

How to be a great baritone

An oxymoron, perhaps... but it's worth exploring.

submitted by Ron Knickerbocker, The Regents, 1974 champion

There are only two things one must do to be a great baritone: use proper vocal production and understand (and obey) the baritone's job description. For purposes of this discussion, let's pretend we all produce sound correctly and focus on the job. A quartet baritone or baritone section in a chorus has three basic responsibilities:

tuning chords

- balancing chords
- staying out of the way. (Some people, mostly basses, feel that the bari has a fourth job -- making the bass sound good -- but I won't address the impossible here.)

In both tuning and balancing it is critical to know what part of the chord you are singing. For mathematical reasons, fifths should be sung a tad sharp, and minor (barbershop) sevenths need to be tuned a bit flat. Thirds should be sung sharp, because we habitually sing them way too flat). As a general rule, it is easier to tune to the bass than to the lead.

A bari's balance responsibility is dictated by two things. The first is where your note is with respect to the melody. Bari notes above the melody need to be sung somewhat softer (how much softer depends on how far above the melody your note is), while notes below the melody should be sung relatively louder. Some coaches maintain that balancing isn't necessary as long as your quality matches that of the lead. I agree that a bari can sing a bit more loudly if he matches the lead well, but the melody must still be predominant. Thus, balance is no less important than it used to be thought, just a little easier to do. The second factor in balancing chords is the part of the chord you are singing. As a general rule, sing roots and fifths more loudly than other parts of the chord.

Staying out of the way means the bari must do whatever he can to enhance the musical flow. Maintain vowel integrity, energize singable consonants and soften hard consonants. Most of the time it is desirable to substitute softer consonants for the hard ones, like using d instead of t. The substitutions must be subtle, however. Don't hit the listener over the head with the fact that you are using a different consonant.

Most rules have exceptions, but if you adopt these general suggestions, you will be well on your way to becoming a great baritone. Now, if we could only find a bass that deserves you!

RON'S 10 TIPS FOR BETTER BARIS

- Produce sound correctly.
- Balance to the lead, but...
- Tune to the bass.
- Know what part of the chord you are singing.
- Sing thirds and fifths a little sharp, AND....
- Sing minor (barbershop) sevenths a bit flat.
- Balance to the melody.
- In general, roots and fifths should be a little louder than other notes in the chord.
- Extend the duration of vowels

Reduce the duration and percussiveness of consonants.