

# The Singer's Library

## No Instruments Needed

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

As the a cappella craze continues to sweep the world, a new book, written by a pioneer in this field, provides an in-depth perspective to a style that has been evolving for thousands of years and is here to stay.



Brian Manternach

The *So You Want to Sing* series continues to produce books directed to vocalists interested in specific genres. The Rowman & Littlefield series, sponsored by the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), now turns its focus to a cappella and barbershop.

### 'So You Want to Sing A Cappella'

*Entertainment Weekly* has dubbed author Deke Sharon "the father of contemporary a cappella." While it may seem bold to assign any one person such a lofty title, the reality is that if audiences have any familiarity with contemporary a cappella whatsoever, Sharon likely had a hand in it.

Many people were introduced to contemporary a cappella through NBC's reality show competition *The Sing-Off*, which launched the group Pentatonix into stardom. Sharon was the producer of that show.

Others know a cappella music because of Universal's three *Pitch Perfect* movies starring Anna Kendrick and Rebel Wilson. Sharon was vocal producer, music director, and arranger for all three movies.

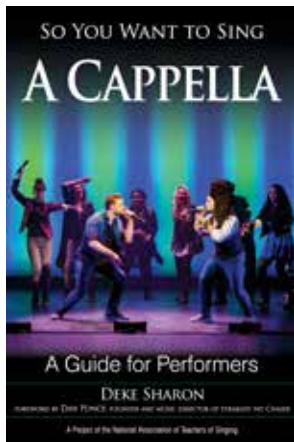
Additionally, he has produced a cappella albums for Straight No Chaser, created a cappella groups for Disneyland and Walt Disney World, and was the vocal arranger and co-producer for *In Transit*, Broadway's first a cappella musical.

Considering all these accomplishments, it is equally bold (yet difficult to deny) that his new book, *So You Want to Sing A Cappella*, is hailed by series editor Matthew Hoch as "Deke Sharon's magnum opus."

Like many of the other *So You Want to Sing* books, Sharon begins with a brief history of the genre with pre-contemporary a cappella ranging from pillars of Western music history—such as Gregorian chant, madrigals, and Renaissance polyphony—to musical forms passed down through oral tradition—like Native American music, sea shanties, and the field holler.

He then outlines a history of contemporary a cappella as it parallels his own journey within the genre. In the early 1980s, most of the a cappella music Sharon could find came from groups like the King's Singers, the Swingle Singers, and the Manhattan Transfer. But it was the Bobs and the Nylons who most caught his attention for the "cutting-edge sound" that he considered the most experimental a cappella music released in decades.

By the late 80s, he was hearing a cappella songs on the Billboard charts, namely the Boyz II Men renditions of "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday" and "In



the Still of the Night," as well as Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy." At about the same time, Sharon was accepted into the longstanding college a cappella group the Tufts (University) Beelzebubs and started moving a cappella in a new direction by creating his own arrangements for the ensemble.

In the 1990s, as Sharon's vocal arrangements

became more widespread and influential among college ensembles, he created the *Collegiate A Cappella News* (CAN) newsletter and the Contemporary A Cappella Society of America (CASA). Out of this effort, the Contemporary A Cappella Recording Awards (CARAs) were created as well as an annual compilation album called *Best of College A Cappella* (BOCA).

The growing popularity of a cappella thrust the genre into the mainstream in the 2000s. In addition to *The Sing-Off* and the *Pitch Perfect* movies, other TV shows appeared, including *Sing It On*, *Pitch Slapped*, *Sing That Thing!*, and *Pitch Battle*.

In *So You Want to Sing A Cappella*, Sharon makes his own additions to the two chapters that appear in every *So You Want to Sing* book. In Scott McCoy's "Singing and Voice Science" chapter, Sharon adds sections on musical anatomy and physical anatomy. In Wendy LeBorgne's vocal health chapter, Sharon adds a section on "A Cappella Group Health" that describes the importance of healthy relationships between the various members of any ensemble. In the same way, a guest chapter on "A Cappella Audio Tech" by Tony Huerta complements the series-standard chapter "Using Audio Enhancement Technology" by Matthew Edwards.

Sharon admits that learning vocal techniques by reading a book is like learning to tie your shoes by listening to an audio recording. For this reason, and to supplement the chapter on vocal techniques, he includes tutorial videos on the companion website hosted by [www.nats.org](http://www.nats.org).

Other chapters address blend and rehearsal techniques while a section called Sing for Your Life: A Cappella Ensembles for All Ages covers school-sponsored ensembles, professional a cappella groups, and recreational groups.

An additional section explores career opportunities (both full-time and part-time) that may be found in a cappella. Large sections of these chapters are written

by guest authors who are specialists in the field and include subjects addressing theme park performing, live sound engineering, session singing in recording studios, and event production and promotion, among others.

The ending of the book is a compelling argument for how singing reaffirms the importance everyone possesses, both within an ensemble and in society. As Sharon states, harmonizing in a community reminds us all that "... together we are able to create something more beautiful than we ever could alone."

*What to sing barbershop? Check out the review by Brian Manternach on So You Want to Sing Barbershop on the CS Music Blog.*

*Brian Manternach is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah's Department of Theatre. In addition to his contributions to Classical Singer, he is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing. An active singer, he holds a doctor of music degree from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Visit [www.brianmanternach.com](http://www.brianmanternach.com) for more information or contact him at [bmantern@gmail.com](mailto:bmantern@gmail.com).*

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