

# The Language of Barbershop

Brian D. Barford

# Why is Language so Important?

- Songs are a unique art form.
  - Melody is combined with lyric to have an emotional impact on the audience.
  - This is especially important for a Barbershop song. It is the essence of “artistry”

# Why is Language so Important?

- Singing with words is a special challenge.
  - Vowels are given specific pitch.
  - They are sustained to the music note duration.
  - This is especially important for acappella music, where there is no rhythm section.
  - Musical expression extends far beyond spoken or written sounds and meaning.
  - Words must be understandable and meaningful, yet fit into the musical scheme.

# Why is Language so Important?

- Everyday speech is imprecise.
  - Varies with regional differences.
  - We all need to use the same pure American vowel sounds.
  - Speech habits carried into song can magnify flaws.
  - Impure vowel sounds & unclear consonants are evident in amateur singing.
  - Unmatched word sounds often makes it difficult to understand the words.

# Why is Language so Important?

- Put your best foot forward by using language to make the story of the song come alive!

# It's Not English, it's *Singlish*\*

*(Thanks Jim Henry!)*

- The dilemma: Each word we “sing” is actually a sound, not a word, but the end result is a story, not a tone poem.
- We must combine technique and design with artistry to get emotional and understandable lyrics from the score.
- To sing cleanly, an ensemble must sing the same things at the same time.

# The Target Vowel

- Fundamental to every sung note is a target vowel. Everyone in the group need to match the same ones.
- For quartets and choruses it is easiest to choose from a list.

# Barbershop Target Vowels

Relaxed Vowels	Round Vowels
1. We	7. Law
2. Sit	8. Boat
3. Late	9. Good
4. Bed	10. Moon
5. Cat	11. Church
6. Far	12. Love



# Some Rules about Target Vowels

- Use only the twelve vowels if possible.
- Identify the correct target vowel for each syllable in the song.
- In order to preserve the meter, the target vowel should be sung on the downbeat of each beat and held without “turning” as long as possible.

# Now, all the other stuff...

- That was the easy part. If you were singing classic choral or opera, vowels are nearly the only thing of interest.
- In popular music, we must tell the story, and so be understandable and emotional with our language.
- That comes from the diphthongs, consonants, glides and connectors that make up our language.

# What is this song?

Tenor Lead

1 2 3 4

oo oh uh ay eh ee oh ah a— eh uhr aw oo ah

# Now you know....

Tenor  
Lead

1 2 3 4

Should old ac-quaint-ance be for-got and— nev - er brought to mind,

The image shows a musical staff for a Tenor Lead in the key of D major (two sharps) and common time (C). The melody consists of the following notes: D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4-G4 (beamed eighth notes), F#4-E4 (beamed eighth notes), D4 (quarter), C4 (half), and D4 (half). The lyrics are: 'Should old ac-quaint-ance be for-got and— nev - er brought to mind,'. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 above the notes. The word 'and' is followed by a long horizontal line, indicating a sustained note.

# Diphthongs and Glides

- Diphthongs must be sung enough to be understood, but don't drift into them....
- Glides (when, you, music, etc.) must be sounded, but quickly, to avoid delaying the beginning of the beat.

# Hard Consonants

- Consonants like b, k, p, s, and t are called “hard” because they explode, and have no pitch.
- We need them to understand the word, but keep them short and unstressed.
- Initial consonants should be struck before the downbeat, so the target can be at the beginning of the note.
- The tall consonant concept....

# Singable and Connecting Consonants

- Sounds like l, m, n, ng and even v and z are called “voiced” consonants and have pitch. They should be sung with the pitch and energy of the target.
- Further, they add beauty and artistry to our language and so should be sustained a reasonable amount of time (in the ‘context’ of the song).
- Be sure that starting singable consonants come before the downbeat and have the pitch of the following target.

# Put it Together...

- Should old acquaintance be forgot....
- Sh-oo d-ohuhl-duh-kwayn-tehn-sbee-fohurh-gaht
- Now put it in the correct meter ( metricalize it!)



# Vocal Expression- what is it?

- Artistic singing to convey the message of the song and to deliver a genuine emotional impact of the lyrics and notes.
- Four Singing tools to enhance an expressive vocal line:
  1. Enunciation – diction to make the message understandable
  2. Language – using word sounds to enhance emotion
  3. Tone Color – drama, passion, tenderness, comedy etc.
  4. Inflection – the art of bringing words to life.
- Most important: “Performances come across as honest, sincere and genuine when the execution of vocal expression is transparent”

# Discussion

- Questions?