

# Barbershop for young singers

- Unique 4-part harmony
- Exciting ringing chords
- Developing strong, confident singers
- Rewarding accomplishment for a vocal ensemble
- Curriculum to get started is absolutely free!

## Why barbershop?

We're passionate about sharing barbershop harmony and have a range of resources to help you introduce this artform to your school students or choirs for young singers under 25 years old.

Barbershop-style acappella is characterised by the structure of chords and voice parts to help create overtones, the unsung tone heard above the highest tone of a properly balanced and matched chord. This is goosebump stuff!

There are a wide variety of songs arranged in 4 parts suited to both young boys and girls. It can be sung in large groups, or just four singers.

Singing barbershop well is deceptively challenging and it helps develop vocal range, interval accuracy and performance skills.

As Deke Sharon, music director and arranger *Pitch Perfect* and *The Sing Off*, says: "Barbershop is built on the finest traditions and techniques of classical choral music, so you know you're learning proper vocal technique and centuries of good habits..."

Barbershop songs and exercises included in your music program will help you to deliver musical excellence and education while giving your students a taste of show business too!

Students will learn:

- improved vocal skills
- musicality
- artistry
- showmanship
- and develop a good ear for synchronisation and tuning.

Students love to sing barbershop!

It's challenging, so they become motivated to learn. And teachers love the program because of the quality education and support - and many of the music and resources are free!

You can tailor the program to the length of time you have and the age of students.

## History

The unique American folk art of barbershop harmony evolved much the same way as many of our other forms of vocal music. It was aided by the types of songs popular during the period between the 1860s and the 1920s with simple melodies that could be harmonised with a variety of 4-part chords.

When the printing press was adapted to print musical notation, there was further advancement of the barbershop idiom. Many early pieces of sheet music were printed with the standard vocal line and piano accompaniment and included an additional quartet arrangement on the final page of the sheet music.

In addition to the improvised barbershop harmony sung by amateur singers then (almost always men!) at parties and picnics, turn-of-the-century minstrel shows featured barbershop quartets. Quartets sang in front of the curtain as an “entr’acte” while the sets were changed and performers prepared for the next act of the show. It was easy to schedule a quartet for this purpose as no props or sets were required.

The traditional barbershop song *Sweet Adeline* did not become well known until 15 years after it was written, when it was sung by a quartet on one of these minstrel shows.

## BARBERSHOP – A UNIQUE CHORAL STYLE

There are certain features characteristic to the barbershop style that separate it from other vocal styles. This section of the guide examines some of these differences.

### Harmony

Barbershop acappella has unique characteristics that separate it from other vocal styles.

The consonant 4-part chords that vertically support each melody note and frequent use of the major triad and barbershop (dominant) 7th chords gives it a unique beauty and richness. It also makes use of minor triads and the dominant 9th chord.

Chords such as the 6th, major 7th and major 9th chords are only included when demanded by the melody and chords containing the minor 2nd interval are not used.

In the barbershop style the major chord is often opened and spread to the 10th interval, using “do-sol-do-mi” (1-5-8-3) rather than the closed voicing of “do-mi-sol-do” (1-3-5-8).

### Barbershop arrangements

A good barbershop arrangement includes:

- All chord tones present in each 4-note chord
- Non-chord tones not present in any voice part
- Frequent use of major triads and dominant 7th chords
- Bass part often voiced on the root or 5th of the chord

### Voice parts

The voice parts in women’s barbershop harmony have different names and functions from other SATB vocal styles.

- The **tenor** part is equivalent to Soprano I but functions as a harmony part above the melody
- The **lead** part (Soprano II) has the melody line

- The **baritone** part (Alto I) fills in above and below the melody
- The **bass** part (Alto II) supplies the harmonic foundation (root or 5th) of the chord.

The tenor sings the highest note in a chord, the bass the lowest, the lead the melody, and the baritone sings the all-important missing note!

