

BARBERSHOP BASICS #1

Vocal Skills

Barbershop harmony is unaccompanied, four-part a cappella harmony. Although barbershop-style music is usually built on simple melodies and is relatively easy to sing, the a cappella style and the ear training necessary for independent part singing make it one of the most challenging and rewarding accomplishments of a vocal ensemble. When the music is sung accurately and with good breath support and vocal techniques, barbershop harmony produces overtone vibrations that create a resonant ring unique to this form of music. As a new Sweet Adeline, you're probably wondering what the requirements are for your own vocal skills. Ladies of all skill levels join us and their abilities are as varied as they are. It's the coming together of these unique voices, talents and experiences that creates the space for an exciting ensemble. All for one and one for all!

Here are the basics:

1. You need to be able to sing in tune.
2. You need to be able to hear those around you and blend your voice with theirs as our organization emphasizes ensemble singing, is not a solo-building group.
3. You need to be able to eventually hold your own – that is you will need to be able to sing your own part when surrounded by those who don't. In a barbershop chorus there are many times when you are singing while standing by someone who isn't your part.
4. You will probably want to begin a normal warm-up routine at home before you practice. This will be good for your voice and, depending on what you choose to use for warm-ups, you can be specifically working on many different skills (ex. Flexibility, range, breath control, dynamic (volume) control, etc.)
5. In order to keep your level consistent and/or improve, you will want to make sure you have a plan for practicing the songs at home, either with the help of the learning tape/CD or not. It's just like exercising the body – if you do it on a regular basis, you will reap the benefits, and if you don't, you'll definitely see the decline.

VOICE PARTS IN BARBERSHOP SINGING

There are certain things you may want to know depending on the part you will be singing. Most of us are familiar with the SATB or SSAA choral music, where the melody is usually in the First Soprano line, above all others. The voice parts in barbershop for women have different names and functions than they do in other SATB or SSAA vocal styles. The **LEAD** voice, generally sings the melody and is below the **TENOR** harmony; the **TENOR** part sings the highest note in the chord; the **BARITONE** part fills in the all-important missing note in a chord that may be above and below the melody; and the **BASS** part supplies the harmonic foundation (root or fifth) of the chord. Similar to choral music, minimal vibrato should be apparent in barbershop singing. Wide and obvious vibratos tend to hamper the lock and ring that we look for in our chords.

TENOR is a harmony part sung consistently above the lead. The tenor should have a light, sweet, pure tone that will compliment but not overpower or overshadow the lead voice. Light lyric sopranos generally make good tenors. The range for young women is from G above middle C to high F on the top line of the clef. Occasionally you will have notes below the lead. When this happens, your tonal quality will need to change from being light and clear to being more full and round. Flexibility is the key and knowing when you need to change.

LEAD is the melody and must be sung with authority, clarity, and consistent quality throughout her range. The lead sings with limited vibrato to add color and warmth to the sound. With too much use of vibrato the chord will not “lock” or “ring” or produce the unique full or “expanded” sound that is characteristic of barbershop harmony. The lead is responsible for conveying the interpretation, emotion, and inflections of the song. The range is equivalent to a soprano II and is from middle C, and D above middle C. On the rarer occasions when the melody line is in another part, which may be only for a few notes, you will need to be aware to lighten your vocal quality to allow the melody to shine wherever it is being sung. If you are in a quartet, the others will follow your *lead*. In a chorus, we all follow the director.

BARITONE covers approximately the same range as lead. The voice part is similar to equivalent to Alto I except that baritone harmony notes cross the lead notes; primarily sung below and sometimes above, depending on where the melody is situated. Baritones must constantly adjust their balance to accommodate their position in the chord. They have to have good ear tuning to balance the chord in both pitch and volume. When singing below the lead, she uses a rich, full sound that helps solidify the relationship between lead and bass. When above the lead she uses a lighter production, similar to that used by the tenor. The range is from A below middle C to C above middle C. Another difference from the alto part is that the baritone is written in the Bass Clef. We sing it an octave higher than it is written.

BASS is the lowest note in the barbershop chord. Singers should have a rich, mellow voice and generally sing the root and fifth of each chord. The bass sings a relatively straight, well-produced tone with a minimum of vibrato. The range is comparable to that of a contralto or Alto II in traditional choral music. The range is from E below middle C to G above middle C. Similar to the baritone, this part is written in the bass clef an octave lower than it is actually sung. A bass sings with a heavier tone quality than the others and generally with more volume, to fill out the ‘cone’. Your part is the foundation.

THE BARBERSHOP CONE

What is the ‘cone’, you ask?

Barbershop harmonies have a different balance than the cylindrical SATB, in that our top voices sing with less weight and intensity than our lower voices.

