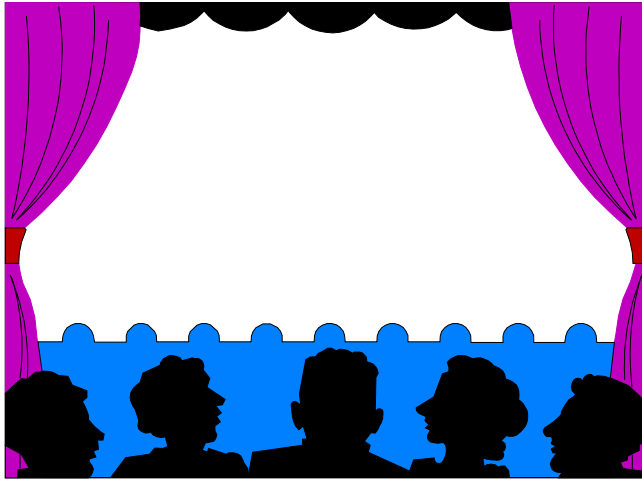


So You Want to Sing in Karaoke Competitions?



If you have reached the stage that you believe you are a serious competitor, it is assumed that you have already mastered the basics such as singing on-key, microphone technique, and have heard yourself through headphones or on tape. If not, it is strongly recommended that you start with the parent sheet, *How to Sing Karaoke* at <http://www.tom.com.au/kara-oke/how2sing.htm>.

If I had the sure-fire winning formula, I'd probably have taken a career in market research. "Make 'em dance ... Make 'em cry" is as close as I've come and it certainly worked for Elvis. Nonetheless, karaoke is like many other types of competitions, such as sport, and is subject to similar psychological principles.

Remember that competitions are meant as entertainment. Research has shown that games which are between 20-40% unpredictable have the most audience appeal. That means that, even if you are by far the most talented singer, a good competition gives you only a head start and a dark horse might well take you out. Judges will tend to look for reasons to keep the competition 20-40% unpredictable. You can't please all the people all the time. If you want a more certain hobby, try snooker competitions or swim carnivals.

What do I want to achieve? Do I want to

- ... win the prize at all costs?
- ... get noticed?
- ... do my personal best?
- ... out-sing the recorded version?
- ... stir the pot with a song I know can't win but makes a statement?

These are all valid goals. The non-winning ones, however, shouldn't become a sour grapes argument.

If the answer is “win the prize”, it might be worth doing some economics. The hourly rate for a karaoke winner is as follows:

$$\text{Hourly Rate} = (\text{Prize} - \text{Costs}) / \text{total hours spent in qualifying \& performing}$$

That \$1,000 prize might require dinners, drinks, baby sitters, cab fares, and long hours spent listening to other singers. If that’s part of the fun for you then ‘great’. If the answer is still “win the prize”, then the next question is “do I want to ‘win pretty’ or ‘Win ugly’”?

Winning Pretty In the best of all worlds, I’d do a rendition that all agreed was purer than Caruso, funkier than James Brown, sexier than Elvis and acclaimed by the songwriter as the definitive version of the song. When the alarm goes off and Earth recalls me, I have to face the compromises. The problem is called “opportunity cost” (the cost of the lost opportunity). However good you are, the audience only hears what you sang, not what you could have but didn’t sing. –ie- If you choose a raunchy soul tune, they will not know what you could have done with a torchy ballad. There is no simple solution to this. If you choose an opus that has a bit of everything, so you can show off all your skills, you run the risk of angering the audience in a song that’s too long. Audience mood determines who will win. The elegant way to win is with something that makes the audience & judges feel good about themselves for giving you the prize.

Winning Ugly There are many cheap tricks that can get a vote: national patriotism, racism, ageism, and sexism all rear their ugly head. A really ugly way to win is to pander to these. Also ugly is to pander to sentimentalism and portraying yourself as a worthy underdog instead of as a singer. It gives a slimy feel to the whole competition. Why not just kneecap ‘em in the powder room and be done with it?

The Competition Itself a key tactic depends on how many songs you will get on the night and whether the audience and the judges will be the same persons as the evening rolls on. It may be the “late crowd” by the time the competition starts and their mood might be completely different to the “dinner crowd”. If you want to show your versatility by doing contrasting songs during the night, bear in mind that the audience and judges may not have seen your first masterpiece and will only hear your one song.

