

Selected techniques for using group movement with the barbershop chorus

by Dr. Christopher W. Peterson

Actions speak louder than words. This phrase might well be applied to the barbershop chorus rehearsal. There are directors who incorporate movement as part of the teaching process who obtain excellent results with men of all ages. Rehearsals are more fun and efficient because singers are highly involved visually, aurally and kinesthetically in the music making process. They have a higher perception of musical events, a stronger comprehension of musical concepts, and are better able to communicate their understanding to an audience during shows or competitions. "Movement allows the singer to experience, visualize, and hear what is present in a piece of music and then, through practice, establish a cognitive base of understanding associated with this experience."

Selected Techniques Incorporating Movement

With careful attention to the connection between sound and gesture, every director can build a repertoire of motions that will elicit certain musical ideas quickly and efficiently from the men. There are as many possibilities for using movement as there are musical phrases and songs, and a creative musical leader can vary these techniques and adapt them to any song they choose to perform with their chorus.

Singer mirroring:

As the men become familiar with a song, they can be encouraged to mirror the director's conducting gestures while they sing. The director should focus upon movements that show aspects of weight, flow, and time in the musical phrase.ⁱⁱ There are several direct benefits derived from this technique. First, the singers will need to watch the director out of necessity to mirror the motions, and getting the men to watch the director is almost always a good thing. Second, the director is provided with immediate visual feedback as to how his gestures are being perceived by his men. If they don't "look like the music" you can bet that the director probably doesn't look like the music either. Third, group mirroring requires every man to be actively participating in the process and not "singing on autopilot." Fourth, the director can quickly evaluate the attitude and energy level of his men by watching the various levels of movement and enthusiasm exhibited by each man.

Unison tapping and clapping:

Getting the men to accurately internalize a musical pulse can be difficult. Any motion that unites a chorus in the speed and quality of a pulse will positively enhance the performance and unification of the music. The men can tap their own lap or snap fingers to the pulse as they sing. By having each singer lightly tap the shoulder of the person beside him, a group pulse is further established. Once the music is memorized, the director can have the men mark the pulse by a light clapping motion marked by an alternation of which hand is on top.ⁱⁱⁱ In any case, the singers should imitate and incorporate movements that exemplify both the speed and quality of pulse.

Walking the rhythm:

Chapters who are quite familiar with a song can better their understanding of the rhythmic aspects of the chart by walking the rhythm. Singers spread out in the rehearsal room as much as space will allow, and each time their individual line of music moves from note to note they take a small step. In an up tune there will be much stepping, and in a ballad there will obviously be less movement. Whenever a note is held for more than a beat the singer should remain in place and slowly lift one hand up, starting at waist level. This motion encourages singers to keep the tone alive and spinning on held notes, and will also enhance group intonation. As in the tapping

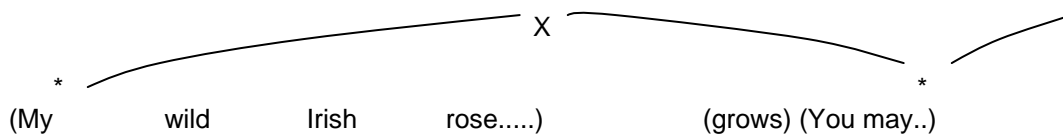
exercises, the stepping should reflect the quality of the weight of each note as much as possible. For example, a very rhythmic song should be stepped with march-like accuracy while a freely interpreted line should embody more flow and grace.

Releases of sound:

The unification of phrase endings can be a real challenge for any barbershop chorus. Using movement as a non-verbal cue at the ends of phrases can quickly unify the sound of the group. If the men sing the last note of a phrase and release the sound with an “upward “ hand gesture, and then perform the same phrase releasing with a gesture that moves in a downward direction, they can begin to evaluate the difference in the quality of the sound and the inflections that these gestures produce. Experimenting with other movements allows them to hear how these gestures affect the release. During a performance, the director can use the gesture that was most effective with the chorus during rehearsal. The use of this specific motion will remind the singers to release the phrase in a style appropriate for the mood established in the song.

Moving to demonstrate phrase shape:

Teaching the men to sing a phrase musically is a priority for all directors. Singers may be asked to “move the phrase along,” or “keep the forward motion or intensity going through the peak of the phrase,” and group movement can aid in the understanding and performance of these concepts. For example, the song *My Wild Irish Rose* can be used to demonstrate the shape of a generic musical phrase. Some barbershop singers might break the sound after “rose”, rather than connecting and building the sound through “grows”. This phrase can be graphically represented by an arc that begins, builds to a goal or peak (X), and arrives at a phrase ending before starting again.



