

## BASICS OF BARBERSHOP HARMONY

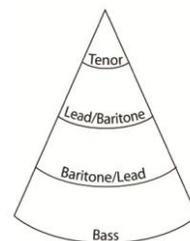
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### **HISTORY**

The barbershop style of four-part a cappella singing is a uniquely American musical art form. It had its beginnings during the late 1800s, and enjoyed great popularity through Vaudeville and 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 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.

### **VOICING**

In barbershop harmony, the four voice parts have different names and functions than in other vocal styles. Although the ranges for the four voice parts are similar to traditional 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 a chord, the Bass sings the lowest, the Lead sings the melody, and the Baritone sings the all-important missing note to complete the chord.



Bass range –

- F below middle C to G above middle C
- Strong harmony part at the bottom of the chord
- Sing 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 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 (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” (as 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.

## **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.

## **BASIC INTRO TO BARBERSHOP HARMONY**

*Lustre Quartet (Men’s quartet), excerpts  
Aug, 2009*

### **BARBERSHOP MUSIC IS SUNG A CAPPELLA**

That is, there are no accompanying instruments – the singers simply listen to a starting pitch and go from there with just their voices. Singers depend on their ability to hear and sing accurate intervals (to go from one note to the next with accuracy) in order to keep the song in tune and in harmony.

### **BARBERSHOP MUSIC HAS A CERTAIN MUSICAL STRUCTURE**

In order to be considered true barbershop, the musical arrangement must adhere to certain rules and guidelines. Without getting too deep into music theory technicalities, here’s a very simplified summary:

- The lyrics are understandable.
- The melodies are easily singable and recognizable, and you can easily hear what key the song is in.
- The harmonies and chords used in the song’s arrangement come from a specifically defined list of options. Chords that are not on the list are used sparingly, if at all.

Perhaps it is this last bullet that makes a barbershop arrangement so distinctive. Modern Western music has evolved into some very elaborate harmonic structures. Many chords found in pop, jazz, blues, or other modern styles of Western music are not included in the barbershop style, so when we hear barbershop, we can recognize it as being unique.

### **BARBERSHOP MUSIC CONTAINS “RINGING CHORDS”**

In fact, this could be called *the defining characteristic* of barbershop. When a chord “rings”, it produces a specific acoustical effect called an “overtone”. If the four voices sing with proper vocal technique, properly tuned, on the right combination of notes (i.e., the right chord), then the frequencies and harmonics in their sounds combine to create an overtone, which sounds (somewhat magically) like a fifth note being sung. At the same time, the four voices combine into one blended, unified sound. The result is a musical sound that is incredibly exciting and pleasing to the ear, both for the singer and the listener. It all boils down to the Ringing Chord.

The goal of barbershop singers is to create this ringing sound as much as possible – to ring as many chords as possible. That’s why we rehearse, take vocal training, hire coaches, and attend workshops to learn how to sing with this vocal quality. That’s why barbershop arrangements only use a limited set of chords – because only those certain chords can combine to create that ringing sound. That’s why barbershop is sung *a cappella* – to eliminate any sound frequencies that might ruin the vocal effects of the ringing sound.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

*Internet*

### What makes a barbershop chord?

Ringing chords. The defining characteristic of the barbershop style is the ringing chord, one in which certain overtones of the four voices reinforce each other, sometimes so strongly that the overtone is perceived by the listener as a distinct tone, even though none of the voices are perceived as singing that tone.

### What is a barbershop 7th chord?

One of the unique qualities of barbershop music is the barbershop seventh chord. This is basically **a major-minor seventh chord, or a major chord with a minor seventh above the root**. The unique aspect of this chord in barbershop music is that the seventh is sung as a blue note, or slightly lower in pitch than normal. *May 14, 2016*

### What makes barbershop music different?

Distinctively, barbershop music is **written with its greatest emphasis on chord structure**. Strongly “barbershop” arrangements showcase full four-part chords for every note, with a minimum of doubling on octaves. *Jan 2, 2020*

### What is a ringing chord?

The ringing chord is also known as **the expanded sound, the angel's voice, or the fifth voice**. This sound is created by singing a chord that is tuned using just intonation in a way that the harmonic series of each sounded note is in tuned with the harmonic series of each of the other notes. *Jun 7, 2016*

### What is a 4 way close voicing?

A close voicing means a chord where the top and bottom notes fall within an octave. The four-way tells us how many voices we have. Four-way close therefore means **to arrange a four-note chord within an octave**. A common way to harmonize a melody in jazz is to hang notes below it, making sure the harmony is supported. *May 13, 2020*

### Why is it called barbershop music?

Although barbershop quartet singing is associated with the United States, its origins (in the 19th century) are obscure: it may date from an era when American barbershops formed social and musical centers for men, or it may refer back to the British expression “barber's music,” denoting an extemporized performance by ...

### Why do 7th chords sound so good?

The chord is made up of the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th notes of a major scale, so Cmaj7 has C, E, G and B notes. **The dissonance between the C and the B** is what makes the chord sound so lush, but make sure you keep the 1st and the 7th notes apart.