



Introduction to Barbershop Harmony

History

The barbershop style of four-part *a cappella* singing is a uniquely American musical art form. It had its beginnings during the late 1800s. It originated prior to the advent of radio and television, a time in which people entertained themselves by singing. The popular songs of that era were written to be sung by the common person rather than the experienced musician. Barbershop melody lines were simple, and lyrics were “down to earth” and easy to understand and appreciate. Barbershop music enjoyed great popularity through the mid-1920s.

Voicing

In barbershop harmony, the four voice parts have different names and functions from other vocal styles. Although the ranges for the four voice parts are similar to classical music, the strength of the barbershop chord structure lies in its cone-shaped sound. The lightest production, without sacrificing clarity or brilliance, must come in the top part; each of the three lower voices sing with increased depth and intensity. The Tenor sings the highest note in the chord, the Bass sings the lowest, the Lead sings the melody, and the Baritone sings the all-important missing note to complete the barbershop chord. The following vocal ranges are for the typical Young Women In Harmony singer:

Bass range – F below middle C to G above middle C

- Strong harmony part at the bottom of the chord
- Sings with authority like a Lead, forming an accurate relationship
- Provides a firm foundation for cone-shaped sound
- Usually sings root or the fifth of the chord

Baritone range – B flat below middle C to C an octave above

- Same range as Lead but as a harmony part
- Sings above and below the Lead
- Full, rich sound in lower range, lighter in the upper range
- Must be flexible and sing very accurately

Lead range – Middle C to D or E an octave above

- Best suited to strong and lyrical first alto or second soprano
- Sings the melody with authority, clarity, and consistent quality
- Responsible for interpretation, emotion, and inflections of the song

Tenor range – F above middle C to G above the staff

- Harmony above the melody
- Light and clear, mostly in upper register
- No heavy sounds or constant vibrato
- Frequently chromatic

To maximize the effect of the natural overtone series, the roots and fifths of all chords are sung a little louder than the thirds and sevenths. In all cases, the melody is tuned to the tonal center, and the harmony parts are tuned to the melody part. Use of similar word sounds in good quality and balanced volume relationships by each of the voice parts reinforces the natural harmonic series -overtone- to produce the unique “ringing” sound characteristic of barbershop harmony.

Structure and Notation

The barbershop style primarily uses major chords, minor chords, dominant seventh chords, minor seventh chords, half-diminished seventh chords, and fully diminished seventh chords. A good barbershop arrangement should use the "barbershop seventh" (a dominant-quality seventh chord that occurs on any degree of the scale) for at least one-third of its chords. The chord progressions used in the barbershop style rely on the classical "Circle of Fifths" ----- with a few interesting embellishments thrown in along the way. Songs with that type of harmonic variation easily lend themselves to the barbershop style.

The written form of barbershop music uses much of the same notation as other forms of music. A grand staff comprised of two staves is used to notate the music. The Tenor and Lead parts are notated on the treble staff. The Baritone and Bass parts are notated on the bass staff and are sung an octave higher than written.

Benefits of Barbershop Singing

Barbershop music is easy to learn and fun to sing. Singing in a barbershop quartet can help your singers develop and refine their tuning and performance skills, self-confidence, and a sense of teamwork. Barbershop singing can be used to achieve a “quick success” for your singers. It can also be used to teach good vocal production techniques. In addition to singing in a quartet, a chorus of many singers on each of the four voice parts can be used to produce a very satisfying barbershop sound, while providing a highly supportive environment for weaker singers.