

Barbershop Criteria

Sweet Adelines International

1. It has four parts - no more, no less.
2. It has melodies that are easily remembered.
3. Barbershop harmonic structure is characterized by:
 - a strong bass line
 - melody in an internal part
 - complete chords without any non-chord tones
 - mostly major triads, dominant 7th chords and dominant 9th chords with other chords used in passing as demanded by the implied harmony
 - traditional harmonic movement and resolutions
4. It has rhythmic interest as an important and vital part of an uptune.
5. It has clear, recognizable form.
6. It has lyrics that are clear and understandable.
7. It is challenging to perform because:
 - it requires great vocal skill and is usually sung by amateur singers
 - all chords must be heard with clarity requiring singers to sing precise intervals
8. Properly tuned barbershop chords are congruent with the physics of sound.
9. Energy and physical involvement are required from the singer in a degree of intensity not usually found in other choral forms.
10. The artistic potential is unlimited since we are not bound by the printed page.
11. It is emotionally satisfying to both the listener and the performer.
12. You can't do it alone.

BARBERSHOP STYLE

The barbershop style of music sounds entirely different from any other style of music. Unless you know exactly what you are listening to, you may not be aware why.

The music is specifically and creatively characterized and arranged with four-part complete chords, including mostly major triads, dominant 7ths and dominant 9ths. Other chords are used in passing as required by the implied harmonies. The melody is carried by the lead voice, while the highest voice sings a harmony part. There are two other parts contributing to our unique harmony. Musical characteristics, deliberately designed by the arranger are used so the delivery is like no other ensemble or choral performance.

The melody line carried by the lead voice is singable and the harmonies (tenor, baritone and bass) are strong, so as to give the illusion of full accompaniment, which also gives multiple dimensions to the performance. A barbershop arranger also considers the rise and fall of the melody line, arranging so as to enhance the melody and imply a natural and expressive dynamic plan. There is a natural forward motion in the delivery which is also inherent in the arrangement. There is a constant build and release of tension throughout each arrangement which, when executed with a high level of vocal skills, creates a truly emotional experience for the listener, as well as the performer.

If you have a strong barbershop arrangement, it is easy to sing in the truest sense of the style. A barbershop arrangement is your "roadmap", so to speak. Therefore, it is essential to select an arrangement that suits your ensemble by showcasing your strengths, and minimizing your weaknesses. Precision, in combination with an artistic delivery overflowing with finesse, is essential to the characteristics of barbershop style. The better the understanding of all the essentials of barbershop style, the higher the level of skill can be achieved. The higher the level we are able to achieve to execute these elements, the more impressive and unforgettable our barbershop performances will be.

Let's get back to our definition of barbershop style. Whatever your definition is, it should include several characteristics:

MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

EMBELLISHMENTS AND SWIPES

Embellishments should be creative, yet subtle at times and outstanding at other times, depending on the intent and arrangement. Barbershop swipes should be handled confidently, and with artistry. Swipes should be executed so that if we could see them, they would "look" like the shape of an hour-glass. That is, the originating note should be connected to the final note, while seamlessly incorporating all notes in between. The speed of the swipe can vary and should be planned and determined purposefully. When two or more voice parts are executing a swipe at the same time, the execution, speed, etc. should be planned and synchronized. In preparation of the swipe, the sound should be lifted and expanded. The swipe is then executed, and at the end, the sound should grow and be energized once again.

TRANSITIONS/EXCHANGES

Transitions between sections of songs are incorporated into barbershop arrangements to create interest and excitement. The effective use of transitions is critical to establishing unity and congruency in the delivery of the song. These transitions or exchanges should not be overlooked as they are an essential element in our music that sets us apart from others art forms. They can be difficult to execute, requiring great stamina, to obtain the desired musically throughout the piece. However, if you have ever heard a performance where the musical storyline keeps building and the excitement and involvement you feel as an audience continues to grow with each passing phrase, you can be sure the performers are utilizing transitions to their fullest and intended use. There is no substitute for generating such exhilaration!

