

# *NORTHERN BLEND CHORUS - Master Class*

*2022 Harmony, Inc. International Chorus Champions*



**Northern Blend Chorus** chartered with Harmony, Inc. in 1985 and has been under the musical leadership of Tracy Robertson (1985-1995), Mary Ann Wert (1995- 2013) and Katie Taylor (2003-current). They have grown both in size and in musicianship steadily over the years. Since 1985 they have

climbed from 22nd place, into the medals in 2000, and have maintained top 5 placements ever since! They feel honored to have won the International title in 2010, 2017, and again in 2022, with MUCH hard work & perseverance! Always believe that you can reach your goals! Dream big & work hard! Want some ideas? Here are some of our secrets!

## *Warm Ups – from Tenor Section Leader, Lorie Autote*

NBC does a wide variety of warmups. Like most choruses, we do exercises to work on vowel matching, legato and staccato singing, diction, and nailing down tricky intervals. We also focus a lot on free, lifted, buoyant and supported singing. Probably the most challenging warmups are the ones that get us to really concentrate on two things at once (finger movements) or to think ahead (leaving out certain numbers in the scale). A few years ago we purchased Debra Lynn's Bel Canto warmup tracks, and have it available for all members to warm up with at home or in the car. This is a great tool before a performance so we don't have to spend a lot of time as a group warming up, and it can be used in conjunction with chorus rehearsal. We also do physical warmups from time to time, but focus more on our vocals and blend, getting us in the mindset for our best singing!

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## *Song Selection - from Bass Section Leader/Visual Team, Lynn Blakeney*

Choosing music is really a team effort. The music team meets, usually in December, to discuss what music we will keep in our repertoire for the next year and what music, new and old, we will be using on the show and upcoming year's contest. Many of us come to the meeting with a list of songs that we would like to do and go from there. We try to keep a good balance between contestable barbershop songs and some fun non-barbershop stuff. Where do we find the music? Everywhere. Personally, I make my list all year long. If I hear a song that I think would work for the chorus, I'll write it down. I spend a great deal of time surfing YouTube to listen to great performances, both barbershop and non. Nowadays, just about anything can be arranged into a barbershop arrangement so the sky's the limit! Truth be told, not everything we choose for the chorus works. Sometimes, no matter how much someone may love the song, it just doesn't fit the chorus. It's important to know your chorus' vocal range, strengths, and weaknesses when choosing music. Our music team is very strong and astute, so this is a strength for us for sure.

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## *Rehearsal Techniques – from Director, Katie Taylor*

During a typical NBC rehearsal we use a variety of techniques to introduce new music, maintain consistency in our singing and performance level, and troubleshoot problem areas. Some of our most utilized tools are duets or part-only singing to identify pitch accuracy and intonation issues. We use the “deet” technique (Thank you Steve Tramack) to work through difficult rhythms and isolate what beat -or subdivision of the beat- on which the word sounds fall. It is tricky but super effective! I do a calendar of events for our members that is usually a 6-month timeline (contest to contest) and it includes our current rep, what songs we use for old-rep warm ups, sectionals, riser testing, tag teaching, performances/shows, and coaching info. The Blenders find it helpful to know ahead of time what we will be working on and it gives them focus leading to the rehearsals each week! This is beneficial for ALL of us!! When we teach new music we use the 4-4-1 method, where our section leaders sing chunks of the song at a time and then break it down by part. We will explain more in the class but the basic breakdown is what you see below. Generally, we sit on the risers or in seats like this:

TENORS - LEADS - BASSES - BARIS

Section leader QUARTET first sings the intro, THEN the quartet splits to their sections and the process is as follows:

1. Lead SL sings words – Leads listen – other 3 SLs sing on doodoodoo and other parts listen.
2. Lead SL sings words – Leads doodoodoo – other 3 parts continue the same ^^
3. Lead SL sings words – Leads join on words – other 3 parts continue the same
4. Then the SAME process is done with the BASS section while leads continue to doodoodoo.
5. Typically, by this many reps the tenors and baris are ready, so they both sing doodoos with their SLs together and then one more rep for words.
6. Lastly, we have all 4 parts sing together.
7. We continue this process with the rest of the song in chunks, and go back after each chunk and sing from the beginning and go as far as we can.
8. Also – sometimes we START with the tag... then when we finally get to the end it feels awesome to know where we are headed and how it will sound!

