

## Vocal Skill Building for Directors

*NOTE TO PRESENTER: This script is intended to be used as a resource - not a definite script of what must be taught. As you prepare for teaching this class, if you find that the material is more than you can present in the allotted time, please use portions of the script that you find most relevant to the objectives and which will make it comfortable for you and the class. We highly encourage you to make this script your own.*

### Objectives:

1. To help Directors make a vocal plan to build the skills of their chorus members
2. To demonstrate the logical progression and sequence of vocal exercises
3. To explain the purpose of each exercise

Introduction: Introduction of self and fellow classmates, provide credentials and reinforce the importance of the subject matter for all levels of musical groups.

One of the major roles of the Musical Director is to develop, over time, the core sound of their chorus. This is best achieved with a well thought out plan of exercises that will help build the individual skills that contribute to a **solid unit Barbershop sound**. In order to develop that core sound, a "tonal ideal", the Director needs to determine a goal sound for their group with specific characteristics that need to be taught to all, learned by all - and then reinforced consistently.

*Hint: Listening to the best Barbershop choruses, male and female, will help you to define a sound you would like to emulate. Fullness, richness, focus, these are all choices made by the Director.*

### CLASS FOCUS

Most vocal teachers will agree that these are the characteristics of good vocal sound:

- Freely produced
- Pleasant to listen to
- Loud enough to be heard easily
- Rich, ringing, resonant
- Energy flows smoothly from note to note
- Consistently produced
- Vibrant, dynamic, alive
- Flexibly expressive

The best Barbershop sound is a combination of these skills:

- Singer's posture
- Solid breath support
- Dependable breath management
- Blend-able vocal quality
- Fully resonated and matched vowels
- Energy
- Cone shaped balance
- A full range of dynamics
- Consistent vocal quality thru-out range
- Good sense of tonal center/key
- Freely produced overtone

So, how do we get our singers to demonstrate a high level of **ALL** of these skills? We start by determining what strengths might already be present. Consider these questions about your own chorus. Do you know the answers?

1. What is their best range, all voice parts?
2. What are their best vowels?
3. What is their best dynamic range?
4. Is there an overtone present at any time? – this is an obvious area of strength
5. What is their level of proficiency in the areas of posture and breathing skills?
6. Are they able to sing a legato line?
7. Others as added by the class

Specific vocal exercises and their correct application can help our singers improve and build their won voices. Here's a list of improvements we might expect to get out of vocal exercises:

- Accuracy
- Matched, resonated vowels
- Freedom in range
- Freedom in dynamics
- Locked octaves
- Key changes
- Fine tuning
- Pythagorean tuning
- Maintaining tonal center
- Appropriate use of registers
- Breath support
- Balance of focus to resonance
- Cone shaped balance
- Vocal stamina

**A GREAT PLAN WOULD BE TO ADDRESS ALL OF THESE AREAS EVERY TIME THE CHORUS DOES WARM-UPS.**

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Where do we start?**

We begin this process by getting everyone's attention and focus on the goals for the rehearsal. That may mean starting with some sort of physical movement. Stretches and dancing are good options while guiding their mental focus into a less stressful, relaxed place with their focus where you wish it to be.

*Hint: Use inspirational, energizing music for physical warm-ups. There's almost always someone in the chorus who can help with this. It can be fun as well as functional.*

### **Breathing Exercises/Posture**

Try not to teach breathing too quickly. It takes time to train muscles and re-training is the most difficult of all. Try this exercise in a slow relaxed manner:

## Exercise 1:

- Inhale easily for 4 counts, sing (any vowel or word) for 4 counts.  
Inhale 4 counts, sing 8.  
Inhale 4 counts, sing 12, etc. to 24 if possible.
  - Inhale easily for 2 counts, sing 4.  
Inhale for 2 counts, sing 8, etc.
- Inhale easily for 1 count, sing 4.  
Inhale for 1 count, sing 8;  
Inhale for 1 count, sing 12, etc.

## Exercise 2:

- Hiss for a count of 4, then breathe for a count of 2.  
Hiss for a count of 8, then breathe for a count of 2.  
Increase to 10 counts on Hiss then breathe in 1 beat.

