
Alignment and Energy

By Nikki Blackmer

Alignment

Alignment, also called posture, is step one in good vocal production. Directors and coaches do not discuss alignment very often as they are focused on other aspects of the barbershop craft of music. As singers, we must rely on self-management to ensure our bodies are properly aligned as we sing.

Our bodies are our instruments. How we hold our instrument is of vital importance. Poor alignment is like bending a flute: that will definitely change the sound!

Good alignment begins with your feet parallel on the ground, shoulder width apart. Your knees should be relaxed, bendable, and moveable. Your buttocks should be relaxed! Any tension in the body will directly relate to tension in the sound. If you are squeezing your buttocks, your sound will be impacted. Your rib cage should be lifted and held high, and shoulders should be slightly raised and rolled back but relaxed: no slumping shoulders, but not military shoulders either. Make sure your neck is relaxed and moveable; you should feel a slight elongation of the back of the neck. Your jaw should be tension free. The back of the roof of the mouth where air from the nose enters the throat (soft palate), should be lifted with the tongue forward. A smile in the eyes will bring the sound up into the resonators.

The logo for Men's Barbershop Chorus is a large, stylized blue watermark. It features a circular design with the words "Men's Barbershop Chorus" written in a serif font across the center.

Energy

When a director says, "I need more energy!" it could potentially mean many things so we have to use our best interpretive skills to understand exactly what kind of energy they mean. However, here are some tips that will help you.

Spin: whenever we have a long note (i.e. the lead part at a tag) the note needs to "spin." More exactly, the note, though it stays the same pitch, needs to have an increase of intensity, excitement, and air. It's not necessarily an increase in volume-but more of a rolling boil of excitement within the note. If you simply hold the note and don't spin, it will go flat. We all know there's nothing worse than a hanger that goes flat! While we're singing that long note, we have to treat each millisecond of it as new and different from the last millisecond by adding interest, and excitement. Don't forget that adding emotion to the note will help spin it!

Forward Motion: adding vocal excitement and interest to the voice at the end of the phrase so that the breath is hardly noticed by the audience. Seems pretty simple – but often it’s quite difficult to do! Forward Motion can be considered like this: singing the length of the phrase until the absolute last second before releasing it to catch the quickest and smallest breath possible. An exception to the quickest breath possible would be an interpretive delayed breath; however, the silence planned there makes forward motion at the release of the previous phrase even more crucial.

Energy: let’s face it, sometimes we show up to rehearsal without our A-Game. We’re tired from the day and have a million things on our minds. We’re distracted, and that carries over into our sound. Your director or coach hears that distraction as a lack of energy – and they ask for more! Your job is to immediately let go of everything else in your mind, and give 100% to the chorus (or quartet!). You must engage your body and core. Check that your body is properly aligned, not tense, and ready to perform. You must “turn on” your face, and sing every word like the treasure that it is. You must use the air you inhale to fuel the sound. Most of all, you must commit to being there and making the best sound possible!