MELODIC VARIATIONS/TRANSFERS

While the lead singer carries the melody most of the time, a barbershop arrangement may transfer the melody line to another voice part, for various reasons. The melody note must be included in all barbershop chords. However, sometimes the melody note will be out of the best range for the lead voice part. The arranger will then transfer the melody to another voice part, adding interest, variation, texture and color to the performance. Once again, when executed effectively, the listener is only aware of the excitement and the mood created, not the technical aspect of the diversion. These alternate voicing should be opportunities to maximize the difference in melody transfer, which will maximize the performance as well.

METER AND RHYTHMIC VARIATION

The meter in barbershop style delivery is usually simple and symmetrical. It is important to maintain the appropriate and intended meter and pulse when singing a tempo song. The ability to maintain tempo is artistry at its best, and requires skill as well as an understanding of how to achieve this and why it is important. Variations in tempo should be used sparingly and skillfully, so as not to draw attention to the actual tempo change, but to enhance the musical delivery of the song. When you have experienced a performance where tempo has been executed effectively at a high level, your awareness and reaction can be physical, as well as emotional.

DYNAMIC VARIATION

Singing with dynamic flexibility is much more difficult that it sounds. A barbershop singer requires a great degree of skill to be able to execute dynamic levels flawlessly, while maintaining the balance and blend of the ensemble, throughout all the dynamic ranges. The tone production must be consistent and steady, and the quality must be maintained. If you use the musical arrangement as your guide, the intended dynamic plan will be evident. The plan should then be adapted to the presentation, taking into consideration the skill level of the performing group, as well as the intended message. Creating dynamic variances can be a powerful tool in interpreting music, in the barbershop art form.

INTUITIVE CHARACTERISTICS

The following intuitive characteristics, demonstrated by and emanating from the chorus director, can be utilized to enhance the performance of the chorus:

INTERPRETIVE FREEDOM

Barbershop style is characterized by the artistic departure of strict tempos in delivery and execution. This should be based upon the abilities and individual style of each performer, utilizing arrangements appropriate to the performing group.

ENERGY TRANSFER IN PERFORMANCE

Energy transfer to the audience occurs in our performances when all the executed techniques are being utilized appropriately in concert with strong physical and emotional commitment of the performer. This is something that is not necessarily seen by the audience, but felt. Energy transfer assists in telling the tale by using effective dynamics to convey mood changes.

TEXTURES/COLORS

We often use the term "painting a picture" when referring to our music. This occurs as our singers utilize different techniques to add textures and color to the sound. It may mean managing air flow to add varying levels of vocal energy, varying degrees of vocal placement: effective use of "word sounds" (i.e., make a whisper sound like a whisper, a dance feel like a dance, a cloud should like a cloud). These effects enhance the performance, adding even more dimensions.

EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

The performer is truly the only connection to the audience during a performance, thus carrying the emotional message to each song.

The artistic potential is unlimited when the director and performers are not held to only the printed music. The ultimate performance experience of "being in the moment" will happen when all the techniques are in place and the performers (including the director) are free to allow the emotion of the music to be created right then and there. Yes, everyone is aware of the plan. However, setting the stage should only happen initially. Once a picture is created, each performance will differ as skills develop. With a full commitment from everyone, there will be freedom to make each performance its own unique experience.

In order to better understand and appreciate the outstanding characteristics of barbershop style as compared with other choral music, one should experience performances of all choral and group ensembles, both a capella and those with instrumental accompaniment.

To further understand and experience the dazzling differences and characteristics of barbershop style, listen only to all different types of choral singing, leaving the barbershop sample for last. While you are listening, ask yourself these questions:

What do you hear? Why? What is the director attempting to execute?
What is the feeling the director is trying to create?

Not only will you have a vivid mental image of the sound of barbershop style, but your reaction to the music will be visceral, leaving you few words to describe the experience.

Once you fully realize the impact all the characteristics of barbershop style have on the musical product, the more you will be able to utilize all the tools available to you, to maximize the barbershop experience. Not only do we want to make our choruses and quartets the very best they can be, we want to share this with everyone we possible can, continually enticing singers to join our organization and become part of us. Barbershop style as its best incorporated all of the necessary technical aspects mentioned earlier in its creation. However, when experiencing the music, there is absolutely nothing technical about it. It is emotional, spiritual, moving, and tells a story that you immediately become part of. And once you become part of the story, the story never ends.