

What is Barbershop?

Barbershop vocal harmony, as codified during the barbershop revival era (1930s–present), is a style of a cappella close harmony, or unaccompanied vocal music, characterized by consonant four-part chords for every melody note in a predominantly homophonic texture. Each of the four parts has its own role: generally, the lead sings the melody, the tenor harmonizes above the melody, the bass sings the lowest harmonizing notes, and the baritone completes the chord, usually below the lead. The melody is not usually sung by the tenor or baritone, except for an infrequent note or two to avoid awkward voice leading, in tags or codas, or when some appropriate embellishment can be created. One characteristic feature of barbershop harmony is the use of what is known as "snakes" and "swipes". This is when a chord is altered by a change in one or more non-melodic voices. Occasional passages may be sung by fewer than four voice parts.

Barbershop music is generally performed by either a barbershop quartet, a group of four singers with one on each vocal part, or a barbershop chorus, which closely resembles a choir with the notable exception of the genre of music.

According to the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS), "Barbershop music features songs with understandable lyrics and easily singable melodies, whose tones clearly define a tonal center and imply major and minor chords and barbershop (dominant and secondary dominant) seventh chords that resolve primarily around the circle of fifths, while making frequent use of other resolutions." Slower barbershop songs, especially ballads, often eschew a continuous beat, and notes are often held (or sped up) *ad libitum*.

Except for the bass, the voice parts in barbershop singing do not correspond closely to their classical music counterparts; the tenor range and tessitura are similar to those of the classical countertenor, the baritone resembles the Heldentenor or lyric baritone in range and a tenor in tessitura, and the lead generally corresponds to the tenor of classical repertoire, with some singers possessing a tessitura more similar to that of a high baritone. Barbershop singing is performed both by men's and women's groups; the elements of the barbershop style and the names of the voice parts are the same for both.

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For singers who come from a traditional choral music background, the world of barbershop harmony can be confusing at first. In simple terms, barbershop harmony is vocal harmony produced by four parts: lead, tenor, baritone and bass. It is sung a Cappella (without instrumental accompaniment) and is one of the most challenging and satisfying forms of music for the singer. Here are some important things you need to know.

Voice Parts

You won't hear us talking about sopranos or altos here. The melody is sung by our **Leads** (on the printed music, it is the musical line where alto is usually written). Leads need to be accurate singers with a full, authoritative sound. All the rest of us match our harmony parts to the lead's melody. Most harmony singers hate to admit it, but the lead really IS the most important part - after all, it's the melody.

The harmony part sung above the lead is the **Tenor**. Although tenor is the highest voice in barbershop (on the printed music, it is the musical line where soprano is usually written) it should not be confused with soprano of conventional singing groups. The tenor should have a light, clear, pure tone that will compliment, but not overpower the lead voice.

Baritone covers approximately the same range as lead and is a middle harmony part. It can be confusing at first as it is written as the top line of the bass clef, but sung an octave higher. It is also very different from traditional alto because the baritone harmony notes often cross the lead notes, sometimes sung below and sometimes sung above. Baritones must constantly adjust their vocal balance to accommodate their position in the chord. The musical line is often called "vocal gymnastics"!

The lowest harmony part is the Bass. **Bass** singers should have a rich, mellow voice and be able to sing an Eb below middle C easily. Because the barbershop style calls for basses to sing notes that are strong components of the chords, the bass part is the foundation of the barbershop sound.

Interpretive Freedom

One of the hallmarks of the barbershop style is interpretive freedom. We are allowed, even encouraged to deviate from the time values on the sheet music in order to deliver the musical message the way we feel is most meaningful to the listener. Don't be disturbed that the director doesn't seem to care whether it's a half note or a dotted quarter note... she/he is free to interpret the song as she/he thinks best. A song is a story set to music. Thus the lyrics become important in order for the story to reach the listener. Our style of music is a conversational style in which we tell the story much as we would speak it. As a result, the interpreter is free to deliver a lyrical line that tells the story.

Our Singing Technique and Style

We teach the same vocal techniques for quality singing that most traditional voice teachers embrace: good breath support, pitch accuracy, a sound that is open and free, forward tone placement, resonance, vowels that are pure and matched, clearly articulated lyrics and so on. We do however, sing a different style than many choral groups, in a least three ways:

- 1) we pronounce our words in a conversational "middle America" manner rather than the "cultured" sound of classical choral music.
- 2) We generally sing a legato, connected vocal line and almost never aim for a staccato, clipped delivery.
- 3) Finally, we minimize the vibrato in our voices so that the pitches of the notes are steady and can lock together into clear chords. That lock produces what is called an "overtone" - - a fifth note that is heard but not sung. That "lock and ring" causes those wonderful "goose bumps" produced on the listener when a properly produced chord is locked in a ringing barbershop chord!!