

THE MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION—"IS IT CONTESTABLE?"

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Sweet Adelines International Music judges are frequently contacted by competing groups and asked to review music for possible use in a contest setting. The question is usually, "Is it contestable?" This is always a tricky question and it can't be answered by a simple "yes" or "no," because any song that has been deemed admissible in the organization's Song Assessment Tool may be sung in a SAI contest except for those specifically prohibited in our rules because of their religious or patriotic lyrics or those that are SAI official organizational songs.

Music judges evaluate the effectiveness of the song and arrangement on a continuum of weak to strong adherence to the barbershop style, and the vocal skills displayed in delivering that vehicle play a large role in our scoring of the performance. A better way of looking at potential music is to ask these two questions:

1. How weak or strong is this arrangement based on the standards set out in the Music Category of the Judging Category Description Book (JCDB)?
2. How closely does the difficulty level of this arrangement fit our current vocal skills?

To answer question #1 - What are the standards set out in the JCDB? Consult that document for details, but some of the main elements of a strong barbershop song and arrangement are:

- A predominance of the "big three" chords that tune and ring the most readily—major triads, dominant sevenths and dominant ninths. Other chords are used appropriately to add interest, to connect the stronger chords, and to establish a musical mood, but should not be the predominant chords.
- A song and arrangement mostly in the major mode (intros, verses, and interludes are sometimes in a minor mode, but a chorus in the major mode is strongest).
- A form that has repeated melody lines in a symmetrical pattern such as AABA, ABAC, etc.
- A harmonic pattern with chords that follow a dominant-to-tonic resolution
- There are other considerations, detailed in the JCDB; the four listed above are a good start!

To answer question #2 – Here are some hallmarks of a song/arrangement that will be singable and successful for the average singer. That's MOST of us!!! Some of these items match the list for question #1 above.

- Part lines with limited interval sizes and an overall range of an interval of a 10th or less
- Song in major mode
- Limited tempo requirements
- Limited key changes (none or one is best)
- A strong but simple structure
- Limited/simple embellishments
- A preponderance of the "big three" chords (major triad, dominant 7th and dominant 9th)
- Part lines well within the singers' comfort zones
- Part lines that remain on unaltered tones of the scale (limited number of accidentals)
- A frequent return to the major triad of the keynote

Factors that add difficulty to a song/arrangement and will affect scores in all four categories:

- Part lines outside any part's comfortable range, or that fall mainly in the register break, or that have wide-spread or odd interval jumps
- Chords that are widespread or that have an octave + gap between adjacent parts
- Melody switch to other parts
- Abundance of accidentals
- Chromatic runs
- Tempo and/ or rhythm demands (backbeat, syncopation, or odd rhythms)
- Not enough natural breathing places
- Abundance of hard consonant sounds or short vowel sounds, wordy passages
- Baritone above lead for extended passages or baritone & lead crossing back & forth repeatedly
- Cross relationships (one voice part has to find a note just ½ step away from the note another voice part just sang)
- Cross-part jumps (one voice part has to find a note that's higher or lower than the note just sung by the adjacent voice part)
- Parallel motion (all 4 voice parts moving the same direction at the same time)
- Tag "hangers" in the voice part's register break
- Tag "hangers" beyond the comfort zone for breath support
- Music that is "over-arranged" in general--too many embellishments, chord changes, arrangement devices that call attention to the arrangement and the arranger and not to the song and the singer
- Music that was originally arranged for TTBB voices and has simply been transposed to a different key for use by SSAA singers

Most arrangements contain some of the difficulty factors listed above. Choose your music based on the ones YOUR singing group can successfully handle.

A couple of additional pieces of advice:

- Just because "Lovely Singers quartet" or "Happy Harmonizers chorus" scored well with a vehicle, don't assume that means it is strong for contest. Their vocal skills may have caused the 70% Performance side of the Music score sheet to overcome weaknesses in the 30% Song and Arrangement side. And—they might have scored even higher with a more traditional barbershop arrangement.
- It's difficult to assess the strength of an arrangement simply by checking the arranger's or learning track maker's listing to see if they call it "contestable." Arrangers and track makers sell their creations for use in various barbershop organizations' contests, and the music expectations vary in those organizations.
- The JCDB is available free of charge on the SAI website to members. Log into the Members Only section and click on "Education" to find the link to the document. It is the defining document for contest expectations for Sweet Adelines International.

Finding the right music for your ensemble is a difficult, time-consuming, and often frustrating task. Finding the right music is, in the end, a joy!

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