Healthy Performance Practice for Male Barbershop Singers

Jacob K. Bartlett
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jbart1081@gmail.com
HEALTHY PERFORMANCE PRACTICE FOR MALE BARBERSHOP SINGERS

by

Jacob K. Bartlett

A DOCTORAL DOCUMENT

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

Under the Supervision of Professor William Shomos

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2011
Barbershop singing is a hobby enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of men and women across the world. We attend conventions, shows, competitions, and educational outreach programs each year at our own expense to preserve a style we truly love.

Most singers of the style are amateur musicians. This constitutes somewhat of a challenge when we consider the need for healthy singing in light of certain assumptions about the vocal technique required of the barbershop style. Most do their best to make a healthy sound but end up doing more harm than good to their own voices after a lengthy rehearsal.

The pedagogical methods in this paper welcome all musicians into the world of barbershop as seen from the viewpoint of a classical musician who enjoys the style. This is a document for the blue-collar worker as much as it is for the _primo uomo_. It’s exercises combine classical techniques with barbershop repertoire. Both professional and amateur musicians will find this document useful, especially as a gateway for classical musicians into the barbershop style. The key is knowledge of the core voice, and its use to project target vowels for perfect blend and expression of the text. The argument of this document is that singing in the barbershop style can and should be taught classically.

To be successful, the barbershop style requires overtones and a unified choral sound. Classical solo singing requires a rich, vibrant individuality in the voice. Here, I create a mixture by merging the former with the latter.
# Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ v
List of Musical Examples ................................................................................................ vi
Preface .......................................................................................................................... vii
Introduction .................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 1: A History of Barbershop, the BHS, and Bel Canto ...................................... 5
Chapter 2: Posture: Evolution or “Big Bang” ................................................................. 17
Chapter 3: A/C Breathing: The “Cooler” Way ............................................................... 27
Chapter 4: Throwing a Curve: Pitched Conversation .................................................... 43
Chapter 5: When you ‘shop, think “Target” ................................................................. 61
Chapter 6: True or Falsetto? ......................................................................................... 77
Chapter 7: The Tag ....................................................................................................... 89
Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 90
Appendix A: Survey Participants .................................................................................. 94
Appendix B: Always the Same, Never in the Same Way ................................................ 96
Acknowledgements

I am forever indebted to so many people that have helped to shape my career and musical life. I must first thank my advisor, mentor and friend Dr. William Shomos for helping me to find my true voice and discover the value of artistic creation and exploration. Thank you to my doctoral supervisory committee, including Dr. Stanley Kleppinger, Professor Donna Harler-Smith and Dr. Ron Bonnstetter for having guided me through the process of the doctoral degree with such kindness and wonderful expert advice. Thank you as well to the voice and graduate faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for your unending support of myself and other students in our prestigious voice department and the Hixson-Lied School of Music.

I am also indebted to former voice teachers at Northwest Missouri State University, especially Dr. Stephen Town, Dr. Brian Lanier, Dr. Scott Quant, and especially Ms. Lisa Lawrence, my first voice instructor at the collegiate level.

Thank you to the barbershop directors who have volunteered their time and efforts in completing the volunteer survey for this dissertation. I, along with others whom you have taught will forever admire your continuous support of our wonderful musical craft. A special thank you also to the Lincoln Continentals, whose undying love for the art of barbershop singing has inspired the creation of this document.

Last, and certainly not least, I would like to thank my family, my fiancée Lindsay and my friends for their undying support of my career and goals. Without your support I truly would not have been able to write this document, much less progress to the point of having a chance to produce it. The support you have given has come in a multitude of ways, and in no way will I be able to thank you enough for all of your wonderful gifts.
List of Illustrations/Musical Examples

Rockwell, Norman “Barbershop Quartet” .......................................................... 5
Gray, Bobby, “I’ll Be Seeing You” ........................................................................ 45
Gray, Bobby, “Smile, Darn Ya, Smile” ................................................................. 46, 84
Waesche, Ed, “Lonesome Rose” .......................................................................... 47
Dealer’s Choice, “Who’ll Take my Place (When I’m Gone)” .............................. 52
Waesche, Ed, “How Deep is the Ocean?” ........................................................... 55
Gray, Don, “Auld Lang Syne” ............................................................................. 58
Evans, George, “In the Good Ole Summertime” ................................................. 59, 84
Parker, Gary “Pure Vowels, with Adaptations” ................................................... 63
Barbershop Harmony Society, Twelve Vowels .................................................. 64
Examples of Target Vowels ................................................................................ 65
Harmony University, Unison/Part Singing Vowel Exercise ................................. 66
Craig, Rene & Buzz Haeger, “Way Down South” .............................................. 69, 83
Bergman, Nancy, “Flower from an Old Bouquet” .............................................. 70
Brock, Bob, “Last Night was the End of the World” .......................................... 72
Harrington, David, “It is Well with my Soul” .................................................... 74
Dowma, Bob, “Run, Run, Run” ......................................................................... 75
Hanrahan, Kevin, “Registration Chart” .............................................................. 79
Clause, Don, “Friendship and Love” .................................................................. 85
Nighthawks, “Silvery Moonlight” ....................................................................... 86
Staffen, Burt, “The Impossible Dream” .............................................................. 87
Rhea, Ruby “Do You Really Love Me?” ............................................................. 88
Preface

In 2002, a man named Chris Droegemueller gave me a compact disc recently recorded by his quartet, *3 Men & a Melody*. At the time, I had no idea how the music would impact my life. While I listened to the recording, the close harmonies of “Shoo Fly Pie” overwhelmed me and “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning” soon became the most played song on my computer playlist. The ease with which the quartet sang, the beauty and expression they created, and the fact that Mr. Droegemueller gave me the recording, for free, all constituted a foretaste of the way the style of barbershop would affect my life.

In the same year, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. It was during chemotherapy treatment that Chris had handed me the disc. I listened to the recording when I rested, when I drove to treatments, and in my spare time, trying to transcribe each part. I was trying to learn all four without any actual sheet music. Soon, I began to explore other quartet recordings, such as *The Buffalo Bills, Happiness Emporium, Millennium*, *Four Voices, Gas House Gang, Acoustix*, and my favorite of the time, *Platinum*. After a few months, I decided to start my first quartet with friends in my residence hall at Northwest Missouri State University. We sang standards from the Contemporary *A capella Society of America* (CASA) and arranged our own music for performances around campus.

As my knowledge of barbershop music developed, I decided I wanted to compete in quartet contests for the Barbershop Harmony Society and immediately found friends interested in starting several quartets. Placing as high as 23rd (and as low as 110th) internationally, the experience of singing in a quartet on a competition stage continues to
thrill me to this day. I joined the American Barberboys chorus (now Voices of America) in St. Joseph, Missouri, and directed the men’s choruses of the University Chorale and Tower Choir at NWMSU during my graduate assistantship in 2006.

It was at this point that I shifted my focus to classical performance and accepted a graduate teaching assistantship at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in vocal performance. While my voice was able to withstand the demands of opera, I did notice that I would tire rather easily when singing in the extremities of my range. Dr. William Shomos, my voice professor at UNL, helped me to condition my instrument so as to be able to sing for longer periods of time, and I realized that for many years I had been singing with a strident technique that had been damaging my voice. After five years with Dr. Shomos, I believe I have “found my voice” so to speak, and along with a classically healthy voice, believe I can now spread the knowledge I have gained through classical singing lessons to the barbershop style.

Many barbershop singers face the same issues I have faced. A two-hour rehearsal (and sometimes longer) can have a long-term negative effect on an untrained (or even trained) voice. Throughout this document, survey respondents discuss how age plays a significant role within the barbershop community. They also discuss other problems, including retention, along with flagging dedication. While many chorus members simply attend rehearsals because they enjoy singing, it is my belief that to truly enjoy singing is to do it in a healthy manner. Through exercises in proper posture, breathing, phonation, head voice management (also termed falsetto), vowel definition, resonance, and choreography, the amateur musician can learn to maintain a healthier, longer-lasting voice for years to come and entertain audiences at the same time.
Here, I fuse barbershop repertoire with classically healthy vocal exercises. It provides exercises in proper posture and body alignment, as well as methods for practicing body alignment outside the rehearsal hall. Breathing exercises will be addressed, as well as the different schools on “how to breathe.” I incorporate a pedagogical technique from The Naked Voice by W. Stephen Smith called “Simply Speaking Simply” into a variety of examples from barbershop repertoire, and focus on falsetto development in all voice types, in all ranges, for all male singers. I also fuse musical theatre acting, belting and choreography with barbershop “choral-ography” and examine ideas in acting on the barbershop stage as described by barbershop directors throughout the nation.

Hundreds of barbershop directors, educators, coaches, and judges were asked to respond to a survey, and their teaching techniques will be interspersed along with ideas from classical pedagogues and myself. Their names and unabridged responses can be found in Appendix A and B, respectively.

It is my hope that this document will serve the purpose of inviting classical musicians into the world of barbershop singing, as well as barbershop musicians into the realm of classically healthy singing. Above all else, my intent is that the document serves as a gateway for barbershop musicians to become better at their craft through exercises created by national pedagogues in singing, directors of barbershop choruses, and myself. Our goal, as always, is to “keep the whole world singing!”

---

1 The Barbershop Harmony Society’s motto is “Keep the whole world singing,” reflected in the same title that is sung at the end of any convention and most chapter meetings.
**Introduction**

Since the inception of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA) in 1938, now known as the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS), no uniform method of vocal training has been offered to its musicians. Each director of a chorus or quartet is responsible for the vocal instruction of his group. This can be valuable or detrimental to the group, of course, according to the training and experience of its leader.

Barbershop music has almost no presence in academic settings, much less a pedagogy devoted to it. An occasional article will be published on techniques a barbershop singer can incorporate to make their performance better, but never do the articles cover everything that should be covered, and most often leave out crucial elements of singing that would be needed for proving the article effective and useful for the barbershop community.

Such an article was published as recently as November 2010 in the BHS’s premier publication, *The Harmonizer*. The article, authored by Debra Lynn, a former operatic soprano and voice teacher from Hawaii, purports to teach *bel canto* singing principles to the barbershop community.\(^2\) She writes this article to be accessible for all barbershoppers. Her goal and my goal are the same.

Unfortunately, several problems exist with the article. She has avoided the use of anatomical terms in favor of general terms, such as “throat” over “pharynx” and so forth. She also makes some comments that can be generally misunderstood by any reader, regardless of musical training. For example, she claims, “Italians, simply because they

speak Italian, can have an edge in the habits that contribute to excellent vocal technique.”³ Of course this is true for some, but in reality, there are many Italians who do not speak their own language correctly, just as Americans do not properly speak in their native tongue all the time. Lynn’s description of vowels is suspect, “Our infamous diphthongs (double sounded vowels)…”⁴ Diphthongs can be better described as “gliding from one vowel to another in the same syllable.”⁵ “Double sounded vowels” implies vocalization of a single vowel twice or of two vowels at the same time.

Lynn continues by stating, “The good news is that the superior results of pure Italian diction can be applied in any language.”⁶ Perhaps it would be better to state that the techniques of bel canto can be incorporated and taught in any language rather than the “superior results of pure Italian diction.” One cannot necessarily apply pure Italian diction to all American diction.

Lynn advocates “…an avoidance of loose vibrato, and seamless transitions between the chest, middle, head and falsetto voices.”⁷ In barbershop, our second goal (behind the number one goal of healthy singing) is to use a consistently vibrant stabilized vibrato. I am not quite sure what she means by avoiding a “loose vibrato.” Her registration terminology can also be problematic. It is unclear what the author means with a transition between chest, middle, head and falsetto. This approach is inconsistent with the teachings of most vocal pedagogues. More importantly it is inconsistent with the type of registration the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS) incorporates at their annual

³ Lynn, “Singing,” 16.
⁴ Ibid.
education event, *Harmony University*. The BHS uses a three-register theory (chest voice, mixed voice, and a falsetto).

Lynn also mentions, “You will not sing your best until you learn to breath in a manner that removes all pressure from your throat.”

Singing requires subglottic pressure for air to escape the lungs and for sound to occur. Furthermore, she offers no explanation on how to “remove all pressure from the throat”; she simply makes the statement.

On vowels, Lynn says, “There are five pure vowels in Italian.” There are five pure vowels in Latin, and seven in Italian. The author omits the closed “e” sound (IPA = [e]) and the open “o” (IPA = [ɔ]) sound. She goes on to say, “You’ll discover that without any conscious effort to inhale, your lungs still have more than enough air.” James McKinney writes, “The essential difference between breathing to live and breathing to sing lies in the amount of conscious control exerted.” With amateur musicians, there must be at least some conscious control of the breathing mechanism because of how little training many barbershop singers have received. In fact, the majority of respondents to the survey for this document revealed that they spend a good amount of time on breathing technique; making it a consciously controlled task. Until healthy habits are established, singers must be consciously aware that breathing for singing has different components than just breathing for life.

---

8 Lynn, “Singing,” 17.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 19.
This article is only three pages long, yet shows many flaws in how to train amateur singers. When training the amateur, one does not need to use elaborate terms, but one should be able to describe fully what is meant when a certain action is required, or when a question is raised. For instance, Lynn mentions “good posture” but never describes what that means. Good posture can mean something different to every musician and each one needs to receive adequate, efficient instruction from his director.

Unfortunately, this is the only article ever published on the techniques of classical musicians being incorporated into the barbershop style. Another BHS publication, Gary Parker’s “Group Singing Techniques” will be incorporated, rather fully, in this document, but is also incomplete if one wants a group to have the full experience of healthy singing at each rehearsal.

In this document, I take existing classical pedagogy and provide exercises for the barbershop singer using his own repertoire, mainly from *Classic Tags* by David Wright. This document is not meant to contribute new voice science or serve as a complete discussion of vocal pedagogy, but to take successful classical methods and give barbershop singers and directors a guide on how to stand, breathe, and sing in a healthy manner, so that they may continue to do so for many years to come.
Chapter 1

A History of Barbershop, the BHS, and Bel Canto

“Was barbershop music actually sung in barbershops?” is a commonly asked question among newcomers to the style. The simple answer is “yes,” but the style was also historically heard at social functions, in parlors, and especially on the curbside in many locales. In fact, before the presence of the term “barbershop” the style was actually termed “curbstone harmony.”

Figure 1. Rockwell Painting

The musical style of barbershop is created by tight harmonies in conjunction with four distinct types of voices set in homophony. The Barbershop Harmony Society’s web

---

site states, "Barbershop music features songs with understandable lyrics and easily [sung] melodies, whose tones clearly define a tonal center and imply major and minor chords and barbershop [dominant and secondary dominant] seventh chords that resolve primarily around the circle of fifths, while making frequent use of other resolutions." A typical belief is that barbershop is only represented by white, middle class Americans, such as in the famous Norman Rockwell painting of a quartet (Figure 1). Yet, barbershop was actually came to us via former slaves who brought a musical repertoire that included hymns, psalms, and folk songs. Jim Henry, director of the International Champion “Ambassador of Harmony” chorus of St. Charles, Missouri, states, "The Mills Brothers learned to harmonize in their father’s barbershop in Piqua, Ohio. Several other well-known African American gospel quartets were founded in neighborhood barber shops, among them the New Orleans Humming Four, the Southern Stars and the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartette." These were simple songs often sung in four parts with the melody set in the second-lowest voice because it was easier for men to harmonize a chord with two voices below the melody and one above, rather than three voices below.

Minstrel shows of the mid-1800s often consisted of white singers in blackface (later black singers themselves) performing songs and sketches based on a romanticized vision of plantation life. As the minstrel show was replaced by the equally popular vaudeville, the tradition of close-harmony quartets remained, often combining music with racially-based comedy that would be scandalous and offensive by modern standards. Many songs, such as “Run, Run, Run” have been banned from contest because of the

---

negative implications of performing music about slavery. The tag, however, remains a standard learning tool for quartets and choruses throughout the BHS.

The barbershop style is first associated with black southern quartets of the 1870s, such as The American Four and The Hamtown Students. The African influence is particularly notable in the improvisational nature of the harmony, and the flexing of melody to produce harmonies in "swipes" and "snakes." For instance, many times the lead will hold a particular note of the melody for a long period of time while the other three parts scoop or “swipe” to the next note, only to slide to the next note again, creating what we call a “snake.” Black quartets "cracking a chord" were commonplace at venues like Joe Sarpy's Cut Rate Shaving Parlor in St. Louis, or in Jacksonville, Florida, where, black historian James Weldon Johnson writes, "every barbershop seemed to have its own quartet." The first use of the term “barbershop” musically came in 1910 in “Play that Barbershop Chord.” This suggests that the term had come into popular fruition by the time this song was performed.

Today, consumers of music receive it by way of radio, video, television, compact disc and cassette. But, in the early 1900s, pop music success depended on sales of sheet music to the general public. Thanks to the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley, sheet music was created in which the songs were easily singable by average singers with average vocal ranges and average ability. After all, these writers made their living by composing for the recreational musician and general public. Songs were generally straightforward with heartfelt, accessible themes and images. When published, two editions were generally included: an instrumental version (generally accompanied by piano or ukulele) and an arrangement for a male quartet.

With the advent of the phonograph, people could actually hear the new songs coming from Tin Pan Alley. Professional quartets recorded hundreds of songs for labels
such as Victor, Edison, and Columbia, which in turn created an even higher demand for sheet music.

Unfortunate for the style was the popularity of radio. This prompted a shift in American popular music in the early 1900s. Writers composed more sophisticated melodies for the professional singers. These songs did not adapt as well to impromptu harmonization, because they placed a greater emphasis on jazz rhythms and melodies that were better suited to dancing than to casual crooning. Quartets were unable to woodshed, or sing improvised harmonies to these melodies. Yet, quartets did keep close harmony singing popular with many amateur singers, and these singers were ready for the revival of barbershop harmony that took place in April 1938, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The old saying among those associated with the barbershop style is that it was all revived by “26 men on a roof.” Indeed, a man by the name of Owen Clifton (O.C.) Cash had run into an acquaintance named Rupert Hall in Kansas City in March of 1938, and the two decided to host a song festival. They invited 14 men they hoped would show up, and asked if they would bring guests. The meeting was set for April 11, 1938 on the Roof Garden of the prestigious, high class Tulsa Club (shown in figure 2) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The letter reads:

Gentlemen,

In this age of dictators and government control of everything, about the only privilege guaranteed by the Bill of Rights not in some way supervised and directed, is the art of Barber Shop Quartet singing.

Without doubt we still have the right of "peaceable assembly" which I am advised by competent legal authority includes quartet singing. The writers of this letter have for a long time thought that something should be done to encourage the enjoyment of this last remaining source of

---

16 A capella foundation, “History”.
human liberty. Therefore, we have decided to hold a songfest on the Roof Garden of the Tulsa Club on Monday, April 11, at 6:30 p. m.

A Dutch lunch will be served.

After several months of research and investigation, we are convinced that your record warrants our tendering you the honor of joining this group. We sincerely trust you will not fail us.

As evidence of the work that your Committee has done in this connection, we enclose a compilation of most of the good old fashioned Barber Shop Quartet songs which we trust you will look over and familiarize yourself with. Bring this list with you.

It is our purpose to start right in at the first, sing every song, in numerical order, plow right down the middle, and let the chips fall where they will.

What could be sweeter than ten or twelve perfectly synchronized male voices singing “Dear Old Girl!” Just thinking about it brought back to your Committee fond memories of a moonlight night, a hay ride and the soft young blonde visitor from Kansas City we dated on that occasion years ago.

Do not forget the date, and make every effort to be present, telephone us if convenient. We will have a private room and so will not be embarrassed by the curiosity of the vulgar public. You may bring a fellow singer if you desire.

Harmoniously yours,

Rupert Hall, Royal Keeper of the Minor Keys
O. C. Cash, Third Assistant Temporary Vice Chairman

On that spring day, fourteen men had somehow turned into twenty-six. They sang old songs together for several hours, some even breaking off into quartets. People below the group complained of the noise, and so the next week, they met at the Hotel Tulsa, where seventy men showed up. By the end of May, the newly formed group began meeting at the Alvin Plaza Hotel and hosting 75 to 150 men each week. What would later be known as the Tulsa #1 Chapter would continue to meet at the Alvin for 37 years.19

19 Kerr, 26 Men.
These chapters spread like wildfire throughout the United States, and eventually the world. SPEBSQSA was the society’s name until just a few years ago. As barbershop has spread across the world, and more and more people from other countries have become involved, the society has shifted its brand name to an easier, more inclusive title, the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS).

BHS has specific purposes, which are laid out by Ed Watson in the March/April 2010 edition of *The Harmonizer*:

1.) to perpetuate and celebrate harmony in the barbershop style, 2.) to promote fellowship and friendship among men of good will, 3.) to provide the opportunity to experience the joy of four-part a cappella singing, and 4.) to introduce and sustain music in the lives of people everywhere.  

Because of the rich tradition of close harmonic singing, barbershop for men/women has become a lifestyle for some people. Many attend several conventions sponsored by the society each year, and devote many hours, days, and weeks of their lives to preserving a craft that they love.

**THE BEL CANTO TRADITION**

*Bel canto* is an Italian term meaning “beautiful singing.” Of course, this is what the BHS would like to say is the ultimate goal for anyone who walks on their stages, but the reality is that very few of the society’s musicians have been trained in this style. In a survey I sent out to barbershop educators, Darin Drown responds that the number one problem his chorus faces is “realizing just how far back to the basics you need to go as a teacher. Much of the education they have received may have been flawed, may have been geared towards a much younger voice, or may have been geared toward a different style of music. The term has a variety of different meanings among pedagogues, and can

---

be interpreted as a different type of singing by almost any singer of any voice type.\textsuperscript{21} For the purposes of this essay, I will connect the following \textit{bel canto} techniques to the barbershop style.

- Legato production through a seamless range.
- The use of head voice (falsetto) in the higher registers of all voices.
- Flexibility to execute composed embellishments (in barbershop, swipes and snakes).
- A pleasing, well-focused timbre.
- Understandable diction and speech-like singing.
- Accurate phrasing rooted in a complete mastery of breath control.

\textit{Bel canto}, espoused in the times of master composers such as Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini, is relevant to amateur barbershoppers today. Through training in \textit{bel canto} technique, amateur singers will be able to sing for a longer period of time, and do so in a healthier way.

Manuel Garcia (1805-1906) was the pioneer and most influential teacher of \textit{bel canto} singing philosophy. It is through his methods that one of our greatest sources in vocal technique and exercises, Mathilde Marchesi’s \textit{Bel Canto: A Theoretical & Practical Vocal Method}, was created. It is a succession of exercises in which Marchesi never burdens the singer with more than one difficulty at a time and assists the singer by presenting exercises in a natural and progressive order.\textsuperscript{22} I have used these exercises with every private voice student for the past year and have noticed significant improvement through regular practice of the exercises by all students. It should also be noted that of these students, a majority are from a barbershop chorus - a group of older men who, as


mentioned before, just want to learn how to sing better. Through these exercises, they now sing for longer periods of time, and have a more enjoyable time doing so.

In the chapters to follow, I will use the term “healthy voice management” in place of bel canto because it is more straight-forward. I will attempt, through exercises suggested by national pedagogues, as well as exercises developed from the barbershop repertoire, to completely incorporate the concept of healthy voice management into the barbershop style while dispelling some of barbershop’s performance myths such as, “higher eyebrows will raise the pitch,” and “the more you pucker your lips, the better the chord will lock.”

In The Singing of the Future (1905), David Davies states that bel canto is not merely a school of pretty voice production.23

“It has come to be a generally recognized thing that voice, pure and simple, by its very composition, or "placing," interferes with the organs of speech; making it impossible for a vocalist to preserve absolute purity of pronunciation in song as well as in speech. It is because of this view that the principle of "vocalizing" words, instead of musically saying them, crept in, to the detriment of vocal art. This false position is due to the idea that the "Arte del bel canto" encouraged mere sensuous beauty of voice, rather than truth of expression.”24

He further mentions that bel canto means a “versatility of tone.” “If a man wishes to be called an artist, his voice must become the instrument of intelligent imagination. Perhaps there would be fewer cases of vocal-specializing if the modern craze for “voice-production” could be reduced. This wondrous pursuit is, as things stand, a notable instance of putting the cart before the horse…hence the monotony of modern singing. When one has heard an average singer, one has heard them all.”25

24 Ibid., 14.
25 Ibid., 16.
Perhaps the greatest articulation of this perspective of singing comes from Clara Kathleen Rogers’s book, *The Philosophy of Singing*:

Those who regard the art of singing as anything more than a means to an end do not comprehend the true purpose of that art, much less can they hope ever to fulfill that purpose. The true purpose of singing is to give utterance to certain hidden depths in our nature, which can be adequately expressed in no other way. The voice is the only vehicle perfectly adapted to this purpose; it alone can reveal to us our inmost feelings, because it is our only direct means of expression. If the voice, more than any language, more than any other instrument of expression, can reveal to us our own hidden depths, and convey those depths to other souls of men, it is because voice vibrates directly to the feeling itself, when it fulfills its natural mission. By fulfilling its natural mission, I mean, when voice is not hindered from vibrating to the feeling by artificial methods of tone-production, which methods include certain mental processes, which are fatal to spontaneity. To sing should always mean to have some definite feeling to express.\(^2^6\)

What Davies and Rogers have to say about singing applies to the amateur barbershopper as surely as to any classical singer. Should we choose to use singing as a vehicle for expressing our emotions, let us do so in a healthy, vibrant way. Let us choose a path that communicates our feelings to our audience, in a healthy way; a method of singing that will sustain our voices for years, perhaps decades, to come.

