



## ***A Guide to Running Auditions For Your A Cappella Group – Part II***

Now you've got a street full of people ready to audition, here are tips on the audition itself. Below is a list of component parts that *could* be included. Think carefully about whether each is appropriate e.g. there's no point in testing sight singing if you learn by ear. You also need to make sure there's a consistent way of recording how each person performed. It's worth giving everyone name labels and taking discreet notes while the audition is still fresh in your mind. Some groups like to take photos of all the auditionees as this can be a useful prompt later – if you're doing this, assure the auditionees that the photos will be deleted as soon as decisions have been made.

**Start together** - have a bit of mingling time (but not too much), making sure all existing members are primed to engage everyone with a bit of easy chat. Like with any audition or interview, if someone arrives early that's generally better than someone barging in late – not a deal-breaker but worth quietly noting. If you rehearse in a room down a warren of corridors, meet at a location easy for everyone to find.

**A warm up** - making silly noises and singing simple patterns together, maybe even with a build-in name game, is a great ice-breaker. If they are nervous, and the first note they have sung that day is your pitch test, then you won't be hearing their real voice – you'll be hearing a mixture of nerves and phlegm. Even if you don't normally do an extensive warm up, do one for the audition – with plenty of physical stuff to get everyone's energy up, and fun tongue twisters to get everyone smiling.

It works best, if possible, to have general rehearsal work happening in one room, while auditionees slip out one at a time with one or two members to do some of the tests below. It should take no more than 5 minutes (practice on a fellow group member in advance).

**A range test** - crucial for a cappella groups for 2 reasons:

1. Even if you have the most fun, best looking singers of any a cappella group around, if there are 14 tenors, 3 sopranos and no basses then you're going to struggle;
2. People might tell you they are a certain voice part, probably because that's what they sang in their school choir, but they may fit somewhere slightly different.

The best way of doing this is not to ask people to sing their lowest note then their highest note (although that's very entertaining) but to sing a catchy figure starting in the middle of their range then moving down/up a semitone until they can go no further comfortably. Have a piano/keyboard or an existing member join in for the first few until they get the hang of it. If in doubt start on an E or D; this should be in the middle for men and women – sing D E F# E D to 'da'doo' or 'na'noo' – 'la' is often the obvious choice but 'l's are tiring for tongues.

*Make sure you write down their lowest and highest notes, and anything else that might be useful like where their breaks are, or where they switch into falsetto, for discussion later.*

**Pitch test** - singing a cappella is tricky, and you need people who can hold a note while all around them are shoo-be-dooing on different, sometimes clashing notes.

A useful way of testing this is to prepare some 5-6 note patterns, sing/play them twice, and then ask the auditionee to sing them back (deciding how many chances you are willing to give them in advance).

- one that's simple, with no big jumps, and pentatonic (can be played using only on the black keys of a piano);
- one that's more difficult, spanning a bigger range, that moves up and down with a few leaps, and is diatonic (can be played using only the white keys);
- the final one deliberately awkward to sing – with semitones and awkward leaps – that definitely doesn't sound nice and familiar. You might be worried about making it too difficult, but if every auditionee can do them all perfectly then you probably haven't made them hard enough.

**Dynamics test** – get them to sing a line of a familiar song (use Old MacDonald if you're stuck), then ask them to do it demonstrating a crescendo/diminuendo.

This will immediately show you if they can sing loudly and quietly, but it will also show you how well they hold their pitch and tone at the extremes of their dynamic range.

**Back in the main room** – get your candidates participating and enjoying a taster of what it's like to be in your group.

Choose 2 songs from your repertoire – ideally one that's slower and slushier to test pitch and harmonic sense; and another that's faster, more rhythmically complex, with more complicated syllables to test rhythmic dexterity and diction – and then teach a short passage – either off the page or by ear.

Choose something where each part is equally challenging in terms of pitch and rhythm but also has lots of scope for dynamics, phrasing, and vowel-shaping.