The singers can position a hand slightly in front of their torso, palm down and to one side. While singing the melody, they can trace the phrase arc by moving the hand across the body. On the word “rose” the palm can be turned over with a slight upward motion, marking the peak of the phrase. From that point the hand continues to trace the last half of the arc, finishing down by the other side of the torso on the word “grows”. The next step is to target a phrase or set of phrases from the chorus repertoire . Explore how the phrases are similar or different from this generic one. As a group, experiment with different expressive movements to visually represent these phrases while singing.

Moving for dynamic contrasts:

Your men can also be asked to show changes in dynamics with their hands and by moving from either a standing or sitting position. The following directions represent only one of many possible sets of movements that can aid in the perception and performance of loud and soft contrasts by the chorus. (1=softest, 5=loudest)

- 1 = sitting to the front of the chair, both hands with palms down, near the navel
- 2 = move the hands away from each other in the horizontal plane
- 3 = standing, both hands at the side of the body
- 4 = standing, both hands with palms up, near the navel
- 5 = move the hands away from each other in the horizontal plane

The three major benefits to this technique are: 1) The men have fun and continue to be involved while singing. 2) The performance of the dynamic contrasts is greatly improved. 3) The director quickly evaluates how well the singers understand the plan for loud and soft singing in the song.

Moving while listening:

The use of creative movement can keep your men on task even when working with other sections of the chorus. For example, if the basses need to work on producing a brighter tone, the other sections can gesture while listening in the following way:

- All singers extend an index finger straight up by the ear.
- While the basses sing a phrase the other sections are instructed to listen and decide if the tone quality produced is relatively dark or bright. A perception of “darkness” can be communicated by pointing the finger toward the back of the head, and a “bright” quality can be demonstrated by pivoting the finger toward the front of the head.
- As the basses are asked to produce various tone qualities, the choir is simply asked to show the differences that they hear.

Singers who are asked to listen with discrimination and who are asked to demonstrate their perception through movement will be more involved throughout the rehearsal and will take more ownership in the music-making process. The director will find that it is easy to visually determine which men are actively participating in the rehearsal, and singers will find it almost impossible to talk and be distracted while performing these kinds of activities.

Conclusion

The techniques listed above are only a few of the uses of creative movement that are possible in the barbershop chorus rehearsal. Each is meant to reinforce a concept that would be less effectively taught when expressed only verbally. I have found the results of experimenting with these ideas to be nothing less than astonishing. Although I have found the movements to be most effective when practiced by the whole chorus, I find that a movement that has been developed during the course of many rehearsals can be communicated from the stage during a performance to elicit the sound previously associated with that motion. Men enjoy the freedom of moving while singing, and the mirroring exercises give them the permission to do so. When practiced regularly, singers who are shy or awkward at first seem to naturally join in and enjoy the experience. Men who practice movement on the risers throughout the rehearsal, and in EVERY rehearsal, develop a natural familiarity and flow in their visual presentation, a quality recognized by the judges every time. Sitting and standing to dynamic contrasts adds a sense of fun and accountability to the rendition of the music. Walking a rhythm reinforces pulse along with pitch, since the men are hearing other voice parts while they are mixing and moving about the room. Kinesthetic attention to phrase shape brings chorus members to a higher level of musical understanding, and they will sing more musically on new songs in a shorter period of rehearsal time. Once a repertoire of movement patterns has been established with the chorus, I talk less and less, since my intentions can be communicated with specific movements. The end result is that we sing more, we stop less, and the chapter members love coming to rehearsal.

Movement that is explored and utilized in the barbershop chorus rehearsal can be a powerful tool for musical expression. Men of all ages can perform creative, directed movements with the chorus leader while singing, and during performances the acquired understandings can be presented visually from the stage by incorporating the gestures into the conducting movements. Actions **do** speak louder than words. Our men would much rather sing than listen to the director talk about the music. Why not explore the possibilities of communicating non-verbally while rehearsing, and at the same time get your chorus “on the move?”

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ⁱ Hibbard, Therees Tkach, "The Use of Movement as an Instructional Technique in Choral Rehearsals." (Ph.D. dissertation. University of Oregon, 1994), p.3.

ⁱⁱ Rudolf Laban. "*The Mastery of Movement*", Lisa Ullman, ed. (London,McDonald and Evans Ltd., 1980), p. 77

ⁱⁱⁱ Also known as the "Yugandan Hand Clap"