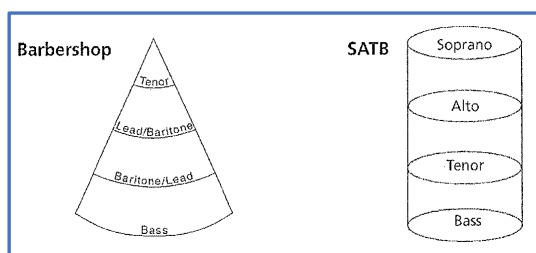
### Balance of sound

One of the primary characteristics of barbershop music is a cone-shaped sound.

Church or glee club music (SATB) is balanced cylindrically, with all voices singing with equal weight and intensity.

Progressive jazz, when sung in harmony, and modern harmony are sung with inverted cone balance - the top voice sings with more weight and intensity, and the lower voices sing with less weight and intensity.

Correct barbershop balance is the opposite.



## VOICE RANGES

The ranges described here reflect the vocal capabilities of the senior primary school/high school female singer. These can be extended in either direction for students or adults.

### Young female voices

#### Tenor

The tenor is the highest of the four voice parts and is a harmony part sung above the melody. The effective tenor range for young female barbershop singers, with extended range in small notes, is:



The tenor must sing with a lighter production than the lower voices, without sacrificing clarity or brilliance. Her quality must complement but never overshadow the lead.

The tenor sings mostly in her upper register (head voice), but she must be able to use her lower register (chest voice) for lower notes in her range.

Lyric sopranos generally make good tenors. The coloratura, dramatic or mezzo soprano must be able to lighten the voice quality and remove excessive vibrato for this voice part.

When arrangements occasionally need tenors to sing below the lead, the tenor must broaden her quality to keep the chords in balance.

### Lead

The lead is one of the two middle voice parts and usually sings the melody. The effective lead range, with extended range in small notes, is:



Because she carries the melody, the lead must sing with authority, clarity, and with a consistent quality throughout her range. The lead sings with just enough vibrato to add colour and warmth to the sound. It's essential she possess an accurate sense of pitch.

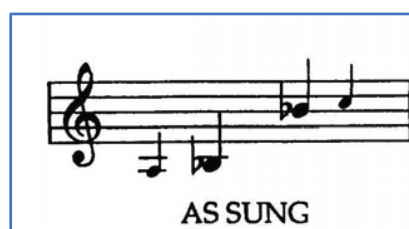
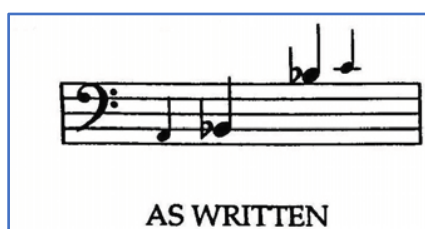
The lead, as the primary melody singer, is also responsible for conveying the interpretation, emotion and inflections of the song. The other three parts literally "follow her lead" in the delivery of dynamics and tempo and support her inflection, artistry and finesse.

### Baritone

The baritone is the other of the two middle voice parts in barbershop music - a harmony part sung below or above the melody, depending upon where the melody is situated.

Baritone differs from the alto part in traditional choral music because the baritone part frequently crosses over the melody (lead). The baritone is written in the bass clef, an octave lower than it is sung.

The effective baritone range, with extended range in small notes, is:



Though the baritone and lead sing in the same basic range, the techniques for singing the two parts are different. The baritone must be constantly aware of her position in the chord and flexible enough to adjust her tone when needed.

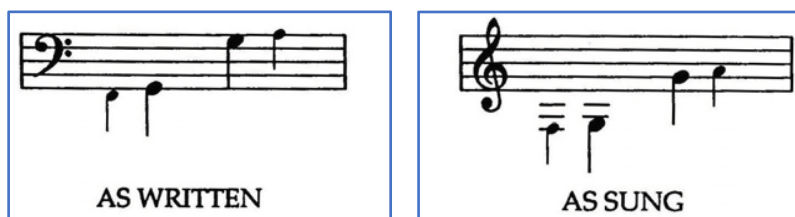
When she's singing below the lead, she uses a rich, full sound that helps to solidify the relationship between lead and bass. When she's above the lead she uses a lighter production, similar to that used by the tenor.

