

Aberdeen quartet Workshop

25th – 26th August 2001

Class Handouts

Quartet Rehearsal Organisation

Always Have a Plan!

- Know where you're going.
- Plan how to get there, including milestones along the way.
- Recognise success, and celebrate as you achieve each step by objectively monitoring your progress.

Warming Up Your Quartet

It doesn't have to take forever, but before you start singing your songs, you need to throw off the speech mechanisms you've been using all day and engage good singing technique instead.

Breathing

Stand in a lifted, relaxed, poised position, then do a few repetitions of a breathing exercise to flush out stale air and wake up muscle memory to the correct technique for singer's breathing.

Phonation / Resonance / Vocal Tone / Vowel Articulation

Use any simple exercise which displays a variety of vowels to practice efficient articulation of all vowels. Vowels are formed at the top of the windpipe, so we must keep our mouths and throats relaxed and open so as not to disrupt the tone flow. Keep all resonators open so that the tone can ring in the most natural way. Remember to match/compliment the lead tone quality.

Chord Tuning

Use a four-part exercise to practice correct Pythagorean tuning of chords as well as tone quality and instant intonation.

Other exercises for consonant enunciation (helpful for speedy word delivery) or sync can be added if they have particular relevance to material you want to cover that rehearsal.

These warmups should only take five minutes, but will leave you primed for correct technique as you start your songs.

Sound Ideals

The Judging Category Description Book (Sound Category) describes well-produced voices as having the following general characteristics:

- “
- The voice has consistency, with a seemingly even tone quality from the lowest register to the highest.
 - The voice has both ring, giving a sense of focus to the sound, and roundness, emanating from a throat that is open and free from tension.
 - The voice has energy and words flow smoothly.
 - The voice is free from tension and has warmth and colour.
 - The voice is flexible and capable of a wide variety of dynamics.
- ”

The Sound Category for Quartets

Synopsis of the Sound Category, from the Judging Category Description Book:

Unit Sound

- Vocal Skills
- Accuracy
 - Notes
 - Intervals
 - Chords
 - Tuning/Intonation
 - Synchronisation
- Barbershop Blend
 - Tone Production
 - Vowel Production
- Barbershop Balance

Artistic Sound

- Energised Vocal Line
- Tone Flow
- Dynamic Flexibility
- Vocal Style

Strategies For Improving Our Sound

Vocal Skills

- Match / Compliment the Lead sound
- Work towards an open effortless tone

Accuracy

- Work the songs target vowel by target vowel, note by note, then slowly speed it back up.
- Use recording to objectively find inaccurate notes / words / sync / tuning
- Duet for word delivery / inflection, notes, tone match with the lead
- Never rush breathing, take air on purpose and be in control.

Artistic Sound

- Work to the emotional plan from the beginning.

Choosing Music For Your Quartet

The Selection Process

1. List your musical goals
2. Identify your quartet image and the types of songs which work in with that character
3. Review your repertoire and list strengths and weaknesses, dropping songs which no longer display your quartet in the right light, either in vocal style or its ability to inspire an audience
4. List each potential song and give it marks for each category. Get preview copies and recordings (same arrangement) if you can. Look at what each song will add to your quartet's music skills: dynamic, phrasing, rhythm, smooth vocal tone, emotional message delivery. Narrow it down to 4 according to how well they rate in the categories below, then take a vote.

“Rating” New Music

The characteristics of each voice in the quartet can affect music choice. Individual ranges and blend between parts can affect your choice where there may be large separation between two parts (usually lead-tenor or bass-baritone). The abilities of the quartet as a group and individually need to be taken into consideration when looking at music. Some of the “features” you might want to rate a song against include:

- Contest Suitability
- “Fit” with other repertoire
- Ranges
- Melodic line movement and relationship to other parts
- Embellishment / Interpretive promise
 - Vertical chord movement vs Patter
 - End of phrase chord movement / key changes
 - Echoes and slides
 - Where is the climax?
 - Non-lead melody
 - Words
 - Strong ending for uptune
- Difficulty rating
 - Rated by international
 - Fast / wordy uptempo?
 - Melody based on the Doh / incidence of accidentals
 - Athletic voice leading
 - Tempo / rhythmic intricacy
- Audience appeal
- Cost

It is important to identify what a song will do for you
so that you get the most out of learning it!

Interpretation and the Expression Category for Quartets

Writing an Emotional Plan & the Use of Word Sheets

In order to reach an emotional performance, start with an emotional plan, then develop dynamics and timing and choreography that support the emotional message.

Use emotionally labile words – specific and intense. “Sad/Happy” are out, “Anguished/Amused” are in.