*Hint: Remember to keep this relaxed and not too fast. Singers can always learn to breathe more quickly as their skills build.*

## Exercise 3:

- Jingle Bells on Shush

## Exercise 4:

- Mimi (4 beats) ming (4 beats) What a Pity (2 times) What (4 times) Zoom (4 times) zah! (4 beats)
- Change pitch and repeat

## Exercise 5:

- Sing ***I can support my voice*** on a single chord.
- Change pitch and repeat
- Sing ***I can support my voice and sustain it to the end of the phrase*** on a single chord.
- Change pitch and repeat
- Sing ***I can support my voice and sustain it to the end of the phrase without any undo tension of any kind*** on a single chord.
- Change pitch and repeat

**Building the voice**

5 note scales are one of the building blocks of vocal pedagogy. Singers are able to tune and to manage their voices most effectively within a 5 note scale. Scale pitches can be moved up or down, ascending or descending, but staying within an octave is best. Variations in vowel and/or dynamic are suggested as well.

Choose your group's best vowel and middle pitches to begin. (For female voices that's normally somewhere around an E flat).

*Hint:* The typical Sweet Adeline approach is to identify weaknesses and to spend time and energy in those areas rather than focusing on strengths and building from there. We never want to try to improve from the weakest position, only the strongest. This should include the best or easiest range, dynamics and vowel.

Beginning exercises then should begin at mid-range, at medium to soft dynamic ranges and should focus on vowel sounds the group sings best.

*Hint: In 5 note scales pitches 2 and 3 need to be sung to help the singer maintain the tonal center. Teaching your singers to hold tonal center during warm-ups is vital to their eventual success. (Using Pythagorean tuning concepts, which are used here only for scale work, not for tuning chords)*

REFER TO EXAMPLE 1 – Vocal Exercises Handout

Suggested vowel patters for Example 1:

- Kee kay kee kay kee
- Kee kah kee kah kee
- Mah ee ah ee ah
- Zoom zoom zoom zoom zoom
- Koo koo koo koo koo
- Soo loo soo loo soo

Another way to use the 5 note scale is to apply it to lip buzzing or bubbling, as in blowing into a trumpet mouthpiece. Buzzing or bubbling relax the throat while allowing you to make comments on posture, breathing and support, vowel match, tonal center, cone shaped balance, and energy.

Be sure to listen for those places where your singers are making choices between registers. The goal is to make no noticeable register break so be aware and ask them to monitor themselves to allow no changes. 5 note scales are very good for helping work out registration problems (handling the *Passagio*).

5 note scales are an ideal way to address the issue of the Passagio, commonly known as the break. Every singer has to address the issue of the break. However, keep in mind that the Lead and Baritone parts in women’s barbershop live in the mid-voice range, making them most prone to registration issues. Basses will be concerned with this on upper pitches, tenors on lower pitches.

Feel free to allow Basses to drop an octave for some low range work at any time while you stretch the upper parts. Just be sure the decision about when to drop an octave is made by you and not the singers - who will traditionally avoid the challenges of the upper range.

*Hint: It’s important to listen carefully while your singers warm-up. Try not to move too quickly. Listen to be sure they are singing the way you want them to before moving on to the next level. Are the vowels matched, are they in tune? Can you change the dynamics without hearing a change in the overall quality? If so, then its time to move on exercises that stretch the range.*

## **Extending the Range**

REFER TO EXAMPLE 2 – Vocal Exercises Handout

Example 2:

- 1-2-1      1-(downward) 5-1      1-3-5-3-1

REFER TO EXAMPLE 3 – Vocal Exercises Handout

Example 3:

- 8-2-8 7-8-7 6-7-6 5-6-5 4-5-4 3-4-3 2-3-2 1
- Vowel choices such as mah-ee-ah or zee-oh-ee work well with this kind of exercise.

## REFER TO EXAMPLE 4 – Vocal Exercises Handout

### Example 4:

- Sing the vowel sounds below on the scale note indicated.  
1-2 3-4 5-6 7-8 9-10 11-9 7-5 4-2 1  
Lah bay dah may nee poh too lah bay

This exercise is over an octave, which allows extra range extension without the singer being too aware of the extra scale notes.

