



By Corinna Garriock,
Approved Candidate Music Judge

THE MUSIC JUDGE. Guardian of the barbershop art form. Her mandate may be intimidating to some, and the technical nature of her category makes it, I would argue, the most enigmatic of the four judging categories to many of our performers. But the music judge is not all music theory intellect and intrigue. Beneath that analytic exterior — deep in the category — is a heart that lives for all that can happen when a creative arrangement, in the hands of the right performer, results in a musically transcendent experience for all who are privileged to be present. The Music Category is about bringing the barbershop arrangement to life and hopefully capturing the essence of the barbershop style in that process. Contestants crossing the competition stage are asking with their performance: “Is this barbershop?” The music judge’s critique will answer that question.

MUSIC CATEGORY SCOPE AND WEIGHTING OF COMPONENTS

THE MUSIC CATEGORY FOCUSES ON TWO MAJOR AREAS: THE SONG AND ARRANGEMENT, WHICH IS GIVEN A WEIGHTING OF **30 PERCENT**, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF THAT ARRANGEMENT, WHICH RECEIVES A WEIGHTING OF **70 PERCENT**.

SONG AND ARRANGEMENT (30 PERCENT)

The music judge is the only judge who provides a critique of the Song and Arrangement and its merit as a representation of the barbershop art form. She must rely on her knowledge of music theory and barbershop vocal arranging to do a live assessment of the suitability and strength of the selection for the barbershop style.

A strong barbershop song is defined as one with a rhyming, “G-rated” lyric (excluding patriotic and religious lyrics) that has musical characteristics suitable for arrangement in the barbershop style. These include a melody that is interesting and consists primarily of tones from the major scale; a simple symmetrical meter; and an implied harmonization plan that mostly utilizes the “big three” primary chords of barbershop: the dominant seventh, the major triad and the dominant ninth. There are a total of 11 acceptable chords for harmonization within a barbershop arrangement. The remaining eight chords are referred to as secondary and are utilized to accommodate the melody or for musical effect or flavor. Chord progressions are expected to resolve along the Circle of Fifths using dominant to tonic movement. The use of predominantly stronger chord voicings, as identified in the category description, enables the “lock and ring” characteristic of the barbershop sound and is rewarded. In a strong arrangement, the lyrical and musical peak coincide for a satisfying musical experience.

A song may stand alone or be joined in a medley to another song. For a medley, the music judge must consider whether the two songs work well together based on a theme or musical style. Transitions from one song to the other should be effected seamlessly by the arranger.

Form is another important consideration of the music judge. A good barbershop song has a chorus which demonstrates melodic unity (for example, an A-A-B-A melodic pattern) and is constructed in eight-bar segments. The song’s chorus is a mandatory element of the arrangement. Other elements of form are optional and may include an introduction, a verse, a bridge and a tag. Once the song (or songs, in the case of a medley) is packaged into an arrangement, the overall construction has a balanced form consistent with the popular American-song style established in the early 20th century.

Creative devices, such as modulations, swipes, echoes, bell chords, patter, etc. can create musical continuity, enhance the creativity of the arrangement and potentially showcase more of the performer’s capabilities, however, they should not be overutilized to the point where the alignment of barbershop chords is continuously disturbed, or the song itself is obscured by too many embellishments.

It is important for the music judge to consistently comment and be specific about the strengths or weaknesses of the song and arrangement in order to fulfill her educational responsibility to the competitor. Through provision of a precise critique, the contestant is better equipped to seek stronger material or modify the material presented.

PERFORMANCE (70 PERCENT)

When judging Performance, the music judge is assessing how well the performer represents the barbershop style in taking the arrangement from the page to the audience. This includes an assessment of the performer's vocal skills, the harmonic accuracy of the performance, and how well the elements of the barbershop style are reflected in the performance including appropriate tempo selection (or ad-lib delivery with implied tempo, as appropriate), use of rhythms to add musical interest, musical unity (i.e., chord alignment/synchronized delivery), phrasing and dynamic choices that showcase the arrangement and its creative devices. Intentional musical energy is required to propel the performance. As performers reach higher levels of competency, the music judge will reward musical artistry, if present, as the basic elements of the category cease to distract from artistic opportunities.

