Barbershop in Harmony
Arrangers' Day: Improvers & Up
Birmingham, 26 April 2009

Summary of Discussion Points

How do you find/choose songs to arrange?

- Songs that I like!
- Songs for a particular occasion (e.g. wedding, themed concert)
- By request/commission
- What do people want to *hear*? (popularity)
- Hear songs on the radio
- Explore YouTube
- Browse song books in local libraries
- What is suitable?
    - melody/range,
    - variety,
    - key (major/minor),
    - is it a jolly theme?
    - does it rely too much on orchestration?
- Difficulty that a lot of songs may already have been done by someone else (and someone better) à so try *not* to listen to other versions to make sure your version is your own – and if it's for your own group, you can craft it for their needs.

How do you get people to sing your arrangements?

- Easy if you're the director!
- My own (captive) quartet
- Give arrangements away to quartets/offer to do arrangements that meet their particular needs
- Arrange songs that groups ask for, e.g. popular songs
- Difficulty – are my arrangements good enough to ask my chorus to invest time and effort in?
- On the other hand, choruses respect the fact that someone has put time and effort in, and will repay that effort by trying the music out
- Get a set of professionally made teach tracks made (a) to hear the chart sung well and (b) to make it easier for other groups to take it up.

How do (or should) you arrange non-barbershop music for barbershoppers?
- Yes: for popularity and entertainment value.
- No: not always suitable – minor keys/lack of harmonic variety/too reliant on orchestration

What technical elements do you find hardest to control? What strategies have you developed to handle them?

- Handling rangy/complex melodies:
    - Careful when picking songs – consider capabilities of ensemble
    - Swap into other parts: briefly into tenor for occasional high notes, or bass for low passages.
    - When the melody goes low, baritone functions like a second tenor part
    - Neutral syllables in harmony parts can allow them to stay simpler around a complex tune (e.g. The Entertainer)
- Tenor staying too high for too much of the time:
    - Re-voice chord (if melody pitch allows it)
    - Look at choice of melody – less likely to have this problem in soh-soh tunes than doh-doh ones.
- Melody needs to use the low tonic, but the bass can't reach the octave below (particularly an issue at phrase ends!)
    - Hand the melody over to the bass briefly
    - Let the bass come higher than the lead for that one note
    - Turn the problem into an opportunity for an effect such as a unison or open octave.
    - More often a problem with doh-doh tunes than soh-to-soh ones
- Chord wheel is useful tool

How do you make artistic decisions about form/embellishments etc?

- Get ideas from the orchestration of original versions
- Shape of the melody and content of lyrics suggest ideas
- Think about sustaining interest – for both audience and for performers
- One strategy for embellishment choice:
    - If it is a question à echo
    - If the question is answered à swipe

Other issues raised:

What methods/equipment do you use for arranging?

- Pen & paper
- Finale
- Music Time
- Piano
- Guitar
- Capella
- Sibelius
- Singing (harmonising) along to recordings

Tips for managing copyright permissions?

- Keep a log of attempts to contact copyright holders, since they can be slow to respond. (But they can't take legal action about unlicensed music if you can demonstrate that you've been attempting to license it and they have been the obstacle!)
- Make sure arrangements are properly licensed before they get onto a CD
- Consider investigating copyright holder before arranging to avoid putting a lot of work into something only to have it turned down