Identify your audience in the plan. A visual plan can be as simple as using 3 main targets and making sure all singers are looking in the same direction.

- Microphone - an intimate or secretive feel, brings the audience inwards
- Seat 10C - direct eye contact / frank or determined
- Balcony - tell the world / addressing the whole room, not an individual. Can also be done for effect to left or right.

Focus with full body not eyes alone. Eyes that dart about the room make the audience nervous or uncomfortable.

Include your breathing in the plan. You don't get points for running out of breath, but you do get them for an interpretive plan that fits your abilities. And remember – you change emotion on the breath not after it.

What kind of breath will you use?

- Delay breath
- Tempo breath (when singing in tempo)
- Fast breath (breathe-sing, often used in ad lib sections)
- Slow breath (for effect in ballads)

Tips for Interpreting Songs

Uptunes

Usually structured: Intro – chorus – tag
Verse – chorus – tag
Intro – chorus – verse – chorus – tag

What tempo is the song? Swing, downbeat, backbeat? Does it have a stomp section?

Intro and tag are usually ad lib. Sometimes an “interlude” or internal verse can be done ad lib with a return to tempo afterwards. Make sure each ad lib section really sets up the tempo starts.

Where a song is repetitive, use dynamic or rhythmic variation to avoid repetition and keep the energy flowing.

Ballads

Usually structured: Intro/Verse – “Hook”/Chorus – Climax – Tag

Emphasise lyric and melodic structure of the song as you decide your phrasing. Dynamics should be appropriate to the emotional message, should enhance the impact of that message and should be effectively performed by the quartet. The greater the range of dynamics exhibited, the more scope the judge has in rewarding that skill, just remember to make it appropriate.

Quartets and Coaches

Question: How do we make the most of a coaching session?

Answer: Go in prepared. Come out with a plan.

Go In Prepared

- Choose a “meaty” song to work on.
- Make sure all material presented is note and word solid.
- Assess your needs - by category, not tiny details – ask for help in this area, but be open to advice on sound at all times.
- Express your needs to the coach, including personal preferences and dislikes, in a positive way.
- Offer the coach word sheets of the songs to be worked on so that (a) you can indicate your plan for the song (b) they can write the points they work on with you so that you can (c) review them at your next rehearsal.

Come Out With A Plan

Make sure you understand each concept taught:

- How you’re doing it
- That you can hear/see/feel the difference
- Why you’re doing it

Minute the session:

- By recording then summarising
- By writing everything on the word sheets during the session

Bring the notes to your next rehearsal:

- Discuss the positive aspects of the coaching session and things that didn’t work for you
- Identify 3-4 priority points
- Work these priorities into your rehearsal plan as milestones or ultimate goals.

The Role Of A “5th Ear”

Choose someone you respect because they have proven that they can listen analytically and will have a positive effect on the moral of the quartet.

5th Ears are listening for your current milestones/goals, identifying problems with basics:

- Balance
- Tonal quality
- Vowel unity
- Synchronisation
- Emotional delivery
- Tuning

Showmanship for Quartets

Preparation

Choreography in quartets is more of an extension to natural body English, with only occasional poses or gestures defined to form an effective tableau or create a 4-part move. This is because quartet performances have a naturally more intimate feeling than a chorus, as we can mentally “include” ourselves in a group that small, where feeling included during a chorus performance is much more difficult.

“Moves” that worked well en masse may look rather staged or plain silly in a quartet. Gestures should be big, but natural/relaxed – more attitude than technical precision. Body language should continue from start to finish of performance and planned choreo should flow naturally in and out of that “background” body movement.

Use subtly choreographed moves to enhance or help your sound – where support may be needed, or to emphasise the use of a different vocal character. Body stance can be used to make the quartet grow or feel more intimate, reflecting the moods of the song.

Performance

Stage presence should be rehearsed as much as the music. Get out and expose your nerves as much as possible. Imagine being in the venue every time you practice so it won't be an added distraction on the day. Visualisation is good for all aspects, as it enhances self-confidence.

Confidence is mostly born out of sufficient practice and faith in your abilities (and your quartet). Recognise your own nervous behaviour backstage and devise methods of handling your actions so that your nerves don't adversely affect your team.

Timing on stage is a large part of “stage presence”. Be in control of the audience at all times. Don't let the applause die out – break before that, so that the audience feels you are directing the applause and are in control of the performance.

If you don't rehearse an emotional performance you are taking an unknown element on stage with you. Practice “getting into it” – you'll get better at it and find it easy to achieve on stage, rather than an added distraction, something more to think about. Also, you will know that you are showing unit emotion if you've practised in a circle or with mirrors.