

Imagination and Creativity in Modern Collegiate A Cappella Arranging, Performing, and Recording

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Introduction

A cappella is a relatively young art form that is catching the interest of many people across the nation. The popular movement is believed to have been started in 1909, when part of the Yale Glee Club broke off and formed the Yale Whiffenpoofs, the first collegiate a cappella group; the Whiffenpoofs exist to this day, and the a cappella movement has only grown in popularity.

Throughout the middle decades of the 20th century, professional a cappella groups attracted a lot of attention for their renditions of popular songs. As this new progressive style caught on, the a cappella art form evolved from its roots in harmonically complex barbershop quartets into a more modern and freely structured type of music. The trend-setting groups remained attentive to musicality, but left behind the rigidity commonly associated with barbershop performance. Songs like “Mr. Sandman,” by the Chordettes, and “It Won’t Be Very Long,” by the Soul Stirrers, showed people that a cappella could be exciting and also that it could tackle a multitude of musical genres.

The next big developments in a cappella came on the collegiate front. While professional groups retained their popularity, their numbers did not increase much toward the end of the 20th century. On the other hand, the number of college groups skyrocketed during this same time period. According to the Mainely A Cappella website's history of a cappella, since 1989, there have been about 20 new groups formed at schools across the nation every year.¹ This paper suggests that the reason for the drastic spike in collegiate interest in a cappella is because students began to realize the wide range of creative expression that can be achieved through this art form.

In a cappella, there are three main avenues for creative expression. Within each avenue are a variety of distinct lanes, but all of them pertaining to arranging, performing, or recording vocal music. This paper will show how a cappella fosters the creativity and imagination of each member of a group through these three main avenues, and in doing so, it will show the reason that the popularity of a cappella in the collegiate spectrum has grown so vigorously.

NOTE : Unless otherwise stated, the arranging, performing, and recording experiences related in this paper come from my last three years performing with the MIT Logarhythms.

¹ Historical information taken from the Mainely A Cappella website. See reference list.

Arranging

For the most part, modern collegiate a cappella groups do not sing original songs. Though they may have a trademark song or two that was composed by someone in the group, the bulk of a group's repertoire comes from covered songs. This lack of original songs does not necessarily indicate a lack of imagination or creativity on the part of the group or the members thereof. In fact, the ability to take a popular song and make a purely vocal arrangement of it is an art that requires a great deal of imagination and creativity.

Arranging popular music into vocal parts is like an abstraction of the original piece into a more pure and simple form. This abstraction is of itself creative, as it generates new and different ways to look at problems. In Ward, Finke, and Smith's book, *Creativity and the Mind*, there is a lengthy discussion of abstraction as a means of invention. They note, "In mounting a more abstract assault on a problem we still deliberately apply knowledge, but we marshal it differently." (128) Arrangers apply their knowledge about a song, but they make it more abstract by translating the parts into vocal lines. This act of abstraction is very hard to do and takes much imagination and creativity.

The primary difficulty of making a good a cappella arrangement stems from a fundamental conundrum of the entire a cappella genre. Instruments were originally created as technology to do what the human voice could not do. However, in modern a cappella arranging, the goal is often to make the voice sound as much like an instrument as possible.

Imagination is required to see how unique sounds like bells, guitars, or drums can be placed back into voices. The instruments were created to surpass vocal or other bodily techniques, but there are still ways to get a voice to make the right sound for almost any instrument. A large part of getting the right sound is picking a suitable syllable. For bells, this might be a ding or dong, dink or donk, jing or jong, etc. The arranger must assess the overall quality of the sound before he can pick a suitable syllable to sing on. Most instruments can easily be vocally replicated in this way. For some instruments like piano, where the mix of percussiveness and sound quality is almost beyond human capabilities, an arranger must choose whether to put in a decent sounding but not totally accurate syllable such as 'dun' or to just put in purely vowels or words into the background part. Actually, inserting words into the background parts is often a stylistic decision on the part of the arranger that will be discussed a bit later.

Sometimes the complexity of a part is not in the sound of the instrument, but in the range or rhythm in which the part is played. In order for the part to come out clearly, the arranger must spread out that part throughout a number of vocal lines. For an arpeggiated guitar line, there may be three or four parts that together create the overall effect. Each part is given the same syllable so that there is a uniform sound for the guitar. The parts are then placed at staggered intervals to create the arpeggio that is heard in the guitar in the original song. The arranger also must place notes where they will fit in peoples' ranges so that they are capable of singing the notes in the way the arranger wants. Using these basic techniques and expanding upon them, an arranger can effectively imitate almost any instrumental line.

To start an arrangement, a person in the group chooses some song that he likes and listens to it until he knows every part of it inside and out. After transcribing the solo line, which usually sticks to whatever the original soloist did, the arranger gets a chance to be truly creative when he builds up the background parts. Basic background arrangements can be as simple as long, held out notes on the correct chords, but this lacks creative flair.