Chapter 2

Posture: Evolution or “Big Bang”

Before we even begin to sing our first pitch, we must prepare our instrument. Many pedagogues address posture in many different ways, but which is most efficient for the amateur barbershop performer?

POSTURE – BARBERSHOP STYLE

When I attended the BHS’s premier educational event, “Harmony University,” in 2010, I gained a great deal of knowledge on how barbershop singers are trained. One myth espoused in barbershop circles is that the body should be set in a military fashion, stiff and erect, moving only when specifically choreographed to do so. The BHS attempts to debunk this myth in their document entitled *The Five Steps Necessary to Produce Quality Tone*:

To attain proper body alignment, we are searching for a dynamic relationship or coordination between the body parts that allow for a freer and more efficient use of the body. We have always been taught that “good posture” for singers is a standing posture, with the body erect, the head straight, the chest slightly forward and the shoulders low and relaxed, feet shoulder width apart with the weight slightly on the balls of the feet, heels touching the floor. This posture does not imply, however, rigidness in positioning the body, as in a “military way.” In most of us, there is lacking a natural chest poise and body poise, a power of relaxing certain parts of the muscular system while a due control is exercised over other parts. If we control some parts, we seem to want to control them all.²⁷

While this is a valid way to begin to address body alignment, it does not go far enough, as it does not address all aspects of posture. Gary W. Parker, a long-time member of the Vocal Majority chorus in Dallas, Texas, created a short handbook

---
available from the BHS entitled *Basic Group Singing Techniques: A Primer for the Amateur Singer*. This is a great booklet for those interested in beginning singing, but he fails to give complete attention to body alignment. His description of posture does not cover the entire instrument. Comparatively speaking, this would be like assembling a saxophone without a reed. Parker states that the shoulders should be slightly back and the rib cage comfortably lifted, with no pressure on the lungs. He also states that the head should be relaxed, facing straight ahead, with the chin “neither raised nor lowered to any significant degree. Slightly lower is better than slightly raised.” The upper body should be kept in a square position, and there should be no strain on the singing apparatus. Body weight should be equally distributed at the middle of the feet, and the body should be completely relaxed. “The more relaxed the body is, the freer the sound will be.”

**MORE PRACTICAL CHALLENGES IN BARBERSHOP**

When teaching amateur singers, the elements of good posture mentioned above are important, but the wording is vague; Parker is missing details, especially when it comes to the legs and abdomen. Karen Frerichs mentions that, “Amateur musicians do not understand how (to) utilize their complete lung capacity. Most have poor posture and breathe high, sing with only their throat and neck. Also, they are typically tense from the neck up.” I do not agree with the assumption that the more relaxed a body is, the freer the sound is. There must always be a sense of forward motion in the body because singing is a physical activity, and the body will exhibit tension at different points in performance to create better sounds.

Other issues arise within my chorus. Many members have been previously taught to “move on the breath” (See Chapter 3) or to stand in a running stance with knees bent

---

ready to move at all times. Barney Johnson has another problem in his chorus, and calls it “moving for the sake of moving.” Many times a chorus will move on the breath, which almost always causes either an audible breath, a shallow upper chest breath, or both. Sometimes this is choreographed, but one can hardly expect an amateur musician to do these moves in a healthy manner for a long period of time.

We must realize that in barbershop performances, posture and choreography are taught simultaneously. This can cause problems, especially for older singers. Many of the directors surveyed mention that age limits the amount of choreography they can perform. Lonnie Miner mentions that his chorus does not participate in contest, while age factors limit the amount of movement they use during performance. Frerichs states, “I try to minimize choreography because of the average age of my men. We do small moves, like turning in or out, maybe a hand out.” While posture may improve because of a lack of choreographed moves, sometimes we actually have to “choreograph” posture.

Some barbershoppers do not know how to stand on the risers. One concern is that feet get tired throughout a 2-1/2 hour rehearsal. Some rehearsals are even longer, such as Mike O’Neill’s, which have the possibility of running for 4 1/2 hours for members performing choreography. Most choruses do not have chairs, as they perform on risers the entire time. Longer rehearsals will ultimately result in more postural issues, especially towards the end of the meeting.

Barbershop musicians are trained for pre- and post-performance posture - the moments where the chorus is receiving opening or closing applause. The director generally conducts these postures. They are usually more rigid, and the group faces the audience in a straightforward stance, which is different than when they turn inward toward the director to sing.
It is commonly accepted that barbershoppers maintain a military style posture when the curtain opens, but should leave this posture for their healthiest singing posture once the director gives the cue. Many do not leave this military posture, and get caught in not being able to move to the music and express to their true ability. Many amateur singers have a habitual stance, but “rarely do they have a balanced one.”

GOOD POSTURE

Elizabeth Blades-Zeller offers a set of criteria for good posture:

1. A stance that is buoyant and elastic.
2. The body feels tall and elongated.
3. The body feels centered and solidly rooted.
4. The torso is not slumped or collapsed.
5. The rib cage feels open and expanded.
6. The body alignment involves the spine, neck, and shoulders, with weight distributed to the feet.
7. The stance has nobility.

Richard Miller, one of the most respected vocal pedagogues in the world, is well known for his view on the “noble” posture. Oren Brown, another popular voice teacher and scientist, concludes that we must always work on our posture because we have evolved from a four-legged species, and the posture we have today, while more efficient, takes practice. Joan Wall responds to Blades-Zeller, “I think singers should realize that they never really stand still – their body is continually moving whether the movement is small or large. Even breathing is movement.” James McKinney, in The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults, provides a “from the ground up” approach to body alignment,

29 Brenda Smith and Robert Thayer Sataloff, Choral Pedagogy (San Diego: Singular Publishing Group, 2000), 113.
33 Blades-Zeller, Spectrum, 5.
and also gives insight into how to know when one’s alignment is off and when muscular tension is a problem. McKinney’s approach works well for barbershoppers because the organization and accessibility of his language makes it easy to recall since choreography disturbs our normal, at-rest posture. A chart of his approach can also be placed on the wall in the rehearsal hall to help with retention, which is, according to many of the survey respondents, a major problem with their choruses.

**HOW TO CORRECTLY SET BARBERSHOP POSTURE**

Barbershoppers are constantly singing on their toes (literally and figuratively) with a forward, leaning motion. Chorus members frequently will be improperly aligned when it comes to body use, either with their legs, or most often with the upper half of their bodies. This occurs for various reasons, but the best thing to do is to provide a framework from which to work and develop a healthy instrument. Each barbershop singer is an instrument, and should be “put together” according to the guidelines. One should not attempt to play an instrument that has been put together incorrectly, so why would one sing with a body that has been incorrectly assembled?

Below is a guide for achieving healthy alignment for the barbershop singer, based on the principles of pedagogues adhering to the *bel canto* tradition. I move from the lower to the upper body, because it is likely that the upper body will be misaligned if the lower body is maladjusted. As VOCE quartet member Keith Harris says, “All projects are best built on a strong and low foundation. Think of building a house… would you put your foundation on the roof?”

*Feet* – During the “presentation of the chorus” at the beginning of a show, the feet should be set parallel, but in a free, natural position. On command of the conductor, as the chorus readies to sing, the barbershopper should shift his feet so that one is slightly in
front of the other, keeping his weight in balance. Since most barbershop rehearsals are conducted on risers only, without chairs, the singer should adjust the feet regularly to avoid fatigue and tension. Performances are shorter, and therefore foot fatigue is generally minimal.

Legs/Knees – Legs support the body. It is impossible for the legs to be completely relaxed when standing properly. The legs should never be locked at the knees or in a position that cannot change, as this can lead to extreme fatigue and fainting. The barbershopper has a tendency to lock knees when smiling and turning to the audience to receive applause (during the presentation). The legs and feet serve as the foundation for a vertical line that could be drawn upwards through the head that should dissect the body at its midpoint. The presentation of a barbershop chorus depends on the flexibility and fluidity of a buoyant lower body that does not promote eventual fatigue but rather a forward motion for choreographic purposes.

Hips/Buttocks – The hips and buttocks should conform to the imaginary vertical line mentioned earlier. Of course, various choreographed movements could have an adverse effect on the alignment of the hips and buttocks, but the barbershop musician should always be aware of the vertical line and realize when/if he has become unaligned. This is not a hard task to accomplish, as McKinney states that “if the previous suggestions about the feet, legs, and knees have been followed, and if your carriage is truly erect, it should be an easy task to bring your body into vertical alignment.”

Lower Abdomen – This is the area extending from the pelvis to the waistline. Many barbershoppers, when told to sing with a down and out breathing method will

---

34 McKinney, Diagnosis & Correction, 37.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
pooch the stomach outward and it may sag forward, creating too much curvature in the small of the back. Yet, if they are taught to always tuck in the stomach, they may pull in too strongly and excessive tension is created. Harmony University teaches barbershop singers a method of breathing for singing called “Abdominal-Costal” breathing (discussed in Chapter 3). By properly tucking in the lower abdomen gently upon exhalation, without excessive force, the barbershop musician will have more stability in his posture to be able to perform moves otherwise impossible without a slightly tucked abdomen.

*Upper Abdomen* – This is the area that extends from the waistline up to the rib cage. The temptation for barbershoppers is to pull tightly inward on this section to show “proper” posture. However this should be avoided as it can have adverse effects on breathing throughout the performance. This is the same in classical singing, as the upper abdomen should feel that it is free to move at all times.

*Back* – We cannot completely straighten the curvature in the small of our back. However, we can use this idea as a tool of imagery when it comes to properly aligning our back. If we think of straightening the small of our back, we will also unconsciously pull in the lower abdomen and tuck the buttocks under and forward. We also will achieve a spinal stretch and the proper chest position for presentation of the chorus, as well as the performance itself. A common problem among barbershoppers is that they lean towards the director, often causing those in the upper rows of the risers to develop a “hunchback” posture. This needs to be avoided and should be noticed and fixed on a regular basis, especially during ballads and pieces with no choreography.

37 Ibid.
Chest – Barbershoppers need to understand that the chest should be comfortably high before inhalation and phonation. Retention of the noble posture is a hallmark of pedagogues subscribing to bel canto principles.

Shoulders – When I ask my chorus to sing with their shoulders rolled down and back, I usually end up with a group of people sticking their chests out with excessive tension. I have discovered that a much easier way to go about setting the shoulders is to use the imagery of a magnetic field between the blades, gently holding the upper body in a noble posture. I emphasize to my chorus that it should not feel as if the shoulders are pulled back, but rather in a flexibly relaxed position ready to let the arms move freely in choreography, or hold flexibly still with non-choreographed numbers.

Arms/Hands – If the shoulders are set as mentioned above, the arms and hands should hang freely and naturally at the side of the body. For all singers, this is the ideal position. Yet in barbershop we deal with a great deal of choreography, along with spontaneous arm and hand gestures within the chorus on pieces that have no predetermined gestures. A general rule in barbershop is to leave the hands/arms at the side, and only perform gestures approved by the choreographer.

Head – Once everything else is aligned, the singer may focus on the head and how it is positioned. Many singers deal with the idea of raising the chin for higher pitches, but in fact, the opposite should occur. If the singer thinks of keeping the eyes level, or even slightly downward toward the director’s head, the head should stay in appropriate alignment. I have my barbershop chorus give themselves individual neck massages, moving their head up and down. I ask for them to feel the tension in the neck when it is too far forward, and tension in the throat when it is held too far back. Eventually, they find the appropriate position based on feeling. Of course, the
barbershop chorus member needs to make sure that the head is not tilted to one side or the other unless choreographed. Many times, when asked to emote a feeling, the head will tilt unconsciously. This should be avoided.

**EXERCISES FOR IMPROVING BARBERSHOP POSTURE**

While many younger singers are involved in barbershop, most choruses are comprised of members age 60 and older. The director must take care when selecting exercises for the chorus that involve posture and realignment, in order to avoid injuring a chorus member. The director needs to consider the general demographics of his chorus as well as any individual physical issues. Here are some exercises I have used and found that help make the chorus members aware of their postural issues.

*The “Push” Test* — This is a fun exercise if the chorus members agree to it. Volunteers should stand in front of the chorus to be pushed, while another group of volunteers lines up to push them. Have one line of members establish their version of proper posture while the other group and chorus watches. Once set, the other members gently push the member in front of them backwards with a gentle, but firm shove. If the member who has established posture fails to keep his balance, the feet are most likely not balanced (depending on the force of the push). This should make the chorus member aware that his weight is not distributed properly (assuming the shove was not forceful), and could be better appropriated. Of course, one should only adjust his feet from this test, and not add more tension to other areas, such as the chest.

*Squat/Tree* — I like to incorporate easy calisthenics into rehearsals so that each member of the barbershop chorus becomes aware of muscles used but rarely mentioned. A good way to bring awareness to locked knees/thighs is a squat. Bring the chorus off the risers and have each perform a squat as if doing a workout on a football team, but
then raise into a “tree” pose from yoga, with the only exception being that both feet stay on the floor. (“Tree” pose involves standing on one foot with the other foot lifted and placed on the inner thigh of the leg while the arms are raised in the air.) Essentially this involves coming out of the squat and raising the arms over the head in a prayer or with open arms and hands. This will lengthen the body and keep the vertical line in tact. Have each member lower his arms slowly to the sides, keeping the shoulders slightly back. Repeat this several times to loosen up the legs and continuously lengthen the body. The director needs to keep in mind the age and abilities of the chorus. The exercise should not be required of those physically unable to carry it out. Simply suggest it and most will follow along. To simplify, eliminate the squat.

*The “Tripod” Test* – Ask the chorus to imagine that each foot is a tripod, with two points on the ball of the foot and one point on the heel. Then, ask those that are able to stand on one “tripod” and see how well they balance. Most will be successful if looking straight ahead and not downward. Ask for the chorus to switch to the other foot. Finally, stand on both feet, with both tripods firmly rooted into the floor. This exercise will ensure the feet are providing a firm stance when needed for pre- and post-performance situations, and that the members will not fall in the event of a wildly choreographed piece of music.

*The “Sit” Test* – Some barbershop choruses never get to sit during a rehearsal. Others are fortunate to have chairs. If one is allowed to sit during rehearsal, I like to incorporate the sit test. This involves setting the chair and then doing a slow, steady squat when sitting down. The goal is to make sure the singer “sits tall” as we always ask of all chorus members. Another goal is to ensure movement that is quick and effortless and less detrimental to ailing knees. If the chorus member sits with his legs at a 90-
degree angle, feet flat on the floor and the upper body as if he were standing, it will be easier and more efficient for the chorus member to stand.

*Isometric exercises* – These exercises involve holding a muscle in a fixed or locked position for a certain period of time (on purpose). These can greatly increase the ability of a singer to hold their music properly, which, in many cases, can be the best cure for an ailing posture. Asking the chorus member to hold his arm out or raise his eyebrows for an extended period of time can greatly increase the awareness of the muscles involved, and in the former case help the singer with holding music, and in the latter case help the singer realize that raised eyebrows are not needed.

*Stretching routines* – These need to be planned by the director or other specialist on body alignment in the chorus, but should generally include a full body stretch routine, which, in contrast to setting posture, starts from the head and moves downward. Every muscle in the body can be stretched and manipulated, and stretching routines in barbershop are useful because of the lengthy rehearsal periods (often three hours or more) while standing on the risers. Also, any extraneous movements in the choreography need to be recognized. For instance, if the members will be doing a great deal of jumping up and down (as some of the better choruses do), perhaps a stretch routine that focuses on the hamstrings, calves, and quadriceps would be ideal.

*Meditation/Mental Imagery* – Some barbershop choruses are exceptionally social. These groups meet weekly to generally discuss the weekly events and sing tags or short barbershop numbers, but are not really interested in competition or performing for large audiences. Gil Burroughs mentions that when his group gets together, they “sing for a while, take a business break, have quartets sing, sing some tags then sing until quitting

---

time.” These groups, along with competition choruses with higher energy, may benefit from meditation exercises and imagery. Such meditation can help with body alignment, but more importantly help with the relaxation of a group full of energy and get the talking at the beginning of a rehearsal down to a minimum so the director can maintain the chorus’s focus. Mental imagery is extremely productive in establishing good posture, especially among amateur musicians. A man who looks like he is carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders can instantly look like a United States Marine without the director having to explain proper posture in so many words as above. However, once these images are incorporated, the director then needs to explain the process, such as standing taller and keeping the shoulders back without excessive force.

A chorus that looks good and stands well scores higher in competition and has better fortune because they are playing properly assembled instruments. It takes great attention to assemble our instruments correctly, and this attention must not be taken for granted. Each rehearsal should have some time devoted to body alignment. Once the best body alignment has been achieved, the barbershop singer will be better equipped to tackle the upcoming obstacles of the singing process, such as respiration, phonation, intonation, blend, and choreography. It cannot be understated that the better one looks, the better one feels. If every member of the chorus has aligned his body properly, success will come much faster, and in a healthier way. In those terms, classical body management and barbershop body management are exactly the same.
Chapter 3

A/C Breathing: The “Cooler” Way

When responding to my survey question “What is the number one problem you face when working with amateur musicians?” Bill Weiser of the Reno Silver Dollar Chorus bluntly states, “Breathing.” Jayson Ryner mentions that his chorus’ number one problem is “insufficient breath support and (enough) air to sing.” Bill Bennett of the Lads of Enchantment says,

Breathing, singing on the breath, producing a pitch without the proper support of moving air is the number one problem. On the whole, most people have forgotten how to breathe. The mechanism of providing a flexible, sustained breath to support vocal production is a foreign concept. Many singers hold on to this idea only for a short while, then they start “pinching” the throat to produce the pitch.

I rely heavily on exercises and techniques I gained from the “Sound Management” course at Harmony University, as well as the booklet by Gary Parker when describing barbershop breathing. Again, these sources are incomplete in their approaches. This is proven below.

How important, in general, is breathing in singing? Richard Miller writes, “Breath management is the essential foundation for all skillful vocalism.” Richard Alderson mentions that “breath is the foundation on which singing is established and

---

good breathing is the basis for all good singing.”⁴⁰ William Vennard states, “If his breathing can be improved, his singing can also.”⁴¹

**“ABDOMINAL-COSTAL” BREATHING**

The BHS teaches a technique known as “Abdominal-Costal” breathing. The annual event “Harmony University” provides a sound management class, which covers this topic for directors in two steps: “proper abdominal-costal breathing” and “singing on the breath, or attack.”

The words abdominal and costal refer to the muscle groups mainly involved in the breathing process.⁴² The external intercostals are located between the ribs and are used to expand the rib cage to provide additional space for the lungs to fill with air.⁴³ The BHS states that the diaphragm is very important, but we exert very little, if any, conscious control over it. They continue by saying that to use “A-C” breathing correctly, three things must occur:

1. The chest must be high before you breathe (the body must be properly aligned in the referenced position.)
2. The rib cage must expand sideways.
3. The abdominal wall must relax as you inhale in order for the diaphragm to descend.⁴⁴

Jim Clancy, former director of the Vocal Majority, says that his group relied heavily on Gary Parker’s document “Basic Group Singing Techniques” as a guide for

---

rehearsal. As of the summer of 2010, it was the only document on vocal pedagogy provided at the Harmony Marketplace at Harmony University for directors and singers to purchase.

Parker states that a breath is proper if it can be supported.\footnote{Parker, Basic Group Singing Techniques, 7.} He also mentions that the diaphragm and intercostal muscles control the release of air. Unfortunately when combining the document from the sound management class with this booklet, the barbershopper may become confused, as “Sound Management” instructors say that we cannot control the diaphragm, yet the diaphragm, according to Parker, controls the release of air.

Parker defends the abdominal-costal method by providing a quote from Charles Hefferman:

Correct breathing for singing is produced when intercostals or rib breathing is combined with diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing. Singers can experience this correct breathing technique by extending the abdomen and attempting to expand the body around the waistline.\footnote{Charles W. Hefferman, Choral Music, Technique and Artistry (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 26.}

This is a great quote, but unfortunately not enough to solicit quality breath management from amateur musicians. It is not enough to simply expand the abdomen, which could produce excess tension, or expand around the waistline, which could lead to a sagging posture. These ideas are not complete. Karen Frerichs uses the following exercise:

I tell [singers] to imagine a loose belt around their entire body at the level of their rib cage, above their waist, and as they inhale they need to get bigger all around, so that imaginary belt is tightened. I also have them raise their hands over their heads all the way, take a deep breath, then let one hand of theirs feel how high their rib cage is. Then I ask them to
lower their arms and keep their rib cage expanded that far and RELAX the shoulders. Keeping their chest as high as can be and still be comfortable, shoulders relaxed, and the strong, firm support of their lower body, and a relaxed neck and jaw, to produce a relaxed “ahhhh” on a comfortable pitch for them. They will be surprised how natural the sound is and how easy it is to sustain the sound for an extended time.

This combines the use of imagery (the belt) with a physical exercise (lifting) to help the singer to notice what happens when one breathes normally.

Within the society, “A-C” breathing is the main way to teach breathing. Its explanation is somewhat incomplete, but provides a sense of lower expansion or what I call “down/out,” meaning to think of the diaphragm expanding downward while the viscera and abdomen jut outward.

Some directors stray from A-C breathing. Darin Drown, director of the Sound of the Rockies, uses an “up/in” breathing technique in his chorus, which places in the top five in competition almost every year. Edward Baird also teaches the idea of “up/in” breath support, and does not emphasize, as many teachers do, the expansion in the back. Other society directors who believe in an “up/in” method include Mike O’Neill and Todd Oxley. This is the opposite of “down/out”, where the singer actually emulates holding his breath, while tucking the abdomen inward.

These choruses are successful with this type of breathing, but this does not mean it is the healthiest approach. The most natural form of breathing involves the lower expansion. Just lying down proves this. When one lies comfortably and breathes naturally, the shoulders and chest do not rise, although the chest expands. A person can

---

sing well in this position, and thus a natural breath should be preferred over one that is artificially produced through clavicular breathing.

John Rettenmayer responded to the survey question about breathing with:

This is a difficult area for me, I think mainly because it is harder for me to detect the results, in contrast to vocal exercises the effects of which I can hear. I have had many breathing exercises at HU and in other classes, but I am much less comfortable addressing that area. Only in the last 6 months or so have I come to what I think is a better understanding of good breathing technique, thanks to presentations at Harmony College Northwest by Ron Black and Ryan Heller (Pride of Portland director) and very recently the excellent article by Debra Lynn in the *Harmonizer*. As a result I have clearly been able to help three of the most problematic singers in my chorus make noticeable improvements.

We all want to achieve two common goals: 1.) Good inhalation that prepares the mechanism and vocal tract and 2.) An ability to sing through the entire phrase. Some people believe in using imagery as means of teaching breathing technique, while others believe in teaching with no imagery at all. Richard Miller mentions in *Spectrum of Voices*:

I think you have to know exactly how breath management is accomplished. You have to know how to stay in the inspiratory position – what the Italians call appoggio – for as long as possible. There are specific exercises I use (described in my book *The Structure of Singing*) which develop both the musculature and the coordination for remaining near the inspiratory position. You don’t say, “It’s like balloons, it’s like umbrellas,” you say what it is, which is a much simply way to teach.48

Miller also mentions in *Structure of Singing* that, “with regard to breath management, *appoggio* maintains for a “remarkable” period of time a posture near that which pertained at the beginning of the inspiratory phase of the breath cycle.”49

No barbershop chorus rehearsal I have attended has mentioned the *appoggio*, and probably

never will. It may be better described as a “noble” posture that leads to the *appoggio* technique, which is another way to say what Miller describes.

Joan Wall states that the noble posture becomes a “catalyst for the source of power in singing, which is good breathing.”

Perhaps the only thing that needs to be said for developing a quality preparatory set by each singer is, “Stand with a noble posture. Your breath is now your power source.” This relates to many barbershoppers in a positive way without using anatomical terms.

Another interesting way to look at breath management in singing is provided by Lawrence Indik, Assistant Professor of Voice and Opera at Temple University. He states that the use of breath for singing is “at once simple and richly complex.” He mentions that pitch and timbre merely color and intensify the sound of exhalation. This is an interesting way to look at breathing as a catalyst and source of power. Barbershoppers are constantly worried about singing the correct pitches, rhythms, and blend. If each singer develops a proper breath management technique by thinking of singing on the breath and by coloring the breath rather than the pitch, they may very well sing more in tune through a strategy other than pitch retention. Indik provides a wonderful chart for the development of vital capacity that can be found in the exercises portion of this chapter.

