

What's So Great About Barbershop? (part 1)

by Harry Buerer

In this series of articles, I'd like to discuss various characteristics of barbershop music. What is barbershop music? That's what we're going to talk about in the upcoming articles.

The first characteristic that I'd like to consider is that barbershop music is Participative. Some things are intended to be watched or listened to, other things are intended to be done. Consider the sports of (American) football vs. distance running. Thousands of people participate in marathon races, but you couldn't get many people to watch a marathon on TV. On the other hand, millions watch football every weekend, but hardly anyone ever plays it (unless they water it down a lot).

Singing, like running, is something that virtually anyone can do. And barbershop is one of the few avenues that the average person has to experience that. Other musical art forms, such as opera or the symphony, require a high level of skill, and a large group of similarly skilled people. Nobody goes home and spends Friday evening with the family around the parlor piano playing symphony music (unless it's a recording). Even most contemporary popular styles today are not things that normal people can sing. Songs are written to show off certain artist's voices.

The heyday of barbershop music was the decade of the 1920s and earlier, before technology had allowed us to pipe professional musicians of all kinds into our living rooms. There was no television, and very little radio. If you wanted music, you had to go to a live event or provide it yourself. And millions of people did. Sheet music sold thousands of copies, not because it was sung by a popular artist, but because it was fun to sing at home. People would sing around the piano, and learn the popular songs of the day. It was this music that was improvised in barbershops while people were waiting for a haircut. And it was this music that was intended to be preserved when in 1938 O. C. Cash and Rupert Hall started SPEBSQSA.

There is a very real sense in which the concept of a barbershop show is an oxymoron. At its heart, barbershop music is intended to be performed, not to be heard. In a world such as ours where few are familiar with barbershop music, the shows are needed in order to expose more people to the art form. But there is still an inherent tension in the idea. But hopefully the opportunity to hear high quality barbershop music performed by skillful musicians will inspire each of us to appreciate our chance to participate in this uniquely American, uniquely populist art form.

Harry Buerer is a barbershop singer and an independent music educator. His specialty is teaching [Sight Singing](#) to non-musicians. His most recent product is an eBook entitled: [Sing It Right the First Time](#).

What's So Great About Barbershop? (part 2)

by Harry Buerer

Another characteristic of barbershop music is that it is sung *A Cappella*, that is, without instrumental accompaniment. This seems so obvious as to not require comment, but we often fail to appreciate the advantages that brings to both the singer and the listener.

A prime advantage of unaccompanied music for the singer is the low cost involved. You don't need to buy a piano or organ, or even a guitar. And there is no need to hire an accompanist. Each singer is his own instrument, and there is no need to pay for instruction on fingerings and embouchures. You just open your mouth and let the sound come out; anybody can do that.

Another great advantage for both the singer and the group is the flexibility that comes with not needing instrumental accompaniment. A group can sing in any setting, without needing the presence of a piano. This allows a group to at rest homes, at outdoor parties, in elevators, and certainly in barbershops while waiting for a haircut.

A third advantage of *a cappella* singing is the precision of the human voice. An instrument or group of instruments can play beautiful music, but there's always a vast degree of ambiguity in interpreting it. Is a song supposed to represent an expression of passion to one's beloved, or does it portray a sunrise over the Pacific? For instrumental music, you can never know unless you are told what the composer intended. But vocal music can express its meaning with the precision of human language.

And, of course, the unaccompanied human voice provides an intimacy that can't be matched with instruments. Any instrument is like a screen between the singer and the listener. Without it, the singer can appeal directly to the soul of the listener, and allow the listener into the heart of the singer, in a way that can't be matched by accompanied or instrumental music. Barbershop music provides a singular opportunity to communicate the message of a song directly to a listener, with the added benefits of convenience and low cost. It's like you really can have it all.

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What's So Great About Barbershop? (part 3)

by Harry Buerer

We've mentioned barbershop music being participative and *a cappella*. Another unique thing about barbershop music is that it's virtually the only musical style to strive for the "expanded sound" that comes from maximizing overtones. What is that all about?

You probably know that a musical note is produced by a string, reed, or air column vibrating at a certain frequency. The faster the vibration, the higher the pitch of the note. Interestingly, when something vibrates at a certain frequency (producing a certain note), there are also lesser vibrations created at double the frequency, triple it, and so on. These lesser vibrations produce additional notes that sound in addition to the note that you consciously hear, the fundamental. These higher notes are called "overtones" or "harmonics".

You can demonstrate these overtones by going to a piano and holding down any key (near the middle of the piano) with your right hand. Then strike and release the key that is exactly an octave lower with your left hand. You will hear the pitch of your right-hand note reverberating when the other note dies away. Try it with several different notes.