The baritone sings a relatively straight, well-produced tone with a minimum of vibrato.

## Bass

In barbershop music, the bass is the lowest of the four voice parts, a harmony part sung below the melody. The bass part, like the baritone part, is written in the bass clef, an octave lower than it is sung.

The effective bass range, with extended range in small notes, is:



Because one of the primary characteristics of barbershop music is its cone-shaped sound, the bass must sing with a fuller tone quality than the upper voices and with more volume than the other three parts.

The harmonic structure of barbershop music helps the bass provide a firm foundation for the sound. Usually she sings the root or 5th of each chord but other chord tones may be sung in passing or for special effect.

The bass and lead work as a team, establishing a strong and accurate relationship, with the lead singing the melody and the bass providing the harmonic foundation.

The bass sings a relatively straight, well-produced tone with a minimum of vibrato. The range of the bass part is comparable to that of a contralto in traditional choral music.

Occasionally, an arrangement will give the melody to the bass for a few notes, a phrase or an entire passage.

## Male voices

Please see this excerpt from the BHS (Barbershop Harmony Society) Music Educator Guide and Songbook for information on young male voices and part placement:

<https://www.barbershop.org/education/music-educator-resources>

## Balance of voices

It's very common for quartets (one of each voice part) and octets (two of each voice part) to sing barbershop harmony. An ideal balance of singers in a barbershop chorus is shown in a 4-3-2-1 formula: 4 bass, 3 lead, 2 baritone, 1 tenor.

This ratio can be projected to show the ideal number in each section for any size group.

Bass	Lead	Baritone	Tenor	Group
4	3	2	1	
8	6	4	2	20
16	12	8	4	40
40	30	20	10	100

## Interpretation

While traditional songs still play a part in barbershop today, most music can be arranged in the barbershop style, and there are many skilled arrangers able to do this.

Today's barbershop quartets and choruses sing a variety of music from all eras - show songs, pop and rock music have been arranged for choruses and quartets, making them more attractive to younger singers.

There are hundreds of songs arranged and ready to sing. Arrangements for younger voices are voiced to suit.

## Where to find free barbershop music

Complimentary sheet music for girls and young women is available at Sweet Adelines International: <https://sweetadelines.com/education/music-educator-resources>

For mixed, boys and girls arrangements, visit the Barbershop Harmony Society: <https://www.barbershop.org/next-gen/junior-quartets-choruses>

## Uptunes and swing tempo

In rhythmic uptunes and swing tempo songs it's important to maintain a steady rhythmic pulse even though the singers are singing unaccompanied or acappella. A ballad demands a different approach.

## Ballad flow

The barbershop ballad is characterised by an ad-lib presentation in a free, rubato style, interpreted and crafted by the conductor's own musicality, rather than adhering to the exact notation of the composer or arranger.

This separates barbershop performances from those in other choral styles.


Barbershop interpretive style permits relatively wide liberties in the treatment of note values. Words of importance or chords of exceptional beauty can be held, pauses can be added to create new meaning, and word flow can be adjusted to help the lyrics come alive.

Effective changes in tempo and dynamics can also enhance the performance.

## Barbershop manuscript

A barbershop arrangement has the appearance of SATB music but the notes for the baritone and bass parts are notated in the bass clef and sung one octave higher than written. This eliminates the need for many ledger lines which are difficult to read.

The music is easily read and singers quickly adapt to this method of notation.

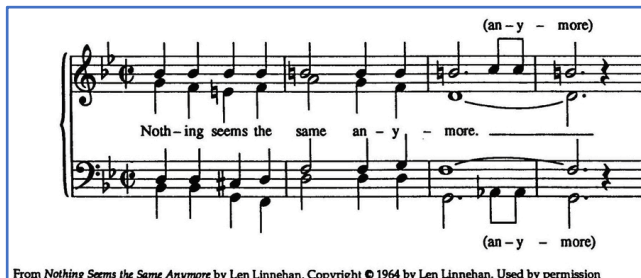


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Noth - ing seems the same an - y - more.