**BREATHING EXERCISES FOR THE BARBERSHOP REHEARSAL**

The Vocal Majority chorus is taught breathing using the imagery of a balloon. The exercise requires the barbershop singer to think of his lungs as three chambers, or

---

balloons. Each balloon is covered by rubber bands (external intercostals) and supported by a rubber pad (diaphragm). One can breathe with a high, middle, or lower balloon breath:

1. If you raise your shoulders and chest, and suck in your stomach when you inhale, the top rubber bands will expand, the rubber pad at the base (diaphragm) will be stretched upward, and only the top interior balloon will be filled to capacity. Being the smallest balloon, the volume of air will be small, and what support you have will only come from the upper rubber bands (intercostals). The rubber pad at the base will provide no support, because it will seek to drop back down to its state of rest.

2. Middle balloon breath: If you expand your rib cage when you inhale, the middle rubber bands are stretched, and the middle interior balloon is filled to capacity. Support will come from the middle rubber bands. This gives you a little more air and a little more support.

3. Lower balloon breath: If you push the stomach down and out, and expand the bottom of the rib cage the rubber pad is stretched downward, the lower rubber bands are expanded, and the bottom interior balloon is filled to capacity. This provides even more air and support.  

This series of breath management exercises, endorsed by Parker, relies entirely on imagery derided by Miller. We know the lungs are not composed of three separate chambers, but this exercise helps to create the breath management technique for the director to incorporate along with a uniform language the chorus can understand and use to teach new members. The key in this exercise is consistency in description, using visual objects rather than anatomical terms. This leads to a more energetic atmosphere and less confusion among the amateur singers involved.

One of Miller’s non-imagery breathing exercises is one I incorporate regularly:

---

52 Parker, Basic Group Singing Techniques, 7.
1. Pick a primary vowel, most preferably “ah” [a] and sing one note in the most comfortable part of the range.

2. Follow the following common-time rhythmic pattern at around one beat per second: four quarter notes, eight eighth notes, four sets of eighth-note triplets, and four sets of sixteenth notes.

3. Take a low, full breath before each quarter note, then before each eighth note, before each SET of triplets, and before each SET of sixteenth notes.

This exercise is good for the barbershopper in two ways. First, he is expected to stagger his breathing, because of the seamless line for most barbershop chorus music. This exercise strengthens each individual’s ability to execute a quick and efficient catch breath.

One of the most troublesome challenges for barbershoppers is silent inhalation. A beneficial exercise, one that Miller finds extremely useful for teaching breath management, is called “Farinelli’s Exercise.” Farinelli was an eighteenth-century castrato. It is believed that he was the great silent breather, and the following exercise, provided by Richard Miller, is one of great significance in teaching the silent breath.

The singer lies on his back. It is best that a pillow or two be placed under the head to ensure that the larynx is not elevated. Breathe normally, feeling as relaxed as possible. Place one hand on the front of the abdominal wall, the other at the side of the lower ribs. Notice the expansion that occurs at inhalation. Next, lengthen this inhalatory gesture, retaining it for as long as is comfortable. There is no sensation of “holding the breath”; one simply suspends the respiratory process. Breathing should be quiet and regular. Lips ought to be parted so that there is no holding back on the breath by the lips in the process. Aim for

---

easy suspension of the breath, its measured exhalation, and for quiet breath renewal.54

While the director of a barbershop chorus probably cannot get each member to lie on the floor, he can have them place their hands as Miller suggests, then have them execute the following sequence:

1. Inhale for five counts, suspend for five counts, exhale for five counts.
2. Do the same exercise, increasing each division of the breath by one count, until reaching ten counts per inhale, suspension, and exhalation.

While this may take some time to learn, and definitely more time to master, the positives of the exercise include an increased vital capacity, an increased awareness of and confidence in breath management, and an increased awareness of the silent breath, which is crucial to the performance/presentation aspect of all singing, but especially in quieter sections of barbershop ballads. The chorus may not be able to sustain a quiet breath at all times, especially during up-tempo, quick choreography, but the more it is rehearsed and mentioned, the more the silent breath will become a conditioned response by the barbershop chorus.

The chorus director can implement another exercise provided by Miller. This is what Miller calls an “ancient device.” The execution of a /f-f-f-f-f/ pattern is accomplished as though five candles were being blown out on a single breath emission (to be followed by a silent breath). Ironically, this imagery is exactly what Miller says elsewhere he would like to avoid. However, he does go on to explain the action and what should be felt during the breath cycle:

54 Miller, Securing Voices, 26.
Feel centered epigastric/umbilical activity (the epigastrium lies just above the umbilical region), while at the same time the lateral abdominal wall retains its inspiratory posture. This technique resembles the earlier laughter-like onsets and the silent sibilant exercise.\footnote{Miller, \textit{Securing Voices}, 25.}

This pattern should occur in common time, with a four-sixteenth-note pattern followed by an eighth note, then an eighth rest. Repeat it until success becomes commonplace. It is a great way to start the rehearsal without taxing the voice.

As the barbershop singer becomes aware of his own breathing tendencies, he should be consistently reminded of proper technique. Yet, the chorus director cannot always spend precious minutes of a rehearsal on breath management exercises. A great way to remind singers of breath technique is to place a chart that is large enough to be read by the entire chorus somewhere behind or to the side of the director so reference can be made at anytime during rehearsal. Since retention is a major problem, anything in the members’ sight can be useful. Lawrence Indik provides a wonderful chart in the November/December 2009 issue of the \textit{Journal of Singing}, a publication dedicated to the advancement of singing technique and other related classical issues. I find it to be just as helpful for the barbershop chorus:

“Strategies that can prolong tone production duration.”
1. \textbf{B}ecome familiar with the sensations of breath.
2. \textbf{R}educe outflow of breath.
3. \textbf{E}liminate extraneous exertion.
4. \textbf{A}nticipate the demands of the phrase.
5. \textbf{T}rain the body to promote greater respiratory health.
6. \textbf{H}old bandhas or other well placed physical locks.
7. \textbf{T}une the voice to formants and use singer’s inertive air flow.
8. \textbf{A}void the mechanoreceptors that call for inhalation.
9. \textbf{E}xploit cooperating impedance.
10. \textbf{R}egulate posture.
11. Be patient and practice.\textsuperscript{56}

A user-friendly adaptation of Indik’s chart, appropriate for the amateurs in a typical barbershop chorus goes as follows:

“You have more breath capacity than you think.”

“Exploit shorter phrases to use less breath.”

“Hold your position while keeping your muscles and joints free.”

“Stand comfortably still.”

Indik provides another breathing exercise. He mentions that we can also explore different patterns of breathing:

1. Inhale, inhale, exhale.
2. Exhale, exhale, inhale.
3. Slowly sip in, breathe out forcefully
4. Breathe in forcefully, sip out.\textsuperscript{57}

These exercises provide a chance to work efficiently on breathing techniques in a way that requires cognitive awareness of the action involved but also reminds the singer to use conscious control in the early stages of his singing career. Each of the exercises involves a twist on what we normally teach. Barbershop educators teach inhale-suspend-exhale-recover, which is the same as in classical singing. I teach my singers to inhale at the end of a phrase rather than to exhale. This not only provides a cleaner onset to the next phrase, but is more apt to include a silent breath and, as a result, less wasted breath.

To understand how fast air fills the lungs, one can imagine air filling the lungs as a glass that is submersed in water. The water rushes into the glass just as the air rushes into the lungs. This helps Andrew Milligan, a tenor in W. Stephen Smith’s studio, to

\textsuperscript{56} Indik, “The End of Breath,” 135.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 137.
understand “that air fills my lungs as soon as I drop my diaphragm without moving my chest, torso, shoulders or head.””\textsuperscript{58} Smith’s holistic approach to singing is wonderful, and his section on breathing is extremely compelling as he invites singers to think of the breath in simpler terms. “The more simply we think about breathing, the better we will do it.”\textsuperscript{59} Another student of Smith’s, Christine Brewer, is quoted in his book:

I have learned to breathe for the phrase, let the texts inspire the breath, and release the breath right before the beginning of each phrase rather than holding it. I used to take a huge breath for every phrase whether I needed it or not. I learned that I needed to trust that my breath was going to carry me through each phrase.\textsuperscript{60}

For barbershoppers, this quote should probably be read aloud at every rehearsal. One of the challenges is that many singers of the style believe it is more important to start the phrase with a motion and “tanking up” than it is to think of letting the text inspire the breath. Barbershop singers should think of the texts while they sing. Take the familiar barbershop text “Time after time, I tell myself that I’m so lucky to be loving you.” Can the singer make it through this phrase in one breath? Probably. \textit{Should} the singer make it through this phrase in one breath? That depends on the interpretation the chorus director places on the meaning. Is the chorus emphasizing “Time after time” or “I tell myself that I’m so lucky” or, “I tell myself that I’m \textit{so lucky}!” When our chorus sang this popular tune (arranged by Ed Waesche), I immediately practiced all of the different interpretations possible to find the best sound our chorus could make, and the best relationship that our chorus could have to the text. This way when we decided to take a

\textsuperscript{58} Smith, \textit{Naked Voice}, 35.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 39.
full chorus breath, we could focus on the inaudible breath, and make sure that the text
(which is quite soft at this point in the music) inspired the breath.

The Barbershop Harmony Society teaches that the diaphragm cannot be
controlled consciously. Yet, Wilhelm Ehmann and Frauke Haaseman, in their book *Voice
Building for Choirs*, provide exercises for building diaphragmatic control through
relaxation and proper air compression. These include:

1. The Hunting Game: Call “Piff, puff, poof!” The consonants p and f will
compress and expel the air. A reflex occurs in the diaphragm. A rippling
motion will occur in the abdomen. Hold a “revolver” at hip level, resting
one hand on the small of the back. With each shot, the hand will check
the action of the breathing muscles. 61

2. Machine Gun Game: Call “Tack, tack, tack!” The consonant t will
exercise the tip of the tongue and the front portion of the hard palate,
while k causes compression between the back of the tongue and the rear
portion of the hard palate. The machine gun can be shot at various tempi
and at different pitch levels. 62

These exercises are helpful for all classical and barbershop choruses, because they
bring a cognitive awareness to what is happening with the breathing mechanism while
simultaneously providing fun in technical work.

Other exercises considered in Ehmann and Haasemann’s book include those that
are created for a steady expulsion and use of air coupled with the restraint of air and
achieving proper breath support. These are common exercises used in many choirs,
including imagery such as puffing on a window, cooling the soup, puffing at dandelions,
playing with feathers, pumping a bicycle tire, imitating a locomotive or imitating
insects. 63 Exercises for restraining the air include emulating holding the breath when

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 6-7.
diving into water, the feeling of fright and gasping “ah!,” spontaneously suggesting something surprising or astonishing to the group, diving while expelling the air, and blowing up a football.\textsuperscript{64}

All exercises mentioned above will work for the untrained volunteer barbershop singer, and most will work for the professional opera singer. The primary consideration for any breathing exercise is whether or not it is healthy and conducive to quality singing. If it is not, then there is no reason to perform the exercise. If it promotes unhealthy singing, ultimately the director will have failed the chorus, at least in that attempt. We need to develop our singers into the best musicians they can be, and that involves teaching the relationship between breathing naturally and consciously controlled breathing for singing. If time is spent on this in rehearsals, no matter the expertise, singers will become better at recognizing their own faults in breathing, and as a result work on bettering themselves when it comes to breathing for a quality sound. As Brewer stated, “let the text inspire the breath.” Let the breath inspire healthy singing. Let healthy singing inspire better sound, and let that better sound inspire more to join our barbershop style.

**SINGING/BREATHING DURING CHOREOGRAPHY**

The best choruses in the Barbershop Harmony Society perform outstanding, fast-paced, imaginative choreography while singing with a beautiful, rich tone. Choruses of varied ages are able to perform moves that are sometimes equivalent to those expected from professional dancers and musicians. Unfortunately not all choruses are able to perform at this level because they have not been taught some key concepts of singing,

\textsuperscript{64} Ehmann and Haasemann, *Voice Building*, 7.
choreographed movement, and breath management. Many choruses choose to do no choreography, focusing more on healthy singing. Pete Centner mentions that his chorus, Lakeland Barbershop, does “little choreography. We focus on making a great, free sound. I’d rather they just did a little something now and again versus something which took too much focus away from singing.” Chuck Lower of Bucks County PA Chorus goes further:

At our stage of development, [we do] very little. We have limited time each week to do all that needs to be done. Time spent on “choreography” is time lost to working on sound. We do only enough “movement” to minimize Presentation judges’ complaints about having done too little. Facial expression and body attitude is usually enough to enhance the song rather than to get in its way. In fact, good facial involvement can enhance vocal production.

The first step for barbershoppers (and all musicians) is to inhale enough air to be able to complete the phrase musically. Second, care should be taken to not have the singers execute movement that would increase the need or desire to perform an “up/in” breath, unless this is the breathing technique taught by the director and music team. If singers have to perform a move such as raising both arms in the air while singing, the sound could suffer and scores in competition suffer because the body alignment is altered. Choreographers should know how to plan movement based on the needs of the music and the ability of chorus.

Third, a common barbershop myth is that the singer should “move on the breath.” The ultimate result of this is a chorus that moves on pauses and stands completely still during the phrase. This is also likely to lead to a higher chest breath rather than an abdominal-costal breath. The barbershopper’s upper body sometimes moves in an upward direction when moving on the breath. The image of the body rising to move on
the breath also involves the chest, thus the higher chest breath, and inevitably one that is audible.

Exciting choreography does not always equate to flashy, difficult moves for the chorus. Some choruses go too far in trying to develop performance sets with moves that are detrimental to their singing and breathing. The most important concept is to emote the message of the music in an effective way, even if that means standing still. Brian Reid of Melodymen Express says, “We don’t do ‘acting/choreography’ in our presentations. We do not normally compete, as this is deleterious to the health of the chorus. We encourage natural movements in response to the words/meaning/intent of the song.”

With the exception of show choir, barbershop is the only style of singing that incorporates high intensity choreography with high intensity singing on risers. The breath, as a power source, must always be considered when the body of any singer is taken out of its best, proper, noble singing position. When this happens, the singer should try to be aware of any breathing faults experienced and relay these faults to the director if the director has not already noticed. These faults need to be addressed before any further choreography is added to the performance. Ultimately, the healthier the breathing technique, the better the presentation will be.
Singing involves much more than just speaking on a pitch, but the mechanics of the voice while singing are similar to those in speaking, and it is through a “stripping” process of the postured voice that true individual voices can shine. This process involves finding the “core” sound of each individual. Each person has a unique voice, and before we can refine vowels, blend, and create rich, vibrant harmonies with one another we need to learn how to access our core voice.

Barbershop choruses face four challenges in tone production: finding a unified sound without completely squelching the uniqueness of each voice, manipulating vibrato, checking hypo and hyper-functional phonation, and employing healthy belting strategies. These challenges are not addressed in any published material on barbershop singing.

**SIMPLY SPEAKING SIMPLY: SMITH’S FIRST “INVENTION”**

In *The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing*, W. Stephen Smith attempts to strip the voice of all its inauthenticity and find the core or “naked” voice. His first “invention” he calls “Simply Speaking Simply”: The priority is to speak with clarity, and then to proceed into singing. Smith explains that most of us are unaware of how the events in our daily lives lead to the entanglement of our words, actions, and relationships. Sometimes, he says, it takes a therapist or psychologist to take care of these issues. Comparatively, he is the “voice psychologist,” as he attempts to untangle

---

65 Smith, *Naked Voice*, 49.
66 Ibid.
the voice of the singer so as to find its most basic, natural, free, clear sound. Through this “invention,” Smith teaches how to speak without complication. The object is to isolate and fully exercise the muscles inside the voice box. The five phases of his “invention” are: 1) Vernacular speaking, 2) Speaking with projection, 3) Speaking with line, 4) Speaking with projection and line on pitch, and 5) Refining the vowels.67

From the barbershopper’s perspective, it is interesting that Smith waits until the fifth phase to begin refining vowels. In barbershop, this is often the very first technique we practice because we want that blend to occur at the very instant we phonate. With Smith’s process, we actually need to delay the idea of vowel refinement until we have “untangled” the voice of its conceived posturizations.

Vernacular speaking means to speak in our original language with all of the original regional dialect we currently use. Smith mentions that when we use our vernacular speaking voices, we use the essential core of the voice, and thus the intrinsic muscles of the larynx speak appropriately, or cleanly.68 Sometimes a classically trained singer will have problems with this first phase because they have always been trained to modify their vowels to the phrase. For some amateur choruses and individual musicians, this may be an easy or difficult concept to grasp, depending on their level of study.

To incorporate Smith’s pedagogy, the chorus should speak Bobby Gray’s tag, shown in Figure 1: “I’ll be looking at the moon, but I’ll be seeing you.” One should not form a “choral” sound. He should say it as if to his wife, his child, or someone else who means a great deal to him. By doing this, he is isolating the text from its musical context, and letting the mechanisms of the voice keep tension to a minimum as it is read.

67 Smith, Naked Voice, 50-62.
68 Ibid., 50.
This relates to the point made in the previous chapter about letting the texts inspire the breath. This time, let the text inspire the reading.

7. I’ll Be Seeing You

![Sheet music]

Figure 2. Bobby Gray, “I’ll Be Seeing You”

In phase 2, Smith adds to the vernacular voice (rather than eliminating it). He adds projection to the voice, which is not the same as screaming or yelling. Smith will often tell his students to pretend as if they are talking to a person in the next room. The key is to learn to project without excessive tension or “entanglement.” Our vernacular voice, without projection, may not easily be heard, but can be clearer when we project.

Projection can simply be defined as our regular voice but with more intensity and focus. Smith avoids telling people to speak louder because they tend to shout, which usually “lifts the larynx, puts pressure on the voice, and spreads the sound.” This is a common problem in all choruses, but especially barbershop choruses when singing louder sections like tags. Figure 2 provides an example of a louder tag with higher voicing.

---

David Wright, *Classic Tags for Men’s Voices* (Barbershop Harmony Society, 2010), 3.

Smith, *Naked Voice*, 52.

Ibid., 53.
Smith’s phase 3 involves speaking with line, and should only be added after phases 1 and 2 have been mastered. Since we are still speaking, it is easy for us to associate with a line, because we have known the concept since our early childhood: line up in school, draw lines in art, math, etc. A line indicates continuity, a simple beginning, constant movement, and an ending.

By adding line to the projected vernacular voice, we are one step closer to being able to sing on the core of our voice. Speaking with line means that we are required to have the same intensity from one point in the text to the next. This will likely resemble a monotone speech, different from our vernacular voice, which is full of inflections. Correctly speaking with line involves staying in the moment and constantly creating speech without driving the sound. It is not easy to use the word intensity without creating a situation for the singer to “hold” the action they feel is correct at the beginning of the phase, and the monotone line may take a longer time to master than one initially realizes.

---

72 Wright, Classic Tags, 4.
73 Smith, Naked Voice, 53.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 53-4.
Taking this tag one phase at a time through phase 3 is most appropriate. First the text should be spoken in a normal, or vernacular, voice, with inflections on the most important words, in a speech-like rhythm. For phase 2, the chorister should pretend that the “lonesome rose” is about forty feet away, while keeping in mind this is a soft tag, meant to end at a very soft dynamic level. One must project and use the consonants and inflections of vernacular speech to get the point across, and do so in a healthy, non-shouting way.

Finally, with phase 3, rhythm can be added to the mix. Smith mentions nothing about adding rhythm at this point, but it is valid to do so when adding line to the existing text. In the vernacular voice, with projected speech on a line, the text can be repeated until the musical line stays smooth. The voice should not be placed in too high or too low a range. If one can make it through the phrase on a clear line, be understood well, and such that the throat feels natural, then he has completed the phase correctly. If something feels wrong, it probably is. The singer should go back to phase 1, and repeat the process.

In phase 4, specific pitches are employed. To incorporate this phase into barbershop, the previous tag works well. Without refining the vowels, and staying

---

76 Wright, *Classic Tags*, 3.
within their vernacular dialect, the barbershoppers should attempt to sing the line that lies closest to each individual’s spoken pitch. For the sake of this exercise, let us consider the baritone line. It lies in a fairly comfortable range, and can be performed without too much stress on the barbershopper’s voice. As pitches are added, the singer should make no attempt to refine vowels—this will come in the next phase. The line needs to be legato, and should feel fairly natural and maybe even different (or easier!) as pitches are accessed for the first time using the core voice. As mentioned in each phase, if it feels wrong to the singer, or something feels constricted or tight, it is incorrect. If most members of the chorus are singing correctly, it is acceptable to move forward, but the director should make sure to work individually with those that are struggling to ensure total chorus success.

The fifth phase is called “Refining Vowels.” It is at this point that Smith finally gets to singing for performance, and he writes a good portion on shaping five pure vowels: [i-e- æ-o-u]. To form these pure vowels, singers must move the articulators differently than in normal speech. We must coax the articulators to function independently of each other. More will be discussed on this in chapter 5.

VIBRATO IN BARBERSHOP CHORUSES

Barbershop choruses are no different than other choruses in that they face the issue of individual vibrato. In most cases, choruses must deal with the notion that the individual voice and its vibrato need to be restrained in order for the chorus to create a blended sound. Members may think they need to sing with a so-called “straight tone,” a vibrato-less sound that will help intonation and improve blend. In fact, barbershoppers should understand that eliminating vibrato completely can be extremely unhealthy and dangerous to the vocal mechanism. Barbershop education fails to properly address
vibrato in the human voice. Since classical pedagogues do cover the issue of vibrato, it makes sense to employ their techniques in an effort to curb the straight-tone mentality prevalent in barbershop circles.

**FALSETTO HELPS “STRAIGHTEN” VIBRATO**

The lead of Vocal Spectrum, the 2006 International Quartet Champion of the Barbershop Harmony Society, sang in his falsetto voice at almost all times to win a championship. This broke certain “unwritten” rules of the society and quartet singing. Everyone had come to expect the lead to be in full chest voice at all times. The great thing about this change is that he sounded like he was in chest voice the entire time, and as if he were singing without any vibrato whatsoever. How did he do this? The answer is most undoubtedly the use of falsetto. Falsetto incorporates a different mix of muscle involvement than chest voice (discussed in Chapter 6). This difference creates a sound with less sympathetic vibration from the vocal mechanism than that of chest voice. Thus, the singing remains healthy while the pitch undulation is minimal. It is acceptable to do this, because the singer is not eliminating vibrato, we are singing with a different percentage of muscle involvement.

Ingo Titze states that if vibrato has not been established, “it is a sign that the muscles aren’t freed up and they are still fighting each other a bit. They are not playing against each other and undulating.”

William Vennard says, “If a tone is well produced it will have the fluctuation [vibration] I have described, five to seven times per second, with a variation in pitch, intensity and timbre.” This is well in line with other pedagogues and the rate that is

---

77 Olson, *Solo Singer*, 64.
78 Vennard, *Singing*, 204.
deemed most acceptable, including Miller, Reid, and Shirlee Emmons and Constance Chase. Emmons and Chase describe vibrato in free singing as the “natural result.” A sound with a tremolo (too fast a vibrato) or a wobble (too slow a vibrato) is caused by faulty vocal production and unnecessary tension. Vennard understands the difficulties created for chorus directors, and describes the reasons for desiring a straight tone blend:

Choir directors began listening to the two pitches of the vibrato, neither of which is the desired one. Furthermore, in an ensemble, one singer’s vibrato was going up while another’s was going down, and there are different rates of vibrato. So the theory developed that perfect intonation was impossible except with a straight tone.

We know as barbershop directors that we should not completely eliminate vibrato in singing. We can tell our singers to use a “stabilized vibrato” in which “the pitch deviation is limited to a reasonable extent.” By stabilized vibrato, I mean a lighter tone with a less wide pitch undulation, but I do not mean straight tone.

It does not make sense to ask the chorus to sing with a vibrant tone and then ask for the members to eliminate vibrato completely. Furthermore, if vibrato is eliminated completely, the pitch may sound out of tune lacking vibrancy. Barbara Doscher states:

It is better to have a slightly breathy tone with an even vibrato and good focus rather than a crystal clear, strident sound with no fluidity. The latter tone often sounds slightly under pitch because the air is being pushed through the resonance tract.

---

80 Ibid., 138.
82 Ibid.
The conclusion is that vibrato in barbershop should become a welcome, healthy vocal technique, and rather than eliminating it altogether, the chorus should, taking Doscher’s advice, strive to create a vibrant tone with a breathier sound. It has been my experience that to achieve that sound, the men respond to the instruction to sing with “more falsetto.” The idea of more head content, or falsetto singing, is covered further in Chapter 6.

**UNDERSINGING v. OVERSINGING**

Many barbershop singers oversing, especially when they want to “hear” or feel the ring of the chord. What they do not realize is that the ringing sensation they feel is not necessarily from the chord created, but by the buzzing of their own resonators. Still, other singers face the problem of not singing energetically enough. This results in another form of unhealthy phonation. Oversinging is called “hyperfunctional phonation” and undersinging, “hypofunctional phonation.”

