

More About Choosing Music

Always take the abilities of your group into consideration in deciding if the 'features' of an arrangement will suit you or just make things difficult!

Part Ranges

Probably the most self explanatory. Find out where each part (section) is comfortable singing, noting upper and lower pitch limits. Check out the music, looking at whether each part generally stays in the comfortable range, and if they have to reach, how far and how many times!

Melodic line movement and relationship to other parts

Look at the lead line. Does it bounce all over the place? Does the melody move from part to part (not brilliant for contest arrangements) and if so, are all your members going to be able to cope with this? If the melody is low and the baritone ends up on top of the lead all the time, is this going to suit and balance issues in the chorus? Is the tenor part under the lead or forever hitting clash chords with the melody? Personally I love that, but this can be a real challenge for some tenors. Vertical chord movement vs Patter – contest songs should have little patter as this won't lock and ring.

Embellishment / Interpretive promise

Look for bell chords (can you do these?), slides or swipes, key changes (these build intensity, but can be difficult to do well), echoes, words that can be sung with special character, rhythmic interest (are you good at tempo/rhythm?), fast and wordy, opportunity to break tempo for a verse, possible stomps or tempo changes, chords that move on the last word of a phrase to keep momentum... There are lots of things that can be brought out of an arrangement if you go looking for them.

Where is the climax?

If you can't build your ballad to a high point, then frankly, what's the point? By identifying the climax chord (or possibly primary and secondary climax points) you can really give shape to the song as a whole. It will help you in your story development and therefore give character, dynamic, flow and energy to the whole song. Generally the climax chord is the highest note in the melody – all the other parts are likely to be high too, or a really big, spread chord. Other clues are the words. On an interpretive note, this should also be the loudest chord in the song! Conversely, when the melody is at its lowest, the chords will be low and you will be singing softly, with suitable emotion...

Words

Read the words. If you don't think your group can sell them, don't sing it. Look at consonants and vowels and figure out if there are going to be any issues for you, or things you need to watch out for as you learn it.

Strong ending for uptune

If you can sing the tag, or get an idea of how it sounds, that can be very helpful. Tempo songs which end with a whimper not a bang can be quite unsatisfying to sing...

Difficulty rating: Rated by international

Thankfully, for music published by SAI, there are now generally comments about the level of songs. This can help, but doesn't mean you shouldn't go through the analysis process yourself as every group has its own weaknesses and strengths. What's easy for one group might be impossible for another!

Melody based on the Doh / incidence of accidentals

Now this is a big one. It has been demonstrated to me (several times recently in fact) that songs where the melody (and often none of the other parts either) almost never visits the Doh (key note of the song) during the verse/intro then only gets there eventually at the chorus, lose pitch. Drop like rocks. Tune badly. Feel difficult. And it's simply because the melody is in a RELATIVE key for all that time and the "sense of Doh" is not established in the group. You can work this out by having the leads (then each part – it's an interesting exercise) sing the melody while the others sing the pitch (on OH). They have to put up their hand when they hit the Doh. This can be eye opening and painful to the ears! But at least you'll know why you can never stay in pitch for that song! When choosing music, zoom along that melody and count the times it hits doh. If it's not there, and not in the bass part either, you're in trouble!

Regards the incidence of accidentals, the more sharps, flats, naturals and other wierd things you see on the music, the more difficult it will be to tune accurately. A good rule of thumb for pythagorean tuning is that anything with a sharp should be sharpened. Anything with a flat should be flattened (this is for you, baritones – I know you like to sharpen EVERYTHING!). Naturals are tricky. If you're in a flat key and the natural is changing a flat in the key signature, treat it as a sharp as it is RAISING the pitch of the note out of the scale. If you're in a sharp key and the natural is changing a sharp in the key signature, treat it as a flat as it is LOWERING the pitch of the note out of the scale. If a natural is just resetting something that had an accidental earlier in the bar, normal tuning applies. Phew!