This experiment illustrates that the first overtone that is heard is an octave above the fundamental. This is because an octave is a note that vibrates exactly twice as fast. If you play the note 'A' (440 Hertz, or cycles per second), the first overtone will be 'A' an octave higher, with a frequency of 880 Hertz. This is why we make it a priority to tune the octave in any chord that has one before we worry about the other notes.

The second overtone is the note that vibrates at three times the frequency of the fundamental, and it is a fifth above the first overtone ('E' - 1320 Hz). The next overtone vibrates at four times the fundamental, so it is two octaves higher ('A' - 1760 Hz). The next overtone, five times the fundamental, is a major third higher than the last ('C#' - 2200 Hz). And the next overtone, six times the fundamental, is obviously an octave higher than the earlier fifth ('E' - 2640 Hz). It is interesting that a major triad (three-note chord) in any key has notes that vibrate at a ratio of 4:5:6. We tune the chord by making the notes as close to this ratio as possible, so that the overtones of the various notes will re-inforce each other. That gives us the "lock and ring" that is so basic to the barbershop sound.

So how do we achieve the maximum of overtones in our singing? One way is to match all the voice qualities as much as possible. A forward, "bright" vocal placement seems to

produce more overtones. But the most subtle way is to fine-tune the notes themselves. Most instruments, including piano, are not tuned to this 4:5:6 ratio for the major chord. If they did tune their notes this way, they would sound good in that key, but really lousy in some other keys. So pianos use a compromised tuning system called "equal temperament" that sounds OK in all keys, but is not exactly in tune in any key. A cappella singers can tune the chords more exactly, and this is what we try to do to produce a great "lock and ring".

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What's So Great About Barbershop? (part 4)

by Harry Buerer

Last time we talked about overtones and why we strive to maximize them in our singing. We also mentioned that a major triad has notes whose frequencies are in a ratio of 4:5:6. That's why the sound is so pleasing; it's inherent in nature.

But there is also a 4-note chord that is built into the overtone series, with ratios of 4:5:6:7. This is the dominant seventh chord, or, as we like to call it, the barbershop seventh chord. Let's talk a little bit about this very significant chord. (warning: music theory ahead)

In western music generally, we build chords by starting on a note (the root) and adding alternate notes of a scale. The interval between these notes is called a "third", and since the notes of a chord are stacked in thirds, we can call it "tertiary harmony" (if you want to impress someone). A "seventh" chord has a root, a third, a fifth, and a seventh. These are the names of the notes within the chord, and also the intervals that each note is from the root.

The overtone ratio of 4:5:6:7 indicates that the chord in question would have a major third and a minor seventh. If we were to consider the possible 7th chords within the major scale, the only one that fits this description is the seventh chord based on Sol, the fifth degree of the scale, hence, the V7 chord. This chord is composed of notes #5, 7, 2, and 4 of the scale. In the key of C, this would be G, B, D, and F. Note #5 of a scale, Sol, stands in a special relationship in a key because it's the earliest overtone to note #1 (Do, the "tonic"). Because of this, note #5 (and chords built on it, referred to as V chords) is called the "dominant".

The V7 chord is used a lot in all music because of it's special character, but it's used

more than ever in barbershop music. The V7 chord resolves very strongly to the I chord, the tonic triad. Almost all songs end with the harmony of V7 - I.

An interesting thing is that each note of the scale has a V7 chord in relation to it. So note #2 (Re) has a V7 in relation to it, a chord built on note #6 (La). And so on with each other note of the scale. These "secondary dominant" chords typically have a raised third that's not in the original scale, and this accounts for most of the sharps (or naturals, in flat keys) that we see in barbershop music. These chords typically resolve to the note they are the V7 of, that is, down a fifth. For example, in the key of C we have this common chord progression: C, E7, A7, D7, G7, C (think "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue"). This is what's referred to as "resolution around the circle of fifths" in definitions of barbershop harmony.

These chord progressions around the circle of fifths are one of the distinguishing characteristics of barbershop music. Every contest song has to have them, and songs that don't include these secondary dominants tend to be pretty boring harmonically. Next time you sing a barbershop song, see if your ear can identify where these colorful "secondary dominant" chords are.

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What's So Great About Barbershop? (part 5)

by Harry Buerer

I'm going to be quoting from the Society's definition of barbershop harmony in some of these articles so we can identify what it is that we're talking about. Most of us think we know barbershop music when we see or hear it, but we might be surprised. According to the Society, "Barbershop harmony is a style of unaccompanied vocal music characterized by consonant four-part chords for every melody note. Occasional brief passages may be sung by fewer than four voice-parts." This is the first (and shortest) of five paragraphs of definition.

We've already discussed the idea of barbershop being "unaccompanied vocal music", and seen some of the advantages that can bring. But we don't always realize that it's "characterized by consonant four-part chords for every melody note." This part of the definition has two parts; the first is that it uses consonant four-part chords.