The primary evidence of hypofunctional phonation is a breathy tone. This is caused by an inadequate or incomplete closure of the glottis. McKinney writes that the vocal folds do not approximate, or close, properly. He goes on to make a bold but agreeable statement: “Wasted air is wasted tone and should be avoided.”

McKinney uses the beginning of a humming sound to bring the vocal folds together. The following procedure is useful in chorus rehearsals:

1. Take a comfortably deep breath and think of starting to hum. You will find your mouth and your vocal cords closing in preparation for the hum. (If you pull in hard on your abdominal muscles, you can feel the vocal cords holding back the breath.) As you begin the hum, bring your teeth together firmly and try to feel a lot of “buzzy” vibration in the roof of your mouth. This type of hum is somewhat penetrating in quality but is seldom breathy.

---

84 McKinney, *Diagnosis & Correction*, 82.
Now, with your mouth still closed, continue humming while separating your teeth by dropping the lower jaw down freely. Try to maintain as much vibration in the roof of the mouth as possible. This type of hum is more relaxed and has a better quality than the first one; it will not be breathy if it is properly produced.\textsuperscript{85}

In this tag (figure 6), most singers can sing the lead line without worrying about range, but dynamics are troublesome. By incorporating McKinney’s humming exercise, we can eliminate the breathy tone while engaging the falsetto musculature. At this point we have finally differentiated barbershop falsetto from classical falsetto.

\textbf{19. Who’ll Take My Place When I’m Gone?}

Figure 6. Dealer’s Choice, “Who’ll take my place when I’m gone”\textsuperscript{86}

Another way to achieve proper closure of the vocal folds is by asking the singer to produce more energy. While not scientifically proven to work, this requires the director to become a psychologist of sorts- it is counterproductive to ask a singer with high energy and hypofunctional phonation to add energy to the sound. Yet, asking for more energy just may be the key ingredient to getting the barbershopper to sing with better glottal closure. In my experiences with choruses, asking for a more energized sound, or even just more energy physically, the sound becomes more vibrant.

\textsuperscript{85} McKinney, \textit{Diagnosis & Correction}, 83.
\textsuperscript{86} Wright, \textit{Classic Tags}, 5.
Other cues that may signal hypofunctional phonation, or at least a sense that the body is not working hard enough for singing, include poor posture, shallow breathing, a lack of suspension during breathing, singing too softly, wrong vocal models, failure to recognize good vocal quality, lack of involvement in the music, timidity, and other related personality factors. Many of these factors can coincidentally lead to hyperfunctional phonation as well.

Hyperfunctional phonation can be described as tight, tense, edgy, hard, or strained. It is a serious problem among barbershoppers in regard to vocal health. Most barbershoppers want to “ring a chord” and sing loud for as long a time as possible. Many people lose their voices for days or weeks after a barbershop event because of not only the amount of singing, but also the quality. This could be the top factor in how the barbershop style is looked upon by classically trained musicians. Bill Weiser says that people outside the style believe barbershoppers only sing loud without good singing. This is not what judges listen for in a quartet or chorus, and it should be avoided even in the pubs and at social events. Contest judge Stephen Jamison says the worst myth is “Louder is better.” He recommends taking the energy from the chest register into the head register.

Signs of hyperfunctional phonation include:

1. Singing in too high a tessitura
2. Speaking far above or below optimum pitch
3. Singing or speaking in a noisy environment
4. Habitually singing or speaking too loudly – with too much force
5. Screaming, shouting, or yelling
6. The wrong concept of breath support
7. Incorrect breathing techniques

---

87 McKinney, *Diagnosis & Correction*, 83.
88 See Appendix B, “What barbershop myths?” to read why barbershoppers believe classical musicians have a problem with the style.
8. Postural tension and rigidity
9. Wrong vocal models
10. Tension resulting from personality problems – feelings of fear, inferiority, insecurity, embarrassment, and so forth.\(^{89}\)

One way to begin correcting hyperfunctional phonation is to create a relaxed environment that promotes less tension-driven energy and more relaxation-based energy. Perhaps the rehearsal commences with a stretching routine, or light vocalises that help to relax the voice. Another way is to place voices according to their comfortable range. This is especially difficult when the lead and baritone parts are so similar. I place those with higher ranges in the lead section because they need to sing in full voice on higher pitches written for their part, while the baritone should be in their falsetto on higher notes.

Another way to try fixing a strident tone is to go in the opposite direction and make it intentionally breathy. Using hypofunctional phonation as a corrective procedure is beneficial when the singer is made aware of the idea that the middleground is the endgame. Many are hesitant to do this at first because the sound is not necessarily “pretty.” Barbershop singers should be given direction that the current sound is not the important part, it is the intrinsic muscular movement that we are trying to condition.

The baritone’s role in a barbershop chorus presents unique vocal issues. It is typical for the baritone to cross the lead in terms of range in barbershop music. When the baritone sings below the lead, he should sound like a bass. When he sings above the lead, the tone quality should resemble a tenor.

\(^{89}\) McKinney, *Diagnosis & Correction*, 89.
In m. 23 of figure 7, the baritone crosses the lead, but in a much higher and difficult part of the voice than mm. 17-20. This section also involves an intense crescendo.

The resulting problem in the baritone line will likely be an example of hyperfunctional phonation, fixed by the barbershop falsetto. Even though the music has become louder at this point, the baritone should mimic the tenor voice during the entire example. If the tone is strident, or hyperfunctional, the hum mentioned earlier helps promote less excessive exertion because the top notes of the line may be uncomfortable and tense while sounding flat.

One should not confuse strident singing with belting, which is a type of chest voice singing more common in female voices than in men. This is a legitimate style of singing for barbershoppers to produce. Oren Brown states that “to belt is to commit oneself to a song by every possible means of identity with its text, allowing the voice to
express itself through an uninhibited release of sound.” Clifton Ware mentions that “belters can push chest voice up to about C₅, including operatic tenors who also sing “C in chest.”

Cornelius Reid argues against belting:

**Belting:** The practice adopted by “pop” singers (particularly women) of driving the chest register too high in the tonal range. Belting is not a legitimate use of the mechanism and is extremely detrimental to vocal health. “Belters” frequently develop nodules on the vocal folds that require either long periods of rest or surgery for their removal.

Of course, this quote sounds more like a diagnosis of hyperfunctional phonation, which is definitely not the sound we want to create. Healthy belting produces a speech-like quality of sound that can enhance the barbershop performance, which has recently become more of a “pop-based” style as composers begin to arrange more modern melodies.

Before teaching belting, the director should have a clear conception of its crucial differences from hyperfunctional phonation. To do this, the director should have a checklist of how to compare it to hyperfunctional phonation so he does not mislead the chorus. The following chart from Norman Spivey serves as a guideline for proper belting:

**Support**
- Amount of energy is immense
- Greater muscular support from the body
- The whole body is working harder
- High subglottic pressure

---

• Minimal breath and tremendous energy in the torso, neck, and head
• The higher the pitch, the higher the effort level
  Larynx
• In a higher position
• Uses a different tilt
• Vigorous activity in the thyroarytenoid muscle
• Thyroarytenoid-dominant mix
• Closed phase is long
• Thick or bunched vocal folds
  Vocal Tract
• Pharynx is narrowed/tighter
• Contraction of other laryngeal and pharyngeal muscles
• Small vocal tract
• Forward tongue
• The mouth is spread laterally
  Sound
• Loud sound, rich in high overtones
• Seems forward
• Loud, chiaro, brassy, twangy, and sometimes nasal
• Stronger at a high range, and is rather weak in the low range
• Most successful with forward vowels (which raise the tongue and the larynx, and with a glottal attack)
• Speech-like/the shape of the word and how it is spoken is intrinsic to the sound

Many of these qualities sound negative. Yet when applied skillfully, these ideas can be extremely positive in barbershop and musical theatre. More effort does not necessarily mean hyperfunctional phonation. Belting is a style of singing that should be conditioned slowly and not put onto a singer’s musical plate until that singer has mastered the art of singing with a classically healthy tone.

In figure 8, the lead part is written in a high range. Since this is around many lead singers’ passaggi, or “cracking area” in barbershop parlance, it can be hard to produce a quality sound in full voice. This is where belting becomes useful. Using the

---

93 Spivey, “Music Theater Singing,” 611.
checklist above, keep the amount of energy extremely intense during the post (the held note).

Figure 8. Don Gray, “Auld Lang Syne”

Appropriate to barbershop is a bright, forward vowel, especially when attempting the belting technique on “Syne,” rather than a dark “ah” [a] vowel. The other vowels that work for belting in this example include the diphthong on “days” and the horizontally shaped “Lang.”

Baritones do not belt here, even though they are below the leads at the end of this tag. Baritones should sing the part like the basses, in chest voice, but in a classically healthy manner, tuning to the root. They should try to match the basses in a duet, and keep the vowel targets locked. The lead is the only part that gets to belt, with the exception of a melody exchange, which is very uncommon.

Figure 9 provides an example in which the tenor is given the melody. Keep in mind that this is a very rare occasion, and in barbershop repertoire, especially for contests, the tenor should always be subordinate to the lead, unless a special adaptation or emotive gesture is being offered by the arranger.
Since the tenor has been given the melody, the lead takes the tenor role and sings in falsetto. The tenor should take great care to not over-sing, but rather switch to full or chest voice by belting. Some choruses with less than sixty members may have only four or five tenors, making belting and blending at the same time an extremely difficult task. As long as the rest of the singers stick to the correct singing technique, and do not belt, the trouble for the tenors should be minimal.

This chapter has presented solutions to common problems of the barbershop style through different techniques and practices offered by classical musicians and vocal pedagogues. Any singer can succeed healthily in the barbershop style, although it should be noted that no single technique will work for everybody. The most important elements of a barbershop chapter meeting, rehearsal, convention, or informal gathering are the fellowship, the fun, the singing, and the camaraderie created by a group of men/women who get together for the sole purpose of the love to sing. There will be less fun if someone is to sing until he has developed vocal fatigue, or even worse, vocal nodules, because of faulty singing habits. The barbershop style requires some slightly different types of singing than classical choral music, specifically in reference to belting, but should in no way be considered a style in which technique is less important. In fact, I contend that technique should be covered more frequently, because most barbershop
choruses are full of untrained amateur singers who rely on the techniques taught in the short frame of a weekly rehearsal. Over time, these techniques will transfer to other social gatherings, such as a group of guys getting together at a bar to sing tags, but without any attention to technical training, these singers are headed down the wrong path for a successful career in barbershop. The style is akin to karaoke because three parts provide the lead with an accompaniment track. If the track does not sound quite right, or the lead is singing in too high a range, and the beer is flowing (as it does at most barbershop events), problems with vocal fatigue will emerge. With proper technique and exercises, the singer should be able to avoid the mistakes and myths commonly associated with singing in the style.
Chapter 5

When you 'shop, think “Target”

Most barbershoppers would undoubtedly choose English as their favorite language in which to sing, since the majority of barbershop repertoire and popular music is in English. In fact, my chorus dropped their jaws in disbelief when I told them we would be performing Biebl’s Ave Maria at the Christmas show.

English has the most vowels and trouble spots (diphthongs and triphthongs, e.g.) of any of the frequently sung languages. Latin has the fewest. Chorus directors Brian Reid and John Mathews mention that they use Latin (and Italian) vowels in their chorus rehearsals. Directors should constantly study the music to prepare for vowel issues. Unfortunately, due to regional dialects and individual voices, vowels can be a daunting musical concept to teach. It is even more daunting if the director is untrained. There are different schools of thought on diction, blend, and how to sing “proper English.” The barbershop style itself has its own vowel guidelines, explored below.

The Barbershop Harmony Society teaches that there are twelve primary vowels, while the rest are considered secondary. Rich Taylor of the Jerseyaires states:

I use the 12 vowel sounds for craft. I teach target sounds and word sounds rather than “words”. I use unison singing up and down scales to encourage the singers to maintain the same word sounds throughout their register. I always begin with the eight primary sounds…WE, SIT, LATE, LET, HAT, SUN, FAR and LAW to get the singers familiar with how the formation of the vowel sounds moves from the forward position for the bright vowels through to the relaxed tongue sensation at the “darker vowels.”
HOW MANY TARGET VOWELS?

The Barbershop Harmony Society, though expanding its reach beyond the United States to also the entire world, has yet to embrace the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). For this study, I will use IPA as a standard pronunciation guide along with the more recognized “word sound” descriptions such as “ah” [ɑ] and “eh.” I hope the BHS will one day adopt IPA to take advantage of its specific nature.

We sing vowels, and we articulate consonants. We express text; we do not sing it; we sing the vowels. One pitfall of the barbershop genre is that choristers sometimes go too far in manufacturing vowels. Many members of barbershop choruses use protruding lips, exaggerated facial movements and other tight articulators like the tongue and jaw when this is simply not necessary. Jack Coldiron states:

Bright forward vowels are always possible – even when the larynx is in a comfortably low position. They are not mutually exclusive of each other. Don’t over-form vowels with the lips. I want to hear the vowels – I don’t want to see them. Give attention to the possibility for vowel migration or vowel modification as you ascend.94

This is great advice for a director to give in the barbershop rehearsal. While we attempt uniformity on twelve target vowels (or in Parker’s case below, ten), we do not want the singer to engage in extraneous muscular tension that could be detrimental to the overall performance and sound.

Other directors, like Jeff Veteto, do not follow the twelve-vowel model; he uses a sixteen-target vowel model. Gil Burroughs does not use a specific number, he simply uses “demonstration.” Lonnie Miner, Rod Schneider, and Bob Shapiro all use exercises

94 Blades-Zeller, Spectrum, 94.
incorporating [mi-me-ma-mo-mu]. This brief survey demonstrates that not all barbershoppers follow the BHS educational model, but all focus on vowels to some extent.

Gary Parker writes that the English language can be sung with as few as ten pure vowels, i.e., no fixed, straight sounds with no change, alteration or transition in the sound (such as a diphthong). The following chart demonstrates these vowels. I have added IPA to aid understanding and flexibility to the chart.

**PARKER’S PURE VOWELS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sound [IPA]</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ee [i]</td>
<td>mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ih [ɪ]</td>
<td>bid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eh [ɛ]</td>
<td>them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ah [ɑ]</td>
<td>job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a [æ]</td>
<td>rag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uh [ʌ]</td>
<td>up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oo [u]</td>
<td>moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oo [ʊ]</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oh [ɔ]</td>
<td>more or [o] obey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aw [ɔ]</td>
<td>dawn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. Parker’s Pure Vowel Chart, with Adaptations

I have changed the order and examples slightly, as Parker’s original chart had the word “dull” for the “uh” [ʌ] sound instead of the vowel sound in the word “up.” His “oh” vowel was also unclear as he used the word example “more.” I changed that to an [ɔ] and added [o] for unstressed “o” as in the word “obey.” If the “o” sound is stressed, in English, the sound is a diphthong written in IPA as [ʊo].

---

95 Parker, *Basic Group Singing Techniques*, 17.
IPA represents sounds, not letters. Silent letters are not placed into an IPA transcription. This must be remembered when practicing IPA or if one has IPA given to him as a barbershop singer and has never used it.

**BARBERSHOP HARMONY SOCIETY – TWELVE VOWELS**

The BHS utilizes a twelve-vowel system (see figure 11) when educating its members and directors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sound [IPA]</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ee [i]</td>
<td>peep, feel, heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ih [ɪ]</td>
<td>pip, hit, fling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aye [ɛ]</td>
<td>pay, late, mate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eh [ɛ]</td>
<td>pep, let, send</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ae [æ]</td>
<td>cat, pap, black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ah [ɑ]</td>
<td>pop, smile, heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aw [ɔ]</td>
<td>dawn, paw, because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oh [o]</td>
<td>coat, pope, boat, home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ōō [ʊ]</td>
<td>good, book, put</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oo [u]</td>
<td>moon, boot, tune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ur [ɜ]</td>
<td>purr, learn, turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uh [ʌ]</td>
<td>pup, love, sun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11. BHS Twelve Vowels

While this is a longer, more complete list, it does bring up some validity questions. Most would classify the “aye,” or [ɛ] sound in English as a diphthong [ɛɪ]. Very few words in English incorporate the closed “e” sound solely. It is usually part of the diphthong [ei]. Furthermore, the “oh” vowel [o] and its examples are wrong if we follow traditional English diction, as again, this would be the diphthong [oo]. It is also hard to defend the “ur” or “er” sound as a primary target vowel. Choruses should be reminded that a final [r] can and should be mostly eliminated from the word if they want the best blend possible.

Vowel targets are important, no matter how many are offered. Consensus among those surveyed by Elizabeth Blades-Zeller in *Spectrum of Voices* shows:
1. Finding ideal vowel formation gives projection and freedom to the instrument.
2. Because of acoustical considerations vowels must adjust to increases in pitch. There is an ideal resonance adjustment for every pitch and every vowel tonal sensations respond to these changes.
3. Sung vowels require treatment different from spoken vowels.
4. Beautiful vowels depend on a number of factors and will have certain characteristics.
5. Vowels are available to expressive impulses and expressive choices.

Parker offers his own explanation of target vowels:

“The target is always the first pure vowel sound in a syllable, except when a “w” or “y” sound precedes it. A “w” sound always results in a preceding “oo” sound as in “wine” (oo-ah-eh-ee-n). A “y” sound always results in a preceding “ee” sound as in “your” (ee-oo-r). In only these isolated cases the target is the second vowel sound in the syllable, like a reverse diphthong.”

The following words provide examples of diphthongs. If one wants to explore further diction rules, wonderful sources include John Moriarty’s *Diction* and Joan Wall’s *Diction for Singers*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>IPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>joy</td>
<td>j-oh-ee</td>
<td>[dʒɔɪ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>now</td>
<td>n-ah-oo</td>
<td>[nɑʊ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well</td>
<td>oo-eh-l</td>
<td>[wɛl]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mute</td>
<td>m-ee-oo-t</td>
<td>[mjut]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12. Examples of target vowels (underlined) within a diphthong

One misconception is that the [j] glide is a vowel, as in [i] or “ee.” Since this glide is never the target vowel, we simply do not need to think of it as a vowel, but as the glide that it is, as written in the IPA for the word “mute.” The percentage of time a target vowel receives depends on the total note value of the syllable and the musical tempo. As the time value of the syllable increases, the target value also increases. Generally, the

---

target should be sung for 50% of the total time, while the rest of the word receives the other 50%.

Another useful exercise:

Ask for members to determine the target and secondary vowel sounds in the following words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sound</th>
<th>will</th>
<th>boil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>few</td>
<td>yore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At this point, have the singers sing the words above on a single pitch. Increase the relative time value of, and energize through, the secondary vowel sounds. The sound may be somewhat mechanical at first, but with practice, it will become musical. In a group, the exercise will enhance understanding of the lyrics by the audience.

Figure 13. Vowel exercise provided by Harmony University

---

98 Parker, Basic Group Singing Techniques, 18.
Figure 13 can be utilized as a vocalise on any of the primary (or secondary) vowels, as well as voiced consonants. This exercise gets the chorus to tune to the same sound without struggling on a text. Also, the exercise places emphasis on unison and part singing. It begins in unison and splits into parts until the chorus eventually sings in four part harmony. For advanced work, the chorus can use one word, migrating to the secondary vowel at the last moment, on the director’s cue, so as not to disturb the synchronization and blend created by singing the same target vowel for a long period of time.

The exercise above promotes uniform pronunciation of vowel coupled with rhythmic timing of diphthongs and consonants, which is "basic to ensemble diction."99 We must always provide an enjoyable experience for our audience, and this will happen if the level of sound is consistent across word sounds, so the lyrics are more easily understood. Thus, we must also pay attention to secondary sounds.

Secondary sounds include voiced and unvoiced consonants, and non-primary vowel sounds.100 The secondary vowels are usually less distinguished than primary vowels but should be sung in the same way as primary vowels. The articulators produce consonants.101 If the secondary sounds are not rehearsed, subtle volume changes resulting from the mixture of rehearsed target sounds and unrehearsed secondary sounds will make the lyrics less comprehensible to the audience.102

101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
Parker mentions three ways to minimize these variations:

1. Reduce emphasis on unvoiced consonants, much like we do in our own American speech.
2. Soften unvoiced consonants in the direction of their related voiced consonants.
3. Energize, increase support and volume, through voiced consonants and secondary vowels.\(^{103}\)

For example, there are four sounds in the word “might”: m-ah-ih-t, or [mɑɪt]. The first, [m], is a voiced consonant. The second, [ɑ] is the target vowel. The third sound is a secondary vowel, and the end of the diphthong [ɪ]. Finally, the fourth [t] is an unvoiced consonant. The singer should energize through the [m], because the lips are closed and blocking the sound, and through the [ɪ] sound because the mouth is less open and the tongue is raised.\(^{104}\)

I have modified the above exercise slightly by using traditional English diction. The description of the exercise in Parker’s booklet is different. He says that “might” has five sounds: “m-ah-eh-ee-t.”\(^{105}\) In IPA, this would transcribe to [mæɪt]. This is disagreeable because there is no need to produce two secondary vowel sounds when one diphthong is sufficient for the audience to understand what word is being sung. The correct way to pronounce this word is [mɑɪt].

**VOWEL PRACTICE IN BARBERSHOP REPERTOIRE**

Figure 14 should start with the use of the “Simply Speaking Simply” method from the previous chapter. The first word, “way,” begins with a vowel sound, even though we recognized [w] as a consonant. The IPA representation for this word is [wɛɪ], but the first sound is a secondary [u] vowel.

\(^{103}\) Parker, Basic Group Singing Techniques, 21.
\(^{104}\) Ibid.
\(^{105}\) Ibid.
The target vowel for this word is \(\epsilon\), or “eh.” The other secondary vowel is \(\iota\) and receives much less attention than the “eh” \(\epsilon\) sound. There are no consonant sounds in the word “way.”

On the word “down,” \(\text{[d]}\) is a voiced consonant, so it maintains a secondary sound status, although voiced consonants do have pitch. One would not want to start the word with its unvoiced partner, \(\text{[t]}\), as that would be the word “town.” The primary vowel, or target, is the \(\text{[a]}\). Notice that the \(\text{[o]}\) is a secondary vowel in the diphthong and the \(\text{[n]}\) is a voiced consonant. Through the first two words, “way down,” nothing unvoiced has been sounded.

The target vowel for the word “south” remains the same as it was for “down.” The IPA for this word is \(\text{s\small{\ae}\text{o}\text{\theta}}\).\(^{106}\) The word south has two unvoiced consonant sounds, the letter “s” and the phoneme “th.”

Knowing the structure of the phrase helps as singing begins. On the last chord of the tag, the chorus can practice singing only the target vowels. In this case, the result would be \(\epsilon\text{-a-\alpha}\). After the chorus is comfortable with the exercise on a single pitch, the notes of the entire tag can be added, moving to the correct target vowels when necessary.

---

\(^{106}\) The \(\theta\) symbol represents an unvoiced “th” sound. For reference, a voiced “th” sound, as in the word “this” is represented by \(\delta\).
The next step is to introduce secondary vowel sounds. The IPA would look somewhat like [ɛɛɛɪ-ɑɑɑʊ-ɑɑɑɑ̃]. This should be done a few times, and only switch to the secondary vowel sound on the director’s cue.

Finally, all word sounds can be added to the tag, resulting in [(u)wɛɛɛɪ-ɑɑɑʊnn-sɑɑɑɑʊθ]. I place the [u] in parentheses in case the director chooses to use an [u] sound to tune the opening chord rather than “eh.” I have intentionally made the [n] longer than the [ʊ] because the voiced consonant will help the audience understand the word more clearly if it is elongated. The word “down” is followed by a breath mark because of the musical duration of the word “south.” The unvoiced “s” and “th” need not be elongated, but should be pronounced with clear diction.

Figure 15 should be sung with an intense yet soft expression. The barbershopper should eliminate the [r] when it occurs at the end of a word or before a pause, getting rid of the “errr” sound.

6. Flower From An Old Bouquet

Figure 15. Nancy Bergman, “Flower from an old bouquet”

107 Wright, *Classic Tags*, 2.
We did not encounter the letter [r] in figure 14, but it is a dominant consonant in this beautiful ballad. There are seven [r]s in this excerpt. The singer should not forget the word “from.” We cannot eliminate the [r] here because otherwise it would be “fum.” The [r] between the words “There” and “in” can be flipped, with a pronunciation sounding like “theh-din” or [ðɛɾɪn]. Notice the [r] in IPA has no tail at the top, which signifies that it is to be flipped, or made to sound like a short “d.”

The word “our” is a triphthong. It sounds like ah-oo-uh, written in IPA as [ɑʊəø]. The subtle differences between the syllabic pronunciation guide and IPA make a huge difference, and one should make note that [ø] is a schwa and is never stressed, but “uh” can be. A schwa is never a target vowel. The target vowel for “our” is [ɑ].

