



BARBERSHOP MUSIC (TECHNICAL)

Barbershop music features songs with understandable lyrics and easily singable melodies, whose tones clearly define a tonal center and imply major and minor chords and barbershop (dominant and secondary dominant) seventh chords that resolve primarily around the circle of fifths, while making frequent use of other resolutions. Barbershop music also features a balanced and symmetrical form, and a standard meter. The basic song and its harmonisation are embellished by the arranger to provide appropriate support of the song's theme and to close the song effectively.

Barbershop singers adjust pitches to achieve perfectly tuned chords in just intonation while remaining true to the established tonal center. Artistic singing in the barbershop style exhibits a fullness or expansion of sound, precise intonation, a high degree of vocal skill, and a high level of unity and consistency within the ensemble. Ideally, these elements are natural, unmanufactured, and free from apparent effort.

The presentation of barbershop music uses appropriate musical and visual methods to convey the theme of the song and provide the audience with an emotionally satisfying and entertaining experience. The musical and visual delivery is from the heart, believable, and sensitive to the song and its arrangement throughout. The most stylistic presentation artistically melds together the musical and visual aspects to create and sustain the illusions suggested by the music.

Slower barbershop songs, especially ballads, often have a continuous beat, and notes are often held (or sped up) *ad libitum*.

The voice parts in women's barbershop singing do not correspond to the named voice parts in classical music. Barbershop singing is performed both by men's and women's groups; the elements of the barbershop style and the names of the voice parts are the same for both – bass, baritone, lead and tenor.

Ringling Chords

The defining characteristic of the barbershop style is the "ringing chord". This is a name for one specific and well-defined acoustical effect, also referred to as expanded sound, the angel's voice, the fifth voice, or the overtone. (The barbershopper's "overtone" is not the same as the acoustic physicist's overtone which is known as heterodyning).

The physics and psychophysics of the effect are fairly well understood; it occurs when the upper harmonics in the individual voice notes, and the sum and difference frequencies resulting from nonlinear combinations within the ear, reinforce each other at a particular frequency, strengthening it so that it stands out separately above the blended sound. The effect is audible only on certain kinds of chords, and only when all voices are equally rich in harmonics and justly tuned and balanced. It is not heard in chords sounded on keyboard instruments, due to the slight tuning imperfection of the equal-tempered scale.

Gage Averill writes that "Barbershoppers have become partisans of this acoustic phenomenon" and that "the more experienced singers of the barbershop revival (at least after the 1940s) have self-consciously tuned their dominant seventh and tonic chords in just intonation to maximise the overlap of common overtones."

What is prized is not so much the "overtone" itself, but a unique sound whose achievement is most easily recognised by the presence of the "overtone". The precise synchrony of the waveforms of the four voices simultaneously creates the perception of a "fifth voice" while at the same time melding the four voices into a unified sound. The ringing chord is qualitatively different in sound from an ordinary musical chord e.g. as sounded on a tempered-scale keyboard instrument.

Most elements of the "revivalist" style are related to the desire to produce these ringing chords. Performance is a cappella to prevent the distracting introduction of equal-tempered intonation, and because listening to anything but the other three voices interferes with a performer's ability to tune with the precision required. Barbershop arrangements stress chords and chord progressions that favor "ringing", at the expense of suspended and diminished chords and other harmonic vocabulary of the ragtime and jazz forms.

The dominant seventh-type chord... is so important to barbershop harmony that it is called the "barbershop seventh..." Barbershop arrangers believe that a song should contain dominant seventh chords anywhere from 35 to 60 percent of the time (measured as a percentage of the duration of the song rather than a percentage of the chords present) to sound "barbershop."

Historically barbershoppers may have used the word "minor chord" in a way that is confusing to those with musical training. Averill suggests that it was "a shorthand for chord types other than major triads", and says that the use of the word for "dominant seventh-type chords and diminished chords" was common in the late nineteenth century. A 1910 song called "Play That Barber Shop Chord" (often cited as an early example of "barbershop" in reference to music) contains the lines:

"Cause Mister when you start that minor part
I feel your fingers slipping and a grasping at my heart,
Oh Lord play that Barbershop chord!"

Averill notes the hints of rapture, "quasi-religion" and erotic passion in the language used by barbershoppers to describe the emotional effect. He quotes Jim Ewin as reporting "a tingling of the spine, the raising of the hairs on the back of the neck, the spontaneous arrival of 'goose flesh' on the forearm... [the 'fifth note' has] almost "mysterious propensities... It's the 'consummation' devoutly wished by those of us who love Barbershop harmony. If you ask us to explain ... why we love it so, we are hard put to answer; that's where our faith takes over." Averill notes too the use of the language of addiction, "there's this great big chord that gets people hooked." An early manual was entitled "A Handbook for Adeline Addicts".

He notes too that "barbershoppers almost never speak of 'singing' a chord, but almost always draw on a discourse of physical work and exertion; thus, they 'hit', 'chop', 'ring', 'crack', and 'swipe....' ...vocal harmony... is interpreted as an embodied musicking. Barbershoppers never lose sight (or sound) of its physicality."