

# ***Critical Listening for Directors***

## ***Ear Training 101***

### **By Chris Hebert, Singing Judge**

I have always believed that no singer has ever sung poorly or sung wrong notes on purpose (certain comedic performances excluded, of course). With this same premise in mind, there has never been a director who taught his chorus wrong or poor techniques on purpose.

For a chorus to get to the next level in singing, the director is the main person who will teach them to get there. And if he can't hear inside his own head the next level of singing he wants them to make or have the correct sound in his "ears," then there will be little or no progress.

The skill that directors need to develop is that of critical listening. It is the art of actively listening to what is being sung and analyzing what is happening to make those sounds. The advent of recording technology makes this easy, as ability to replay the music of the best barbershop champs over and over again gives us the opportunity to re-listen to different aspects of the performance.

For example: Take one of your favorite champ chorus performances and first just listen to how incredibly in tune it is. Hear how high the pitches sound; sing along softly and "feel" how high they are. There is a buoyant quality to the sound when things are in-tune, vocal energy is in abundance and the music seems to have a life of its own. Replay it again and again, and really try to get this in-tune sound in your head.

Then take this new sound with you to your next chorus rehearsal and work on the song that always seems to flat. Teach what you can to get the guys to match the sound in your head. OK, it might take you a while to be able to convey to them what you want them to do, but as director you have already been granted permission to try what is necessary to improve the chorus. Don't be afraid to experiment.

You can use this basic technique for many areas of singing, picky things like what proportion of vowel to continuant sound do they use on their diphthongs, to broad categories such as:

- Vocal quality (open, free, supported, tall, resonant, etc.)
- Vowels (matched, round, clear, relaxed, uniform, etc.)
- Word sounds (diphthongs, triphthongs, consonants [emphasis or un-emphasized] etc.)
- Unity (no single voices can be heard, all voices sing all sounds together, etc.)
- Expansion (how well to they balance chords to produce the best ringing chords)
- Tone color (how to they change the volume, timbre and texture of the sound to convey emotion)

Actively listen, and get critical. Play sections over and over until you have grasped the nuance, and then take it to rehearsal. Work on the one aspect you listened to for that week and try to get them to do it better based upon what your new, improved ears are telling you. Historical listening is also fun. Get some old champ records from the '50s-'70s and tune-in to what types of sounds they were producing. Then listen to the best we have today. What are we doing differently now, how do they do it and why are they doing it?

As you can see, the things to listen to are too many to mention. One of our most successful directors instructs other directors that they should "teach to what they hear." My take on this is that they first need to be able to hear what is going on to determine what needs to be taught. If they can't hear it...