By singing this first word correctly, other words are automatically fixed, because “our” rhymes with “flower” and “bower.” The only worries about these words are the opening consonants. The director should give a cue when to switch from the [ɑ] to the secondary vowels. The target vowel should be placed at the start of the beat, thus the [fl] and [b] of the preceding words should be sung before the beat.

The final word, “bouquet,” provides some alternatives from which the director can choose. “Bouquet” has an unstressed [o]. The end should not be pronounced [ke]. The director can choose the English diphthong [ɛɪ] or, even more radical, choose [ɛj]. I prefer the latter ending because the tendency of barbershoppers is to move towards an [i] sound at the end of this diphthong. While it is not normal in English to finish a word with a [j] glide, it is helpful to instruct the chorus to do this at the end of long phrases because it will keep attention on the target vowel for as long as possible. In this case, that vowel is [ɛ].
Figure 16 is much more complex, but one of the most sung tags in the barbershop repertoire. Many experienced barbershoppers will know at least one part in this tag, so rehearsal can focus on target vowel formation. The performer should sing all target vowels for every word except the lead pick up on “my.” The chorus can guess which vowel is the most important. One must listen immediately as to whether or not the leads start the phrase with increased intensity on the voiced consonant “m.”

Second, on the same word, do the leads emphasize the “ah” [a] or the “ih” sound? Third, instead of “ih” do they make an “ee” sound? One should consider all of these factors, and then realize the rest of the chorus has not even begun to sing a note. The director must make sure the lead section is singing with correct vowel formation before anyone else, because after all, they have the melody. If the leads are not singing correct vowels, and the other sections are, the chords will not lock correctly.

One can ask and instruct the chorus to make sure their articulators are not too tense or tight, as this does become a very powerful, loud tag. The tendency of many

---

barbershoppers is to really pooch the lips out on the vowel [i] for dream and [u] for to. The opposite effect tends to happen on the word “world.” The barbershop singer tends to pull the lips back because as he feels the tightness in the articulators, he will tend to not let the air flow, creating a tense, edgy sound, which is what he thinks he wants to hear. This is not the appropriate way to sing in barbershop or classical music.

As a director, I have a choice. I can choose to ask the chorus which vowels are most comfortable (less likely) or I can choose the vowels I find most appropriate to target. The hardest question to answer here is what to do with the word “world.” The leads are soaring on an F, and the rest of the parts are in a particularly high part of their range. Do we sing an “er” sound? Regardless of the exact vowel sound, the director should encourage the chorus to sing with loose articulators and a tall opening in the back of the throat, as if the vowel were a tall “ah.” With this, the soft palate is high and the tongue should be completely relaxed. This tag ends with all voiced sounds (there are no unvoiced consonants in this tag except within the words “to,” “last,” and “night.” The unvoiced consonants in “last night” provide an excellent dramatic contrast to the rest of the tag, and should be pronounced with full energy and excitement as the tag grows emotionally to the end.

Figure 17 is the beginning of the barbershop arrangement of a familiar hymn, “It is Well with my Soul.” This example provides an opportunity for musical growth in a unison setting. It serves as an excellent passage for early rehearsal exercises because of the range. I ask all four parts to sing so that every member of the chorus is included and can engage the falsetto register in a mix with the chest register while locking the correct target vowels.
unvoiced consonants. The first three words contain unvoiced consonants. The chorus should be asked to find the consonants that do not have any pitch. Most likely, the very first one, “wh,” will be skipped. When it comes to classical English diction, a “wh” should almost always be reversed to sound like [hw]. To stress the importance of the [h], the chorus can sound it for two counts before singing the “w.” Finally, end the word with a short [ɪ] sound when eliding to the word “peace.” The IPA, combined, would look like this: [hwɛnɪpis].

Another problem is the next word “peace.” Since it is on a C, and many of the lower voices may not have adequately developed their falsetto, the tendency of the singer could be to migrate toward the [ɪ] vowel. The word cannot be sung with this modification in this setting for obvious reasons. An [ɪ] vowel must be sung.

A good way to sing “peace” and “like” is to combine each into one long word, such as “pea-slike.” In IPA, this would look like [pi sluɪk]. This ensures that the target vowel in “peace” is elongated and the unvoiced consonants are placed together. The [s], which is often held too long, would be shortened. Again, the singer should place all sounds that occur before the target sound before the beat on which they occur, so that the target vowel is sounded on the beat.
Finally, the word “river” constitutes the same problems as in previous examples (see figure 16 with the words “flower” and “bower”). The director should choose against an “errr” quality.

The very first tag I learned in barbershop is the one presented in figure 18. While this tag remains popular, the song is banned from competition because the song speaks of slaves “running to the city of refuge.” The controversial nature of the song has kept it off stage, but the tag itself remains a staple among barbershop singers everywhere.

27. Run, Run, Run

A notable aspect of this tag is the post held by both the tenor and bass on the word “run.” This is a hard word to sing. The consonant “r” and the “n” are both voiced, and the vowel [ʌ] is not the most pleasant target vowel to sing for long periods of time (although it is a healthy migration from the “ah” [ɑ] vowel in the higher range). I encourage my chorus to first shorten the opening “r” to as short a length of time as possible to still be

109 Wright, Classic Tags, 8.
audible. Then, I encourage each repetition of “run” to be performed as if each member were saying the name “Ron.” If one thinks “run” and open the back of the throat to “Ron” which contains the “ah” [a] vowel, the throat will be more open, and the articulators will be looser than with the “uh” vowel, which has a higher tendency to spread and tighten.

Pooching the lips on an [u] is a problem for many barbershoppers singing “to the city of refuge.” Another potential problem is the spreading of the vowels [i] and [ɪ] on the word “city.” Both are poor ways to shape target vowels. By shaping an “ah” [a] vowel in the back of the throat when singing [u], the singer will keep the lips in a more neutral position. With the back of the throat more open, the sound will be more resonant and the target vowel more clearly heard.

As the barbershop style evolves, singing needs to become healthier and barbershoppers more accustomed to the word sounds typical of classical singing in order to be able to sing the harder, higher-pitched arrangements that composers and audiences are now starting to appreciate. Gone are the days of the particularly easy “Sweet Roses of Morn.” Here are the days of famous Sinatra tunes, Billy Joel, and other famous stars from the last twenty (rather than the last 100) years. As barbershop becomes more accessible to more musicians throughout the world, the talent pool becomes deeper, and the singing improves. We must strive to provide our amateur singers with examples of healthy, quality singing, and through the exercises in this chapter, the barbershop singer is one more step closer to a healthier, long-lasting singing career.
Barbershoppers must perform music with proper intonation, diction, blend, and expression, and registration. These concepts must be taught because many will not have prior training. Barbershop is the only style of singing in which falsetto is a “required” register in singing. The tenor part is to be sung in “barbershop falsetto” at all times except for when they have the melody. Understanding barbershop “falsetto” is difficult due to many individual definitions of the word. Registration terminology can be problematic.

Let us consider a few points of view on registration from classic pedagogues.

James McKinney says that a register is “a particular series of tones, produced in the same manner (by the same vibratory pattern of the vocal folds), and having the same basic quality.”

By the word register is to be understood a series of consecutive and homogenous sounds produced by the same mechanical means and differing essentially from other sounds originating in mechanical means of a different kind; hence it follows, that all the sounds belonging to the same register are of the same quality and nature, however great the modifications of quality and power they may undergo.

Elizabeth Blades-Zeller’s survey for Spectrum of Voices yielded the following results on registration:

1. Opinions vary regarding how many registers of the voice exist.
2. Sensations of “placement” change as the singer goes through changes of registration.
3. Teachers work for freedom through registration change.
4. Resonance and registration are linked.

---

110 McKinney, Diagnosis & Correction, 93.
5. Certain conditions can be utilized to help the singer negotiate passaggi and changes of register.
6. Vowel work is an important key to registration adjustment.
7. Smooth changes of registration involve subtle adjustments of breath, phonation, and vowel resonance. Coordination of these elements is a fundamental part of vocal training.\(^1\)

Strategies and terminology vary. Joan Wall speaks of “low, mixed, head, and falsetto for men.”\(^2\) Marvin Keenze argues, “registration is the ability to color a tone in any part of the range for the communication of emotion, poetic atmosphere, or for vocal production ease.”\(^3\) Barbara Honn teaches that men have three registers: “chest, head, and falsetto.”\(^4\) Out of all responses, I prefer Shirlee Emmons’s: “the voice is made of five “gears”: 1.) Total chest, 2.) A mix of predominantly chest content with some head content, 3.) A mix of predominantly head content with some chest content, 4.) A 50/50 mix, and 5.) Total head.”\(^5\)

Some teachers would tell us that the voice is composed of one seamless register. This would imply that we do not consider musculature when we classify the voice. Rather than a register, one seamless sound should be considered the goal of a singer.

Others believe in two registers: chest and head. The most common theory includes three registers: the chest, the head/falsetto, and a mixed voice. This would imply that the musculature shift between chest and falsetto is a register. Finally, there is the four-register theory, based more on musculature change, vowel definition, dynamic and pitch levels.

---

\(^1\) Blades-Zeller, Spectrum, 41-42.  
\(^2\) Ibid., 42.  
\(^3\) Ibid., 43.  
\(^4\) Ibid., 45.  
\(^5\) Ibid., 46-47.
For barbershoppers the four-register theory is the easiest method to teach registration because “falsetto” and “head voice” are synonymic. The four registers are: Vocal Fry, Chest (Modal) Voice, Falsetto (Head Voice), and Whistle. The most significant attributes of the barbershop style involve the unique sounds created by each voice in each register. Many barbershoppers believe they have both a head voice and a falsetto. This belief only complicates the teaching/learning process in rehearsal.

**A DESCRIPTION OF THE FOUR-REGISTER THEORY**

We should always be singing in a state of “flux” among the registers. Lower notes, as Emmons stated, should be predominantly placed in the chest register without eliminating use of the falsetto or head voice.

Consider the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vocal Fry</th>
<th>Chest</th>
<th>Falsetto</th>
<th>Whistle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Muscles</strong></td>
<td>ETAs</td>
<td>ITAs</td>
<td>CTs</td>
<td>ETAs/CTs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pitch</strong></td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Highest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dynamics</strong></td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>$f, ff$</td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>$pp$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pressure/Airflow</strong></td>
<td>Higher/ $\text{Low}$</td>
<td>High/ $\text{Low}$</td>
<td>Lowest/ $\text{High}$</td>
<td>Highest/ $\text{Lowest}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vowel</strong></td>
<td>$[i \varepsilon \ae \alpha]$,</td>
<td>$[\alpha \ae]$</td>
<td>$[\o, \o, \u]$</td>
<td>$[i, \varepsilon]$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 19. Kevin Hanrahan, “Registration Chart”

This chart is a helpful tool in describing the registers to the barbershop chorus because of its superb organization. The differentiation between each register is clear, ranging from the muscles used, the pitch, acceptable dynamic levels, the pressure and airflow needed, and comfortable vowels for practice. A short description of musculature is warranted. “ETA” stands for external thyroarytenoids. These are the false folds, or the muscles located just outside the vocal cords. CT stands for “cricothyroid” which is the main

\[117\] This figure is from the Vocal Pedagogy I class at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln during the fall of 2007.
musculature involved when singing in falsetto. Utilizing this musculature alone results in a breathy tone.

**VOCAL FRY**

Vocal fry is the lowest register. It is not a legitimate barbershop performance sound, but is useful in rehearsal. The air pressure is higher than normal, while the airflow is lower. Synonyms for the register include pulse, glottal fry, and creak voice. Vocal fry “permits air to bubble through with a popping or rattling sound of very low frequency.”\(^\text{118}\) It is extremely useful in the early morning, as it utilizes the ETAs rather than the ITAs, meaning less demand on the vocal folds while keeping the dynamic at a lower level. The “growl” on an “ah” \([a]\) is a great exercise for “shaking the phlegm” off the folds. By incorporating vocal fry into routine vocalizations for the barbershop chorus, higher voices also develop, especially the whistle register, because both utilize the ETAs.

**MODAL VOICE (CHEST VOICE)**

Chest voice is used for both speaking and singing. Since the muscles are conditioned through both, this means that the dynamic level is louder than that of the other registers. The chest voice is best exercised on an open vowel, such as \([a]\) or others listed in the above chart. On lower pitches, the thyroarytenoid muscles are the most active but as the pitch rises, the cricothyroids become more active, thus beginning to lengthen the folds.\(^\text{119}\) When the CTs become more involved, the muscles are in a higher state of flux. Under the four-register theory, this in itself is not a new register, but simply a mixing of modal and falsetto.

\(^\text{118}\) McKinney, *Diagnosis & Correction*, 94. 
\(^\text{119}\) Ibid., 97.
**FALSETTO (HEAD VOICE)**

Classical falsetto primarily engages the cricothyroid muscles. It sounds above and overlaps the modal voice. A breathy sound is characteristic. This is confusing to some barbershoppers, as many believe falsetto is the sound created in the whistle register (also known as damping), but the classical falsetto sound should be breathy. It is best practiced on an [o] or [u] vowel. The director should encourage the chorus to sing as lightly as possible with low pressure. The breath flow will be very high, and the length of the phrase the singer will be able to accomplish will be shortened.

“Barbershop falsetto” is a mixture of the whistle (see below) and classical falsetto registers. The sound created is much like that of a countertenor. Some would argue that the modal register is also accessed. I do not utilize the modal register in the tenor part because the barbershopper will tend to put too much weight on the voice when told to sing with a chest mixture.

Although barbershop falsetto is preferred, classical falsetto is useful in barbershop choruses as it enables the tenors to healthily sing the demanding ranges represented in the repertoire. Classical falsetto is also beneficial when singing soft tones that would be difficult to perform in the modal register, and works as an excellent tool for vocal development, especially relaxation of a hyperfunctional tone. Barbershop falsetto is not as useful in these situations due to higher pressure.

**DAMPING (WHISTLE REGISTER)**

The highest register is known as the whistle register, and is also called “damping.” It requires the most subglottic pressure on the highest pitches at the softest dynamic. Although most pedagogues do not consider this a register for men, Oren Brown does say
that some males can find it “quite easily.”\textsuperscript{120} James McKinney does not mention that this is useful for men, but states that the whistle register is “the highest phonational register” and that the sound is made by the “passage of air through a triangular opening between the arytenoid cartilages.”\textsuperscript{121} It can be assumed that both sexes are able to form the opening in this way, although McKinney does state further research is needed in regards to this register.\textsuperscript{122} I can utilize this register in my teaching to increase pressure if hypofunctional phonation exists. While the highest pressure is required in this register, the vocal folds are minimally engaged, so the action should not tax the cords. Damping is extremely helpful in conditioning the voice, especially the tenor, for the demands of the barbershop falsetto. By engaging the CTs with low pressure, we will achieve a breathy tone. By engaging the CTs with a higher pressure, and use of the ETAs, a less breathy tone is phonated. This is the sound that most chorus directors are looking for from their tenors. It is best to sing in falsetto most often, reserving the whistle register for more dramatic moments requiring a louder, clearer tone. A mixture of chest and falsetto may also work, but it is safest to use caution and stay away from this mixture in the tenor part so as not to add too much pressure to the chest voice.

**EXERCISES FROM BARBERSHOP REPERTOIRE**

In Figure 20, the lead has the melody and will want to stay in the modal register, or chest voice. This is easier for the leads than on several other tags, because the target vowel is “ah” [a] in the word “south.” The high point of the lead line, the F in the third measure on the word “south” is a neighbor tone to the E\textsubscript{b} before and after it, making it less important.

\textsuperscript{120} Brown, *Discover Your Voice*, 59.
\textsuperscript{121} McKinney, *Diagnosis & Correction*, 106.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
Thus, if a lead needs to sing the F in falsetto to keep a blended sound, no harm is done (even if stylistically incorrect).

The basses have a tritone leap between “down” and “south.” Although this is higher in the bass voice, the A♭ is indeed the high point. The basses should stay in the modal register, but lighten the tone slightly on the word “south.” This can be accomplished by adding a breathy “mix” to the registration. In other words, the bass singer can add falsetto and keep the vowel tall in the back of the mouth to make the word “south” easier to sing.

The baritone does not cross the lead, so he should sing in the modal register. This will create a great synchronization with the lead because of the parallel thirds written on the word “down” and the first five beats of the word “south.”

Finally, the tenor has a post, or held note, on a high A♭. The entire tag should be sung in falsetto, but depending on the interpretation of the director, the tenors will need to crescendo or decrescendo at the end. A decrescendo in falsetto can be difficult for any singer, and practicing messa di voce exercises for this type of passage may be required.

Figure 21 features a tenor post that can be sung in either full voice, a mixed voice, or the whistle register. A mix of falsetto and full voice is most preferable. The composer has taken great care to assure the voices needing to sing in full voice are given an easier target vowel, this time the [ɑ] in “smile.”

123 Wright, Classic Tags, 1.
The lead should remain in full voice the entire time, keeping the same [a] target through the entire tag, with the exception of the word “ya” which has the target [ʌ].

The baritones need to sing the last portion of this tag in falsetto because they cross not only the leads, but the tenors as well. They finish on the third of the chord, meaning that they do not need to sing as loud. The root and fifth of the chord are the prominent tuning notes, which in this tag belong to the bass and lead.

Figure 22 is different for two reasons: It has no post, and the tenors have the melody, and therefore should abandon falsetto for the modal register. Since this is written in a higher range than usual, I would not ask tenors to sing in chest voice at the end; I would ask for a brighter, more forward sound. This makes a difference in barbershop, and the imagery makes sense as the sound becomes louder and brighter.

Figure 21. Bobby Gray, “Smile”\(^{124}\)

Figure 22. George Evans, “In the good old summertime”

\(^{124}\) Wright, Classic Tags, 4.
The leads assume the tenors’ role even though the part is composed lower than the tenor. Since the leads sing the third of the chord at the end, and not the root (which is more typical), there is no reason for them to leave the falsetto register.

Both the baritones and basses have an easier range on this tag, and can sing it entirely in modal register. The basses do not sing too low, and the baritones not too high, especially when compared to other examples in this chapter. It would be beneficial to isolate the two parts because of the foundation they provide for the other two parts in this tag. After this, the director can add the tenor because of the “full voice” quality needed, and then the leads.

Figure 23 features an octave between the basses and leads at the beginning. Since this is an open octave, the leads can sing in their falsetto because they are simply reinforcing the basses’ note. Singing the parts in duet on only target vowel sounds can help this. It would sound as [u i ɛ u i ɛ] for the basses and [u i ɛ] for the leads. Once this is acceptable, the other two parts can be added.

![Figure 23. Don Clause, “Friendship and Love”](image.png)

The baritones sound should flow seamlessly from the chest register to the falsetto register as they cross over the lead line. The final slide down will need to be completed vice versa, so that the baritone can lock the fifth of the chord with the basses.

125 Wright, Classic Tags, 8.
The tenor represents the norm of barbershop registration in this selection, as he will remain in falsetto the entire time, ending on the third of the chord in a softer dynamic than the other parts. At no time in this tag should the tenor move out of falsetto.

Figure 24 is a good exercise for practicing the lower bass range. The line never goes above a D, and ends on a low F. Most barbershop basses will tend to sing this with a throaty, scratchy growl sound, and the goal is to take the sensation completely out of the throat and to make it seem effortless.

Figure 24. As performed by “Nighthawks, “Silvery Moonlight”

The basses should practice scales, descending from 5 to 1, in their falsetto voice, going lower into their range each time. This act should be emulated especially when singing the lower notes of the tag. The throat muscles should remain more relaxed at all times, and one should never feel as if he is choking.

Figure 25 features a starting unison note among all four parts, as well as on “the unreachable.” Most choruses can sing this very well, and practice the unison full voice passages quite nicely but then really bomb the opening chord on “star” because it is sung way too loud. Many times the tenor ends up singing their post in full voice and the lead does not sing in the proper register, and is not able to move from the A to the E in seamless fashion. That is a difficult leap to make even when staying in the same register. The “-ble” syllable does not set up a successful change of pitch, especially higher, to the

\[126\] Wright, Classic Tags, 14.
word “star.” It can be practiced with the entire chorus singing the first “star” chord in falsetto.

![Figure 25](image_url)

Figure 25. Burt Staffen, “The Impossible Dream”

By keeping it soft, the chorus has the ability to create expression on the word star rather than just starting loud and potentially harming their own voice. Eventually, all three of the bottom parts should be singing in a mixed register between falsetto and chest, while the tenors post in the falsetto register.

Figure 26 is the end to “Do you really love me?” by Ruby Rhea. This is a beautiful ending to a ballad in which the tenor has the melody, but should sing that melody in their barbershop falsetto register. The lead should also enter in their barbershop falsetto register because of the tender nature of this tag, and the exposed nature of the words “all mine.” The only post in the tag is sung by the leads, and unlike all other examples with a post, it does not conclude the tag, only the section. The rest of the tag is in complete four-part homophony, and contains several swipes and snakes. The baritone may choose to sing in either falsetto or full voice, depending upon the level of musicianship in the higher extremities of the voice, especially on “drop me a line.”

---

127 Wright, *Classic Tags*, 21.
128 The definitions of “swipes” and “snakes” can be found in Chapter 1.
At “Tell me you’re mine,” the baritone should be singing in chest register. At the breath mark on the word “all,” the baritone and lead finally cross paths, handing the notes of C and E♭ back and forth to each other (with the baritone also singing a C♭). The baritone and lead should both sing in their barbershop falsetto register here because the tenor has the melody, and the interval of a third between the two parts needs to sound consistent and seamless throughout the passage.

By incorporating study of the above passages, and other barbershop repertoire, the barbershopper can become familiar with the nuances that are particularly important to the way the style is performed. Each person uses the same type of instrument to make different sounds. By exploring the various capabilities of our instruments, we become better musicians, and by exercising all the registers and musculature on a regular basis, we not only improve our range, but we improve the flexibility of our singing in a comfortable range, and thus, we become healthier singer.

129 Wright, *Classic Tags*, 32.
Chapter 7

The Tag

It is important to realize that every barbershop director will bring a unique style of directing and communicating to his chorus. This is certainly proven true by the survey results displayed in Appendix B. No one single approach is necessarily the “right way.” In this document, I have prescribed healthy, proven pedagogical methods that can be applied to all ways of teaching the barbershop style. Setting up the instrument (posture), fueling the mechanism (breathing), using the mechanism (phonation), changing gears while using the mechanism (registration), and staying “within the lanes” (vowel modification) can all be successfully achieved for the barbershop singer who employs a classical singing methodology.

In sum, this document presents a glimpse into the barbershop style for those that have not been exposed, a basic pedagogical tool for those involved in the style, and a practice guide for those directors seeking improved rehearsal techniques for the barbershop chorus. The ideas given here do not promise a path to the international competition stage of the Barbershop Harmony Society, but rather provide an array of healthy techniques that, when incorporated into a chorus rehearsal, will help the chorus sing longer, sing better, and sing healthier, no matter the chorus’s intentions. Whether the goal is becoming an international champion or just enjoying Polecats for an hour before going out to the bar, this document will help “keep the whole world singing” for a longer period of time.
Bibliography

A Capella Foundation. *History of Barbershop.*


Appendix A

Survey Participants

Dave Barton ................................................................. Cape Chorale
Bill Bennett ................................................................. Lads of Enchantment
Carl Bozzuto ............................................................... Enfield Chapter
Tony Bowman .................................................................. Appalachian Express
Gil Burroughs ............................................................... Albemarle Sound
Pete Centner ................................................................. Lakeland Barbershop
Dr. Jim Clancy ............................................................... The Vocal Majority
Darin Drown ..................................................................... Sound of the Rockies
Mike Feyrer ................................................................. Lehigh Valley Harmonizers
Karen Frerichs ............................................................... Federal Way Harmony Kings
Chuck Greene ................................................................. Land of the Sky Chorus
Keith Harris ..................................................................... VOCE Quartet
Stephen Jamison ........................................................... Contest Judge & Coach
Barney Johnson ............................................................. Oswego Valley Snowbelters
Mark Leimer .................................................................. Summit City Chorus
Chuck Lower ................................................................. Bucks County PA Chorus
John Mathews ............................................................... Shreveport, Louisiana
Lonnie Miner ................................................................. Chorus of the Plains
Mike O’Neill ................................................................ Barbershop Educator
Todd Oxley ..................................................................... Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus
Bryan Pulver ..................................................................... Heart of Texas Chorus
Bill Rashleigh ................................................................. Sounds of Aloha
Brian Reid ...................................................................... Melodymen Chorus
John Rettenmayer ........................................................ Rocky Mountainaires
Charlie Rose................................................................. Kokomo Men of Note
Jayson Ryner........................................................................ River City Chorus
Rod Schneider ........................................................................ Denison, IA Chapter
Rick Serpico............................................................................ Bryn Mawr Mainliners
Bruce Sellnow.......................................................................... Golden Valley Chorus
Bob Shapiro ............................................................................... Sounds of Concord
Rich Taylor .................................................................................. Jerseyaires
Kristen Thompson........................................... Certified Barbershop Chorus Director
Burt Van de Mark .......................................................... Martin/St. Lucie Mariners
Jeff Veteto................................................................................ Sho- Me Statesmen
Bill Weiser .............................................................................. Reno Silver Dollar Chorus
Appendix B

Always the Same, Never in the Same Way
(A Survey of Barbershop Coaches, Judges & Directors)

The following is a compilation of answers to a survey sent out to barbershop directors, coaches and judges. The survey was voluntary, and the respondents weren’t required to answer every question. They were also given the opportunity to provide additional information about their chorus rehearsals not covered in the survey. All responses are given in full.

