

What is Barbershop??

By Ed Fritzen

There has been a lot of discussion lately on just what is this music we call barbershop harmony. If you attended the International Convention in Kansas City, or participate in any of the internet listserves about Barbershop Harmony, eg, the Harmonet or the Pionet, you might have seen considerable discussions as to what is and what is not good barbershop. This is nothing new and such discussions will continue, and is really very good for the Society. It forces us to look at our style of music and to constantly redefine our style of music, while preserving a unique American art form. I should note, that it should not be thought that our style of music is stagnant or never changing. Our music evolves, but within strict limits. To help you understand our style of music, I've included below the Definition of the Barbershop Style, as stated in the Contest and Judging Manual. This is what we're all about.

Definition of the Barbershop Style

Barbershop harmony is a style of unaccompanied vocal music characterized by consonant four-part chords for every melody note in a predominantly homophonic texture. The melody is consistently sung by the lead, with the tenor harmonizing above the melody, the bass singing the lowest harmonizing notes, and the baritone completing the chord. The melody is not sung by the tenor except for an infrequent note or two to avoid awkward voice leading, in tags or codas, or when some appropriate embellishing effect can be created. Occasional brief passages may be sung by fewer than four voice parts.

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 harmonization 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.

I know this sounds pretty technical but the above definition really covers the hallmarks of our music. Elements of singing, arrangement, music and presentation can be found in the definition. Just like any definition, parts are open for interpretation, discussion and refinement. It serves as a basis for discussion, and is well worth understanding by all of us. ***If you would like to learn more, just ask me, or pose questions that I might answer within this column of our Bulletune.***