

## Vocal Education Series

### **Part 5 - Twist and Shout**

By René Torres

*Execution of choreography is an inevitable part of barbershop singing. Since the quality of sound is paramount, how do you cope with choreography while at the same time maintaining a good sound? That's the subject of this article.*

#### **The performer's stance**

Basically, the best singing position is one where you are standing comfortably, with your weight evenly distributed on both feet, with a slight "lift" to the body, as in eager expectation. This position has the advantage of keeping your air path straight and uninterrupted. There is a straight-line relationship between your diaphragm muscles (for support), your lungs, trachea (voice box), throat, and facial cavities. This position allows you to apply only the required amount of breath support to the diaphragm and still have a consistent steady sound.

As long as you stay in this position, you will have a great deal of control over expressive nuances, intensity, color, etc. Problems begin to show up when you deviate from this relaxed, almost unconscious singing position, and begin to move your body in time with the music. The key to a consistent sound--in any position--is to try to keep the relationship of that air path as straight as possible no matter what your position.

#### **Basic side steps**

There are several basic body positions as you sing, and several basic transitions to keep in mind. Let's take the transitions first. Easy, slow steps as you sing are probably the most common of moves for the lower body. If they are done slowly, there is basically no difference than if you were standing still. The primary thing you have to keep in mind is not to step too hard, because if you do this, your sound will jolt, and the effect will be noticeable to the audience. This is usually the case for side-to-side steps as well. Do not sway from the waist as this type of movement may kink your air path. If you have to move sideways, use your lower body as a pivot point. The entire upper body should sway as one piece, and keep trying to touch the ceiling with your head. This will prevent droopy posture and droopy sound.

#### **Advanced steps**

Next in difficulty is stepping up or down (as on risers). Now the problem becomes complicated, because other muscles come into play that could affect your sound quality. A step up uses lower back muscles, and they are also being used to support the sound. As a result, if you do not compensate for the extra tension as you move up, the sound will momentarily sound forced (like when punched in the stomach). The best way around this is to see if you can time the step to coincide with a breath. That way, you are not singing at that moment, and no harm is done. If you can do this, take the breath just before stepping up. Then time the move such that you start letting out the breath and sound just before you complete the move. In that way, the attack does not sound plosive. If you are not able to time the step and are forced to sing as you move, then the best thing to do is to back off slightly on your conscious breath support while those muscles are tensed for the move. Remember, though, that if you do this, two things can happen: The note will tend to go flat, and the color will diminish. Therefore, if you are conscious of it, you can correct for the quality of sound as you go. If you do it right, the volume does not necessarily diminish.

Stepping down has its own set of problems. As mentioned before, the best approach is to step down while you are taking a breath, but this is not always possible. There is an unconscious instinct to look down to see where you are going to step. This drops the body, bends the throat, kinks the airway, and directs the sound to the floor. It takes your eyes off the director. Needless to say, none of these are good things. Against your instinct, you must train yourself to already know where you are going to step. Get to the point where you can step down without looking, keep the body raised, and face the audience so the sound goes forward.

Stepping down also involves relaxing diaphragm muscles to allow the body to bend. Some of those muscles could be engaged in breath support, and stepping down will cause loss of breath support. It takes a conscious effort to maintain control while singing.

Stepping up and down while singing takes practice, as does everything we wish to do well. A good exercise to try at home for both of these transitions is to hold a comfortable note as you climb and descend stairs. You will see the problems as they affect you. Climb up and come down the stairs facing backwards (be careful!), and facing forwards, but looking back. These are the two typical stage moves where you wish to sing towards the audience. As you get good at it, try some progressively harder notes and see what happens.

### **Head moves.**

Let's consider the upper part of the body. Head moves are the easiest to do, provided you are aware that the air paths must stay open. Jerky moves are always something to avoid, as the sound comes out jerky as well.

Looking up and down presents the possibility of complications. We already mentioned the problems of looking down when we covered stepping down; and as suggested, simply avoid it. If it is a planned move, however, the trick is to tilt slightly back as you look down. Try to do this as imperceptibly as possible, and your sound quality will be less degraded.

Looking up is good for the voice! It is probably the one move where your posture improves the sound quality. The benefit occurs if you do not tense the neck muscles and do not look up too far. Tense neck and throat muscles will pinch the sound.

### **Arm moves.**

After facial expressions, the arms are the most used parts of the body for choreography. Their use is entirely a matter of timing as far as sound production is concerned. Try this simple exercise. Stand erect with your feet together, and then raise your arms as you exhale, and lower them as you inhale. Repeat this exercise five times, and form a mental image of what your lungs are sensing. Then, reverse the procedure, and raise your arms as you inhale, lower them as you exhale for five repetitions. Normally it is easier to raise the arms as you inhale and lower them as you exhale. This is so, because your rib cage is being helped to expand as you raise your arms. Thus, the best arm moves for singing are those that allow you to take a breath as you raise the arms, and sing as you lower them. Up on the breath, down on the sound.

Any move becomes more complicated when performed at a faster tempo or in combination with other moves. So try to think the move through at home and, if all else fails, remember that the sound is paramount. Do what you have to do to preserve its quality.