of preparation.

### C. Use of the Score Sheet

1. The scale and box are reminders of the judging ranges and the concept of the overall effect. Many may want to circle or flag a range on the scale, or a particularly appropriate phrase in the box, and use arrows down to a written comment below.
2. The element list is a selected list of ideas to circle or check off for later comments. Consider it to be for reference; it can serve as an abbreviation list for comments as well.
3. During the performance, the judge will identify only two or three of the most significant elements of the performance and several "fixes" for any of these elements. The judge will also point out where in the performance the best singing occurred and why, thereby giving the performer a chance to relate to the good experience firsthand.
4. The Singing judge will determine, through practice, how much detail is necessary to trigger recollection of the performance and focus on the major items. Flaws in the smallest sense are not relevant; the judge will be looking at the broader perspective. The judge will find elements of the performance that, if changed, would most significantly result in improvement.
5. The highest scores will be earned by performances solidly within the barbershop style that offer the greatest opportunity to create stylistic and artistic singing.
6. The final score is first written in the box on the scoring form (CJ-28) and then copied onto the judging form (CJ-25) in the box in the lower right corner.

### D. Differences between Quartet and Chorus

1. The basic sound of barbershop is found in the quartet performance. Four voices achieving vocal artistry in the manner described above produce a sound unique to this art form. When one adds more singers to each part, a similar effect can be obtained but with significant differences. We have learned to recognize these differences and evaluate the chorus singing sound in its own unique form.
2. Choruses are more able to blend, or even hide, the differences of pitch and timbre between the singers than is possible in quartets. The net result can be less demand upon the individual singer while sustaining a unique and vital sound from the chorus. The vitality of sound still

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depends on the degree of agreement of voices within sections (parts), as well as the relationships between sections.

- a. Wrong notes and more than four parts in a chorus performance have a muddy effect on the whole ensemble, or, at its worst, depart from the barbershop style. This results in lower scores.
- b. The perception of a unit sound requires that individual voices not be heard. In a quartet, each person retains a recognizable voice of his own, whereas in a chorus, no individual tone color should be discernible.
- c. Precision of the chorus takes on a new challenge as there are more possibilities for error. The preparation of the singers, as well as the skill of the chorus director, greatly affects this aspect.
- d. Larger choruses can generate a larger quantity of sound than smaller ones, as well as a greater ability to bury the problems of any individual. However, the judging of choruses emphasizes the quartet-like cleanliness of the sound, not the volume. Volume of sound will not, in itself, have a positive impact on the Singing judge.

### **IV. INTEGRATION WITH OTHER CATEGORIES**

The Presentation Category is principally responsible for evaluating entertainment value in a barbershop performance, which includes visual and vocal aspects. Good singing generally enhances the emotional effect of the performance. Conversely, singing that is out of tune and not of good quality usually diminishes the overall effect of the presentation. Vocal expression is important to judges in both categories as well.

While the Singing Category evaluates the technical and qualitative aspects of the performer's sound, these factors also affect the Music category in determining the level of consonance, consonant harmony being the primary hallmark of the barbershop style. Singing that suffers from poor synchronization, intonation, or vocal quality, or other sound problems, will also negatively impact such Music areas as theme, delivery and execution.

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