Modern collegiate a cappella arrangers strive to capture not only the chord progression of a song, but also the textures and characteristic

instrumental sounds in the song. This task varies in difficulty from song to song. A simple song like “All the Small Things,” by the punk rock band Blink 182, is easily arranged using a minimal number of parts. The guitar line is almost entirely done with repeated eighth note power chords, and the bass line is in quarter notes on the tonic note of the chord. Using the syllables na, nare, and dare for the guitar, and the syllables dit and dow for the bass, the song is halfway done. Add in one person on vocal percussion and one person on the solo and the song is brought to life. However, as already stated, this song is on the easy side of the spectrum in terms of arranging.

A song that represents the more complex side of arranging is “Blurry” by Puddle of Mudd. In the opening sequence, there is an extremely complex series of interweaving notes between bass, guitar, and bells. In order to accomplish the arranging of this sequence, all of the parts must work together with a common line in mind, even though they are all singing at different times. If everything is sung as it is written, then when all parts are sung together, the entire sound quality, timing, and tuning make the group sound just like the opening sequence of Blurry.

There is another big arranging trick that was touched on earlier that needs to be developed a little further. Imitating instruments with unique

syllables is a fascinating task, but it gets boring if that is all a background part does. In order to keep both the audience and the singer of the part mentally and emotionally involved, the arranger can choose to insert words into the background parts. Lyrics are the basis and the backbone of almost all vocal music, and “therefore any approach to the interpretation of vocal music...must of necessity begin with the consideration of the text which has been set to music.” (Hemsley, 112) The text may tell a story or describe a scene which the author is witnessing. The author’s tone or emotions will come out through this text, so it is fundamental that a singer derives his emotional state during a song from the words in that song. Sometimes this is difficult to do as a background singer, which is a big reason why words are added into the background parts.

The words that are added into a background part may be simply repeats of whatever the soloist is saying, or they may be something completely different thrown in for comedic effect. If the words are repeats, they are provided to emphasize the lyrics at this point of the song. This technique serves a dual purpose of engaging the background singer in the song and of drawing more of the audience’s attention to whatever lyrics the soloist sang. Since the words for these parts usually do not exist in the actual song (unless there are backup singer parts), this is a chance for the

arranger to add originality into his arrangement besides just the choices of how to best replicate the instruments in the song.

There is one other commonly used arranging technique that allows arrangers additional room for creativity. This technique is to put together various songs in a sort of medley to create something original from bits and pieces of other songs. The popular method that is currently being used is to do most of a song normally, then insert part of another song by the same band at the end, and then return to the first song. This provides an imaginative alternative to the actual song, but some arrangers have the tendency to get carried away with this technique. The best arrangers are able to either seamlessly integrate these other songs into their work or to make the arrangement so full and developed that there is no need to distract from it by adding in a portion of another song.

Performing

Performing is the main focus of a cappella, since this is when the entire group comes together to create a song. It is also the time when each individual is able to express himself through the music and to connect with a live audience so that the feelings and emotions that come out in the song are shared. There must be a mix of art and science, since the performance should be creative, and yet it still needs to be rehearsed to the point of

automation. A more scientific approach to learning songs will enable a singer to be more emotive when performing, since he will be able to concentrate on the meaning behind the song and not be totally preoccupied with singing the correct notes. The notes are obviously important, but higher goals exist beyond a mechanical performance of correct pitches.

Emotions are the driving force behind all vocal performance. As Irving Singer observes in the introduction to his book *Feeling and Imagination*, “The singer tries to initiate and experience different kinds of felt rapport – with (his) listeners in the audience, obviously, but also with the conductor,...with the artists in a vocal ensemble, and above all with the music itself.” Singer correctly identifies the connections that should be made during a vocal performance, and for the most part, he puts them in the order that a cappella singers should think about them. Ultimately, it is a bond with the music that should give rise to all of the other connections that develop in a performance.

In a cappella, the first commitment a singer has is to the arrangement as it has been learned (the “music itself”). After this, the singer must be in harmony with his surrounding singers so that everything is in tune and in time. One will note that if everyone is focusing on singing their part as it fits into the arrangement, this second goal should be relatively easy and should

consist mostly of remembering to listen around the group. After the group connection is the connection to the audience that is developed through emotionally expressive singing. Finally, if the conductor has done his work ahead of time, he acts mostly as a figurehead during the performance and should simply work on keeping the group together and focused on relating to the audience. To achieve this order of goals, there are many processes that must take place before a song is ready to be performed.

When an arranger completes a song, he gives his arrangement to the conductor, who decides whether or not the group should learn the arrangement. If the song is simply too easy or too difficult, it will not fit in with the rest of the repertoire of the group and thus it is not worth learning. If the conductor accepts the song, he will often work with the arranger to add creative input and to clean up any problem sections in the arrangement. Once the arrangement is up to snuff, the group can start to learn it.

In learning arrangements, it is important that each person in the group knows the basic sound and structure of the original song so that they can know how their part fits into the whole. This takes some imagination to move from a produced song played by a band to an abstract arrangement that is produced solely through voices. The central theme of Hemsley's book as he states it is, "Imagination is an essential prerequisite of singing – not an

optional extra.” This is true in all singing, but especially so in a cappella. Each person must individually think about singing his part accurately and well, but then he must also consider how his part blends and interacts with other parts. During this process of learning, each person of the group is usually allowed to use his imagination to make stylistic interpretations for how to perform his particular line of the song. For the solo line, there is a lot of room for interpretation, but the background parts do not have as much freedom.

