

People Hear What They See

(submitted by Joan Ross, Education Services Coordinator)

Ladies, this month we have an article from a friend of ours. Bobby Gray, Jr. is a Barbershop Harmony Society Presentation Judge who has judged many of our contests, and taught craft classes for us. He took the time to write out a thoughtful paper that speaks to our non-verbal, non-singing communication responsibility as performers and has allowed me to share it with all of Harmony, Inc. Please read it, think about it, and use the information in when you are planning and performing.

People Hear What They See

The Importance of the “Visual” on the Barbershop Performance

By Bobby Gray Jr.,

Presentation Judge

(written September 17, 2006)

“We are a musical organization.” “I didn’t join to learn how to dance.” “People come to our performances to hear the singing.” “If you don’t sing well, nothing else matters”. I’m sure that you’ve heard these statements, or statements like them, from fellow Barbershoppers or you’ve even been quoted as saying them yourself. After participating in this art form for over 38 years, I can say that I agree whole-heartedly... and this, mind you, is coming from a Presentation Judge!

We are all about the music, the melodies, the lyrics and the songs that people leave our performances humming. The quality of music that they listen to, and that they “hear”, is paramount to having a successful performance in our barbershop arena. The reason they come and the reason they leave so thrilled at having attended is the music, the quality of the singing, the excellence of intonation, and the sweetness of consonant chords. What they “hear” is what will keep them coming back. Yes ... it’s all about what they “hear” that makes barbershop special.

I suppose if I was in the Singing category, I could end the article right here and simply implore you to work on your vocal production, your vowel matching, your breath control, your intonation and your general singing prowess. I could give you some tips on how you could achieve vocal excellence and my task would be complete on providing some insight into the successful barbershop performance.

Ah ... I bet you knew there was a catch. No doubt you’ve heard the phrase *“perception is reality”*. For an audience, how they “perceive” your quartet or chorus performance is what will be the “reality” of how your performance will be received and remembered.

Let’s consider another cliché ***“People hear what they see”***. Think of some of the performances you’ve seen, been thrilled with, and then heard the recording later and said to yourself, “that couldn’t have been the same performance.” Some of the greatest performances I’ve experienced in this wonderful musical art form fall into that category. Who wasn’t thrilled with 4 Under Par the year they finished in the top ten. Yet ... when I heard the top ten album for that year ... well ... you really couldn’t experience the impact of their top ten performance when listening to the recording. People truly do hear what they see.

If you agree with me so far, then you must recognize the importance of the visual aspects of our art form. If people truly “hear what they see”, then the “perception” of our singing, the core of our art form, can be altered by the visual presentation that accompanies our music. Although we “are a musical organization” there is no doubt that we must work a great deal, if not as hard, on our visual presentations.

“So fine,” you say. What exactly do you mean about working on our visual presentations and how do we go about doing it? Although books could be written about this subject, the first step is an awareness of what visual “basics” impact our presentations and communicate the mood, emotion,

and feelings of the music and lyrics we present. I will try to summarize with some “vowel sounds” of visual presentation.

The following are some things to consider:

Body Language –

I can never bring you to realize the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumbnails, or the great issues that may hang from a bootlace. -- Sherlock Holmes to Watson ("A Case of Identity") So ... I bet you never thought that Sherlock Holmes could provide some insight for us Barbershoppers to spend more of our time working on our visual presentations. Yet if we realize that all of our movements contribute to other's “perception” of us as performers, then maybe old Sherlock was right ... the importance of the visual is paramount; so much so that there are organizations whose only charter is the study of body language as it relates to human emotion and communication.

The Center for Nonverbal Studies (CNS) is a private, nonprofit research center located in Spokane, Washington. The Center is committed to the idea that, for a deeper understanding of “who we are” and “what it means to be human,” more attention should be paid to our nonverbal nature. Although they deal with issues relating to improving relationships, sales techniques and other business related communication techniques, it's interesting to note how these principals relate to what we do in performance. In commenting on body language they state, “The nonverbal brain expresses itself through diverse motions of our bodily parts. That body movement is central to our expressiveness and is reflected in the ancient Indo-European root, meue- (“mobile”), for the English word, *emotion*.”

Wow ... “emotion”... the very thing that we try to inject in our music and the very thing that creates “perception” in our audiences. In this article we would never have time to go into details of body language, but suffice it to say that our body language plays an important role in communicating the emotion of our lyrics and music.

Gestures –

Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind. --Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (1850)

Gestures, or what we might call “choreography” is defined as “a body movement, posture, or material artifact which encodes or influences a concept, motivation, or mood (thus, a gesture is neither matter nor energy, but information). In its most generic sense, a gesture is a sign, signal, or cue used to communicate in tandem with, or apart from, words and music. Gestures include facial expressions (e.g., EYEBROW-RAISE, SMILE), and body movements (e.g., HAND MOVEMENT, ARM MOVEMENT, FOOT MOVEMENT), and postures (e.g., ANGULAR DISTANCE). Keep in mind that the impacts of our gestures are multiplied by four (in a quartet) or many (in the case of a chorus). Gestures can accent and increase the audience's perception of our vocal dynamics, our moods, our tempos, our tone colors and the general emotion of the song. I've heard it said, “If we can entertain an audience of half deaf people and half blind people, how successful that performance would be to our average audience. Gestures can be one of our most expressive tools in influencing an audience's perception of our singing and our music.

Facial Expression –

I will often fly great distances to meet someone face to face --Mark H. McCormack (What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School, 1984:9) We've often heard from our judges that facial expression is the most important aspect of our visual performance. Even at the International Convention, where people are sometimes football fields away from the stage, the “Big Screen” brings our audience to the front row. We can't escape the fact that our audiences see and relate closely to our facial moods and expressions. Studies in the field of non-verbal

communication reveal that the combined expressive force of our mobile chin, lip, cheek, eye, and brow muscles is without peer in the animal kingdom. Better than any body parts, our faces reveal emotions, opinions, and moods. While we learn to manipulate some expressions (see, e.g., SMILE), many unconscious facial expressions (see, e.g., LIP-POUT, TENSE-MOUTH and JAW, EYE MOVEMENT and FOCUS) reflect our true feelings and hidden attitudes. Having an awareness and total control of our facial expression is critical to our ability to have our audiences “hear what they see” and more importantly, hear what we would like them to hear in terms of mood generation and emotional delivery. Musically we may be delivering, but if our music isn’t synchronized with our visual presentations, and in particular, our facial expression, the audience will be confused and our impact will be diminished.

Yes ... people do “hear what they see” and our presentations must incorporate that philosophy. If this is not the case, see how many tickets you can sell to your next performance where you simply play your CD to your audience! “Don’t be silly,” you say, “people would never come to a theatre to hear a CD.” OK ... I agree, it’s a silly thought. So, let’s make it a point to accept the fact that, in our musical organization, where the singing, the chords, the intonation, the melodies and the lyrics are what we are all about, and our visual presentation is just as important. It’s important that we spend a great deal of effort and time working on the visual aspects of our performance. It’s so important because people “hear what they see!”