

# A Cappella Pop

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A COMPLETE GUIDE TO  
CONTEMPORARY A CAPPELLA SINGING

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FOREWORD by DEKE SHARON



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# WHAT ARE WE, ANYWAY?

“Begin with the end in mind.”  
—Stephen Covey

Welcome to our guidebook. I say guidebook rather than handbook because there is no one way to run your a cappella group. Not only is there more than one way to skin this proverbial cat, there’s more than one type of cat.

What defines an a cappella group? Isn’t barbershop “a cappella?” Can’t vocal jazz be sung “a cappella?” Hey, wait a minute . . . our chamber choir sings madrigals “a cappella.” Throughout this guidebook, we’ll use the word “a cappella” to mean *contemporary a cappella*, also sometimes known as *pop a cappella*. This means that the group is recreating popular music by imitating the sounds of a band. Guitars, horn lines, bass guitar, and even the drumset are there to support the soloists. This concept of a “vocal band” is one that we will explore and embrace.

At first blush, contemporary a cappella might come across as fluff—the dessert after dinner. After all, any group that sings rock, pop, hip-hop, or funk is really just a gimmick, right? This isn’t “real music.” This is just the bait to lure students in, so we can teach them all about classical music. It’s the old “bait-and-switch” where *Glee*-esque pandering opens young singers’ minds, allowing us a chance at getting them to sing Brahms, Mozart, Poulenc, Whitacre, and the like. Not so. I’m here to say that just isn’t the case. Contemporary a cappella has great educational value. It has real merit. It requires skill. Chops.

Public awareness of a cappella is on the rise. Between Rockapella’s commercials for Folger’s coffee, group numbers on *Glee*, and the appearance of NBC’s *The Sing-Off*, a cappella has been seen by tens of millions of Americans. At one time, a cappella might have had an image problem. It has often been parodied and lampooned (think

Andy Bernard on *The Office*), but even that parody has led to acceptance. Can you think of another American musical form that at one time was considered a novelty? How about jazz? Once upon a time, jazz was an indulgence, a playground for late-night musicians steeped in cool rather than technique. Over time, jazz was studied and found to have real merit. It became academically institutionalized and is now respected as an **art form**. We're here to say that a cappella is also an art form.

Why can't we use music from the Top 40 as a teaching tool in our choirs? We can and we should. If you're a teacher, you know that first we have to know where the kids **are**. After that, we can figure out what direction they should move to improve, as well as what might motivate them. Pop music is familiar. It's fun. That helps.

Once we've connected with kids, what do we do? The answer goes far beyond "get them to eat their veggies by promising dessert." Sure, we use fun music or membership in a select after-school group as a motivator. On top of that we must illustrate to students why a cappella can help them. Let's look at the educational benefits of a cappella. A cappella develops an individual's skills in many areas:

- » *Collaboration*: Working together as an ensemble.
- » *Improvisation*: "Riffing" solos or adding harmonies to an arrangement *just because it sounds cool*.
- » *Evaluation*: Singers must constantly listen to each other and adjust to improve their overall sound.
- » *Emulation*: Singers must know what sounds they are trying to make (guitar, drum, horn, backing vocals, solo, etc.) and figure out how to emulate them.
- » *Independence*: Singers will have to sing in small sections, even down to just one on a part.
- » *Tuning*: With only voices in the mix, there's nowhere to hide. Singers must learn to sing in tune with each other.
- » *Keeping time*: Singers must keep time to ensure all sections of the group stay together.
- » *Visual presentation*: It's just you and that microphone. The world is watching, so look alive.

Let's face it—a cappella is the new chamber music. It's fun, interactive, and frankly . . . **challenging**. It's a dream come true for us choir directors. Now that I've convinced you it's worth doing (and given you some ammunition against those who think you're "selling out"), let's figure out what type of group you should have.

When I took my first high school job, I inherited someone else's program. That means I started off by working in someone else's format. I had to find what worked for me, or actually, for *us*. A cappella became a great fit for us. The reason I believe that a cappella is for everyone is because it is the most flexible genre around. The variety of music available to you is endless, from 60's soul to present day Top 40. You can have a cappella groups of virtually any size, talent level, or combination of

# THE BALANCING ACT

One of the biggest downfalls of the beginning a cappella group is failing to understand the balance of parts within a performance. I think most singers have a basic knowledge that they can't sing every note the same way. Still, many high school singers are limited to a concert choir experience. They probably have made it as far as "solo vs. choir" or "moving parts sing louder." These are good concepts. Combined with dynamics, they are a solid start. However, a cappella music has more opportunities for changing musical roles than any other genre. Where else might you be a soloist for a full verse, then switch to "playing electric guitar," then switch to singing an internal harmony in homophonic chords? You might even stop singing and become an auxiliary vocal percussionist for part of a song.

Singing in an a cappella group is a different experience with every arrangement because each one brings new textures and "instrumentation." Some songs have horn lines and some don't. They may be "rock band," "jazz combo," and everything in between. This means each song is like a new puzzle and good singers find that fascinating. The process is similar to building a piece of furniture with every person in your group owning one tool. You have to plan, communicate, and sometimes trade tools in order to get the job done. Let's start by getting a common vocabulary. Then we'll look at a graph that can help organize your singers and develop their a cappella instincts.

The components of acappella singing include:

- » Solo(s)
- » Background Vocals
  - Harmonies
  - Echoes/Inserts