During sectionals, our section leaders focus on artistry, support, phrasing, vocal technique and accuracy of pitch. The idea is for the singers to have your music learned so we do not have to work on notes, but sometimes there are discrepancies and we trouble shoot! However, the singers do know that it is wise to be prepared! Our section leaders (Lorie, Jodi, Lynn, Mary Ann) are all strong music readers and this is HUGELY beneficial for our chorus. They are such a strong CORE to NBC and we are so lucky to have their wealth of knowledge and talent!!

I'd also like to add that I use language that is inclusive as I lead the chorus, and we are all very conscious of the ages, physical abilities and uniqueness of our members, so that we are ensuring all members and guests are included, feel welcomed, and are supported.

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## *Music Organization - from Music Librarian, Dorene Dickerson*

*and our "Box" organizer, Mary Ann Wert*

Music Copies [Music Librarian] – As Lynn has explained, we on the Music Team decide what new music will be previewed and/or purchased for the chorus to learn. Once music has been legally purchased for NBC, I make copies to keep in an alphabetic file of all current repertoire at our rehearsal location. We annually update our current repertoire after IC&C and the holidays have passed. We like to get working early in the calendar year on our new music for upcoming spring events and of course AC&C. Guest Folders are something we have on hand and I keep them current so that hard copies of music are available at weekly rehearsals for any visitor or prospective new member to use. A 'soft' copy of our music is kept electronically in a data storage website online. All chorus members have access and are able to print a single copy of our music for their own use. We file some copies of each current rep piece of music to have on hand at all times for anyone to use as needed. I ask only that they return it at the end of the night, or let me know if ever a 'last copy' is needed to be removed from the folder. The goal is to always have hard copies of music on hand. Also, I do store music that we take out of the current rep, and move it to an alphabetic archive file for possible future use or resurrection!

NBC uses a cloud storage called **Box (box.net)** to keep all our important info. Members have access to things like all our learning tracks, important forms, advertising receipts or donation receipts for our show, warm ups we purchased from Debra Lynn, our rehearsal calendar and membership roster. All of these things are accessible with a few easy clicks! We also have selections of rehearsal videos at our fingertips. We stream our rehearsals each week on our Members Only facebook page, so anyone missing rehearsal can watch from afar OR we can go back and watch later to review something from that night! It's an excellent tool!

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## *Riser Placement - from director, Katie Taylor*

NBC experiments with many different riser positions, but we generally find that having our more clarion/powerful voices in the center of our chorus and fanning out to the more blendable and gentle voices on the outside works best for us. You will see that we split voice parts and stand mixed to some extent, but THIS is different for each chorus. Knowledge of your singers and who needs to hear a fellow lead beside or behind them or who is more independent and can be an anchor for others on different parts is also helpful. It is also important to have people in the front and back rows that are visually strong (granted, we aim for ALL to be visually strong!) but some are more (or less) coordinated than others, so front row isn't always ideal. We are fortunate to have Lynn Blakeney, who is a certified Performance judge, and she really keeps us honest visually! Try not to get in a rut with the way you stand – try different positions and experiment. You may be surprised! :)

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## *Riser Testing – from Lead Section Leader, Jodi Castello*

The importance of individual accountability and outside-of-rehearsal music preparation is strongly emphasized by the music team of Northern Blend. Prior to both Area level and International level competitions, each singer must successfully pass a riser test on both competition songs. Riser testing is done on pre-determined designated days and involves one person from each section standing in front of the chorus, while section leaders listen intently on their individual performance of the chorus song. Section leaders listen for accuracy of notes/pitch, words, rhythms, vowel sounds and phrase endings, breath plans, and general artistry - to name a few. In order for a singer to be allowed to perform on the contest stage, she must be approved by her section leader. If a member is struggling with specific areas of her music, her section leader and/or the director will work individually with this singer, to denote specific areas within each song that need additional work, and what, specifically, needs to be fixed, as well as providing suggestions for how the singer could address these concerns. Singers are encouraged throughout the rehearsal process, to record themselves whilst singing on the risers, and send these recordings to their section leaders for ongoing review and coaching. Additionally, our director Katie offers PVI (private vocal instruction) to singers who may be struggling with specific elements of musicality, upon request. Ultimately, the goal is for every singer who wishes to perform on the contest stage, to be allowed to do so - while still maintaining a high standard of excellence achieved only through consistent efforts by all. At the end of this packet is what we use for a guideline/rubric when evaluating our singers. They need to score an 18 (average of 3 out of 4) to pass. If they do not pass initially, they can retest.