(an - y - more)

From *Nothing Seems the Same Anymore* by Len Linnehan. Copyright © 1964 by Len Linnehan. Used by permission

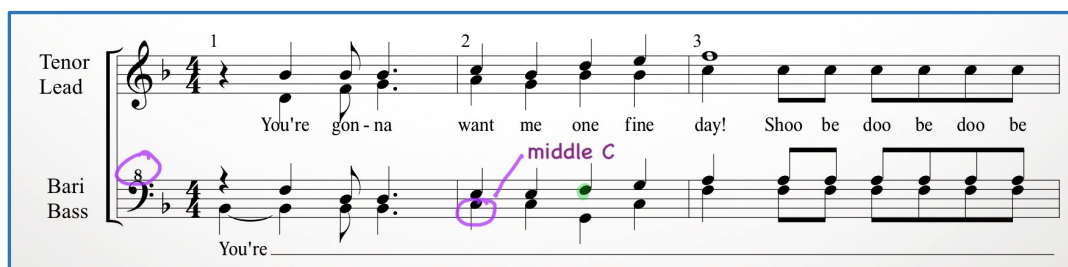


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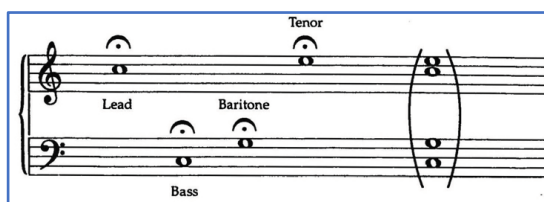


## Use of the pitch pipe

To establish pitch (tonality), the key note (tonic) is normally sounded by the pitch pipe. Then each section sings a prescribed note of the tonic chord:

- basses and leads sing “do” an octave apart
- baritones sing “sol” below the lead
- and tenors sing “mi” above the lead.

A vowel such as “ah” or “ooh” is used.



This method of pitch-taking establishes a sense of tonality with the singers. Many choral conductors then have the singers move to the first chord of the song.

## Teaching barbershop

Teaching a barbershop arrangement is similar to teaching other choral music. Barbershop style music is memorised and unaccompanied, so it’s important for the students to learn their parts thoroughly. Learning tracks can be helpful in the teaching/ learning process.

### Learning track method

Learning tracks are available for many Young Women in Harmony/young singers arrangements. This is a very efficient method of teaching and enables the director to focus on interpretation, balance and performance skills, as the note learning is accomplished mostly outside of the rehearsal.

The tracks are distributed to the students along with the sheet music so singers can practice at home. The learning tracks are available with all four parts balanced, as well as with examples recorded with each voice part predominant.

The student has the opportunity to follow along with the music while listening, then can practice singing along with the part alone until confident. When she feels ready, she can practice fitting her part into the recording of the other three parts.

After practicing with the learning tracks individually, the first rehearsals together should include practice of the song fairly methodically to check for note accuracy. If necessary, individual sections should have repetition work on difficult passages. Some voice parts are easier to learn than others!

The chorus needs to learn to identify the sound of barbershop harmony and to recognise the sound of a well-tuned chord. It is sometimes helpful to sing a passage chord by chord until each chord is accurate.

The best barbershop harmony is sung with listening skills as well as vocal skills and the learning process is the best time to emphasise this. Repetition is the key to retention.

## Rehearsing

### Vocal skills

Vocal skills are an integral part of all aspects of the barbershop style. The basic elements of good postural alignment, breathing, phonation, resonance and articulation each play an important role in the vocal presentation of barbershop music.

### Body alignment

Correct body alignment allows optimal breathing and effective use of the vocal instrument.

A tall stance with weight distributed evenly on both feet, unlocked knees and a feeling of fluidity in the body. Shoulders are relaxed, head level. The body should be free to move when singing.

### Breathing

Breathing for singing should be natural, organic and instinctive rather than a mechanical process.

