

Basic Barbershop Interpretation

Characteristic of the style, barbershop interpretation has several 'rules of thumb' by which we are guided as we strive to bring out the full musicality of our performances. These depend firstly on what kind of song it is.

Tempo Song (Uptune)

A Tempo Song or Uptune is one which is sung primarily with a strict beat. This can be 6/8, 3/4 or C - as long as it is IN TEMPO it falls in this category.

Tempo can only be changed or interrupted once during the song - the 'toe tap' of the audience must not be lost more than once or their enjoyment of the performance will be diminished. This means that acceptable forms include:

- songs with a single 'ad lib' verse sung in the middle
- the inclusion of a 'stomp' section
- a song that starts 'ad lib' then sets the tempo some way through.

If a return to the original tempo is required after such an interruption, this is usually done by a pause or fermata on the last note(s) of the ad lib or stomp section. Tempo can also be reset from a slower delivery by using an accelerando.

Many uptunes have an 'intro' which is generally sung 'ad lib', with the tempo set on the first beat of the verse or chorus which follows. Most uptunes complete with a 'tag' which is usually all or partly 'ad lib' as well, even if this is only a suspension on the penultimate tension chord and then a held resolution for the last chord. These bits are added to the top and back of a song to make it feel finished as there is no accompaniment to play an introduction or ending for us.

Ballad

Ballads are sung totally ad lib or rubato.

There is a general sense of 'pace' remaining, but all note values are changeable from what is written. The reason for this is that we strive to draw out as much of the song's message as possible - for some songs this is easy, as high notes and important phrases coincide, but for other songs, where the held value is often on an unimportant word (like 'is' or 'of') it can make a dramatic difference to the portrayal of the message.

For example, if the words are "life would be nothing without you" then you have a choice of emphasis: "life would be NOTHING without you" or "LIFE would be nothing without YOU" etc. One hopes (as in this case) the melody will help us: it peaks on 'nothing', so that's where the emphasis should be. This is where artistic license comes in, and individual interpretation and connection with the song. You certainly wouldn't wish to hold a chord on 'be' or 'would'!

In general, chords to hold include:

- where melody rises to a natural word and music climax
- in an end-phrase chord progression, the most interesting tension chord should be suspended the longest to increase the pleasure of resolution for the auditor
- where pleasant chording combines with word emphasis

Words are milked of all meaning, using emphasis by sound colour, embellishment, vocal effect etc. to add full dimensionality to the piece.

The placement of breaths within a phrase can also be used to create an effect. For example, “..so just kiss me one more time hold me one more time please kiss me once before we say goodbye” might be sung “..so just kiss me one more time // hold me one more time // please kiss me once // before we say goodbye” but by changing the breath points, drama and tension can be added to what is the musical climax of this song: “..so please kiss me one more time – hold me // one more time – please! // kiss me once before we say // goodbye”.

Dynamics

Dynamics follow word meaning and melodic direction.

Unless done for effect (eg from fff to ppp), dynamics shouldn't change significantly over a breath. Dynamic change should occur WITHIN the phrase, where it can be noticed by the ear and therefore used effectively to enhance musicality and meaning.

Dynamics and vocal colour are often used together to make echoes or repeated phrases sound different each time, so that the ear still ‘hears’ the message and passes it on. The brain will often ignore a phrase it has heard before if sung exactly the same.