The results of this survey can shed light on the similarities and differences between classical music pedagogues and directors of barbershop choruses. No two directors utilize the same exact model of instruction. Heinrich Schenker’s statement about voice leading in music composition can be applied here. “Semper idem sed non eodem modo. (Always the same, but never in the same way.)”\(^{130}\)

Responses are placed randomly under the appropriate question. Any editorial changes to the responses have been clearly marked.

SURVEY QUESTIONS & RESPONSES

What is the number one problem you face when working with amateur musicians?

Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies

Realizing just how far back to the basics you need to go as a teacher. Much of the education they have received may have been flawed, may have been geared towards a much younger voice, or may have been geared toward a different style of music.

Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus

Besides the obvious difficulties of reading music, target vowels, and basic tone/production, the biggest issue with amateur musicians is that they try too hard. They make singing harder than it has to be.

Burt Van de Mark, Martin/St. Lucie Mariners

Many think they can’t sing as well as they really can.

Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus

Insufficient use of breath support and amount of air to sing.

Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus

The major task is convincing (members) of the absolute requirement for a healthy body. The vocal cords never tire when singing properly, but the body will get tired because of the energy required to support a proper vocal approach. It takes a lot of energy to sing properly. The next task is to help them to get their body out of the way and let Mother Nature do its work.

Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator

Catering to the needs of every individual singer is probably the biggest challenge I face. Group vocal techniques are effective to a certain extent when teaching to a chorus of 70 people, but the individual private instruction that our chorus also offers proves to be invaluable.

Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus

Lack of understanding and identifying differences in tone quality.
Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Mainliners

I find that retention is the (most) difficult obstacle that I face. It is impossible to (perform) enough reps to really build habits and change behavior. This is especially true in the area of vocal production.

Bill Weiser, Reno Silver Dollar Chorus

Breathing.

Mark Leimer, Summit City Chorus

Retention of what is taught in the (prior rehearsals). I direct 2 choruses and both have this problem. Neither chorus is an international champion chorus. So the level of commitment and discipline is the route cause.

Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha

Rebuilding (proper vocal habits in favor of poorly learned technique in earlier years).

Tony Bowman, Appalachian Express

Discipline of time for the task.

Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment

Breathing, singing on the breath, producing a pitch without the proper support of moving air are the (top problems). On the whole, most people have forgotten how to breathe. The mechanism of providing a flexible, sustained breath to support vocal production is a foreign concept. Many singers hold on to this idea only for a short while, and then they start “pinching” the throat to produce the pitch.

Dave Barton, Cape Chorale

Maintaining pitch, avoiding (going flat), especially the lead (section).

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

Most of our members are over 70 with depleting voices. Fading memory also accompanies this same age.

Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers

#1 is breathing consistency.
John Rettenmayer, Rocky Mountainaires

The number one problem is overcoming life-long (usually very long for long-time barbershoppers) poor vocal production habits.

Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter

In general, amateur musicians don’t expect to have to really work at singing as a hobby. They would like to show up once a week for the appointed period of time and mostly sing songs that they like. This is just as true for church choir, community chorus, or barbershop chorus. Doing homework (i.e. practice at home) or doing vocal techniques is looked upon as an intrusion rather than a bonus that helps them to sing better. The second problem, particularly with older chorus members, is that they have trouble remembering. That includes technique as well as words and notes.

Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus

Complacency—"I’ve always sung this way and don’t see any need to change just because the director asks me to.”

Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note

Lack of ability to read and interpret music quickly; to be independent learners.

Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

Proper breathing to sustain phrases and proper singing and vocal techniques.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

Choppy singing, standing like a stick, wanting to sing through without correcting mistakes.

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

The number one problem I face when working with amateur musicians is a lack of training on what most would consider ‘the basics of music’. Some have had no training and desire the same; they just want to enjoy music without having the need to ‘study it’. Some have a little interest in wanting to know more; they've found that learning a little in small amounts is helpful. For them, too much at one time would simply be too much. I've been encouraged during the past 10 years that my chorus actually does want to learn; it’s finding each member’s learning style and making it interesting for them. Ah, the joys of being an educator… you always learn more than your students!
Pete Centner, Lakeland Barbershop

Trying to speak in layman’s terms. Sometimes, although I’m trying to not use musical terms, I find I get blank stares. I then have to try to come up with a different approach without explaining too long.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

Vying for their discretionary time.

Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus

Dedication and commitment level to learning music and rehearsing on their own outside of the regular rehearsal evening.

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

The weakest part of the male instrument/training is the head voice. Amateur singers often carry the chest voice (too high) by shortening the tube (raising the larynx).

Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

Two things: a) Having to fix the same things, week after week (i.e., lack of knowledge retention), and b) moving from “rehearse enough to get it right” to “rehearse enough that you can’t get it wrong.”

John Mathews, Shreveport, Louisiana

Sight singing and memorization are the biggest obstacles in my community choruses. Also, amateur musicians have a problem of commitment. No pay, no accountability.

Gil Burroughs, Albemarle Sound

Proper vowel sounds (are our biggest problem).

Karen Frerichs, Federal Way Harmony Kings

Amateur musicians do not understand how (to) utilize their complete lung capacity. Most have poor posture and breathe high, sing with only their throat and neck. Also, they are typically tense from the neck up.

Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord

Craft. That covers a lot of territory, and it’s not all the same for each singer. It includes: breath control, free & easy sound production, target vowel, staying on the target vowel (diphthongs), phrasing as you speak (no staccato), staying on the pitch, continuous sound, resonance, etc.
Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

Understanding their individual capabilities when it comes to singing. In my experience, amateur singers believe they are unable to improve their vocal abilities.
How do you attempt to fix such problems? Note to the reader: You will need to reference the appropriate director’s response to the previous question to understand his response to this question.

Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus

Breath exercises, arranging more breath opportunities, constant reminders.

Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus

Smile and sing. (We give) constant reminders to smile and sing. Stop thinking about your singing. To sing is a natural act and we often get in the way of ourselves.

Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus

Using the skills learned from private lessons in singing and from other courses, provide visual clues, and in some cases physical distractions to (help) them sing naturally.

Burt Van de Mark, Martin/St. Lucie Mariners

Quarteting. Every meeting. Every man has an opportunity.

Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies

Start back at the basics as if they have never sung.

Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator

I look to identify and correct what is negatively affecting the ensemble sound, even if not every singer is contributing to the specific problem. I feel that blanket statements work to correct it most of the time. However, there are times when it becomes necessary to address it one on one, either in private or discreetly in front of the group. In my chorus, dialect is the biggest culprit. We have men who sing with us who come from all over the country, but the majority of these men are from the Deep South! (This) proves to be quite challenging when looking for uniformity.

Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Mainliners

Drill, drill, drill. I have also found that keeping vocal concepts simple is crucial to success. You won’t hear me talking about abdominal-costal breathing in my rehearsals. Since I only see my singers once a week, I try to teach concepts in a way that every singer can easily apply at home during the week. The music staff also attempts to stay diligent in the reinforcement of concept throughout the rehearsal, not just during a “craft session”.

Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus

We try to remedy the problem with vowel matching exercises and eliminating wide vibrato.

Bill Weiser, Reno Silver Dollar Chorus

Breathing exercises.

Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha

Education, demonstration, imagery, drill, question/response, and every way I know how.

Tony Bowman, Appalachian Express

Increase riser time in rehearsal and ask others to come down as extra ears and eyes.

Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment

To address the breathing, constant reminders to “keep breathing”, with reviews each week of the mechanism of breathing, are incorporated into continuous flexibility warm-up exercises. One-on-one (instruction) during warm-ups to help individuals without exposing him to “solo” situations. One other big consideration is using all the air each time.

Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach

Get them to “experience” improved performance so they can change their belief system to support a “work ethic” to improve.

John Rettenmayer, Rocky Mountainaires

Even though I don’t have formal academic vocal training I have attended many BHS schools and have been coached by many barbershoppers, many of those having quartet gold medals. I do my best to practice what I have learned and to pass that knowledge on to my chorus members. I also persist in not accepting less than what they are capable of producing, which often means repeating passages a lot. Over time I think the general level of performance has risen, although reminders are frequently needed.

Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers

During warm-ups, breathing is talked about weekly. (It should be hourly!) During rehearsal when it becomes an issue I usually put the chorus under arrest (hands in the air) a good reminder. (It works.)
Citing examples of what we’ve done in other pieces.

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

Trying to find younger members, pick easier and more familiar music.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

In short, we have gone to extraordinary lengths to make rehearsals compellingly attractive. From research I collected, there are 15 “Attractive Value Characteristics” [AVCs] people look for when joining or renewing with a chapter-based organization like the Barbershop Harmony Society. If a chapter exhibits those fifteen—especially eight designated as “Deal-Makers”—it earns a person’s discretionary time. The characteristics are given life primarily by the Music Team with the Director as chief champion.

Dave Barton, Cape Chorale

Sing against “do” sung by another section; sing against “do” blown on a pitch pipe; listen to each other better. Nothing works well.

Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter

In part, learning CDs help with home practice and learning songs. Warm up exercises (if not too long) can help improve technique. Working on a particular passage that benefits from certain techniques is one of the best methods as it helps with the song in question and brings the point home.

Karen Frerichs, Federal Way Harmony Kings

I tell them to imagine a loose belt around their entire body at the level of their rib cage, above their waist, and as they inhale they need to get bigger all around, so that imaginary belt is tightened. I also have them raise their hands over their heads all the way, take a deep breath, then let one hand of theirs feel how high their rib cage is. Then I ask them to lower their arms and keep their rib cage expanded that far and RELAX the shoulders. Keeping their chest as high as can be and still be comfortable, shoulders relaxed, and the strong, firm support of their lower body, and a relaxed neck and jaw, to produce a relaxed “ahhhh” on a comfortable pitch for them. They will be surprised how natural the sound is and how easy it is to sustain the sound for an extended time.

Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note

We constantly work on reading music by just reading a lot of music. They have improved in this area over time, but still need guidance and reinforcement.
Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

I would attempt to fix this issue by taking the time to find what specific learning language (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, or any combination there of) each learner needs, develop a ‘lesson plan’ (in my mind, that is…again, I’m an educator) to meet their need, and implement it. Of course, we always need more plans than what we are currently using; it’s just great to have backup plans, just in case. It’s simply a process of replicating success. Find what works for them and help them learn how to replicate that success on their own; giving them ownership of their own success.

Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

Our chorus warm-up schedule contains exercises (that) work various techniques. Some techniques have been learned from the Barbershop Warm-up Manual and some have been brought to us by coaches from the Society. We have also used break out sessions within the last 4 months to work with 4-5 members on a more individual basis.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

Remove the consonants and sing one phrase at a time, physical warm-ups involving the body, work one phrase at a time, no complaining.

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

The easiest access to the head voice is the falsetto. As the falsetto strengthens a mix is created in the middle and upper registers that is very healthy and sustainable for ensemble singing.

Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus

I use “we” statements more often that “you” statements: “Listen what happens when we all use the same target vowel on that word;” “Remember that we always inhale through an open, relaxed throat so that we don’t introduce tension into our sound.” Encourage group thinking.

Mark Leimer, Summit City Chorus

Review what was taught last week. (I ask) the members to tell me what we covered. Record the answers on a white board in front of them. Also each week every member receives by email, the rehearsal agenda for the following rehearsal. They are encouraged to prepare between rehearsals with the next rehearsal in mind. Asking them to come to contribute. Not to make it another night out with the boys.

I am willing to say at least 50% of the guys do this in both choruses. I do have members that are very committed and do work hard between rehearsals. So we do get frustration because of members having to carry others.
Out of those that are very committed we have members that are A- to B+ singers that carrying the C- to C+ singers. The “C” level singers no doubt work the hardest and have a wonderful work ethic. So how does a Director tell those that work the hardest that they don’t meet the goal we are shooting for? This does not mean the goal is set too high. I have adjusted it many times. It comes down to realizing the potential. Then, understand it a process that could take many years to work out.

The good news is we are getting a good turn out of young singers, which is helping raise our potential. Also keeping them involved in as many ways as possible has been key for their retention.

*Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen*

Just keep on hammering. If the chorus gets tired of hearing the same thing over and over, perhaps they will learn it, so we can move on.

*John Mathews, Shreveport, Louisiana*

I hold sight-singing exercises and give various tips for memorization. Writing down lyrics seems to be the best method along with repetition. You can't hold the amateur to too high a standard for music or attendance or you will not have an amateur chorus. Pride of ownership and fun are the best tools. Vowel placement is explained below. Legato line can be improved through what I call elision (taking one word and linking it to the next with one articulation). Also, define the line and make the chorus arch the line dynamically – as in a line from a Bach aria.

*Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus*

Place the expectation there that they will (need to) work at home. Conduct the rehearsal focused towards the men who do, rewarding them with a rehearsal that challenges them, rather than cater the rehearsal to the men who are least prepared.

*Gil Burroughs, Albemarle Sound*

Try to get the lips, tongue and jaw properly positioned.

*Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord*

Exercises, learning media, and demonstration. So, for example, for free & easy production, I ask for a “fog horn”, and for continuous sound, I ask them to sing “like they have cleft palates” once on a phrase. For resonance, I ask them to “Give me a YO to be heard on the other side of the wall.” We have a bunch of different exercises, but it’s more to teach craft than to “fix problems.”
Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

I have a program of vocal craft and individual attention, often working off site or at a time other than rehearsal with singers that desire extra work. Even those that do not seek out extra help will improve just taking part in the vocal craft sessions during the rehearsal.
What types of breathing exercises do you incorporate into your chorus rehearsal?

Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord

"Hand up. Take a breath. More. More. Out.” On the 3rd breath, I ask them to hold the breath while lowering their hands to touch the seams of their pants legs. I explain about the rib cage, so they know what we’re trying to accomplish.

Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus

Standard exercises based on Tai Chi.

Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies

Combination of diaphragmatic and “back-breathing” exercises.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

Our chapter has three Associate Directors, two with music degrees including one in Opera and one with a Masters in Choral Conducting from New England Conservatory. All four of us teach breathing exercises, usually focused during warm-up that we tag-team each week, with occasional reminders during choral rehearsal. The exercises vary due to our varying backgrounds but cover three basic concerns:

a. Deep breathing, open throat breathing, filling the tank quickly not shallowly
b. Using the air to allow freely produced tone throughout dynamic range
   c. Using the air to allow freely produced tone throughout lengthy phrases

Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus

We use exercises to stop releasing air without using it; i.e. not to waste air with initial aspirations, breathy tone, poor posture pushing too much air out. We use a warm airflow (hand in front of mouth). We stretch to get greater body involvement and support.

Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach

Dynamic tension and release – singers don’t breathe, they “sing” and when they cease singing they “relax” and air is “acquired” without tension.

Bill Weiser, Reno Silver Dollar Chorus

Everyone shapes their vowels using words with the same or similar vowels. We have small mirrors that hang around the singers’ necks that they can hold up to their mouths and match vowel shapes.
**Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment**

Mah-Mo/Meh-Mo from Do to Sol 2X then Sol to Do back to Do. Starting low in the register, incrementing by half steps, and ending when most have to use a “head voice” not to strain. Flexibility of voice and breath is the result of this exercise, when properly executed. The secondary goal is to sing in one breath, but this is not emphasized, due to bad habits potentially starting.

**Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus**

Typical choral breathing exercises. (We work) on long slower (inhalation) to shorter to train the muscles to work in the correct manner. Exhalation on “s” and “sh.” Sustained tone warm-ups with inhalation at the end.

**Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Headliners**

We use hissing exercises for stamina. We also do drills that use rhythmic breathing that can be transferred to the repertoire.

**Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus**

Basic choral techniques used in a warm-up, such as “ts ts ts ts ts ” for breath then “ha ha ha ha ha” on a major triad for using the breath. I had my choirs lie down on the ground and discuss “bending the instrument” and what it does to the breath, and therefore, sound. We also rehearse breathing together so that the breaths are a part of the music.

**Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers**

Over the years many methods have been tried and used from lying down on the floor to balancing against a wall to the motorcycle position. The most effective (for producing) longer term results is imagining taking in air through a straw for a specific count and then producing a tone for that count.

**Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator**

All kinds…we do a lot of bubbling (or lip trills). Often times, we will sing the melody in unison on a lip trill for several minutes and then sing our parts for several more minutes to ingrain a consistent connection to the breath.

**Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains**

This is a problem. Age is limiting us somewhat. We are working on more support, breathing from the “stomach” instead of the shoulders. We spend more time on singing in-tune.
**Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus**

Only during the warm-up, teach the men how everything works in their body to help support the breath. Practice lower abdominal exercises to avoid “chest breathing”. Practice taking breath “sudden but silent” and ensure there is no tension. Practice the different types of breaths. We refer to breath textures, that every breath has an emotion or purpose to it that coincides with the lyric.

**Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha**

Inner-costal diaphragmatic breathing; “feel” the expansion in the right area, work to have shoulders stay (immobile), chest high and silent inhalation with purpose to project the emotional intent of the following phrase.

**Mark Leimer, Summit City Chorus**

Breathe from the diaphragm. Never chest breathing. Shoulders back and relaxed to promote diaphragm breathing. This promotes a better-supported breathing allowing for phrase endings to hold their intonation. Key changes actually become key changes. We also work with bubbling and hissing to develop a controlled exhalation. We also talk about using it all and use less stale air as possible.

**John Rettenmayer, Rocky Mountainaires**

This is a difficult area for me, I think mainly because it is harder for me to detect the results, in contrast to vocal exercises the effects of which I can hear. I have had many breathing exercises at HU and in other classes, but I am much less comfortable addressing that area. Only in the last 6 months or so have I come to what I think is a better understanding of good breathing technique, thanks to presentations at Harmony College Northwest by Ron Black and Ryan Heller (Pride of Portland director) and very recently the excellent article by Debra Lynn in the Harmonizer. As a result I have clearly been able to help three of the most problematic singers in my chorus make noticeable improvements.

**Pete Centner, Lakeland Barbershop**

Mostly raising our arms above our head to make it almost impossible to breathe high. After we get used to it, we bring our arms down.

**Dave Barton, Cape Chorale**

Vocal directions—Breathe as deeply as possible without moving shoulders; expand your back and sides as well as your belly; breathe down to your knees. Take a “singer’s breath” in for 4 counts, hold for 6 counts and hiss for 12/15/18/20 counts. Do the same and hum on [u] “oo” in unison for X counts.
Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note

We work on singing longer phrases without taking a breath. We stress the technique of not using all the air at the beginning of a phrase so that you will have plenty of air at the end of a phrase. I have sometimes used short hisses directed in varying tempos to help build up diaphragm strength.

Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter

Sometimes, during warm-up, I use the breathe in for 4 and hiss out for 8, 12, and 16 beats. I follow up with a song that may have a sustained ending or something similar.

Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

The following are a few examples we use on a regular basis: Motorboat buzzing of the lips with focus on creating the air pressure needed to sustain the buzzing. Maintaining proper singers stance to enhance the proper intake of breath. Focus on an open throat to allow free intake of air. Allowing the diaphragm to naturally drop when taking air in. Hands in the small of the back to focus on expansion in this area for a full recharge of air.

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

The two most common issues related to breath are the regulation of the air itself and tension in the body (or chest breathing). By utilizing a combination of regulation exercises (square breathing) and kinesthetic methods the bodies develop a better use of air-flow with a more relaxed body position.

Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

This is not a huge emphasis in my rehearsals. However, we do touch on “breath management,” meaning breathing appropriately for the upcoming phrase. Under-breathing is a problem, of course, but too big a breath for a short phrase can result in “stacked air,” with its problems.

John Mathews, Shreveport, Louisiana

I am a proponent of high chest breathing with no support below the diaphragm and intercostal muscles (those around the lungs). My technique is really quite simple. Take a very deep, high chest breath without raising the shoulders. Hold the breath and feel where that support is located. That is the only support you need. Also, do not control the amount of air coming out of your mouth. You should always think that you are holding the breath when singing. NOTHING below the stomach should be employed in correct breathing. Girding the stomach muscles or tensing the stomach as if you are going to get hit in the stomach is absolutely terrible for the singer. Do it and feel what it does to the vocal muscles. Pure tension. When I hear this kind of tension, I tell them to get off the pot. I reference Luisa Tetrazzini’s book of vocal methods. (Dover Publications)
Gil Burroughs, Albemarle Sound

Breathing from the diaphragm.

Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus

I address both “how” and “when”--giving suggestions such as filling the beltline with breath, feeling the “pillars of strength” in the back when the breath is taken properly, demonstrating proper breath location by breathing while lying on the floor, etc. And then breathing before the down beat, and encouraging “stealth breathing” during long phrases- avoiding breaths between syllables and instead dropping out for a beat or two while a “proper” breath is taken.

Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

I use several that are fairly successful. 1.) Singers exhale all their air, then inhale on a count from the director. First a count of 8, then 16, then 24, then 32 seconds. The singers are forced to breathe in slower each time to learn to manage their intake. 2.) the reverse of the above where the singers inhale the biggest breath they can manage. Then they exhale at a count from the director. The exhalation is done on a “hissing” sound that keeps the diaphragm engaged. Count goes again from 8 at the beginning through 40 sometimes. 3) To get the singers to understand how the breath can be taken “low” in the diaphragm, I have the singers place their hands around the back of their waist line in the lower back region and I have them inhale and try to “expand” their fingers, giving them the ability to “fill” the lower part of the diaphragm in the lower back. 4) I use the concepts of breathing in warm air and breathing in cold and then exhaling warm air to show the difference and to encourage singing with warm air.

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

The types of breathing exercises I incorporate into our chorus rehearsal deal with giving each singer their own mastery over this vital aspect in singing. “If you can’t breathe, nothing else matters,” according to the American Lung Association. Here are just a few examples of what we use. Specifically, a LOT of imagery: in the nose & out the mouth by blowing out a candle first and then warming up an apple, taking a breath with a feeling of a hot slice of pizza coming in, having a hot hard-boiled egg in the center of your mouth (to keep the palate raised), hissing like a snake on a suspended beam of air or on pulses, ‘ya-ha-ah-ah-ah-ah’; activating the diaphragm for a pulsed feel on the first to pitches and then descending from ‘sol’ to ‘do’, starting a song and seeing how long you can go without taking a breath, pulsed breaths of ‘huh’ alternated between pitched ‘ha’s’ on a count of 4, and sequenced ascending and descending lyrical lines that can be combined in as many sets as desired to build confidence, agility, endurance.
Do you believe in a down/out breathing method, or an up/in method? Why?

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

Three of us teach down/out. One of the Associate Directors [Opera Degree] has some background with up/in. The chorus has been exposed to both methods. What the Director believes in is “best results” for each individual regardless of method. The results for today’s amateur singers are less about aligned methods—minions following the master—and much more about their sense of individual worth and their choices and efforts that make a distinct and unique contribution.

Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator

BOTH! I believe in constantly feeding the air through the phrase after a taking a natural, expanded, healthy amount of air.

Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies

(I believe in) up/in with the addition of intercostal muscles. I like to use as many tools as possible to catch as many learning styles as possible.

Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus

Down/Out. I have never heard of up/in unless that is clavicle breathing. That’s the only way I have been taught through a Masters in Music Ed.

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

No opinion. I use somewhat of both.

Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus

Up/in? I don’t know that I’ve ever heard of this method. In my experience, asking a choir to breathe “up and in” leads to chest and shoulder movement. This is never good mostly because the sound will most likely be produced from the chest or throat. Expanding the chamber surrounding the diaphragm and stomach and focusing the energy both “down and out” help with the sound being produced from the core. A much more grounded approach.

Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord

I demonstrate taking a breath by ending a phrase by breathing in. (e.g. “One” breath “Two” breath “Three” breath, etc.)

Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment

For proper breath, the air must move into the lungs when the diaphragm moves down. That means for most of us other things move out. Therefore, I describe the process as the
air moving down toward the belt buckle and the tension developed by the flexible parts stretching, provides the vehicle to start the air moving back out.

_Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus_

Never heard of those methods. Basically there is no time while singing to think of what you are doing; it has to come naturally, with training. Basically to breath in low and make sure that the chest is in a natural position i.e. not “lifted up” as this drains all energy.

_Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach_

I believe in whatever mechanic works for the individual naturally.

_Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus_

(It is) hard to distinguish between the two. I definitely want the breath to be felt below the sternum, low in the body, permitting the belly to come forward as internal structures are pushed out of the way by the descending diaphragm. But I sometimes ask singers to breathe “through their feet,” bringing breath up from the floor into the body. Anything to place the breath at the belt line and avoid high chest breathing. (Of course the chest is held high, to permit proper expansion; just don’t place the breath there.)

_Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Headliners_

Down and out. To me it is the most natural. Although, I don’t want my singers to try pushing outward. I teach them to keep the chest high and “breathe to the toes”.

_Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus_

I prefer up/in but find it encourages those with little training to lift and drop their shoulders while breathing. I teach expanding the rib cage: “Become bigger around.”

_Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers_

I was taught expand to breath don’t breath to expand. This concept seems to be simpler but easily understood by amateur singers

_Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha_

Down/out method, based on Vennard’s research.

_Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter_

N/A. I try to emphasize “warm air.”
Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note

I like the breathing low and expansion of the rib cage technique. I contrast it with the upper chest breathing technique that most non-singers use to breathe to exist.

Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

Purely from a visual stand point for the chorus members, I would have to say the down/out method. Allowing the diaphragm to drop down and creating the air pressure to exhale out would be something that is more appealing to me. We focus on learning techniques of our members and 80 percent are visual and auditory learners in our case. We have a couple members that are kinesthetic learners and want a technical hands-on description.

Tony Bowman, Appalachian Express

Down/out seems to resonate with the men I direct; an up/in would promote shallow inhalation for many.

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

I believe in ‘down & out’ more than ‘up & in’; it just makes more sense physically. If I’m asking a singer of any experience level to breathe deeply, word association of ‘down’ works better than ‘up’. Plus, it’s been my experience that clavicular breathing for singing is not as successful or reliable than diaphragmatic.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

Neither. Expansion only, up and down bobs the head (novices), down and out creates flatness.

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

I believe in a down and out method of breathing. All projects are best built on a strong and low foundation. Think of building a house… would you put your foundation on the roof?

Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

I suspect down/out, but I can see that either could work. Face it; it is more mental imagery than really changing the physiology of breathing. I also tend to agree with the late Jim Casey: Get the posture and embouchure right, and breathing will tend to take care of itself. Too much mental emphasis on the breathing process can lead to muscle tension in the wrong places.
Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus

Down and out, but we don’t call it that. Imagine if your mouth were in the middle of your back, way down at your belt line. Now take a breath through that. It’s all about “increasing space” in the abdominal cavity, making room for the air to flow in naturally, not “sucking it in” like you’re trying to inflate a balloon. I don’t think I would ever refer to anything in singing as down or out though. We’re always talking about “lift” and such things…

Gil Burroughs, Albemarle Sound

Down/out because that’s the way my band director taught me.

Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

Down / Out because I believe that the act of breathing is really relaxation after exhalation and, therefore, I want my singers to recognize that when they finish exhaling (singing a phrase), and then “breathe”…the diaphragm should be allowed to drop to the lowest (down) and the fullest expansion (out) for the next phrase.
How do you teach vowel consistency to your chorus? What exercises do you use?

_Burt Van de Mark, Martin/St. Lucie Mariners_

We listen for the overtones singing major chords. Simple stuff. They get it.

_Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator_

A technique that was passed down to me was to use the “church” method. With a raised soft palette, every word of the song is spoken in a high head voice, while speaking through a vowel formed by the word “church”. After speaking through the text several times and helping this become habitual, we move to the singing.

_Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus_

I use the pure Latin vowels. We do this at the beginning of each rehearsal. I use listening techniques so that they can hear the differences.

_Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note_

We work on vowel unity mostly through some unison singing as well as a harmonized exercise promoted by the Society several years ago, which incorporates twelve different vowel sounds. It’s kind of like a tag except on one vowel at a time.

_Mark Leimer, Summit City Chorus_

I promote vertical / tall vowel shapes. Never spread. Singing through an “O” with a smile inside feeling. Open throat placement. Tongue flat, relaxed and against the lower gum ridge. Depending on the vowel and the individual need, I will encourage the singer to allow the tongue to go over the bottom teeth and touch the lower lip. All of this is director college material.

_Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment_

We call it vowel matching and we often stop and change the vowel by section to produce an expanded sound. Yes this often “goes away” but we keep trying.

Bing-(Oh, Ah, Ee, Ooh, etc.) staying in the Do to Sol portion of the scale, including chromatics. [1-5-1 1-3-5-3-1 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1 1-#2-#3-4-#5-5-#5-#4-3-#2-#1]. Nah-Nah-Nee-Nee-Nee and Many mumbling mice are also used. I enjoy the many mumbling mice because it is sung in the minor and has most of the vowel sounds. [Many mumbling mice are making midnight music in the moonlight, mighty nice]

_Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord_

We pick a vowel in a short word (eg “It”) We say it 3 times and sing it (on a Bb). Take a breath, sing it again on the Bb, and do a peel off (Bass/Bari down 7,6,5 – let it lock –
Bass down stepwise to 1 – lock it in – Tenor up to 3). Finish with that word on the May, Me, My, Mo, Mu notes. (Repeat with next word.)

*Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus*

We use the old Archie chart vowels: keyed kid ked cad cawed code cooed could cud. Those words provide reference sounds for virtually all words or word sounds encountered in our music. I do a four-part rehearsal of each word sound: three times on a single note; repeated on each note of a unison downward major scale; a peel-off starting down from do, to a major chord; a simple five-chord sequence (I, I7, IV, V, I). By that time we’ve usually found a common vowel shape. We teach a common “unifying vowel shape:” sing each vowel with URGE in mind. URGE helps singers to achieve a matched mouth shape, corners in, teeth showing, soft palate (and hard palate!) raised.

*Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus*

Start with the visual part of the aperture. The part you can see as a director. An “O” needs to look like an “O”. Once you get them to make their vowels “look” the same, then start to teach that we sing word sounds, not words. Consistent vowel work in warm-ups works better if you use words from the lyrics in your repertoire for that evening. Then later when you’re working the song you can refer back to the craft session.

*Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus*

I use the shape of their mouths as a guide. We want the vowels to be vertical, not horizontal. Warm-up exercises are usually done on one or two vowel sounds and targeted. Once we have some consistency, we work on the brightness or darkness of each. Polecats, which are familiar to all members, are used to allow better concentration to match.

*Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa*

We typically use the ME, Ma, Mi, Mo, Moo exercises. We typically resolve problems with vowels simply by bringing it to their attention and it heals itself. When necessary, we will stop and hold a trouble spot and find the individuals that are not matched and correct it that way.

*Tony Bowman, Appalachian Express*

Such techniques as north/south; begin a yawn; uniform drop of the jaw; tongue lying flat and out of the way; closely related lip position…

*Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains*

Constantly. May, me, ma, mo, mu. Taking words from the songs and plugging them into the exercise.
Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha

We use video, mirrors, observers, one on one correction and self-actualization. Warm-ups will target specific vowels, we will sing the phrase on just the vowel sounds, we will sing in a circle to help all observe when the vowel is formed correctly and hope they can hear the difference when it is.

Dave Barton, Cape Chorale

Vocal directions—Think tall rather than wide, vertical rather than horizontal. Keep corners of mouth in their natural position rather than widening during vowels. Most important exercise is to sing the vowel in question and LISTEN to everyone else in the room; make your sound match theirs. This never fails to get a decent match, BUT even though everyone hears and understands the benefit, the next time they sing that vowel, it’s still not matched—very frustrating.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

Mirror; sing vowel to vowel, no consonants, Mona Lisa/ventriloquist exercise.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

We teach placement more than vowels. The Royce Ferguson terminology is “inviting resonance”—for instance, an OH vowel resonated in a manner so that if a singer nearby were singing a long “ah” [a] vowel, the “ah” [a] would feel invited into the “oh” sound [and a vice versa exercise as well, and other vowels, etc.] We work placement almost every week during warm-up, standing in a large circle—concentric circles if more than 50 guys are singing. It promotes better hearing—one vowel being invited by another. The result is heightened resonance awareness and the ability to achieve placement consistency. We ask in general for basses to invite “ee” sound and other parts to invite the long “eh” [e] sound. Unusual voicing, range extremities and certain emotional effects often require adjustments apart from the “in-general” guideline. The choristers understanding of resonance placement produces better vowel consistency as a byproduct. Other byproducts of working resonance include better breath support/tone production.

Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter

For my chorus, I only worry about this for certain parts of certain songs.

Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers

Vowel consistency is based on placement consistency. Inner smile, yawn. We do a lot of unison singing to teach vowel and placement consistency.
Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Headliners

I probably spend more time teaching my chorus to match resonance and vocal texture then I do with vowel matching in the traditional way. I have found that looking at each other or at pictures and trying to mirror vowel shapes can cause tension. The technique that I use is to teach each singer to sing through his vowel sound. I listen to each individual and find the vowel that creates the best forward placement and ring. For most men, one of the open vowels will be best (let, hat, hot, long, love). Once a man has his vowel, the goal is to sing everything through that shape. This works very well to match things up.

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

12-tone exercises seem to work the best. We keep them written up on a chart and keep reminding all of us (we ALL forget!) to ‘transfer’ similar sounds to similar word sounds. Here are a few (exercises) we’ve been successful with over the years: 12-tone exercises on a standard 5 chord progression, going from ‘Johnny One-Note’ to ‘Johnny One-Chord’ to (what we call everyone singing together) “All Skate”. We’ll often identify a voice part one at a time to help maintain consistency.

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

Vowel consistency can drive a director to the funny farm! The first problem is recognition by the singer. Singers will never hear sounds inside their head the same way a third party will hear them. Amateur singers often sing to hear themselves rather than to feel their vibrations. This is a disaster in a choral setting because it leads to vocal battles on the risers. I ask my singers to play with sound… sing outside of your mouth – now contain the sound inside your head and pretend the sound never exits your mouth but instead resonates inside your head. 90% of vowel match issues can be resolved through proper vocal pedagogy. Simply put… good/proper vocal production is synergistic to all the voices in the ensemble. Controlling the voice to “blend” will never achieve as good as result, in any style of music, as releasing the instrument.

Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach

We agree on the lyric sound but then strive to get each individual to sing it with his best resonance. I use a complimentary vowel exercise in warm-up.

Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

I use the 16 vowels (we, sit, late, let, hat, high, spot, love, go, la, joy, now, girl, moon, mute, look), in a simple 4-part vocalise. Then, I stop them when I hear bad choices in the songs themselves.
John Mathews, Shreveport, Louisiana

I use pure Italian vowel sounds when getting unity of sound. I also do not allow “wide” singing. All vowels must be produced with the minimum of jaw droppage – no more that 2 fingers and they must imitate the bells on the ends of brass instruments. All sounds must be placed in the nasal cavity (not a nasal sound, just away from the throat to take away tension) and articulated off the front teeth. The soft palate usually rises when singing so artificial control of the soft palate is not necessary. And I ask my singers to try to keep the back of the tongue flat in the mouth. The tongue back is an indicator of open the throat is. If the tongue back is raised (high larynx) then the throat passage is smaller and the vocal folds cannot expand as needed. When the tongue back is low (depressed larynx) then the passage is too wide and the vocal folds are pulled unnaturally apart producing a breathy sound. I suggest a copy of Vocal Wisdom by Lamperti ed. Brown. The best book of its kind – ever. Hard to understand but well worth the effort.

Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus

In my high school choir, we use tall vowels produced through “rounded lips.” Sound like the British, sound like the British!! This is mainly because they are unaware of vowel modification and immature singers so it is the quickest and easiest way to create a pleasant blend in the choir.

In my barbershop chorus, I take a much different approach:
1. Every sound we produce is focused through an “ah” [ɑ] vowel in the back. The only thing that changes is our lip shape. The modification lies in the lip shape only.
2. No vowel is ever created without a smile. When in doubt, a smile will do.
3. Don’t think about vowel shape. Trust yourself and sing.

Gil Burroughs, Albemarle Sound

Demonstration.

Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

I use the 12 vowel sounds for craft. I teach target sounds and word sounds rather than “words”. I use unison singing up and down scales to encourage the singers to maintain the same word sounds throughout their register. I always begin with the eight primary sounds… WE, SIT, LATE, LET, HAT, SUN, FAR and LAW to get the singers familiar with how the formation of the vowel sounds moves from the forward position for the bright vowels through to the relaxed tongue sensation at the “darker” vowels.
What barbershop “myths” do you find the most troubling? How do you attempt to handle these myths (I.E. raise the eyebrows) in performance?

*Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus*

Barbershop started as a very popular and credible form of music. It has become less noticed and respected over the years. When I was in college, my voice instructor told me that she wouldn’t keep me in her studio if I continued to sing barbershop music (and I was an education major). Needless to say, I found a new voice instructor. Recently, respected music educators have begun directing barbershop choruses and the art is becoming a little more credible among the choral music world (The Vocal Majority was invited to sing at ACDA last year). The most troubling myth about barbershop is that it is only sung by amateur musicians and old men, and therefore, we make amateur music. This is because much of the society is made up of amateur musicians and old men, and educators are rarely exposed to groups like Westminster and the Vocal Majority. Many are also unwilling to change their views, although many music educators love barbershop!!

*Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus*

Logic refutes myths… but BHS has done a pretty good job over the past 10-20 years of providing solid education that reduces the problems…. Actually, the worst myths are in the public sector, and what music educators think about barbershop….

*Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies*

The old hard-production, laryngeal ring is the most concerning and most difficult to get rid of. Helping them to realize the free production is by far the (healthiest) and resonant ring is a hard sell in the beginning.

*Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus*

I do not believe that “raise the eyebrows” is a barbershop myth. It is utilized throughout choral singing to help amateurs attain lift in the soft pallet. There are no truly barbershop myths that I haven’t found in my regular choral work.

I have been a barbershop singer for over twenty years. I hold a Masters degree in Music Education and have been a college choral director and voice teacher for ten years. The idea of bad singing habits or “myths” tied exclusively to barbershop singing shows a lack of experience working with amateur adult singers as well as a lack of respect for the musical style.

I utilize the exact same singing techniques in my barbershop singing as I do in my every day collegiate teaching. Good choral singing works.
Burt Van de Mark, Martin/St. Lucie Mariners

The greatest myth, as far as I’m concerned, is that we should be great “musicians”, whatever that is, and that we should try to be like classical musicians. That was never the point in barbershopping. We “handle” this by singing some tunes we’ve never seen arrangements for. And we often have the audience join us. Our chapter has not forgotten what creativity is. The kids love it.

Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord

"You’ve got to sing modern/familiar songs because audiences don’t like Barbershop anymore.” Bunk!! If it doesn’t follow the circle of fifths, and use a lot of Barbershop chords, then I’d be lying to my chorus members and my audience.

Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus

I don’t have any “myths” proposed in my group of singers. When I do hear of them I gently correct them and let the folks get on with their singing.

Mark Leimer, Summit City Chorus

I don’t promote the eyebrows. I push for the cheeks to be up with expression. Eyebrows will happen on their own if the singer feels the song and emotion. I find that energy put forth into a song fixes so many things without mention. The audience has got to feel the song. Take them on a ride. The guys have come to know 2 things: First, we have 8 seconds from the start of the song to convince the audience that it is worth their time to listen to us. Always pushing for a stand “O!” Second, facially and physically if you feel stupid then you are almost there. I encourage to let go and go find the edge.

Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus

The most difficult issue to deal with has been to get the performers to emote. Many have been raised to conceal their emotions, consequently little is apparent to the audience without a great deal of work.

Bill Weiser, Reno Silver Dollar Chorus

Barbershopping is loud and not good singing. We find opportunities to create beautiful moments in our songs and also preach singing with class.

Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha

Singing barbershop is not using proper vocal technique. I work to help the singer improve vocally and we then apply those techniques to the barbershop style.
Karen Frerichs, Federal Way Harmony Kings

I don’t really pay attention to any of the “myths”. I teach high school choir, church choir and my barbershop chorus. I treat them all the same as far as vocal production goes and facial expression and body language. Mostly I want them to really understand what they are singing about so they can convey the message of the song to the audience. Of course the basics have to be there of correct notes, timing, vocal production.

Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment

I don’t talk about the myths. They are not taught anywhere in the society and my organization is unaware of them. I speak of singing with an animated face, which helps energize the vowels. The flaring of the nostrils and lifting of the cheeks can be accomplished by telling the chorus to sing with a twinkle-in-the-eye.

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

Try not to look dead. We also use the raised eyebrows, smiles and looking excited. I believe the director’s hands will tell a lot about what happens with the chorus and how they react.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

**Myth: This is just a hobby.** We teach our guys that we are “community enrichers.” A hobby is where participants focus on creating value for themselves as a pastime—where progress, creativity, growth, excellence, skill/talent development and value for others are not high level concerns. As community enrichers, barbershoppers have a valuable mission. According to research [*American Scientist*, July/Aug 2008, “The Psychoacoustics of Harmony Perception”] consonant harmonies inspire wonderful emotional responses in human beings. That’s not news, but the fact that the effects are greater when voices are added to instrumental consonant harmonies and greater still when the harmonies are a cappella is somewhat surprising. The effects are also directly relative to the accuracy of “lock n ring.” As purveyors of the vocal art called Barbershop, we potentially have an enormous and wonderful mission. The populace can come to value Barbershop for the inherent wonderful emotional effects—inspiration, joy, love, hope, comfort, laughter—and value it distinct from other music. Thriving chapters can play an enriching role in people’s lives performing, branding and popularizing the style. That’s not hobbyist pastime thinking.

**Myth: Baritones should sing quietly—be seen, not heard.** We do ten-minute quartet coaching in front of the entire chorus while they are sitting for a knee & foot break. The coaching is highly educational demonstrating many facets of Barbershop performance. One of the facets is part balance—the guys no longer think the best sound is produced when baritones sing quietly.

**Myth: The audience doesn’t much care about visual presentation—they came to listen.** We’ve made large changes in this area. We perform our show (except for the two freestyle ballads) without a Director except for setting the opening tempo and extending
the tag. Our singers are coached on performing visually, as if in a quartet, seeking the eyes of the audience. We no longer do “concert style” performances—we do comedy skit work as segues. The chorus songs and non-singing time are planned and performed to embellish the story of the skit. When we first made these changes—no director throughout the songs and comedy skit work—the response differences from audiences were stunning. They laughed, big and gave instant standing ovations—the guys (some of them begrudgingly) admitted that visual presentation is a huge powerful part of any complete performance. We’ve never gone back and we get better at this every year.

Myth: It’s best to watch the Director—not the audience, not the dude in the back of the rehearsal hall—when singing. We teach that what’s best is each guy owning his role in the performance and presenting it directly to the audience instead of funneling/filtering the potential through a director without eye contact with the audience. Directors in performance tend to control and block more audience-friendly chorus potentials than they embellish by conducting.

Pete Centner, Lakeland Barbershop

We talk about engaging the face. I just challenge them every performance to sell the living s**t out of the song we’re doing. Look alive. I smile at them voraciously until they start to smile. I also save my goofiest joke for curtain time. Then I can mumble the punch line to them if they’re scowling.

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

“Moving for the sake of moving”. This needless sake of having to move my hands without it meaning anything or being connected to anything is pointless to me. Connect everything you’re doing in a performance; it'll have more meaning to your audience and to you! “Manufactured sound production”. Just produce a tone that’s free of tension, that’s naturally resonant, and that’s well supported; who could ask for anything more? (BTW, the ‘raise the eyebrows’ myth isn't just reserved for barbershoppers; my college voice instructor used that imagery on me to get me on top of the pitch and I was called out on it by members of my competitive quartet. It was quite funny that night. I was looking across the table at my baritone and he had this highly pained look on his face and I asked him what was wrong. He said nothing; he was just doing what his lead was doing. We couldn't stop laughing for about 10 minutes. I still find myself doing it today and each time I do, I start laughing.)

Dave Barton, Cape Chorale

I guess I don’t have a good answer. Many generalities, like your example, are not very helpful, but sometimes such general instructions can be beneficial depending on the skill level of the chorus involved. In other words, I wouldn’t think the director of a medalist chorus would tell his guys to “raise the eyebrows” in an interpretive or choreography session, but it might very well help the performance of a D level chorus.
John Rettenmayer, Rocky Mountainaires

I have been a barbershopper for 38 years, and have been fascinated by how so many ‘rules’ of singing and presentation have changed over the years. All one has to do is listen to recordings from the early days to hear the differences, with a major sea change coming with the Dealers Choice in 1973. There have been so many that none stand out for me.

Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

I typically have a thumb up hand signal if intonation is a little off along with raising my eyebrows. I can usually pick out the individual that is having the problem and look into their eyes with the signal. We also find that their body and facial energy effect the group’s vocal production. Again I have visual signals that the group will recognize automatically recognize to enhance the performance.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

The local classical snobs think it’s drunken gang singing in costume (not something we do, but it’s a myth I had also).

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

I believe calling the average barbershop singer a representative of the style is like calling your average church choir a true representative of classical music. All forms of music carry vocal “baggage”. What I find most troubling from a pedagogical standpoint is the misunderstanding of the “belt voice”. For those who have a healthy understanding of the belt voice it can be an impressive tool in a quartet or solo setting. Belting is completely forbidden in my chorus. As the saying goes, “many hands make light work.” When you have 25 leads there is simply no reason to belt.

Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

Well, first, I completely disagree on the eyebrow example. I swear there is some sort of tendon that runs between the eyebrows and the soft palate. It is futile to try to lift the soft palate without raising the eyebrows…or phrased another way, why try to do it the hard way? Particularly since raising the eyebrows does so much to enhance the visual energy of the performance! So, shame on you for even suggesting that raising the eyebrows is a myth!

However, there ARE some TRUE myths out there, some of which have been debunked as the style has evolved. Classic example: That the lips and teeth form vowels. The height of this myth was when Bill Myers produced his famous vowel chart. The epilogue there is that Bill went on to produce vowels the correct way (mostly inside the mouth), and won a gold medal with his quartet in 1998. I handle this myth by having the chorus do a ventriloquist exercise. Have them stand with their mouths slightly open, with a wan,
bland smile…then sing without moving their lips. It can be very eye-opening just how much vowel formation happens inside the mouth.

Then there are those things which aren’t so much myth as evolution in technique. Moving from the clunky chord-to-chord style of the 50’s and 60’s to the more legato line of today was huge; it took two sea changes in the judging categories to make it happen. Moving to a taller resonant space required the likes of Vocal Majority and Acoustix to make it to the masses. Hopefully this evolution will continue.

*Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach*

“Louder is better” – put your energy into singing with upper head resonance.

*John Mathews, Shreveport, Louisiana*

Since I have classical training (Bachelors in Vocal Performance and Masters in conducting) in both choral and orchestral areas, I have, nor do I allow, barbershop “myths” to creep into my singers. As far as song presentation clichês, isn't that what the judges expect – I mean “Opera for the Deaf?”

*Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires*

I think the most troublesome to me is the image among the trained “professional” music scholars that barbershop singing, and the participants are not concerned with good singing habits. Additionally, that we do not spend, or that we have not spent, as much time in music education as “they” have, and therefore, are not legitimate in our credentials. I personally, did not get a degree in Music Education or Music Performance; however, I have spent more than 30 years studying our craft to improve the quality of my singers and my own musical ability.

*Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus*

“Raise the eyebrows” is a myth? I don’t know how you sing with the proper placement mix (open, rotunda-like inner space plus forward placement) without raising the eyebrows. Maybe coning is a myth, or at least commonly misunderstood. It’s sometimes interpreted as “broader as you go down,” rather than adding volume as you descend, lightening volume as you ascend. Maybe the most troubling is “If you can hear the guy next to you you aren’t singing loud enough,” a characteristic of early barbershop singing. And maybe “Raise the soft palate” is a myth, if taken to the extreme of closing off passage of air into and through the nasal passage.
How much emphasis do you place on acting/choreography within your repertoire, particularly at contest? How do you achieve healthy singing while still producing a quality sound?

_Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus_

I don’t believe in choreography in choir. I believe in presentation and entertainment. A presentation package should only enhance the musical product, and if the musical product suffers the presentation is a distraction from the music. Too many times a chorus will overdo the choreography leading to chaotic-feeling performances. I like to call this “singing AT your audience instead of singing TO your audience.” A few choruses can handle large choreography productions (Ambassadors of Harmony, Masters of Harmony, Vocal Majority) because they are so large. It is easier to hide poor singing in a chorus of 200!

Our view is focusing on having fun, smiling, and not thinking so much about singing or moving. By getting out of our own way, we create a very natural and genuine performance, which is often very entertaining.

_Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus_

We don’t do “acting/choreography” in our presentations. We do not normally compete, as this is deleterious to the health of the chorus. We encourage natural movements in response to the words/meaning/intent of the song. I’m not sure what you mean by “healthy singing.” You can’t produce a quality sound with unhealthy singing.

_Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies_

We use a great deal. We are very careful about making sure the moves do not get in the way of good (vocal) production.

_Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus_

We have a philosophy that the singing comes first and that no one ever comes to watch a barbershop chorus. The sound is the thing. We work to maintain proper posture and vocal tract while executing choreography. Singing and dance are both physical expressions that require similar good body mechanics.

_Pete Centner, Lakeland Barbershop_

Little choreography. We focus on making a great, free sound. I’d rather they just did a little something now and again versus something which took too much focus away from singing. We don’t like competition. We seldom go.

