

Read Me First – General Learning/Teaching Notes

The purpose of the introductory explanation of terms and the notes after each song is to guide the singer to a more successful experience singing barbershop harmony and to aid directors in their teaching practices. This opening section includes descriptions and explanations of terms and phrases that you'll find in the specific notes for each song.

ON THE SHEET MUSIC:

Bass clef: Noted with a small 8 above the clef sign, this symbol indicates the notes are sung an octave higher than written.

Breath marks: Suggested breath marks, when not indicated by a rest, are noted with a comma above each staff.

Tempo: *Ad lib*: Indicates free-form phrasing; *a tempo*: Indicates strict use of tempo; *Rit.*: Indicates a gradual slowing of tempo.

Lyrics: A special note for the bass: When placed above the baritone line, lyrics are to be sung by the bass part unless other lyrics are indicated.

MARK YOUR MUSIC FOR...

Do: This is the tonic and indicates the key of the song. It always helps to know how often this note appears, which section sings it the most and, in the case of octaves, how often two parts have an octave on the key note. Increased awareness of Do frequently strengthens the singer's ability to stay in key and in tune. Each part should be aware of when her part line falls on Do. Chords/phrases with Do, especially in octaves, are good point in any song to check for pitch retention.

Unisons: Although they do not occur often in barbershop harmony, when they do, be sure to give them rehearsal time to ensure that they are well-matched. Note that in a chorus, with multiple singers on each part, the technique of singing in unison is the beginning of building a unit section sound.

Octaves: Look for the phrases or groups of phrases that contain multiple octaves. These chords are critical to lock and ring and call for strength in the bottom pitch and “height and light” in the upper pitch. The ring in a chord is most audible when the two parts singing the octave lock and match the vowel; thus duetting in rehearsal is especially crucial for parts to strengthen their interaction, balance and accuracy.

Major 2nds: This interval (one whole step between the two notes) is truly close harmony. It takes practice to get used to singing this interval, since most of us came to barbershop harmony from other kinds of choral music where harmonizing a third above or below the melody is more common. Being aware of this interval by marking it on your music will increase your chances of singing right notes at these points, especially for the harmony singers. Major 2nds occur in combination between tenor/lead (easier to find when on the same staff), lead/baritone (harder to find when on separate staves), occasionally tenor/baritone (also on separate staves) and sometimes baritone/bass (same staff). The balance between two parts for this interval requires equal dominance, adequate height on the upper note and stability on the one under.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

Movement of vocal lines as the page turns: Singers will often have difficulty with memorization (notes, words, unusual intervals, tempo/rhythm changes, **key changes**) at page turns. Consider separating the pages and holding the bottom line of one page next to the top line of the next page until the memorization process is firmly in place.

Accidentals/Groupings of accidentals: Be aware of measures with accidentals, especially when there are multiple accidentals in one chord or measure. The accidentals that need special attention are the ones that raise the pitch of a note a half-step. Be particularly alert when a voice part is on an accidental and additionally challenged by being at the end of a phrase when breath support may not be solid. All accidentals raising the pitch of a note need to be sung especially high. Finding more than one accidental in a chord or measure is usually a signal to pay particular attention to the details of small or unusual intervals.

Patterns in vocal lines: Look for consistent or inconsistent patterns of note movement in vocal lines to aid memorization. Be especially vigilant about details of note movement (*e.g.* repeated notes, “scissor” movements with other parts, descending/ascending cascades) that need to remain independent of one another.

Noticing these types of details early in the learning process tends to minimize or eliminate incorrect notes and encourages correct interval singing.

Vocal line swapping: Another way to hone fine tuning skills is to look for part - swapping vocal lines, measures or whole phrases where two parts (most commonly lead and baritone) swap the same two notes back and forth on sequential chords. When these two parts sing together, there should be a degree of stability in both vocal lines that allows the interval created between these two parts to remain intact and well tuned. Swapping notes in a shared resonating space results in the best effect, especially when the interval is a Major 2nd.

“X” above the staff: An indication that the tenor is below the lead to aid in the learning process and as a reminder to adjust the vocal balance between the two parts.

Enharmonic: A term used to describe the same notes of the same pitch with different names (*e.g.*, Ab and G#), usually marked with a dotted line bracket.

Additional tuning awareness: Be alert for situations when one (or more) part sings the same note throughout the measure while the other parts change. Just because your part doesn’t move, doesn’t mean the chord doesn’t change; therefore, your function and balance in the chord could easily be different.

Posting: This is a note held by one of more parts while the remaining parts move through additional chords and/or lyrics. The posting part needs to remain consistent, spinning the note continually upward to remain in pitch.

Hook: A melody and chord section of the song that repeats. For example, in a song such as *Side by Side*, those title lyrics take on special and renewed emphasis each time they are sung.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Ascending vocal lines: The demands of such a vocal line require that resonance be maintained and adjusted as the singer moves through various registers. This additional space will tend to enhance the vowel match and provide a subtle degree of internal dynamics.

Descending vocal lines: The demands of such a vocal line require that the singer maintain mask involvement (forward focus). Achieving this quality, especially for a bass, assists with balance in the lower third of her range.

$\frac{1}{2}$ or whole-step rock: This is a situation that can occur for any voice part. Rock this group of notes in the lifted space of the higher notes --- sing the lower notes in that higher space. Accomplishing this technique usually results in a smoother vocal line and improved accuracy.

Breath elevation: After the breath spots have been determined in your phrasing plan, strive to lift and elevate every breath for an open-throated, smooth entry into the beginning of the next phrase. To begin to practice this technique, find places in the song where the notes of the chord for each part are the same both before and after the breath. The same degree of accuracy should be possible in both chords; they are, after all, the same but demand a heightened attention to accuracy and a true return to the note.

Embellishments: Keep sight of the lyrics you're moving through when planning embellishment timing. For example: In m.3 in *Bundle of Old Love Letters*, if either chord in this embellishment is held "too long," the listener loses the sense of the word itself. Plan your embellishment pacing so that the lyrics and the thoughts of which they are a part remain whole and intact.

Phrase planning: When we look at a song written in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, we have a tendency to hold all the half-notes for true value, thereby rendering a waltz-like and possibly monotonous rhythmic pattern. While it's always important to rhythmically imply the meter of any song when planning an ad lib delivery, a departure from written note values is necessary to achieve ad lib phrase flow.

While you don't want the actual tempo of $\frac{3}{4}$ meter to dominate your phrasing, the use of THE triplet "feel" phrase movement is a legitimate tool in designing a phrasing plan. Consider varied pacing to avoid a distracting level of rhythmic repetition.

Song structure: A clear understanding of the musical line of the melody (where it rises, descends, reaches climax, etc.) and an awareness of repeated structures or harmonic segments of the song are necessary to build a story in such a way that vocal, harmonic, and lyrical climaxes are appropriately reached and to design phrase planning that is appropriate for both forward motion and artistic restraint.