

En-Hansen-ments - Visual opportunities to support good vocal production in warm ups.

By Cindy Hansen-Ellis

One of the long time items of discussion in the barbershop world has been, "if we are a singing organization then why do we have to do choreography?" We've all heard that question, right?

Well, depending on who is in the room when the question is asked will determine the direction and opinions that will be expressed. I have been lucky enough to work with some of the most talented director/musicians in the society. These individuals while committed to preserving the true sense of the Barbershop Style are also continue to entertaining the audience, and they have learned that when you teach chorus members to move correctly it can enhance the sound.

Moves enhance the singing? That can't be true - can it?

Well, yes it can...I would like to share with you some of the techniques I have used to move the singing level up while working the visuals with a chorus. These are some simple basic things that every chorus can do.

Just to prove it works - try these simple visual techniques for yourself next week at rehearsal.

Stance: Regular Chorus Position (RCP)

You've seen those choruses that look bigger than life. Look like they are ready to jump off the risers into your lap. They have clean spacing and every angel of each body looks like it has been positioned individually. It's simple...each chorus member can look like they have a medal hanging on their chest.

The chorus members should stand with their outside foot pointed directly at the director. The toes of that outside foot should hang over the edge of the riser (helps spacing for the back row gentleman). The body should have the chest (sternum) also pointed directly at the director. Then the inside foot should be positioned about shoulder width apart about in the middle of the riser. With the toe pointed at about a 45 degree angel from the outside or front foot.

Then the body energy and body weight should be in the chest and not in the feet. I use the term "lifted" this helps keep the pitch up, while making the chorus look tall, proud, and electric. This is just another way to stay, stand tall - but with more power and commitment. Hands should hang free and loose at the side of the body. Shoulder should give the statement of being proud to stand on the risers with this group of individuals.

Layering: a technique to practice different parts of a visual plan during Vocal Warm Ups.

Once a director has the sound (vowel matching, cord balance, tuning, etc.) they want - start to add parts of the four step visual plan.

- Add a Dynamic Level - determine what level of sound we should be making. You can use the standard level from 1-10 or be more creative and use words like, soft velvet or crush. I believe dynamics drive all of the visual plan and levels. That is why I start with a dynamic level.
- Request that they add an emotion to sell with their face. Some great emotions I love to use are: genuine, spectacular, restful, famous, honored, alluring, electrifying and bold. That way,

we make them think about how to sell different than they have in the past. Emotions like happy, sad, lost, etc. are fine to use, but try to make the chorus think different.

- Add a body energy word. This is used to get each and every individual physically involved in the song. Emotions and Body Energy need to be intertwined into each other. They are different but you need to do one with the other for the most success. Some of the words I use are...gentle, majestic, military, strong and vibrant. The emotions, body energy, and dynamics can be in any combination. You will be most successful in your warm ups - if you pick sections of your current repertoire and apply those emotions and dynamics to the layering process.

Example: Let's sing an "Ohh" warm up, with a dynamic of a 3, emotion of tenderness, and body energy of warm - as if we were singing the beginning of "my wild Irish rose, the sweetest flower that grows".

- Now add some simple movements. A sway or small chorus spread that matched the warm up. This continues to make the chorus learn that we would never ask them to stand totally still and rigid in a performance - unless we are looking for an effect. You can also allow "freelance" time, so each individual can get use to moving on their own before you do a planned move.

The layering technique is a way to ease in simple moves that you would like to teach or add to current songs as well. Once you have the move learned then you can place them in the song or phrase and maintain the musical level. You can use this warm up time to teach new moves - then add it to a song later.

The payoff

When you do vocal warm ups and chose not to ask the chorus to do these four steps of visual layering, you are getting the chorus to sing in away that is different than you will ask them to perform. As a director, I think most of you would like to work with or fix the sound that is made while the chorus is active visually in the song. To be the most successful with a visual plan and maintain musical excellence, you need to give your chorus opportunities as often as you can for them to learn to be expressive, combine their abilities, and start performing above the standard. It is simple to add these steps to the current warm ups where they don't have to think as much about words and notes. Most chorus individuals can do warm ups with little effort.

Once again - during the first run through of the warm up - get the vocal level where you expect the chorus to be, then, begin the layering technique.

For the layering process to be the most successful, the chorus needs to believe that what you are asking them to do is valid and that you are committed to it's success. This is more likely to happen if your comments are specific, positive and direct. Link the process to the improvement of the chorus and establish a common goal that you both want to reach.

Adding any new process to your chorus celebrates the kind of excellence exemplified by directors like yourselves. These technique contains skills and opportunities that can change the way a chorus members sees himself as a performer, the way the chorus improves it work ethics, and a way to be more successful in enjoying our music as well as entertaining our audiences. "I guarantee you will not see or hear the same old stuff."