

Early Barbershop History

Barbershop is largely an African American folk art, and was inspired by professional vocal groups that toured the United States in the mid 1800s. These amateur singers combined elements of these vocal groups with their own musical practices, adding new embellishments, complex rhythms, and a much wider harmonic vocabulary. As patrons socialized in the barbershop and other places, someone with a strong voice would lead others in a popular song. The crowd would improvise harmony with a person singing harmony above, someone below, and someone jumping above or below the melody to fill out the chord. Barbershop harmony was born!

What Makes It Barbershop Harmony?

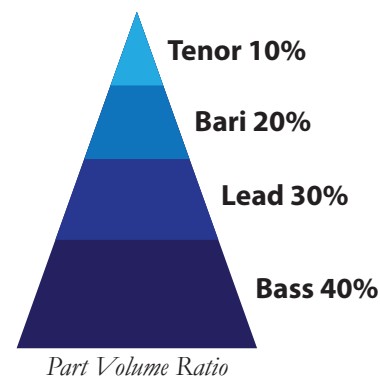
Barbershop is a style of arranging in close, four-part, a cappella harmony; it is not an era, style of music, or genre. The melody is usually in the second voice with harmony above and below. The arranger harmonizes every melody note with few passing tones or doubles, and creates more harmonic movement by adding secondary dominant chord progressions. The baritone part functions in a unique way, filling in the missing note of each chord.

Finally, a tag is music that is added to the end of the song, often introducing new harmonic progressions, similar to an amen. Tags are very popular in barbershop culture as standalone musical excerpts. Because they are often taught without using sheet music, tags are a wonderful way to introduce new singers to barbershop chords in just a few minutes by ear, rather than learning an entire song. Visit Barbershop.org/MusicInfo to learn more.

Barbershop Performance Best Practices

Barbershop has unique voice-part ratios

Most choral groups strive to have roughly the same number of singers on each part. However, barbershoppers use a 1-2-3-4 part ratio, striving for approximately 10% on Tenor, 20% on Baritone, 30% on Lead, and 40% on Bass. Barbershop quartets should reflect the same balance, with the Bass singer prominent as the foundation of the sound. The Baritone should adjust to a softer volume when above the Lead and a louder volume when below. The Tenor should be the lightest of them all. Because the melody is not in the top voice like most choral music, it is critical for groups to make these volume adjustments to ensure the melody can be heard in the second voice. This special ratio contributes to a more authentic and robust barbershop sound.



Barbershop performers may freely interpret rhythm

Songs with moderate or fast tempi are typically performed as written. However, most slow barbershop songs and introductions are sung freely in a rubato or speech-like style. Barbershop performers often slow down at cadence points to emphasize special harmonies, with the last few chords significantly longer than notated.

Barbershop singers use “just intonation”

Experienced barbershop singers do not tune using a piano’s equal temperament—they strive for just chord tuning. Visit Barbershop.org/MusicInfo to learn more.

Barbershop singers perform expressively

Barbershop singers stand and sing music from memory, performing in the style of musical theater with body and facial engagement. Barbershop groups often use synchronized movements to emphasize the style and energy of the piece. Quartets perform in a semicircle, helping them to hear each part and focus on creating a combined unit sound. Choirs stand on risers, with the director performing and moving with the group at special moments in the song. Few barbershop singers wear straw hats or striped vests today, but many groups do wear matching outfits.

Learn more at Barbershop.org/MusicInfo