## Vowels

The building block of the Barbershop sound is the vowel so it's important to put some time focused specifically in that area. It is not enough to achieve a matched vowel sound. The goal is to also have a blended and fully resonated vowel from all singers, all the time. Using the vowel sound families as developed by choral expert, Fred Waring, consider the following vowel exercise and how many other skills can be applied to it as you work on vowels.

We	Mute
Sit	Moon
Late	full
Men	Urge
Have	Long
Hind	Go
Heart	Joy
Sun	Now

## Chords/Tuning/Part technique

Part techniques can be learned and practiced during warm-ups. Consider the following that may be taught or reinforced during our warm-up time together:

- locking octaves
- teaching the importance of descending lines
- tuning chromatics, descending versus ascending
- interval accuracy
- blend
- balance
- critical listening, fine tuning
- breathing techniques such as quick breaths or sneak breaths

## Developing tonal relationships/interval accuracy

Chord exercises provide us with the opportunity to practice tuning chords prior to applying these skills to a song. Exercises as simple as the very familiar:

## REFER TO EXAMPLE 5 – Vocal Exercises Handout

### Example 5

- May me my moh moo

## REFER TO EXAMPLE 6 – Vocal Exercises Handout

### Example 6

- I can sing and match my voice to you (and sing in tune).

*Hint: It is important to really get and keep these chords in tune. Match all octaves, match all vowels. When you change the key (moving up and down) be sure all key changes are accurate and maintained.*

## Teaching Tempo/Rhythm

Warm-ups are a perfect time to reinforce rhythms, tempos and dynamics.

- Speak/sing lyrics with energy and appropriate timing – any lyrics, any timing. **Note to Faculty: Use examples from the Workshop songs here.**
- You may want to remove the lyrics for finer detail work and to clean up synchronization issues. Try singing the line staccato or on a short but extended sound like “book”.
- The wordier the phrase the more important it is that we learn to bring the sound forward and use less law movement. Try an exercise such as:
- The lips the tip of the tongue and the teeth
- Rounds can be very helpful combing the skills introduced in warm-ups. See how many skills can be applied to something as simple as:

1 • 121 • 12321 • 1234321 • 123454321 • 12345654321 • 1234567654321 •  
123456787654321

8 • 878 87678 • 8765678 • 876545678 • 87654345678 • 8765432345678 •  
876543212345678

*Hint: Take advantage of exercises like these to build stamina and energy into your sound and your rehearsals.*

## Ending your warm-up time

Determine in advance what song you wish to sing immediately following warm-ups. If you are starting with a ballad finish by using the vowels present in that song, in or near that key and with the appropriate energy level. Starting with a big, energized uptune intro? Prepare them to start just that way.

## Writing your own exercises

Class Exercise: Using the workshop songs, write a vocalese you think would benefit your chorus.

## Conclusion

The more the Director knows about the sound and singers in their own chorus the more they will be able to build a weekly program that develops the vocal skills necessary to create their goal sound. Learning and internalizing these skills until they are consistent requires long term goal setting and much patience. These skills are not learned by all at the same rate so a lot of repetition and re-teaching are to be expected. The creating and shaping of sound however is an exciting part of the

## **BARBERSHOP VOCAL SKILLS**

Vocal skills necessary for the best Barbershop sound:

- Singer's posture
- Solid breath support
- Dependable breath management
- Blend-able vocal quality
- Fully resonated and matched vowels
- Energy
- Cone shaped balance
- A full range of dynamics
- Consistent vocal quality thru-out range
- Good sense of tonal center/key
- Freely produced overtone

## **VOCAL EXERCISE EXPECTATIONS**

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[Vocal Exercises – see pdf format attached]

### **Suggested Bibliography**

Evoking Sound: The Choral Warm-up.....James Jordan  
How to Train Singers.....Larra Browning Henderson  
The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults.....James C. McKinney  
The Perfect Blend:Over 100 Seriously Fun Vocal Warn-ups.....Timothy Seelig  
The Science of Vocal Pedagogy..... Ralph Appleman  
The Structure of Singing.....Richard Miller

