

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 1800's, and remained popular through Vaudeville until the mid-1920's. It originated prior to the advent of radio and television, a time in which people found ways of entertaining themselves by singing. The popular songs of that era were also written to be sung by the common person, rather than by the experienced musician. Barbershop melody lines are simple, and lyrics are "down to earth" and easy to understand and appreciate.

Voicing

Barbershop music is sung by four voice parts. The **Lead** (equivalent to the 2nd Tenor) sings the melody line. The **Tenor** (equivalent to the 1st Tenor) sings a light harmony part that is consistently higher than the melody (often a parallel third above). The **Bass** sings a harmony part that is consistently lower than the melody and provides the foundation for most chords by singing either the root or the fifth of the chord. The **Baritone** sings a harmony part comprised of whatever note remains to fill-out the chord. When sung out of context, the baritone part sounds very unusual, but it gives the Barbershop style its unique sound.

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 (overtones) 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 which suggest that type of harmonic variation easily lend themselves to the Barbershop style.

The written form of Barbershop style 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 notes are written one octave higher than they actually sound. The Baritone and Bass parts are notated on the bass staff.

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 the same voice part can be used to produce a very satisfying Barbershop sound, while providing a highly supportive environment for weaker singers. Girls like boys who sing. Singing a cappella barbershop harmony can attract more boys to your program.

For More Information

Headquarters office for the **Barbershop Harmony Society (SPEBSQSA)** in Nashville, TN: (800) 876-SING

<http://www.barbershop.org>

Headquarters office for **Sweet Adelines International** in Tulsa, OK: (800) 992-SING

<http://www.sweetadelineintl.org>

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