We speak of consonance and dissonance in music. Consonant harmonies are those that are harmonious, that sound good. This is typically based on the notes being related in the

overtone series, as we've discussed before. The notes of major chords have a frequency ratio of 4:5:6 and barbershop seventh chords, used frequently, have a ratio of 4:5:6:7. Minor chords are used, but less often than in many styles of music, and they don't have an easy analog in the overtone series. The minor third interval is there in the 5:6 ratio, but there are not three consecutive overtones that define a minor chord.

Consonant chords can be contrasted with the dissonant chords that are used in much jazz and various contemporary popular styles. It's common in these styles to have major seventh chords and chords with added 6 or 9 (or both). These are not consonant chords by our definition, and they are only used in barbershop when the melody demands it.

The other part of the definition tells us that every melody note is harmonized with a four-part chord. This is different from most other styles of music that can have various kinds of non-harmonic notes, suspensions, passing tones, etc. This characteristic of barbershop lends to a much more interesting and varied harmonic structure. In some other styles you can have one harmony sustained over several measures, while the melody covers almost every note in the scale. In the barbershop context, each melody note must be harmonized on its own, and this gives a fuller and richer sound as a result.

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What's So Great About Barbershop? (part 6)

by Harry Buerer

Last week we considered part of the definition of barbershop harmony that told about each melody note being harmonized by consonant four-part chords. The part of the definition that we didn't get to was the one that says that, "Occasional brief passages may be sung by fewer than four voice-parts." The point of this definition is that if we have fewer than four parts going on for very long, it's not really barbershop harmony.

I remember hearing a quartet in a contest a few years ago that received a zero in the music category. I wondered why. The song they sang was one that I knew, and considered to be a barbershop song. It turned out that large portions of the song were in unison. Since the characteristic of barbershop is four-part harmony, unison singing is not barbershop. Unison singing is like a spice; a little can be used to add flavor, but you sure don't want too much of it in a barbershop song.

The same thing is true of two and three part singing. We've all seen brief sections where just the lead and tenor sing a phrase, or perhaps the lead and bass. This adds an element

of variety, but too much of it turns the song into something other than barbershop. We've also seen songs where the bass (and maybe other parts) does a rhythmic bit on nonsense syllables. This is fun, but it's not barbershop.

The characteristic style of barbershop music is what's called "homophonic" music. This means that all four voices are singing the same words at the same time in fully harmonized chords. This is the "meat and potatoes" of barbershop. Creative arrangers will add some "salad" and "dessert" in the form of unison or two/three part passages. But they need to be brief or it's not barbershop.

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What's So Great About Barbershop? (part 7)

by Harry Buerer

This final article in the series covers the distinct style of song interpretation that is used in barbershop ballads. This style is found elsewhere, but nowhere is it as prominent as in the barbershop world.

Barbershop songs typically fall into two categories. Rhythm songs maintain a steady tempo; you can tap your foot to them. Ballads, on the other hand, are usually performed with only a loose adherence to the written rhythms in an ever-changing tempo. This approach has pros and cons.

The downside to this approach is the loss of rhythmic integrity. We're used to a song having a particular rhythm, and when it is performed "freely", we can lose connection with the rhythm. This is especially an issue if the song is familiar and we're expecting a certain rhythmic pattern when we hear it. It could be that this pattern is inherent in the song's identification in our minds.

This disadvantage is balanced by the flexibility that the rubato approach gives us in interpreting the song. With this style you can adjust the note-lengths and accents to better coincide with the sense of the lyric. Many songs have a rhythm that doesn't line up with the sense of the words. Often the accented beats fall on unimportant words. An example is the verse on Jingle Bells. "He got in-to a drifted bank and...". Dictionaries will tell you that the accent in "into" falls on the first syllable. But in the song it has to fall on the final syllable, sounding a bit strange. Since this is a rhythm song, we can't fix it by a free interpretation. But if it were a ballad, we could.

One of my favorite examples of accent changes is in the Rodgers & Hart song, "My Romance". In the chorus, "My romance doesn't have to have a...", the accent in "romance" is where it should be, on the final syllable. But the verse begins, "Everyone dreams of a storybook romance," with the accent on the first syllable (dactylic tetrameter). If you're "balladizing" this song (or any other), you can make adjustments for these strange accents, since there's not a rhythm that you have to stick to.

The advantages of free interpretation go far beyond correcting accents. It enables us to stress or stretch the important words in a phrase, instead of being limited to the written note-lengths. If you're singing, "You're the flower of my heart", you can de-emphasize "of" and stretch "You're" and "heart" (in contrast to the way the music is written, where "of" is the climax of the song). The result is a rendition that is truer to the sense of the words, and the result is a performance that communicates the message of the song to the audience more effectively. That's what barbershop performances are all about.

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