

## Vocal Education Series

### **Part 6 – Words to Sing By**

By René Torres

Much of the instrumental music of yesterday and today evokes moods and feelings as you hear it. Unfortunately, what it evokes in one person is not necessarily what is evoked in another. Even when the composer tells you what the mood should be – as when you are given a description of what is going on (the Grand Canyon Suite or The Moldau, for example) – you are still left to flounder inside a loose “frame” of music.

#### **Boats upon the river**

Only when words are added to a piece of music do we begin to have a common ground upon which to build a concept, feeling, emotion, or mood that can be shared by all. Overall, if it can be said that the music is the river, then the words are the boats upon it. German composers called this the “ring” of words.

So when you first pick up a piece of barbershop music that you (or your quartet/chorus) is considering, the words will have a great deal of influence on whether you accept or reject it. If it is to be part of a repertoire, does it fit? If you are looking for common themes, do the words fit in with the theme? Let’s look at words a little closer.

#### **Getting the message across**

The first thing a good song should have (text-wise) is one thought. If more than one thought is present, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to sing it and still convey your message to the audience. Check out the words to any hit song and you will see that only one message is presented.

Words should stand on their own. If the words to a song are written out as a poem, there should be no doubt as to their meaning, even if there is no music.

Consider the phrases in the song as distinct yet part of the overall whole. Different parts of the poem will have their own internal “song,” depending on where in the piece they are placed. The message to be conveyed should be stated (as in the Introduction), developed, possibly have variations, and when the song is over, the listener should feel that there is “closure” of the thought expressed.

#### **Is this a song I want to sing?**

To answer this question, first look at the words without the music. Is it something you (or your group) can sell? Is it in keeping with the image of the group? The style of the group? The feelings of the group? The occasion (or occasions) where it will be primarily sung?

Say the words out loud. Do they have a “ring” to them? Do they follow a natural rhythm? Do they flow easily?

Write the words out in your own handwriting. Flowing the words onto the paper, as opposed to pecking away at a keyboard, will help you connect better with the lyrics. As you write, watch for stresses in the writing, points of emphasis, places where your hand hesitates, where it accelerates as you flow with the mood. If there are words or phrases you do not understand, look them up in a dictionary or thesaurus and write their meanings in the margin. This will be of help later.

After you have them written down, read the words again from your handwritten paper and underline those words that deserve (or naturally seem to have) emphasis. This will be the beginning of the interpretation of the song as it cries out to be sung.

Once you have a plan on paper in the manner described above, then play or listen to the music written to underlie those words. Say the words mentally to check for “fit” with the main thought of the piece. Watch for places where the music seems to “get in the way” of the words. These are places to de-emphasize as you sing. If there are places where the music just naturally seems to go along with the words (as a well composed piece should), note it as a possible place for emphasis as to volume, color, expression, rubato, or a musical pause — whichever you determine to be most appropriate.

As an added step, you may now wish to physically write out the words again. This time, you should see that mental images form and interpretive nuances begin to emerge as you write. This is the beginning of true comprehension of what the composer had in mind when he or she was conceiving the work.

Now, having a preliminary interpretation “worksheet” from which to start, sing the song slowly and get the whole “flow” of the piece. With this much “homework,” you will find that the song has already taken on a personal meaning. It will be easier to remember, easier to interpret and, as a result, easier to convey to your audience. You will have made the song a part of yourself, and all that is left to do is give that of yourself to the audience as you sing.

If the work is to be sung in a quartet or group, it is important that the members of the ensemble generally agree on the interpretation and motivation for the song prior to learning it and committing to its performance.

Don't be afraid if your “interpretation” is not exactly the same as another person's. Although a well-composed work will allow only some leeway to the singer, there is always room for freedom of expression. Remember Nat King Cole's rendition of “Blue Moon” and the later rock-and-roll version? Same song, entirely different renditions. But importantly, the same message.

Don't lose sight of the power of “pre-digesting” a song before you commit it to memory. It is easier to learn a song you believe in. A little homework goes a long way. It's the difference between a good interpretation and a great one.