The Great Gamble Because of the uncertainty, the winner will often be someone who’s taken a risk. In many sports the rules encourage a gamble. If you do a riskier shot, you get an extra point. In basketball, it’s the 3-point shot from the outside, in gridiron, it’s trying to cross the goal line for 2 points instead of more safely kicking over the goal posts for 1 point... If you succeed, the extra point will win the night. If you fail, you will look the greater clown. In karaoke, the gamble is an ambitious song: perhaps a bit too high, not practiced enough, too frenetic for comfort... whatever the challenge, it needs to be worth the risk. A good singer doing an almost-great song always beats a great song almost on-key.

Unless you're a professional, you need some degree of gamble to win because the other competitors are almost certainly going to be going for broke. Don't underestimate the competition. Professionals come out of the woodwork when there is prize money on offer.

Supply & Demand

- **Knowing Yourself** Unless you've brought your own audience and paid the judges, all that you have under your control are your choice of song and how you deliver it. Taking a meaningful gamble means really knowing your limitations and not picking a song that will be too difficult on the night.
- **Knowing the Audience** Principles of market research apply. Age, sex, ethnicity all enter the equation. However, a competition is a dynamic event and the audience wants to be changed by it. They want someone to create a mood then change that to another mood. They want to help underdogs and drag down tall poppies. There is no point trying to think through all the possible permutations and you will usually just end up choosing the song you do best in general.

Be Exciting Perhaps the worst mistake would be to take no risks and do a song which is as noteworthy as wallpaper. Wallpaper will not win a competition. Even being pure, on-key, and with exceptional range does not prevent being boring. Excitement can be stirred up in many ways:

- **Tempo** – changes of pace: fast versus slow; syncopated v ballad
- **Volume** – a quiet song can force attention just as easily as a loud one
- **New/old** – brand new hot hits or ancient favourites both stand out
- **Classiness/trashiness** – a pop star needs both raunchy & conservative
- **Language** – learn a popular Spanish or Italian number
- **Surprise** – something out of character –ie- youth doing an ancient song
- **Passion** – infect the audience with your great emotion & enthusiasm
- **Quality** – just doing a great version of whatever attracts attention

Trends There is an unfortunate tendency for lay judges to go for range and vocal tricks –ie- the higher the singer's range the better singer they must be ... the more ornate trills that can be used to stretch out a syllable the better the singer ... the more powerful ... etc. Sadly, audience and judges may fall for this, so you had best make sure your song choice shows off your range and vocal versatility.

Passion Great actors give the impression that they have a great passion. Actors often make good singers. For example, Catherine Zeta-Jones & Rene Zellweger in *Chicago* and Gwyneth Paltrow in *Cruisin'* showed what actresses can do with a song. None of them were known as singers but each of them injected the timing, phrasing, facial expression, and changes in vocal style

within a single phrase from their acting craft with a result that was probably better than would have been done by famous singers. So fake the passion, ham it up, or whatever you have to do. It's a long way from stage to audience and you need some degree of exaggerated expression to be noticed.

Impersonation This is tricky. An impersonator can win a karaoke competition whereas such would not be a desirable quality in a true starsearch environment because the judges are looking for someone with an original voice to sell records. Impersonation would be an ugly win but some people may not be able to avoid the fact that they sound like someone famous. If you sound like Elvis, you may be best off sticking with Elvis.

Relating to the Audience Audiences and judges want to feel you are one of them. Most great singers of the modern era have had that quality. Men related to Bing Crosby because he was relaxed sounding and shared their interest in sport. He wasn't a threat because he was modest and didn't put others down. Elvis was very modest and humble. Sinatra, by contrast, was brash and competitive and alienated a lot of people. One way of relating is by gestures that show you're not taking yourself too seriously (even if you actually are being very serious). You can look like you're sending yourself up. Elvis was a master at this. This has the added advantage that the audience feels you could have done even greater things.

The Zen of Stage Fright Even famous entertainers admit to stage fright. It can affect your vocal delivery directly by tightening throat muscles, making it hard to hit extreme notes. Your high notes are squeaky and your low notes aren't full & relaxed. Anxiety also affects your appearance, as you want to appear casual and comfortable with the audience. Zen and other Eastern masters and teachers would advise you to focus on as few things as possible: the audience, the song, and your movements will take enough brain-power without thinking about the mortgage, the job, and the kids for the couple of minutes you're on stage.

The tendency on karaoke nights is for the volume and tempo to increase as the night goes on: younger, newer, faster, louder, raunchier Everyone wants to be remembered as the one who livened up the party rather than the one who put the damper on it. As an entertainer, your job is to create the audience mood, not merely reflect it. You may need to use gesture and interaction to break them out of the mood from the previous songs and get them in the mood for your song.

