

The Naked Voice

The challenge and the beauty of Barbershop is that the music created is built with only the naked human voice. No instrument to hide behind, just the unique and beautiful tone which is unlike any other instrument.

We therefore strive to make that voice as beautiful and pleasurable to hear as possible. There are a number of ways to approach our vocal skills in order to improve them.

Ladder of Skills

- ☞ Posture - our posture defines the shape of our instrument
- ☞ Breathing - without breath, we cannot make sound
- ☞ Phonation - this is the act of turning air into sound
- ☞ Resonance - we must give the sound space to vibrate in
- ☞ Articulation - how we form different shaped sounds (vowels)

Ideal Sound

In order to improve, we must define the “ideal sound” which is our goal.

- ☞ Clarity - sometimes called “focus”, this is efficient phonation
- ☞ Depth - the tone needs dimension, created through resonance
- ☞ Sonority - good support is needed to carry the tone through a phrase
- ☞ Lift - this upward pull gives life to the sound and helps to ensure the sound doesn’t become “squashed”
- ☞ Consistency - we are rewarded for how much of the time we display our skills. This is not just a stamina issue – lasting the whole song – but also a character of our voices. How consistent are the above 4 elements throughout your range? Do you have as much clarity at the top of your range as at the bottom? “Chest Voice” and your “break” are fallacies – if you sing with clarity, depth, sonority and lift, you will never have problems with a break, or sink to singing in “Chest Voice”.

You can use any vocalise to practice your skills – don’t think of “warm-ups” as something you do to get in gear for a rehearsal. They are actually vocal studies – do them with concentration or you’re simply wasting time.

The Visual Voice

There's a common misconception that focusing on Showmanship will automatically mean a dropping of the skill level in Sound and possibly Expression as well. This comes from our early attempts at choreography that left us so busy flailing our arms that we couldn't sing, never mind sell the song!

At some point in the growth of a chorus, quartet or individual, it becomes clear that in fact the opposite is true. It's usually shortly after the point at which you stop doing choreography for its own sake and start making gestures and using your body to sing instead. It's a subtle difference, but a chasm exists between the two levels of understanding.

So what is the Visual Voice? To me, it's characterised by a number of elements, some more obvious than others. The most important thing to remember about all of it is that singing with a Visual Voice is a mental attitude – more than that, it's something you do from deep inside, from the wealth of feelings and images that live in your being, rather than something you slap on the outside, like a suit of clothes.

- ☞ A Visual Voice is one where you can hear the facial expressions with your eyes closed... That's just not something you can fake! True dynamics, true lyric flow and natural forward motion can only be attained by believing in what you sing, and singing from the heart – not mindlessly, but using every word, every phrase to tell the audience how you feel.
- ☞ Your voice is always “visual” to the Sound and Expression judges, as just by listening, they can hear postural problems, improper breathing, inappropriate choreography.... They can even hear vocal acrophobia! Use taping to identify these things yourself and fix them!
- ☞ A Visual Voice is created by using the whole body to sing. We all know that our body is our instrument, but do we prepare and use it properly on every breath, through every phrase? The more we use our bodies to sing, the more energy we will have. Learn to burn that energy efficiently rather than just throwing at the audience.

Tone Flow & Articulation

Judging Category Description Book

Sound Category

Vowel Production

“One of the common faults of the untrained singer is the attempt to form vowel sounds by altering, or even contriving, the external mouth position. When this occurs, formation of vowels is moved from the pharyngeal area, where it occurs naturally in the properly produced voice, to the mouth cavity, where proper resonance cannot occur. Vowel sounds produced in this contrived manner will lack the consistency of quality achieved when vowels are produced in the pharynx.”

Tone Flow

“Tones must move easily from syllable to syllable and from note to note with as little interruption of the sound as possible. The effect of singing a flowing phrase should be similar to the kind of connection of tone that would be achieved if a melodic line were sung on a sustained ‘ah.’ Many singers overuse the lips and jaw, making tone flow impossible. Flowing tones supported to the end of each phrase are a requirement of the sound category.”

Expression Category

Consonants

“If vowels are the basis of musical sounds, consonants can be considered the punctuation. In speech, consonants are articulated in a manner that will add distinction to the spoken word and vowels are not sustained. Singing requires an opposite approach; consonants must be adequately articulated so that lyrics are understandable, but not to the degree that tone flow is noticeably interrupted.

The manner in which consonants are delivered can add style, meaning, artistry and individuality to a performance. This is particularly true of the pitched consonant sounds – ‘m’, ‘n’, ‘l’ and ‘ng’ – and the performer can often sing through these sounds to articulate words effectively without disturbing the musical line. Other consonants can be classified as voiced or unvoiced – those that have pitch and those that do not. Proper treatment of voiced consonants requires that they be produced at the same pitch as the vowel sound contained in the syllable in question.”

So What Do We Do?

- ☞ Produce vowels in the pharynx – let the mouth follow, not lead!
- ☞ Use Vowel-to-Vowel delivery (consonant goes at the beginning of each syllable, not at the end, except possibly at the end of a phrase!) and sonority to enhance tone flow and thus forward motion / energy
- ☞ Articulate the vowels firmly, consonants clearly but not explosively, so that vowels lock for as long as possible while the words are still clear.