_Bill Weiser, Reno Silver Dollar Chorus_

We emphasize performance at all times – in rehearsal – and stress the need to always sing your best while performing choreography and use the face to tell the story.
Burt Van de Mark, Martin/St. Lucie Mariners

Very little. What is ‘healthy’ singing? Who determines what a ‘quality’ sound is?

Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator

Being visually involved and good pitch I feel are directly related. Whether it is a choreographed move or just facial and physical involvement, we place A LOT of emphasis on it. Healthy singing is always emphasized, no matter what we do.

Karen Frerichs, Federal Way Harmony Kings

I try to minimize choreography because of the average age of my men. We do small moves, like turning in or out, maybe a hand out. The acting part of it is critical. I insist on very expressive faces and body language.

Tony Bowman, Appalachian Express

I stress quality singing first, telling the story second, acting the story third.

Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord

Almost none! I like to sing, and I like to dance – just not at the same time. We try to make the story of the song real by facial expressions and an occasional hand gesture. For a quality sound, I believe it requires healthy singing. I usually adjust arrangements slightly to revise notes that are outside the singers’ normal range, and to make the song easier to sing. For quality sound, we reinforce craft topics.

Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach

That depends on the chorus and the chart. I expect a high degree of up-tune choreography execution from one chorus I direct, and almost none from my other chorus on a ballad.

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

We don’t do contests. We do some small movement due to age. We have a couple of younger people that will do most of the movement. Watching them makes the rest of the chorus tired.

Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus

First and foremost, we are telling a story, not singing a song. With new music, we always talk about a song’s lyrics, and what is the story behind the song. When we sing, tell the story. Convey the message of the lyric to the audience. When it’s good, it goes beyond acting. How much? … All of it. As long as it’s real…
Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment

Stage presence is unfortunately the last portion of musicianship brought to the stage in my group. I have a preponderance of 70+ singers who struggle to produce consistent quality sound. Tuning, balance and phrasing consumes most of their attention.

Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha

(Now that we compete at International, we do more.) Opera singers do it, so can barbershoppers. And I am grateful that we are actually judged on the visual/vocal representation of the text/theme of the piece, otherwise we might well be like thousands of choruses that make wonderful sounds but look like they hate it.

Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers

The story of a song is what we must sell and is one of the hallmarks of barbershop performances. If the choreography interferes with from the heart singing we don’t do it. Quality singing is healthy singing.

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

Excellent question! I would have to say not nearly enough. We’ve found that acting out any song (especially if you’re ‘over acting’) frees up any tension in your individual performance. When we do focus on it, we constantly remind each other to keep the ‘carriage’ intact; meaning, from the hips to the shoulders, nothing interferes with quality sound production. This requires a lot more leg involvement in everything we do as well as not breaking the Jan Muddle “100% Rule”; no matter what you do with your body, nothing gets taken away from selling the song with 100% believability from your face.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

From the previous answer, we obviously emphasize visual presentation throughout our repertoire—no more or less for contest. Contest is not our highest priority—it’s one of a number of educational, social, fun activities we do, and it’s usually not the most valuable for the amount of time/money invested. Our self-image is not built on our contest rank or score. When we think of health relative to singing, we generally have heard that singers have longer lives than the populace average, and it’s not healthy for the voice to shout or attempt range extremity work without suitable warm-up, but our continuous conscious focus is on the psychological and emotional health—ours and our audiences and upcoming generations of singers in our community. We are community enrichers through the innate emotional spirit-lifting quality inherent in Barbershop styled consonant harmonies. We embellish these outreaches with elements of visual presentation and comedic storytelling.
Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Headliners

My philosophy is that the better you sing, the better you perform. That has to be first. Having said that, the vocal and visual interpretive presentation of the song is a must.

Dave Barton, Cape Chorale

Not very much. At our level, we have to concentrate on better basic singing techniques. Try to emphasize correct breathing and the relaxation of shoulders/neck/throat/mouth especially during warm-up to teach correct healthy singing, but it’s quite difficult to transfer these things from the warm-up session to the repertoire.

John Rettenmayer, Rocky Mountainaires

Two years ago we were singing at about the 50 level in division contest, with virtually no choreographing or attempt to worry about presentation matters. Since then my attention has been entirely on vocal production. We may start to work on visual presentation after this spring’s division contest. OTOH, as our sound has improved and guys have become more comfortable (because they are less troubled by the noise they used to hear, I think) they have become more relaxed and are naturally looking better and individually getting into the song, i.e., acting.

Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note

We try to stress looking like the message of the song you are singing – i.e. happy, sorrowful, surprised, longing, sad, etc. and singing from the heart. We know that the face is the biggest part of choreography. We stress singing in front of a mirror. We occasionally use some pre-planned hand gestures or shift of body weight, but we don’t have dancers in our chorus.

Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

We work a lot with facial and body energy and movement to enhance the music. This begins in the warm-up exercises and continues through the end of the night. We have limited choreography that allows the group to produce a quality sound. Our chorus is a small group so all singers are needed for our sound enhancement which limits our ability to perform large choreographed moves on stage.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

My men can handle 3 moves per song. We work on acting all the time, it may never sink in, but I try. But somehow we did win small chorus champs…
Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

The Westchester Chordsmen are well known for their comedy routines and creative packages. It is very difficult to sustain the same level of singing with choreography as you have when standing still. By separating the two components and slowly putting them together an ensemble can develop the stamina and muscle memory to achieve both a visual and vocally high-level performance.

Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

Not all that high. We stress faces a LOT, and remind our singers that the body is an extension of the face. When we do have choreography, however, we try to add it intelligently. For instance, moves that are visual strong tend to also keep the vocal mechanism where it belongs… Typically, this means keeping hands either at our sides, or within the “Westminster Window” that directors/conductors know so well.

Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus

At our stage of development, very little. We have limited time each week to do all that needs to be done. Time spent on “choreography” is time lost to working on sound. We do only enough “movement” to minimize Presentation judges’ complaints about having done too little. Facial expression and body attitude is usually enough to enhance the song rather than to get in its way. In fact, good facial involvement can enhance vocal production.

John Mathews, Shreveport, Louisiana

If one sings as I have described, anything that a vocal choreographer can throw at a barbershop chorus should not affect the sound. I, personally, since I have a “low B” chorus, use little choreography, since when we have incorporated a great deal of choreography, we have scored poorly.

Acting is different from choreography. Acting means that you can sell the song as well as sing the song properly. Choreography tells the story in movement, or it should. In my opinion, barbershop choreography falls very short of this goal.

Gil Burroughs, Albemarle Sound

Very little

Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

I believe that every time we sing, we are in Performance Mode. While I have planned choreography in most songs, I put more emphasis on the individual’s ability to sell their own performance of the song. We are constantly singing to each other (1/2 sings to the other) and we use video to isolate singers and allow them to see what they are doing on
stage. Contest to us is just another performance. If the singers can “perform” the very best they capable of doing at contest, the scores will reflect that. When you have 18-20 singers with an average age of 60+, it is far better to have each man doing his best within his own abilities then to have an elaborate choreography plan that takes away from the individual’s contribution.
Describe a typical chapter meeting for your chorus. Include social time, craft sessions, afterglow, and who is involved. What techniques do you always cover? What techniques do you NEVER cover?

Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus

We open with a standard song, begin body and vocal exercises, the use a “tag” as a tuning exercise. Next comes learning new songs if we are not preparing for a sing-out. As we are a small chapter, everyone has a part to play. We almost never discuss elementary musical instruction i.e. how to read music. We always cover breathing, intonation, different vocal attacks, interpretation, and styling.

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

Warm-ups, intonation, quarteting, singing a couple of the old songs, work on new music. The officers need time for a business meeting. Review repertory. We don’t have social time until the rehearsal is over.

John Rettenmayer, Rocky Mountainaires

We had Chuck Greene present his CACM program to our chapter and to others who came from within a 200-mile radius. However, my attempt to deploy his techniques did not last very long because it seemed to me that a 10-12 man group simply is not big enough to provide the active participants CACM requires and still have a performing chorus. I try to implement the central theme, i.e., keep things moving and interesting, but I am sorry to say that our meetings are pretty much still a one-man show. I will widen participation as it becomes possible. A 14 year-old boy who has Bell Canto training with the Portland, OR, opera group has joined us and he may be able to take a more active role as he learns about barbershop. The techniques I always cover deal with vocal production -- breathing, elimination of tension, raised palette, pure vowels, etc.

Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus

Old Songs

Physical Warm-up – NOT music team guys. Other “energetic enthusiastic fellas” like chiropractors or football coaches…. Really need to start the evening off high-energy.

Vocal Warm-up – Section Leader or Assistant Director – connect the craft to the planned repertoire of the evening. Work craft with specific intent to refer back to it later (application of learned skill)

Rep Review – (risers) we try to do this every week. Quick run-through of 5-6 chorus rep songs, just to refresh and keep them tuned up. There is a “master schedule” that covers the rotation of songs to ensure all songs get reviewed at least once a month. Section Leaders take note of any challenges or opportunities in any given rep song during this review time, and let the Director know later on that “this song needs more work”.
Quartet Opportunity – After rep review, chorus goes off risers to chairs. Any four guys can pick any song that we just reviewed and sing it in a quartet. Unlimited number of quartets may opt for this opportunity.

Announcements, Teach a Tag, Introduce Guests (Welcome as the Flowers in May) Break (hopefully to sing the tag during the break…)

Second half of the evening is more “focused” rehearsal…. Includes:

- New Music
- Sectionals
- Working on any rep that a Section Leader mentioned the previous week
- Contest Sets

Always end the rehearsal with the chorus singing and performing at their best. Choose a couple songs they know well and can perform at a high level. Sing and perform right to the end, and don’t make any “last minute announcements”. End the evening on a high.

*Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet*

The Barbershop Society often educates that our chapters should have meetings not rehearsals and this makes absolutely no sense from my perspective. The entire purpose of joining a singing society is to SING not to meet. Therefore, is the responsibility of the Music Team and the Director to create a rehearsal evening that is engaging to all learning styles and develop a learning process that does not stop. Which means… have a specific goal for the song you are rehearsing and keep at least 5 or 10 tricks up your sleeve to accomplish your goal. An evening full of accomplishment will ensure your singers return each week. The members vote with their feet... if they are not showing up then your rehearsals are not engaging. The Westchester Chordsmen rehearse from 7 to 10 PM every Monday night with a 15/20 minute break in the middle, most of which is used for business and announcements.

*Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen*

We nearly always begin with some sort of warm-up. I like to move from breathing to thinking to individual production to tuning of chords. We typically intersperse new and old repertoire among each other. A quick water and announcement break in the middle helps out. Always acknowledge guests (fairly early, preferably). I like to always be in the process of learning a new song. We have had some difficulty maintaining an active Program Vice President, but when we do, it is so much better when he sets the pace for the evening, gathering the chorus, introducing the Director, ramrodding quartet activity, etc.

*Gil Burroughs, Albemarle Sound*

Sing for a while, take a business break, have quartets sing, sing some tags then sing until quitting time.
Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter

Our meetings are scheduled for once per week from 7:30 – 9 pm from September to June. We have the summer off. This schedule is complicated by my business travel requirements. We start with a few minutes of chapter business. We have a fairly short warm up period. We then proceed to sing some songs we know and like. We then work on a few new songs to be ready for the couple of local performances we do each year.

Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

Meeting time is 8:00 – 10:30PM
Elements always include: Warm Up (15-20 min.), Craft (15-20 min) Repertoire Review (30-45 min), Quartetting (as part of repertoire review), Tag Singing (once or twice a month), New Music Learning (8 songs a year), Riser rehearsal for Shows (20-30 min) Break time (15 min)
Once a month we have a “Team Meeting” from 7:00 – 8:00 (we do have a BOD but they just vote officially on matters). All members of the chapter are on the “Team” and we solicit input from everyone on all matters before the chapter. Our chapter went through some very tough times at the end of 2009 (almost folding) and we believe we need to have all singers buying into whatever is decided.
How much emphasis do you place on healthy singing? How do you promote a healthy singing environment?

*Karen Frerichs, Federal Way Harmony Kings*

Yes, we promote healthy singing. We insist that they breathe properly and relax their body from the neck up so there is not tension. Also we insist they do not sing too loudly. It is great to practice singing quietly and responding to the director’s cues.

*Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus*

Mostly by encouraging plenty of head tone rather than carrying chest tone too high in the range. We encourage hydration but I don’t see many water bottles.

*Bill Weiser, Reno Silver Dollar Chorus*

This is probably the most stressed point of a chorus rehearsal. We always work posture, breathing, vowel matching, voice placement, open throat, lips, tongue, and teeth.

*Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies*

100% of the time. Demonstration, talks about vocal health, giving knowledge about how a healthy voice works.

*Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus*

We place a good deal of emphasis on healthy singing. We begin each rehearsal with warm-ups. We encourage drinking water throughout the week as well as during rehearsal. We work on physical and mental warm-ups. We rehearse choreography separate from singing until both can be done with muscle memory.

*Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha*

Lots of attention to healthy singing, proper vocal technique is proper vocal technique, most of our singers have water during the rehearsal and we are very careful to make sure those that shouldn’t sing, don’t.

*Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord*

We don’t specifically talk about healthy singing; we teach craft, demonstrate, and have learning media that reinforces what it should sound like.

*Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus*

I place everything on healthy singing. I promote it in the shower, in your sleep, at football games, rock concerts and singing along with Metallica on the radio. Promoting a healthy singing environment starts with being a good teacher. Teach the same techniques every
rehearsal using a variety of different ways for different learners, and use an approach that works for you and your singers.

Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator

Every person who stands in front of the chorus promotes healthy singing. He does so by what he says and how he demonstrates.

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

We have been working on this. I promote deep breathing, control of the breath, constant vowels, softer singing, don’t shout.

Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter

Not enough.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

We mention every week—usually multiple times—that we are community enrichers and that the performances we prepare have ripple effects through others. We speak of the compellingly attractive value of chapter life in our chapter and the positive psychological and emotional effects for ourselves. It’s not that deep—the mentions are quick—but it’s cool stuff to know these things together.

Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note

We emphasize singing with a beautiful, naturally produced sound without stress. We warn against over-singing: singing too loud and forcing the voice which produces stress. I have to remind them quite often to back off and sing easier without pushing so hard.

Dave Barton, Cape Chorale

I don’t use the expression “healthy singing” at all (perhaps I should start!), but I try to teach correct breathing with abdominal support of the vocal sound along with the relaxation of the vocal apparatus during singing. I remind the chorus of this occasionally during the rehearsal, but as noted above, transferring good technique from a warm-up or craft session to repertoire singing is difficult, and I am basically a failure at being able to do that.

Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment

Every week I monitor individuals and their singing habits. I provide immediate feedback to help establish healthy singing habits. Often it is a lifetime of habits, which requires continuous feedback to change. Healthy singing does no harm, therefore if your voice is sore at the end of the evening, go back to the basics: sing on the breath.
Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

We identify individuals with singing problems and try to resolve them through proper singing techniques. This includes relaxing the facial, neck and upper body muscles. Maintain control of the vocal apparatus to prevent over singing or vocal strain. Many of our members carry water bottles for proper hydration. We promote all of this by being a good example.

Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers

Getting guys to sing within themselves and listening for the differences in voices and how they can match up with those voices to make a bigger sound is a huge challenge, but singing is quartets and octets promotes this type of singing. As a director part of my responsibility is to help guys understand what good healthy singing is and encourage it at all times and in all situations.

Pete Centner, Lakeland Barbershop

I work on posture from time to time. Don’t want anyone to get too relaxed, slouching, etc. I want the guys to have fun and enjoy their night out more than anything. I don’t preach other than to offer suggestions on how we can do better.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

No shouting or being a hero….

bring your own water!

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

We, as a team, quickly identify someone who is not practicing good healthy singing habits and find a positive for them to refocus on to help replace their current focus. Simply, to tell someone they’re doing something wrong or bad, it already plants a negative image in their mind. Always find a way to turn a negative into a positive! Myself; I constantly listen to my voice and evaluate what I’m doing on the spot and recall ‘tools’ I’ve learned to put me back on track. I’m not perfect, but using self-regulation and help from others assures I make as few mistakes as possible.

Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus

LOTS. We talk about drinking water. Don’t over-sing, We talk RELAX all the time.

Remove the tension.

Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Mainliners

I am a music educator, so good singing technique is always at the forefront.
Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus

All of our emphasis is on healthy singing. Frequent reminders of what is needed to sing well promote it. Most often it is the care of the body while away from the chapter that is most significant. One cannot sing well if the body is not healthy, fed properly and well-rested. All other activities should be undertaken with a view as to how they will impact your physical and mental health. If you want to really sing well, some of them may have to be put on hold, while you prepare yourself for a performance. This may include limiting baby sitting grandchildren (a source of endless infections).

Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus

This varies. We do emphasize healthy singing, but the amount of time we can spend on it is dependent on the proximity of performances and how much preparation is left. Our rehearsal hall is excellent…it allows us plenty of space to use chairs, risers, and acting space for scripted sections.

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

Members do not come to rehearsal every week to go home hoarse and physically beaten. Singing well is its own reward! If you members feel rejuvenated by your rehearsal your program will grow. Promoting a healthy environment… always assume there aren’t any bad choruses, only bad directors. Members do not volunteer their time and pay dues to come to rehearsal every Monday night and see how badly they can sing. Pick music appropriate to the level of your singers and then teach them how to achieve.

Tony Bowman, Appalachian Express

I always promote good singing techniques and I use the phrase “no shouting, please”; promote daily consumption of water to hydrate adequately…

Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

This has been one of the most positive changes in Barbershop over the last 30 years, and it has trickled from the top down. Back in 1981, when I attended my first Harmony College, a lot of people had roached their voices by day two, mostly due to ghastly singing habits while tagging. The Society got smart, and during the 80’s, they started bringing in top vocal coaches (Dr. Paul Mayo, for instance) to run through something like an hour of vocal warm-up, first thing, every day. What a difference! We have tried to learn from that experience, and when we hear “hard” singing, we stop and address.

Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach

Lots! Efficiency + confidence = freedom! Drill efficiency into the bodies – the brain is frequently left off stage.
Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

I can say, to my knowledge, we only have one man now that smokes, so we have really made headway in that area. I preach the concepts of not straining their voices…either by yelling or loud talking. I talk about hydration and using that to keep the voice in its best shape. I also talk a lot about how rest and sleep can be a great ally in their vocal health.
How do you (if you do) encourage your chorus to maintain a healthy physical lifestyle, since singing is a physical activity?

*Mike O’Neill, Barbershop Educator*

Constant reminders about foods to eat, when to eat, what to drink, what not to drink, etc. We annually encourage guys to think about exercising to lose a pound or two for added singing stamina. Generally, we encourage good lifestyle choices.

*Todd Oxley, Winnebagoland Barbershop Chorus*

We have not addressed anything more than the evils of smoking and drinking alcohol. We encourage hydration and getting enough rest prior to performances.

*Bryan Pulver, Heart of Texas Chorus*

I can only be responsible for what my singers do during the 3-hour rehearsal we hold every Thursday night. We stretch as a part of every warm-up and work on breathing to help our active singing voice. Once and a while someone will offer up a weight-loss competition!

*Bill Weiser, Reno Silver Dollar Chorus*

(Sing) everyday, drink lots of water, take walks, and exercise!

*Bill Bennett, Lads of Enchantment*

Oh, boy! Now you’re meddling! I wish I could say “by example”, for there are members within the chorus who are physically more fit than I. However I bring energy to the experience and endurance that shows effort and dedication to quality. That is often verbalized with, “Barbershoppers live longer!”

*Bob Shapiro, Sounds of Concord*

We don’t specifically talk about it. We will occasionally joke that someone has “More room for air.” We also occasionally remind members to drink a lot of water, especially while singing.

*Darin Drown, Sound of the Rockies*

We have had physical activity challenges amongst the guys like weight-loss challenges, walking challenges.

*Jayson Ryner, River City Chorus*

We encourage drinking water, watching weight, being in shape physically, and good posture.
Rick Serpico, Bryn Mawr Mainliners

We talk about the importance of hydration. Staying hydrated can help many of the vocal struggles of older singers.

Brian Reid, Melodymen Chorus

We encourage it, but not actively.

Lonnie Miner, Chorus of the Plains

Age keeps us from doing some of that. We have to sit a lot.

Karen Frerichs, Federal Way Harmony Kings

I do not tell them about how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. I just try to make it a positive environment at my rehearsal so stress is very low. That hopefully transfers to their day-to-day life.

Tony Bowman, Appalachian Express

Promote exercise (like walking) and also encourage the mid-line exercise (hands clasped, doing figure 8’s in front and crossing the mid-line)

Bruce Sellnow, Golden Valley Chorus

This is important. We’ve had weight loss “competitions” before. But a healthy lifestyle is key to so many things, including singing.

Burt Van de Mark, Martin/St. Lucie Mariners

I have long given up on telling people what a healthy lifestyle is. It can only be done when they are led by example. We keep our meetings to two hours so that fatigue and boredom don’t come too soon in play.

Stephen Jamison, Contest Judge & Coach

Exercise – both the singing kind and aerobic/resistance

Bill Rashleigh, Sounds of Aloha

I don’t address that as much as I should.
John Rettenmayer, Rocky Mountainaires

I don’t. Should, but don’t. I do ask them to stand to sing, but they resist even that mightily.

Chuck Greene, Land of the Sky Chorus

We have not approached this subject in any official or specifically planned way with our guys. However, many times in individual coaching sessions (we do a lot of different breakouts designed for more individual training), there are mentions of muscle tone relative to support issues and mentions of how even some modest exercise can enhance lung capacity—that kind of “in-passing” encouragement.

Mike Feyrer, Lehigh Valley Harmonizers

I must admit that I stay away from this for the most part. But I do encourage my guys to walk and exercise to develop stamina.

Dave Barton, Cape Chorale

I do not do this.

Charlie Rose, Kokomo Men of Note

I emphasize good breathing habits, good posture, and the enjoyment of singing together in harmony, not only for ourselves, but for our audiences.

Rod Schneider, Denison, Iowa

We do stretching exercises at the beginning of each rehearsal. I can’t really say we promote a physical lifestyle very well, but it has been mentioned a few times in rehearsal.

Kristen Thompson, Certified Barbershop Chorus Director

E-mail encouragement, discussion of diet, no yelling, discouraging smoking, encouraging individual voice lessons

Keith Harris, VOCE Quartet

It is very difficult to expect amateur singers to change their life style for their hobby. Your best educational tool is to live by example and provide a rehearsal environment that educates and motivates.
Jeff Veteto, Sho-Me Statesmen

This is something we probably should do, but we haven’t really stepped on those toes yet. Perhaps it is my latest 50 pounds, which I guard jealously, that keeps me from throwing those particular stones.

John Mathews, Shreveport, Louisiana

I do not talk of healthy physical lifestyle to the group. If someone asks, I will impart my personal opinion. You need to understand that singing to these amateur musicians, and I use the term musician very loosely, is not a vocation – it is a hobby. If one needs to work strenuously for a hobby, I have found that it ceases to become enjoyable.

Barney Johnson, Oswego Valley Snowbelters

I have been coined by my chorus as the ‘poster child’ for water consumption; I normally have a 64 ounce water bottle that I’ll go through in one meeting. In the summer; twice in one night! I also try to model aspects that ensure healthy singing; proper posture, alignment of the singing mechanism, the aforementioned ‘100% Rule’, and have developed little kinesthetic signals to have the guys recall aspects they need to remember without having to say a word about it. The whole aspect of it all is each guy helping each guy to be better at what they do and to enjoy the journey together!

Pete Centner, Lakeland Barbershop

Never talked about it. Again, this is a fun night out, not meant to be a second job. We thrive on getting a great sound while enjoying our evening out.

Chuck Lower, Bucks County PA Chorus

Not a frequent topic with us. I usually include the suggestion to “sing every day” in my weekly emailed letter.

Carl Bozzuto, Enfield Chapter

Most of our members are in their 60s and 70s. At one time, we had some members in the 80s and even 90s. I don’t preach to them about lifestyle.

Rich Taylor, Jerseyaires

Not often enough. I have a “Taylor’s Do’s and Don’ts that I use at times of major performances and contests, which talks about the healthy approach to the event, so those who have been with the chapter for a while are aware of those things. I also do mild physical exercise at the warm up time in the meetings and consistently remind singers that singing is no less challenging that preparing for a sporting event.
In lieu of responding to individual questions, I received the following e-mail correspondence dated January 24, 2011 from Jim Clancy, former director of the perennial championship chorus Vocal Majority:

Hi Jake,
It's good to hear from you. Sorry I haven't gotten back to you before now. If you will order Gary Parker's booklet entitled Basic Group Singing Techniques, I believe all of the answers I would give you are there. Gary was a part of the VM in the very beginning and his booklet explains in detail the exact techniques we implemented in the beginning and still use today...

Best of luck on your doctorate, Jake. And please give my best to your chorus.

In (tune) harmony,

Jim