



MATT BOSTICK

The Hallmark

7th Chord

Music judges recommend a new standard to measure its prominence

One of the hallmarks of the barbershop style is the barbershop 7th chord. Beginning in the early 1970s (see history sidebar), Arrangement judges would penalize songs that contained fewer than 33% barbershop 7th chords. When the three-category judging system was created in 1993, this criterion was maintained in the new Music Category Description.

For some time, this 33% criterion has been in question, and not because most barbershop songs do not indeed contain roughly 33% 7th chords. The practice of using the 33% figure as a preeminent factor to judge what constitutes barbershop carries inherent challenges:

1. Songs and/or arrangements that previously would have been significantly penalized or disqualified prior to 1993 have for some time been acceptable in competition. For most of these songs/arrangements, the 33% criterion still works as a reliable measure, but for others it does not. Among some songs/arrangements that fall short of the 33% mark are great examples of the barbershop style, including “What’ll I Do?”, “Once Upon a Time,”

“Smilin’ Through,” “Love Letters,” “Don’t Blame Me” and a number of other popular arrangements. Barbershoppers find value in performing these, and virtually any audience would conclude these are solidly in the barbershop style. They deserve their rightful place on competition stage without reduction.

2. No one can really judge the quantity of 7ths in real-time during a performance. Even though a judge can identify the musical pillars of each measure, actual counting is subjective due to a variety of causes. As a result, assessing this criterion often

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led to judging errors (thinking an arrangement was fine when it fell short, or reducing the score when it actually met the criterion).

3. We have seen efforts in the past to shoe-horn or engineer 7th chords just to make the 33% count. This is unnatural and not good music. In these cases, the 33% criterion was being misused to justify arrangements for contest that otherwise may not have been strong vehicles to showcase the hallmarks of the barbershop style. This sort of practice is not one we wish to encourage. On the flipside, we have seen competitors take some of the songs mentioned earlier and distort them to get the perceived 7th count higher. These are also bad musical practices that we do not wish to encourage.

Recommendations

Earlier this year, all Music category judges were solicited for their concerns and feelings about the 33% criterion. Additionally, Music category judges spanning a variety of perspectives were assembled to look at the criterion and see how it could be improved to reflect the current view of the style without compromising one of the hallmarks of the style. At the beginning of March, they delivered their report to me. The Music Board of Review and I reviewed and approved these two report recommendations:

1. *Remove the single statement concerning the 33% guideline. This recommendation was based upon the strength of the Category Description before and after the 33% statement. Statements concerning the requirement of a predominance of major triads and barbershop 7ths still exist. Most importantly, the requirement of circle of fifths movement still exists, which promotes the frequent use of the barbershop 7th.*
2. *Create a position paper to describe the history and intent of the 33% criterion and how the Music judge's score can be impacted by arrangements with low 7th count.*

Recommendation 1. Recommendation #1 could cause undue alarm among the most conservative among us. Here is how the category description would read with that recommendation:

Other than the major triad, the most prominent chord should be the barbershop 7th chord. Songs that favor the use of any other chords over the use of dominant 7th chords and major triads may result in a lower Music score, even forfeiture in extreme cases.

Chord progressions in the barbershop style

History of the 33% criterion

Prior to the early 1970s, there was no judging quantification associated with the frequency of the barbershop 7th. During the early 1970s, Joe Liles, Dave Stevens and Val Hicks were charged with attempting to codify the style. In order to accomplish this task, they took *core* barbershop material and characterized different aspects that they observed. One of the ideas they investigated was counting the number of beats that barbershop 7ths occupied. For their stack of arrangements, they found a minimum of 35% barbershop 7ths. This finding was then incorporated into the Arrangement category. This was reduced a few years later to a minimum of 33% barbershop 7ths.

For both the Arrangement category and the Music category, the Category Description has been clear that the two most frequent chords should be major triads and barbershop 7ths. All judges and barbershoppers agree that we favor songs/arrangements with a high frequency of these chords. When the Music category came into existence, many of the Arrangement category criteria were incorporated, including the 33% criterion.

What is a 7th chord? The barbershop 7th chord is built on scale tones 1-3-5-b7 (e.g. G-B-D-F). Songs that have frequent circle of fifths motion will likely exhibit a high count of barbershop 7th chords, especially songs that go far out on the circle and resolve around the circle of fifths. Songs that feature other resolutions may or may not feature the barbershop 7th as prominently. In these cases, the melody will often determine whether or not barbershop 7th chords can be featured prominently.

are based on the harmonic practice of dominant 7th (and ninth) chords resolving primarily on the circle of fifths, but making frequent use of other resolutions.

What is key in this section is the mention of circle of fifths. When a song has circle of fifths motion, it should provide ample opportunity to feature barbershop 7ths characteristic of the barbershop style. In addition, the statement that forfeiture could result in extreme cases reinforces the importance of the barbershop 7th. Music judges intuitively follow circle of fifths motion and have no problem determining whether 7th chords are prominently featured.

Recommendation 2. Creating a position paper is the heart of this change. Rather than having a single statement buried in the Music Category Description, we can articulate how much all barbershoppers value one of the defining hallmarks of our style in an entire paper. All of us want songs that have a lot of barbershop 7ths. However, we have examples of great barbershop literature (cited earlier) that do not meet this criterion, as well as poor examples of barbershop literature that meet this criterion at the expense of others. If the texture of a song is arranged in the barbershop style featuring our hallmarks, then it should likely fly in contest, regardless of the count of 7th chords.

As much as objective criterion measures are desired, we judge art. Each piece of art is unique unto itself and should be judged on its own merits. When math trumps artistry, we risk entering the territory of the "Pritchard Scale" so savaged in the movie *Dead Poet's Society*. This proposed change to the category description will allow for Joe Barbershopper to sing material that is clearly barbershop without fear, yet expresses the importance of one of the hallmarks of our style in greater detail. ■



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