

Ensemble Singing: Barbershop In The Classroom

Synopsis

A great way to foster ensemble skills, promote singing and provide a performance art opportunity to students is to run a Barbershop program in your school. Whether as an adjunct to an existing group program, or as a stand-alone activity, a youth chorus or youth quartet can add variety and interest to the Performing Arts opportunities at your school.

Outline

Learning Opportunities

A Barbershop ensemble provides learning opportunities on various fronts:

- vocal skills / singing
- ensemble skills
- some music theatre / drama elements
- opportunities for self-expression and collaborative work.

The vocal skills fostered by the Barbershop style are very similar to classical vocal production, although special note should be made of differences in enunciation and the discouragement of vibrato. Also, Barbershop is well suited to the 'average' voice, in fact too much 'solo style' can harm the blend and unity of voices required by the artform. This makes it accessible to a wider range of students.

One of the big selling points is that Barbershop is more closely related to music theatre than to choral singing, in that the staging of the performance has great importance. All music is memorised, choreography and physical expression is included and costuming is for stage, not concert hall. This provides opportunities for the students in planning and developing moves and costumes themselves, under the guidance of the teacher, helping them to 'own' the music and the ensemble, rather than just being a member of a choir.

As a member of a Barbershop ensemble, the students learn a high level of musicianship and musical expressiveness, especially if quartet singing opportunities are explored within the group. Quartets are self-directed and thus require a higher level of listening skills and performance confidence. Just being part of an a cappella ensemble hones listening skills, stage presence and develops an understanding of musical form and harmony.

How To Get Started

As with any vocal ensemble, an initial audition is essential if you are looking for a quality sound. Although some juggling may be needed to balance the parts correctly (not all singing tenor for example), simply auditioning for strong voices which can sing against harmony is best. Sight-singing ability, while useful, should not rule out a good singer, as all music must be performed without music anyway.

Choosing music is perhaps easier for girls than boys, but both International Barbershop organisations provide either free arrangements or a free music packet for new groups. It is recommended that a tempo song and a lyric delivery song (ballad) be chosen as the first pair, so that an understanding of the Barbershop style can be learnt from the outset. Just as a jazz singer doesn't sing the notes as written, Barbershop requires an understanding of the style in order to perform it correctly.

Use local Barbershop groups as well as sound and visual recordings to show the students the highest standards and to give them a feel for the style. The students may use these tools to help design a visual plan for the repertoire, and suggest costuming.

Resources

Local resources:

- Sweet Adelines in Australia: www.sweetadelines.org.au
This will give you the locations of your nearest choruses and a list of education faculty for women's Barbershop in Australia.
- Australian Association of Men Barbershop Singers: www.aambs.org.au
This will give you the locations of your nearest choruses and other information.
- Youth In Barbershop Development Initiative: www.yibdi.info
Based in Perth, WA, this group runs an annual youth workshop and is generally involved in the promotion of Barbershop in schools. If you are out of WA, they may assist in finding support for you. The website also has resources for teachers which may be useful.

International Websites:

- Sweet Adelines International: www.sweetadelineintl.org
The Young Women In Harmony program run by SAI offers a range of youth arrangements and other useful tools for teachers, including a free introductory packet.
- The Barbershop Harmony Society: www.barbershop.org
There are a number of free music arrangements available on this site, as well as a wealth of information on Barbershop.

If all else fails:

Contact me! Joanne Oosterhoff. I run the websites for Sweet Adelines in Australia, have helped run the workshops as a member of YIBDI, and I'm on the education faculty for Australian women's Barbershop. My website is <http://joanne.oosterhoff.info>

Conclusion

Summary of points, Q&A.

Requirements

Multimedia clips from CD and DVD will require an appropriate AV interface. A 2 page handout (a revision of this document) will be provided.