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# Analyze your way to better interpretation

Use the song's lyric as a guide to interpretation.

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Barbershoppers concentrate primarily on a song's lyrics to guide them in making performance decisions. However, many of us are unaware that a song also has a musical form, independent of its text. You will interpret and perform songs better when you understand how each song is put together and how its form works with the lyrics.

The basic musical unit in popular songs, especially those that Barbershoppers sing, is the phrase—almost always four or eight measures long. Our ears are so accustomed to these four- and eight-bar phrases that hearing a phrase of five or nine measures makes many of us uneasy.

These four- or eight-measure phrases are combined to form larger sections, including:

- Introductions of 4 or 8 measures
- Song verses of 12 or (usually) 16 measures
- Refrains or choruses of 16 or 32 measures

The study how songwriters combine phrases is a topic worthy of more analysis than space allows here. The point here is that Barbershoppers need to understand not only how musical phrases combine to form larger structures, but also how the phrases relate to one another. Consider, for example the refrain of “My Wild Irish Rose”:

Phrase A  
My wild I - rish Rose, the sweet-est flow'r that grows. You may

Phrase B  
search ev-'ry where but none can com - pare with my wild I - rish Rose. My

Phrase A  
wild I - rish Rose, the dear-est flow'r that grows, and some

Phrase B2  
day for my sake she may let me take the bloom from my wild I - rish Rose.

Phrase B2 (section slightly different)

I've laid out the melody so it's easy to see that the song is made up of four, eight-bar phrases. (Incidentally, the pick-up note at the beginning does not count as a measure.) The lyrics support eight measures (rather than four) as the phrase length. Sing through it to yourself and see. Use the following analysis of the song structure as an example of what you may look for when getting ready to interpret other songs.

### Let the structure help dictate when to breathe

Most of us tend to take a breath whenever it's convenient. (I've heard rumors that some quartets and choruses will even take a breath in the middle of a word!) For my chorus, I examine each song ahead of time, locate each phrase, and encourage the chorus to sing the entire phrase in a single breath. (As a visual clue, song composers often insert a rest at the phrase endings, providing the singer with a natural place to breathe.) Not only can we deliver the song's message more clearly when it is not interrupted with a breath, but we also discover that we don't need to breathe every four measures unless there's a musical reason for doing so. Fewer breaths almost always yield a much more musical result—just listen to performances of any of the top quartets or choruses.

### Nip a potential weak spot in the bud

Notice that every phrase of “My Wild Irish Rose” ends with a note that's held for five beats. A longer held note at the end of a phrase is very common, but it also creates a momentary pause in the forward motion in the music. This can be problematic for the average quartet or chorus because the energy and motion created during the course of the phrase comes to a halt. The performance may come across as a bunch of discrete phrases, one after the other, without any sense of one phrase leading to the next. Swipes, which arrangers often insert at the ends of phrases to help maintain forward motion, are often overlooked in performance. Now that you've identified this structural challenge, you can find a way to deal with it.

### Add variety to discovered patterns and relationships

Look at the phrase structure of an entire refrain/chorus and you may discover some relationships you might have otherwise overlooked. For example, in “My Wild Irish Rose,” the first and third phrases are identical, and the second and fourth phrases start out the same, but end differently. Recognizing these facts will help you better interpret the music.

To show how the phrases relate to one another, use a simple, traditional music analysis technique to identify

phrases. Use one letter (such as “A”) to mark a particular phrase and any time that phrase is later repeated. Use “B,” “C” and “D” to mark different phrases and their repetitions. The phrase structure of “My Wild Irish Rose” is: A B A B2. The B2 (called “B prime”) means that the fourth phrase is very similar to the first B phrase, but not exactly the same.

Using this type of analysis, we can see that this song is actually split into two 16-measure units that are very similar to each other. Repetition is an effective tool in song writing, but the songwriter likely did not intend similar phrases to be sung in exactly the same manner—that’s not an effective performance technique. When the same phrases are repeated, more often than not you better serve the song by making appropriate and artistic differences in the way the phrases are performed, whether it’s a change in dynamics, tempo, tone color, mood, expression, etc.

Now, “My Wild Irish Rose” is a rather simple song compared to the repertoire of most quartets and choruses. The important thing is to recognize that all songs are constructed using phrases. Once you start recognizing these phrases, you’ve taken a critical first step in putting together a more meaningful performance, for both you and the audience.

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