

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:
 - 16 bar verse that sets up the song
 - 32 measure chorus
 - Typically the verse is not longer than the chorus
 - Verses do not have the musical climax or high point
 - 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 The Valley”)
 - Through composed songs are not suitable
 - Songs in languages other than English, art songs, patriotic songs, religious songs, military songs
6. Consider the note ranges:
 - The melody line easiest to sing stays within an octave plus one or two notes (ninth or 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 the 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 a 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, make 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 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