The singer is not given as much imaginative freedom as the arranger since it is the arranger’s vision of the song that is created by the interplay of parts. The interactions between vocal parts used in order to imitate higher complexity songs require that each part be sung with a certain style and tone that may or may not be defined by the arranger. If one person sings in a different way than all of the rest of the people on his part, he will stick out like a sore thumb and possibly destroy the final product. If everyone sings at the correct levels, with the right tone, diction, notes, and general blend, it is possible to attain a higher goal of creating as a group.

Sawyer’s book, *Group Creativity*, does an excellent job of looking at the ways in which groups function together to be creative as a whole. Even outside of the realm of the arts, groups often transcend the creativity of

individuals to get to a higher goal. Sawyer relates the following study as support of his claims about group creativity:

In the 1980's, a group of psychologists known as *socioculturalists* began to study individuals in different social and cultural contexts...They studied how individuals behave intelligently and effectively in specific cultural contexts, while engaged in well-defined tasks with culturally valued goals. While observing these psychological processes as they occur in rich social settings, the socioculturalists gradually began to believe that these processes were not, strictly speaking, “psychological” – rather, individual cognitive processes were so deeply embedded in group practices that it was difficult to identify what was “individual psychology” and what was “group process.” (Sawyer, 21)

The results obtained by these ‘socioculturalists’ is consistent with the way most a cappella groups work. Groups must come together as a cohesive unit to be truly creative in this art form. Individuals must heed their own responsibilities, but still remember that without everyone else, performing would not even be possible.

Recording

In a cappella recordings, creativity focuses around bringing to life a perfect version of the arranger's conceptualization of his song. In an ideal situation, a group could spend as long as possible to get a perfect recording of every part from every singer in the group. In reality, this is almost never possible. Fortunately, technological developments in the field of audio recording have enabled groups to pay greater attention to detail, and thus to produce more intricate, complex, and interesting musical works.

In the past, a cappella groups were constrained by the currently available technology so that they had to record in large groups. Transcription, wire, and tape recording techniques left much to be desired as far as data saving capabilities were concerned. Because of this lack of memory, songs were usually tracked by the entire group at the same time. They would stand around one microphone and sing take after take until they settled on one that was good enough. Since all of the individual waveforms were immediately blended together to make the overall track, it was impossible to do editing or mixing of single parts. Even just the act of selecting the good takes and piecing them together with other parts of the song was an arduous process. With the advent of digital recording, this style of group tracking has become anachronistic.

Digital recording is perfectly suited for a cappella recording, and may help to explain the sudden burst of interest in a cappella in the late 80's. Born in 1982 with the creation of CD's, digital recording far surpasses other recording techniques in its ability to capture individual parts.² Each part can be recorded separately, and it is also saved directly into computer memory, instead of as analog data, as in previous techniques. Digital recording has enabled arrangers to produce amazing recordings from lesser quality tracks because each part can be individually manipulated.

The most modern digital recording systems come fully loaded with tons of tricks to help producers and arrangers to create exactly what they want, even if the singers did not sing their parts entirely right. Tricks that are currently being used include the following: being able to fix the pitches of notes and thus creates perfect chords by taking a digital copy of every person's voice and constraining the final output to the desired frequencies of each note; aligning each part on the right beat or part of a beat; sampling or sequencing parts so that only a small section must be sung and then repeated wherever else it occurs in the song. Even more advanced tricks like adding distortion or fading a part from side to side are being commonly used because of the ease with which digital recording makes them possible.

Conclusion

² Taken from Recording Technology History. See reference list.

A cappella groups have provided an extremely valuable and meaningful outlet for thousands of college students in the last century to artistically express themselves. It allows groups to perform a vast array of songs that demonstrate all facets of their creative expression. Many levels of creativity can be achieved in arrangements and in performances, as well as in recording.

College students who have been brought up with musical training seem to be drawn to this genre of music because of the possibilities for further development of musical abilities. This development may come in many different forms, and a cappella provides the means for all of these forms to flourish. Sawyer provides great insight when he says, “Ritualized ensemble genres, by virtue of their rigidity, do not provide as many opportunities for individual performers to act in creative ways.” (129) A cappella music breaks away from traditional forms of music to create something wholly new and special that is both musically pure and extremely progressive.

Music is an essential part of education because of all of the benefits it provides for its students. As Michael Kendall of Bethel College simply states, “Music enhances the quality of human life. The study and performance of music stimulates the growth of students’ sensitivity and

creative skills...Music has the ability and power to enrich human activity with deep meaning...It provides a readily accessible avenue to the study of other cultures.”³ A cappella has the capability to give students all of these benefits. It is able to truly expand students’ cultural and musical horizons through its simple and yet deeply developed methods of making music.

³ Quotation from Michael Kendall’s “Philosophy of Music Education.” See reference list.

Reference List

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