The goal is for air to flow easily and silently into the lungs without effort. When teaching breathing for singing, a focus on the exhalation first can assist. With tall alignment maintained, singers expel their air slowly to a 'hiss', noticing the abdominal muscles slowly moving inwards, then release those muscles to allow air to flow into the lungs. It's important singers have a free and flexible muscles in their abdominal area to allow for the breath to flow naturally into their lower lungs.

All unnecessary tension should be released, for example in the neck, shoulders and jaw.

### Phonation

Phonation is the action of the vocal folds which produces speech or singing. No force or pressure should be applied to produce sound.

### Resonance

Resonance is the amplification and enrichment of the tones produced. Resonance occurs in the spaces above the vocal folds including the pharynx (throat) and mouth. Resonance is enhanced by singing with a relaxed jaw, and throat.

### Articulation

Articulation is the process by which sounds are shaped. In singing, vowels are sustained and consonants provide only split-second interruption.

An effective barbershop ensemble does not rely on highly articulated lyrics but, instead, focuses on the target vowel sounds, especially in the harmony parts.

## Vocal registers and barbershop singing

The goal is a freely produced tone at all vocal ranges, which is well produced with active breath support. Use of all vocal registers is needed, the so called 'head', 'chest' and 'mixed' voice.



As notes raise in pitch, singers add more head register to keep the sound buoyant and musical. More chest register is added as notes descend.

The singer needs to learn to apply the correct vocal skills - breathing, phonation, articulation and resonance - to achieve a smooth transition between the registers. Forcing the chest too high will cause constriction and tension. Slow 'ng' and 'oo' slides can assist to develop an easy transition.

Be careful not to over-extend the young voice and encourage gradual and healthy progress. Encourage release of unhelpful tension anywhere in the body but particularly the shoulders, neck and jaw.

## Rehearsal strategies

All the techniques used in rehearsing any choral music will be effective in rehearsing a barbershop ensemble. There are also approaches that seem to work especially well in barbershop choruses.

Here are some ideas...

### Humming

One section sings the words while the other three sections hum their own notes. This is effective in helping all four sections to become familiar with their own parts while keeping them involved during the learning process.

### Silent song

After notes and words have been learned, ask the chorus to take the pitch of the song. As you direct, the sections think their parts. At a signal, they continue the music audibly. Repeat "silent" and "sing" a few times throughout the song. This is a good method to determine if the chorus is losing tonality or straying from the pitch. This activity also encourages the singer to be aware of her part and its relationship to the others.

### The singing circle

The chorus forms a circle, facing inward (double or triple deep if the chorus is large) with the director in the centre. The purpose is to add variety and to enable the members to hear one another from a different perspective. In addition to rotating within the circle to face different sections, the director may choose to walk slowly around the circle listening to each voice. This allows for monitoring individual parts and voices without adding pressure or embarrassing the singer.

### Sound-off

Each section counts off 1,2,3,4 until every member has a number and the chorus has been divided into four smaller choruses. The entire chorus begins a song and on cue all stop singing except the group whose number is called. Combine numbers for variety.

### Sectional rehearsal

Occasionally it's helpful for a section to work alone on trouble spots or difficult passages. Section rehearsals can include interpretation, matching tone quality, matching vowels and synchronisation. Section rehearsals of the tenors, baritones and basses can benefit by the addition of a few leads. This allows the relationship of the melody and the harmony to be reinforced.

### Tags

Tags are an integral part of the barbershop genre and will enhance your rehearsals. Tags are short sections of barbershop music, often the ending to a song. They are easy to learn, quickly taught and

easily recalled and allow the singer to practice the blend of voices, the balance of chords and accurate tuning.

Tags are sung free-style, permitting the singers to hold each chord until it meets the ear's satisfaction and even a bit more, just for fun.

You can find music for tags at:

**Tags for female voices:**

<http://lloydsong.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Barbershop-tags-for-women-final-portrait.pdf>.