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## *Annual Show – by Show Committee Chairperson, Mary Ann Wert*

NBC has been successful producing an annual show, SING FLING, for the past almost 20 years. In addition to our awesome chorus and chapter quartets, we typically invite a Harmony Queen quartet to perform a show set and up to 3 local school choruses (singing any genre in the a cappella style) to also participate. Using our local school groups not only introduces young people to the wonderful style of barbershop, but also helps us draw a much bigger audience, with parents and other family members wanting to see their students on stage! We also print a large advertisement-laden program which brings in all the money we need to cover the cost of our venue, lighting, and sound.. and then some. We donate funds to the music departments of all of our school participants, and also offer some freebies to entice both family attendance and encourage the purchase of ads by local merchants. We love a full house! Our show is done “concert style” with short 2-3 song packages done by each group (with the exception of our feature performers), and we find it keeps the audience more engaged, and varies the style and genre, creating a much more diverse compilation of songs! We’d be happy to share our success using these tips!

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## *Fund Raising/Ways & Means – by Ways & Means Chairperson, Ellen Flynn*

Fundraising can be accomplished most easily by having a Ways and Means committee, led by a chairperson, or even better, co-chairs. The size of the committee will depend on the size of your chorus and how much fundraising you would like to do. Ideally, the chair/co-chair would oversee committee members and/or volunteers from your chorus for each particular fundraising activity. Fundraising activities can range from major: in our case, an annual show; to more minor, but just as important, such as community performances, trash and treasure sales, bottle drives, farmers' markets, and any others you can think of. Some restaurants have a program for nonprofits where an organization can get a percentage of the sales during a specific time period at that restaurant. Make sure to take advantage of any special talents or contacts that your members may have. We encourage our members to participate in our fundraising activities by sharing a portion of the receipts with those members who were involved in the fundraiser. The percentage each member gets can be determined by your chorus. We disperse the monies earned by our members twice a year - before Area contest and before International, with funds going directly to NBC costs (costuming, AEPs, hotel expense, etc). We designate a percentage of the money we raise to go into our general treasury, while some goes to our members and some to charity. We might set up a separate fund if we are saving for a specific purchase, such as risers. Fundraising/ways and means is not only a way for your chorus to raise money, it can also be a way to get publicity and get your chorus more well-known and involved in your community!

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## *“Board Sense”- by outgoing NBC Chapter President, Taralee Lashway*

- Understand the landscape - Know the people you serve with and build strong relationships quickly. A good solid team can perform the impossible, but rift can create barriers and obstacles that can be felt throughout the chorus. Know everyone's skills and use them accordingly.
- Boards must be led- A failure to lead at Board level will have significant negative consequences. Expectations must align from top to bottom and all must be held to a set of standards and behaviors. There should be the expectation that members show up and communicate with a framework and platform in mind.
- Be Proactive- The board meeting doesn't just happen at the meeting. Key issues should be a continuous discussion up until final decision time. Be prepared. If you don't know...don't be afraid to speak with past leaders and experienced players within the organization.
- The Agenda - Have one and keep to it. Don't let it get too crowded and turn negative.
- Set the Bar High- Remember that it is the board obligation to have the chorus's best interest in mind. Share values and vision; and hold everyone accountable for this.
- Is the Board for you? - Do you enjoy getting to the nitty-gritty of policy? Do you have enough time? Do you enjoy collaborating with others? Are you comfortable making decisions, raising money, and listening? If you said yes, then go for it! It's wonderful to help in the collaboration and growth of your chapter!!

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## *Social Media – by NBC and HI Publicity Guru, Anita Prather-Harvell*

While there are some PR basics, marketing your chorus isn't a "one size fits all" proposition. No matter what tools and techniques you use, one common denominator of all of this is the "R" in PR – relations. Personalized contact with your audience and media sources is key to being noticed. There are dozens of organizations vying for attention, so if you can make your local media's job easier, it will help you be successful. Through the years, Northern Blend has had very substantial write ups in our local newspaper, feature stories on local TV networks, radio spots, and more. All of these stem from personal relationships with news writers, editors and feature writers.

- Press Releases: These are good for news outlets and print journalist sources. They provide a background of your organization and in some cases will **be the article used** if it's written well. Don't forget spell and grammar check – typos are forever!

