

THE WAY I SEE IT - The Harmonizer, November, 1974

THE DANGERS OF SOPHISTICATION

by Val Hicks

We often pride ourselves on our level of musical sophistication, but let me remind you that sophistication, strictly speaking, refers to deception, adulteration and lack of simplicity. The Sophists were teachers of rhetoric and philosophy in ancient Greece (5th century BC), and they were known for their adroit, subtle, but often fallacious modes of reasoning. They were wise, clever, but deceitful. So, strictly speaking, a sophisticated person is one who has lost genuineness and naturalness.

When we boast that our barbershop music has acquired musical sophistication we are, in reality, saying that it has lost its original naturalness and simplicity. And this is what worries me, because sophistication has been the death warrant for more than one folk-art form. Barbershop harmony has always possessed a virility untouched by the more complicated and esoteric choralistic techniques; untouched, that is, until the last few years. I now see and hear an EMASCULATION process taking place!

It is due in part, I think, to the gradual merging of sexual identities in our current society. The traditional roles of man and woman are becoming blurred. As the women's liberation movement gains strength, some men are relinquishing their age-old masculine leadership functions. This musical emasculation (and I'll explain what I mean by that term in just a moment) is also due in part to the growing number of music educators and other academically trained musicians who have joined our Society in recent years. They bring with them a background of choral and glee-club techniques which they apply to barbershopping. Yet another influence is the constant influx of new barbershoppers raised on a different musical diet. The musical tastes of these men have been molded largely by radio, television and the recording industry.

I see this emasculation first of all in our staging and costuming ideas. We have entered an era of pseudo-dramaticism. Too many quartets look dandified, with their garish outfits, ponderous entries, heavy makeup and overly delicate, even sissified stage presence gestures. What ever happened to the quartets that came on like gangbusters, standing firm of foot and belting forth a song like it was a command performance?

PROBLEMS NOT ALL VISUAL

The problems are not just visual, however. There are some aural trends with which we should be concerned. One noxious practice is to balladize portions of up-tempo or rhythm songs. Granted, we sometimes hear popular songs singing

stars utilize this device at Las Vegas shows, but remember, they have an orchestra to help them gain any lost momentum. Often, in our style, the quartets and choruses never quite regain the centrifugal impetus and toe-tapping excitement once they allow a balladized section to impede rhythmic interest.

Another bothersome practice is the overuse of *accelerando* and *ritardando*, and when these devices are coupled with numerous contrasting dynamic nuances, there is an insipidity that sets in. I guess it's something akin to the duality of choices expressed by Robert Frost in his poem, *The Road Not Taken*. We can either serve the music or go on a musical ego trip! If we serve the music, we remain true to the songs melody, rhythm, harmony, lyrics intended tempo and form. If we make it an egoistic adventure, we FORCE our ideas upon the song instead of letting the song speak for itself. You see, if a song has little to say until we have twisted it to fit our will, then it is probably a weak vehicle in the first place.

The choralist and concert vocalist have always relied more on technique than have barbershoppers, but technique can be dangerous, because it tends toward abuse. The essence of art is subjugation or disguising of technique, and much of our technique is blatantly apparent. The not-so-subtle turning of the vowel that we hear today has been abused, as have other practices such as the Waring Tone Syllable system.

Another area of emasculation is the growing use of Hollywood and Broadway songs, many of which were not intended for unaccompanied treatment. When crooned by a well-meaning but mis-directed lead singer they create a mood of preciousness, as one critic noted. In other words, they lean toward a feministic approach, tinged with plasticity. Another trend is toward the use of overly saccharin and maudlin songs. I have even seen a certain lead singer who is able to bring forth a real live tear on command as he tells of unrequited love or premature death.

DANGERS ARE THREEFOLD

The dangers of musical sophistication are threefold:

1) We begin competing with the commercial world of show business; not financial competition, but competition in the eyes and ears of the public. We'll lose every time if we insist on copying show biz styles and stars. We have to give our fans the music they DO NOT hear on records, radio and television. This has always been one of our vital features. Let's not lose it as an attribute.

2) We begin to lose our stylistic identity as we become more of a choral organization. Perhaps it's the difference between hand-crafted furniture and factory-made. I have never objected to barbershop harmony's slightly rough-hewn appearance because it holds up so well! Technique is always a means to

an end, and it has never been granted Godhood. True artists always hide technique. They never flaunt it.

3) We begin to lose our strong masculine appeal. Our Society remains one of the last bastions of defense against forces which would rob us of truly masculine rights. A truly masculine right is the freedom to shed a tear recalling a mother's smile, friends of yore or days gone by. Please note, the song creates the mood, not an array of phony visual and aural gimmicks. A truly masculine right is to put your arm around a guy because you love him like a brother (after all, you've sung with him for fifteen years!) and not be called queer. A truly masculine right is to stand, firm of foot and voice, and burst forth in song, song that is unimpeded by pseudo-dramaticism, dynamic gimmickry, tempo tampering and complicated technique.

The way I see it, we have to keep barbershop harmony strong, virile and exciting.

The question is: what are we going to do about it?