Song Choice It's hard to top my late Mammy's advice: "Son – Make 'em dance then make 'em cry". Singing is largely about emotion. The more emotion you can convey, the more impact your performance. The ultimate killer song would have the following:

- beat
- range
- change of pace
- dynamics

There a good reason why no-one has yet written the perfect all-purpose killer song: It is an impossibility. Any song that has such great variety ends up too long to be practical. The karaoke singer only gets a few minutes of audience goodwill. So some sort of choice will have to be made. Each of the types below has potential to stand out from the pack

- **The Killer Song** a distinctive, memorable song with great variety
- **The Big Song** a searing wide-range vocal solo with a wall of sound finale
- **The Hot with a Bullet song** something in the charts at the moment
- **The Torch Song** schmaltzy and full of romantic passion
- **The Frenetic Song** a hot hit with fabulous beat, not necessarily current

Each runs a risk. Older songs may date you. Current hits are a risk because the chart may be full of undeliverable rubbish at the time of the competition. Songs which you find positive and spiritually-uplifting may have the opposite effect on a cynical audience. The object is to pick the one that best suits your voice and the audience.

The Music Cycle A Karaoke night is a microcosm of the pop charts. The charts follow a cycle like the stock market: what starts as a bare sound, like folk, gets gradually embellished with more harmonies, more instruments, more electrics, and finally a full orchestra and choir. Then the audience begins to crave something more “authentic” or “back to roots” and the cycle begins again. Folk, punk, rock, and hip hop have all followed such a cycle. Think Rock, Paper, Scissors. On karaoke night, a wall of sound can be countered by a sparse rap song, which can be countered by a gushy torch song, which can be countered by ... etc.

Losing Techniques to Avoid

- **Loud is not big** To sound big, you only need to match the volume and distance of the backing track. In a big finale, you need to sound farther away to blend in, not necessarily louder. Singing too close to the mike for extra volume will kill the “big sound” effect. You’ll sound more like a chook raffle announcement over the PA.
- **Wallpaper** A popular and easy to sing middle of the road adult contemporary song might be a safe choice but will not get you noticed and can only win a competition if everybody else goes off-key or loopy.
- **Over-reaching** Never choose a song that you enjoy hearing, but don’t know very well. If it was made famous by a particularly distinctive, gifted megastar who has a completely different voice than yours, it will only emphasize the flaws in your version. Avoid anything long & gloomy or full of corny uplifting sentiment.
- **Over-Performing** The great winners can sing & dance. Just to rub it in, they’re often good-looking, successful, and nice people to boot – Don’t you just hate the bitch! Dance will not compensate for poor singing, and the song & dance style is fairly dated. So limit any performance to telling the story or the rhythm of the song. Plan your subtle movements in advance to make some sort of flourish like a spin or hand gesture that is timed to end precisely at the points when the music stops. This shows the audience that you have rhythm and stops you looking wooden in delivery.
- **The Lament: “It sounded good in the shower”** The big problem is that you can’t hear your own voice. Rehearsing in the shower will only give you distorted feedback. At all times, try and listen to what is coming out of the speakers, rather than your inner voice. The speakers are what the audience hears.

Summary of Competition Strategy

- **Be satisfied** with several realistic goals such as ‘better than the record’
- **Win Pretty** make the audience & judges feel good about themselves for giving you the prize.
- **Choose the song for the crowd** that will actually be judging at the time of the competition
- **“The Great Gamble”** take some risk by choosing a song that will show off your best qualities
- **Know your limitations** for a meaningful gamble
- **Understand audience** need and create a mood for them
- **Be Exciting** make sure your song choice shows off your range and vocal versatility.
- **Create contrast** with other competitors through Tempo, Volume, New/old, Classiness/trashiness, Foreign language, Surprise, Passion, and Quality
- **Trends** make sure your song choice shows off your abilities with modern styles
- **Passion** use acting skills to put life into your delivery
- **Avoid impersonation**, try to come up with a unique presentation
- **Relating to the Audience** audiences and judges want to feel you are one of them. Use gestures that show you’re not taking yourself too seriously
- **The Zen of Stage Fright** forget about everything but audience, song, delivery
- **Song Choice** “Make ‘em dance then make ‘em cry”, by showing beat, range, change of pace, dynamics
- **Apply Rock, Paper, Scissors** of The Music Cycle, rather than head-on assault
- **Losing Techniques** to Avoid: Loud is not big, Wallpaper, Over-reaching, Over-Performing, “It sounded good in the shower”