

# The Language of Barbershop

## Why is Language so important to the Singing Category?

- 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.
- 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.
- Put your best foot forward by using language to make the story of the song come alive!
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## It's Not English.....It's SINGLISH!! (apologies to 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.
- 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. Here is the most common one...

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

### 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.
- 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.

## **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.

## **Role of Breathing**

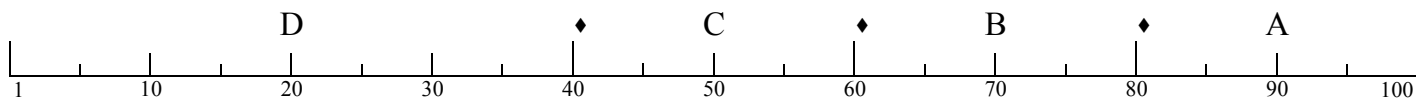
- Breathing is natural. At the beginning of a phrase, start the sound, whether it be a vowel, glide or consonant on the pitch of the target (don't scoop). At the end of the phrase, finish the final sound(s) in the meter of the song, then breath quickly (but without a gasp) and continue.

## **Addendum: 80/20 vs. 50/50**

- How long do I hold the target vs. all the other sounds in a syllable?
- There are two schools of thought here. 80/20 is the basic rule for choral singers. Usually, this can be achieved by asking singers to sustain the target and under emphasize the consonants.
- 50/50 is metrical (subdivide the beats) but can sound artificial if not done well.... Advanced Quartets use this for musical artistry.

# SINGING

Song 1: \_\_\_\_\_



Not in tune Offensive vocal quality Not a unit Insignificant expansion No artistry	Rarely in tune Improper vocal quality Rarely a unit Rare expansion Rare artistry	Sometimes in tune Satisfactory vocal quality Sometimes a unit Some expansion Some artistry	Frequently in tune Pleasing vocal quality Frequently a unit Frequent expansion Frequent artistry	Consistently in tune Excellent vocal quality Consistently a unit Consistent expansion Consistent artistry
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**Intonation**

melodic (t/c) # / b  
 harmonic # / b

**Vocal Quality**

support  
 free  
 resonant  
 ring  
 bright, strident, nasal  
 swallowed, dark, breathy  
 throaty, over-sung  
 vibrato/tremolo  
 tessitura  
 suitable to performer

**Unity**

single voices  
 timbre match  
 word sound match  
 balance

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attack, release  
 synchronization  
 flow  
 pronunciation  
 enunciation

**Expansion**

R, 3, 5, 7  
 degree  
 quality  
 ensemble ring  
 barbershop style

**Artistry**

musical  
 technical  
 tone color  
 expression  
 from the heart

Song 1  
 Score

**Strengths:**

**Areas to improve:**

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