Finally, an important aspect of Performance is the suitability of the vehicle selected to the performer. This element of the Music Category marries the song and arrangement to the performer's ability to deliver it in the barbershop style. It is not related to the strength or weakness of the selection, but rather assesses the fit of the selection to the performer's current skillset. Any element of Performance may impact the music judge's assessment of suitability, whether the group's harmony accuracy/musical unity skills are not yet capable of delivering jumpy part lines with ease, or a backbeat song has been selected for performers who do not have a good feel for that style of tempo delivery, or certain harmonizations (e.g., secondary chords) in the arrangement negatively impact harmony accuracy, or extreme chord voicings put vocal weaknesses on display.

The music judge's critique will raise the contestant's level of awareness as to which aspects of the performance require their attention in order to raise their level of accomplishment.

SCORING THE MUSIC CATEGORY

The first consideration in assessing the level of the performance begins with a review of the demonstrated level of vocal skill. The quality of the instrument generally dictates the quality of other aspects of Performance and forms a foundational assessment for scoring from which the music judge may move upward or downward as the performance dictates.

When finalizing her score for a contestant, the music judge must assess the overall quality of the song and arrangement, as well as the performance, taking into account the level of vocal skill demonstrated and the frequency and severity of performance errors that occurred. The Performance Level Guidelines for the category are published in the Judging Category Description Book (JCDB) and provide the key characteristics of each level. The music judge then assigns a score within the selected level indicating whether the performer is entering the level (i.e., inconsistently demonstrating the characteristics of the level), in the heart of the level (i.e., demonstrating most or all characteristics) or close to exiting the level (i.e., solid in this level and showing glimpses of the level beyond).

THE INTERRELATIONSHIP OF THE FOUR JUDGING CATEGORIES

The four judging categories are designed to assess a performance from differing vantage points. Sound experiences the performance through the instrument, while Showmanship assesses visual salesmanship. Expression is focused on communication of the lyric, while Music is concerned with the treatment of the song and arrangement.

Despite each of these specialized views, there are significant commonalities which frequently support reasonable alignment of scores and allow the contestant to identify themes across the performance. For example, the Sound Category refers to "tuning" while a key component of music category is "harmony accuracy." Expression and Sound both assess "synchronization" which appears as "chord alignment" or "chord clarity" on the Music assessment. All four categories assess vocal skills, energy, unity and artistry — each seen through the lens of the particular category.

Although these commonalities exist, it is important for the music judge to maintain her unique window on the performance. For example, the music judge writes about "harmony accuracy" rather than "ring," which is a Sound Category concept. Commentary about

phrasing and dynamics should be related back to the arrangement being presented (e.g., “suitable to the arrangement,” “as dictated by the voicings”) rather than the Expression Category vantage point of lyric or emotional plan. The music judge trusts other panel members to care for their domains and focuses on her unique duty to the contestant.

THE ROLE OF THE JUDGE

The International Judging Program is the single most important educational program in our organization. It drives a cycle of learning and feedback across every member of the organization as they strive to improve their skills and scores with each round of regional competition. As a longtime chorus and quartet competitor myself, including a five-year stint as a director, I have learned a great deal from the many scoresheets I have received. I was the contestant who always read the sheets shortly after the performance, memorized them on the flight home, and actually did the analysis suggested in the scoresheet packet. I used the sheets to identify our projects for the coming year. Although not every competitor views her scoresheets in this way, I always assume I’m writing for someone like me – someone who is seeking input, wants to improve, and indeed will improve with the right critique delivered in a manner that is both forthright, compassionate and inspires the journey ahead.

CONCLUSION

I’d like to conclude with a quote from a member who is rapidly absorbing the JCDB in her various roles as a quartet lead, director and chorus member.

This is her perception of the Music Category:

“If barbershop were a romantic comedy, the Music Category would be the love interest who is always hanging around in the background, but you don’t really pay attention because he seems excessively cerebral and says incredibly boring things like ‘Strongest voicing results when the root is doubled or when the third is doubled in a minor triad used as a substitute for the relative major ...’

“Instead, you allow yourself to be drawn towards the more obvious charms of Showmanship, Sound and Expression, and you don’t give much thought to the nerd in the corner.

“But then one day, Music whips off its coke-bottle glasses and you realize just how much passion was tucked away in all those embellishments, waiting to be unleashed, and you go, ‘Where have you been all my life, Music Category? I LOVE YOU!’”

—Elizabeth Davies, Region #13

**I REALLY CAN’T ADD MUCH TO THAT. MUSIC CATEGORY,
I LOVE YOU, TOO. LONG LIVE BARBERSHOP! 🎵**