As a rule, choose a shorter section of the song, so that you can spend time not just teaching the notes, but exploring in detail *how* to sing them. BUT – if your auditionees pick it up quickly then be ready to move on – your process should test the limits of what people can do, not just have them doing lots of nice singing. And if you choose something significantly easier than your group normally sings, then the auditionees may be less impressed – remember it's a two way process.

If you have a musical director then they will probably lead this section most naturally; if you don't, nominate someone to lead and let them practice how they will do it in the rehearsal before. It's also a good idea to have a separate person watching the clock.

At some point you may want to have a break – and provide some refreshments – or you (and they) may just want to get on with it, sipping water as you go along.

**Choreography** – If you are a group that performs with lots of movement, include this in the audition. Devise a choreo test of your own, monitor people while doing some physical stuff in your warm up, or just choose songs to rehearse that have a bit of choreo in them (although be conscious that they may have sheet music in one hand!)

**Hearing the auditionees as a group** – Those people standing with the auditionees as they learned their part will have already formed the most useful opinion you will consider in the selection. However, it's a good idea to have small groups – existing members mixed with auditionees so that there is one person on each part – perform the section of the songs you've learned. This will show confidence, posture, rhythm, pitch and perhaps most importantly for this bit – balance and blend. Decide in advance who will sing with who in order to save time.

**Performing to the auditionees** - This is a good way of showing them that you're proud of the sound you make, that you enjoy singing, and that you're happy to stand up and sing in front of them, since that's what you're asking them to do.

**Solos** – Yup, the bit they are probably dreading. If you want them to sing a solo (unaccompanied of course) you need to have let them know so they can prepare something. Alternatively, you could invite them to sing a solo from your existing repertoire along with current members of the group, to see how they project and how their sound fits with your group. Either way, you should be able to tell that they have spent a bit of time practising.

This is the most nerve-wracking bit, and voices can crack at the crucial moment. You could stock up on a multi-pack of bottled water to hand out to your auditionees at this point, or even earlier when they first arrive as a welcome gift.

It will give you an insight into lots of things so pay attention (while remembering to smile and look like you are just enjoying their performance). Things to look out for might include

- How comfortable are they? Check out body language and movement, facial expression, eye contact.
- Their choice of song can tell you a bit about what kind of singer they are.
- Pay attention to whether they slip into a different key at any point – this should ring some alarm bells about their internal pitch.
- Lots of solos have gaps between lines – are they keeping a pulse or just waiting for a random amount of time and then coming in with the next line?

Remember this is the bit they have had total control over in their preparation. While you can be sympathetic to nerves in an audition, they are going to have to stand up in front of even more people and sing, and you haven't even taught them all those dance moves yet. Some groups even give their applicants an unseen solo to perform in their callback round!

**What happens next?** – Make sure that at some point, preferably early in the session and then recapped at the end, you have explained how and when they will hear the outcome, and if there are any callbacks.

**Post-rehearsal ritual** – Hopefully your group has a bit of down time together after rehearsal – if you are a university group this will probably involve a cheap drinking establishment, but it could just as easily be a cool cafe with comfy sofas, or a milkshake bar. It might be a nice idea to invite the auditionees to join you afterwards. This can sometimes feel artificial for auditionees as they still probably feel a bit under the microscope. That aside, you need to know that you can have a good chat with someone you're about to invite into your group.

### **Sample Schedule -**

*Round 1* (on 2 separate occasions to give people a choice and avoid clashes)

10 mins – arrival time and mingling

10 mins – warm up (physical and vocal)

5 mins – formal introductions and expectations – as well as what happens about finding out if they got through/in

30 mins – learning a section of a song (while range tests are taking place elsewhere)

15 mins – hearing mini-performances of rehearsed song section

20 mins – prepared solos

30+ mins – hanging out afterwards

= 2 hours approx.

*Round 2*

10 mins – arrival time and mingling

10 mins – warm up with more complicated exercises this time

5 mins – explanation of the final stages and how the final outcome will be communicated

20 mins – learning a section of song A (more complex than last time)

10 mins – hearing mini-performances of song A

20 mins – learning a section of song B (more complex in a different way)

10 mins – hearing mini-performances of song B

= 1.5 hours approx.

then finish early to allow time to deliberate as to who gets in!