

Ballad Choreography

For quartets

By: Debbie Connelly

I. Ballad Choreography??

- Q. You mean the way we swish our hands up at the tag?
A. Well, yes, that's a small part of it. But there is SO much more that you can do to visually stage a ballad
- Q. All of our faces are dramatic throughout. Isn't that enough?
A. Why leave out the other 95% of your body? Get it ALL together!
- Q. Will the movement be 'genuine' if we plan it and do it the same way every time?
A. That's the goal. Choose something that enhances the meaning and then continue to refine your use of it with each rehearsal and performance. If you can "feel" it as you make the plan, you should work toward being able to recreate that feeling each time.
- Q. Can't I just stand still and sing?
A. Yes you can. But does it look natural? Watch people when they communicate verbally. Their degree of movement can vary, but we rarely stand still when we are communicating something dramatic, and especially to a large group of people.

II. Benefits of Ballad Choreography

- A. Synchronized movement holds attention of audience
1. Even subtle moves can be very powerful when executed together
- B. Enhances the meaning of the lyrics
1. The audience will understand how you feel by seeing as well as hearing
- C. Supports the vocal impact of the musical line
1. You will sing with more heartfelt emotion as you are 'acting it out'
- D. Makes the ballad more enjoyable for the singers
1. You know what you are supposed to do throughout and 'why'
2. No guessing what the others are doing – it's a plan

3. Gives me a visual purpose for each section and specific lyrics in some places

E. Visual unity is drastically improved

1. The audience is not distracted by individual movements that may feel right to that individual, but do not add to the 'big picture' in a meaningful way.
2. Showmanship scores can be greatly improved as they are looking for that visual 'unity'. It's usually easier to see in an uptune. Why? Because it is usually choreographed!!

“Ballad choreography requires as much time, energy, intensity and attention to detail, if not more, than uptune choreography.”

*Joe Connelly
3 time Champion and Presentation Judge*

III. Repertoire of Movements for Ballad Choreography

A. *Weight shift

1. Outside foot toward downstage. Shift to that foot
2. Outside foot toward downstage right or left. Shift to that foot
3. Shift to back foot from either of the above
4. Use different speeds to complement different emotions
 - a. slow fade
 - b. quick shift and 'plant'

****Knees should always stay flexed to make these moves fluid***

B. *Pick up feet to move

1. Picking up the inside foot and bringing it downstage can bring the quartet in stronger in a compact and intense way.
2. Picking up the outside foot and bringing it upstage can bring the quartet out in a stronger and more dramatic way.
3. Combination – step inside, then outside and 'plant'. (A ballad has to have a **really** strong climax point to use this one.)

C. Chest rise and fall

1. Chest lift for pride, triumph, intense happiness
2. Slight chest drop for defeat, sadness, or loss (be careful not to drop too far to inhibit breath support)

D. Head movement

1. Nod (up & down)

2. Shake (left & right)
3. Tilt toward center for the 'aw' factor
4. Turn in to make eye contact with quartet
5. Turn 'toward', but don't make actual eye contact
6. Slight raise or lower (careful again about vocal production)

E. Eye Contact and Focus

1. Focal points – Singing to a focal point draws in the “audience of one” (example – when you don't sit in the middle of a movie theater)
2. Suggested spots
 - a. #1 – about five rows back in center of audience (directly behind imaginary judges pit)
 - b. #2 – above audience heads (to imaginary balcony or 'exit' sign)
 - c. 'Visual Journey' – look as if to make eye contact (even if it is pitch dark) at your focal point. Then take that 'person' with you on the journey as your eyes move to take in more of the audience.
 - d. Closing your eyes to indicate remembering or pain (use sparingly!)

WOW! All these moves, and we haven't even gotten to the hands!

F. Hand movement

1. Three rules about hands:
 - a. Don't use your hands until you 'have to'
 - b. Gesture with them near or above the waist, not far below
 - c. When you are done with them, put them down unceremoniously
2. Pull up with bent elbow, strong fingers
3. Use both hands as in #2
4. Fists are intense (angry, threatening?) Use sparingly
5. Gesturing in a certain direction to match a destination in the lyrics
6. Gesturing toward yourself or to the person who is the subject of the song
7. Rise and fall to match the dynamics and intensity level of sections

The lead should be the 'visual lead' also. She should have the most prominent and frequent moves. Other members can move 'through' her energy to unify the look.

IV. How to know when to use the moves

- A. Start with a basic plan. Here's a suggestion:

1. Make a focal point plan:
 - a. Go to Focal point #1 on the opening breath
 - b. Stay there until the first idea has been established
 - c. Return to Focal point #1 on the 'hook line' of the song, or any time there is an emotional or musical mini-climax and at the tag
 - d. For the big climax, go to Focal point #2

2. Make a weight shift plan
 - a. Begin in your regular quartet formation
 - b. Use a mirror to see which moves match the sections of the song
 - c. The 'size of the formation should match the ebb and flow of the music
 - d. Use a variety of shifts to keep it interesting

3. Hand movement plan
 - a. Let the lead find her 'have to' spots
 - b. Trio find fewer individual 'have to' spots (based on the music)
 - c. Plan maybe two places that will be all four together (climax and tag?)

4. Individual moves vs. matching moves
 - a. The musical plan tells you what to do. An individual should move separately if she has a lyrical pickup, echo, or solo passage. More subtly, you may feature a musical embellishment such as a 'baritone tiddly' (spelling? ☺) or a bass slide. Feature the tenor visually when she has an echo or the root of a held chord. Smaller features can be accomplished with a hand gesture, others may call for a weight shift.
 - b. If the trio or a duet has an echo, they can make it more unified by moving together on it also.

Evaluate by videotaping, too!!

V. More Q & A

- Q. Now I'm sold on this Ballad Choreography. When should we add it in?
- A. When the ballad is singing well. Movement should be matched to a musical product that is successful.
- Q. Will people notice and compliment our Ballad Choreography?
- A. Hopefully NOT!! The movement should be so subtle and so enhance the music that they will not really notice it as a separate effort, even if they see you perform the ballad more than once.

Q. Do all of the champs use this method?

A. No, and they obviously have sung well enough to win without it. Some of it they may do naturally without developing it fully. MY OPINION: They could unify their performance even more with a real plan, and I would love their ballads even more.

Q. If they don't all use it, why should we?

A. We don't all have the vocal virtuosity of the champs, even though our singing may improve with instruction and practice. Go for more points in something else that might be easily added. Draw in your audience with your total performance. Also, the organization is ever-changing and improving. We need to be on the threshold of new and improved expectations!