**Tags for male voices:**

<https://www.barbershoptags.com/>

## The visual barbershop performance

The total barbershop performance incorporates the art of showmanship, relying heavily on the visual impact and unity of the ensemble.

### Entrance and pitch pipe

In performance, the stage entrance and exit should be planned in advance and executed with confidence.

Rehearsals include practice for the pitch pipe timing as well as any breaks and audience acknowledgement of applause.

### Visual communication

Effective communication of the music and its message is essential to the barbershop performance. The aim is for authenticity in story telling through physical and facial involvement. Some planned moves (choreography) is often also included. However, sound is never sacrificed for the sake of planned movement.

### Facial expression

An animated and expressive face is not only a great way to show the message of the song and connect with the audience, it also enhances resonance in the sound.

When the barbershop chorus can display both musical proficiency and an energised visual performance, the end result is an entertainment package that thrills everyone involved.

## Learning a song using barbershop resources

Depending on the copyright permissions you have, download all the learning tracks for the songs and save onto your device. Your students can do the same.

Most barbershop learning tracks come in All four parts, lead dominant, bass dominant, baritone dominant and tenor dominant tracks. Some may also have each part on its own and a single part missing.

### Pitch note/start note

Each track starts with an electronically produced pitch for the song. If you're new to acappella singing, this is how singers learn the key of the song which they need to be aware of throughout. The pitch of the song will change if there's a key change in the song.



When rehearsing, each part needs to learn where their first note is relative to the pitch note. Some singers just memorise it, others count the number of notes from the pitch pipe note to their start note. There are many online resources with examples of songs for each of these intervals which some singers may find useful.

After the pitch is blown, you could ask all parts to sing it in unison, to establish a good tonal centre – the basses and sometimes the baritone may take the lower octave – before everyone moves to their start note at your direction.

Hand-held pitch pipes, either electronic or mechanical, are most often used by barbershop singers, but there are also a range of apps you can download for your device.

For hand held pitch pipes, C to C pitch pipes are best for female singers, F to F for males. Picture shows C to C pitch pipe.

## Tips for learning music quickly and accurately

It's important for the music director to be aware of the different parts and how they interact with each other. Some directors learn all four parts of the song, while others play each part to make themselves aware of any tricky areas.

Students should be expected to learn their part at home. To start with at choir rehearsal, practise the song with the students standing together with their voice part. You'll need weekly rehearsals to properly learn a barbershop song.

### For your students

- Repetition and really listening to the recording will help you learn your notes accurately.
- Plan 15 minutes at least 3 or 4 times a week to learn your music. The learning process should take 3 - 4 weeks, or less, depending on the song.
- The learning tracks often don't match the sheet music exactly with respect to timing and rhythms. Barbershop interpretation allows for much flexibility! The director can make notes on their copy of the music and share it with students, or run through any interp changes with the group. Students can follow along with their sheet music while listening to the learning tracks – with any notes from you on correct interpretation, vowel sounds, timing and vocal production.

## Suggested process for students learning new songs

- Play your part 4-6 times in a row, listening only – don't sing along.
- Play your part again while humming softly 2 or 3 times.
- Sing your part softly with the recording of your part 3 times.
- Sing your part with the 'All parts' version 3 times. If you lose confidence in any particular section, go back and relearn that bit.
- Look at the sheet music and sing along while following your part in the sheet music.
- If you find you have trouble with a particular section of the song, listen to the learning track again a few times, then hum through 4 times, then sing it several times with the recording until you have it right.
- When you feel you know it, sing your part with each of the other 3 parts, to hear the harmony and how your part fits with the others.
- Follow these steps for 2 or 3 weeks.

## Music & other educator resources

For sheet music and other Music educator resources for young singers please visit [Sweet Adelines International](#)

Australian female barbershop information: [Sweet Adelines Australia](#)

Australian male barbershop information: [Barbershop Harmony Australia](#)

International male barbershop information: [Barbershop Harmony Society](#)

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We hope you enjoy working in the barbershop style.  
If you'd like any further information please email [ywih@sweetadelines.org.au](mailto:ywih@sweetadelines.org.au)