- Professional and Candid Photos: Buying a photo package from contest is always a good idea, even if it is one or two. You should also have someone designated to take candid (non-posed) photos of your chorus to use for multiple purposes (traditional and social media)

- Video: Be aware of copyright issues; however, a way to get around this is to record singing some public domain songs (there are a lot of them listed at pdinfo.com)

- Free Marketing: Community Calendars, News Briefs, PSA, Fundraisers (show up in person)  
Have a Plan: What is the message of your chorus? What are your marketing goals – new members, awareness of barbershop, show attendance? Make sure all your efforts support those goals.

- Flying Solo: Marketing is a family affair. Make sure your social influencers also share your chorus content to their friends and circles to help broaden your reach.

Resources:

Harmony, Inc. Communications Team and Members Only Website

[https://www.harmonymembers.org/findyourvoice\\_index.asp](https://www.harmonymembers.org/findyourvoice_index.asp)

Social Media for Choruses

<https://www.chorusamerica.org/management-governance/social-media-choruses>

NOTES:

## *Costumes – from Costume Committee member, Katie Taylor*

Costuming is so unique to each and every chorus. NBC tends to lean toward costumes that make all members feel comfortable that still look stunning on stage. We do have some matching outfits and tend to go with black pants and a colorful/sparkly top as it gives flexibility. However, we find that most members *really* like it when we wear a specific color combo that allows them to dress in a way that suits their body style, age, sense of fashion, and gives them confidence to feel their best as they perform. Our favorite is our "black and silver combo!" We wear this for contest/shows. We also like red/white/black casual wear for casual gigs. We highly encourage this idea, and have found that our audiences also enjoy the look of individuality!

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## *Youth Outreach – by Katie Taylor – 26 year K-12 Music Educator*

NBC is lucky to have quite a few youth members – Hazel, Camille, Jade, Emily & Rachel! Hazel & Jade are sisters, and 3rd generation Blenders (mom and grandma are both Blenders!) Camille was brought in by Hazel as a schoolmate & friend! Emily is a brand new kindergarten teacher who had Katie as her music teacher for 13 years! Rachel is a brand new music teacher, whose mom was Katie's college roommate over 25 years ago!! They all have been exposed to wonderful music and a cappella singing in their youth, and it inspired them to sing barbershop! How do you attract the youth? We have obviously found that the summer camps are beneficial! We have a local camp, "Lakeside A Cappella Camp," that several of our members have been part of either as clinicians, section leaders, chaperones, volunteers or campers! It is a wonderful experience! We also invite school singing groups to sing on Northern Blend's annual show, and that exposes them to the style. We can only hope that they love it, and find barbershop again in their future! It is also very helpful to choose a repertoire of music that will reach all ages – teens included! Having a pop song or two to sing out in public where there are a variety of singers in the crowd, can be the hook needed to get them to come see you or visit a rehearsal! Also, yes, they are young, but it is important that we value them and their talents and what they bring to the table. I was a 12-year old girl when I joined back in 1987, and I knew way more (both instinctively and via music theory/piano lessons) than I "should have." I offered help in lead sectionals and it was not well received back then. We now value our young members for the talent and skills they bring to our chorus. They are the future of our organization! Let's encourage and empower our youth!

If you have young members or you know of youth that love to sing, Area 3 has a summer youth program in Cazenovia called "Lakeside A Cappella Camp" & you can look into it at - <http://www.lakesideacappella.com>! This summer it is July 13-14-15.

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## *Coaching/Retreat - by NBC "Mother Hen," Marcia Trick*

Coaching is an integral part of a chorus's road to improvement. Northern Blend has coaching sessions twice a year usually in February/March before Area and in August/September before International. The coaches are chosen for the area(s) in which we can use improvement. Coaches should also be chosen for their positive interaction with the chorus. If a chorus responds well to a coach, then the results are much better. In the spring the coaching consists of a long one-day session or two shorter evening sessions broken up. In the fall we often do a retreat for an entire weekend at a local hotel. This acts not only as coaching time but also chorus bonding time! A very important thing that often isn't focused on as much as it should be! A chorus that plays together also sings together!

NOTES:

For further questions, feel free to contact Katie (director) at [ktsinginglady@yahoo.com](mailto:ktsinginglady@yahoo.com).

You can find NBC at - [www.northernblendchorus.homestead.com](http://www.northernblendchorus.homestead.com)  
or <https://m.facebook.com/NorthernBlend> - Thank you for joining us today!