

Tips to ease your transition into our unique style of a cappella singing

Voice Parts

- From the “bottom up,” the four voices of barbershop harmony are bass, baritone, lead and tenor.
- The melody is usually sung by the leads
- Bases generally provide the root of the chord
- Tenors add the “natural harmony,”
- Baritones take what’s left over to complete the chord.
- In barbershop, the lead takes the role of the melody and tenors must harmonise.

Speaking of Vibrato - It's a no no!

- Many singers may have been trained to add colour and warmth to their voices through the use of vibrato, this is undesirable in barbershop singing.
- Barbershoppers work hard to keep vibrato to a minimum, since chords cannot “lock” if voices are varying in pitch at different speeds.
- Slight vibrato or a tone produced with “colour” is desirable in the lead voice.
- All other voices should strive to produce a clear tone without vibrato. (Good breath support helps here.)

We're All In This Together

- There are no soloists in barbershop harmony
- Blending is the name of the game
- Individual voices should not be discernible
- If you can't hear people around you, back off the volume a little; you may be too loud.
- If you can't hear yourself for the other folks around you, sing out!
- A successful barbershopper must listen to those around him, since we have no instrumental accompaniment to cover our discord.

Talking on the Risers - DON'T

- You may have to do as we say, not as we do.
- Musicians are not usually known for their reticence, and the Blenders are no exception.
- Rehearsal goes much smoother if everyone can hear the director, so please save conversations for the break.
- If you have observations or suggestions regarding a song, talk with the director or your section leader after rehearsal.
- If you hear your neighbour making a big mistake, don't attempt to correct him on the risers, bring it to the attention of his section leader during the break.

Coning

- You may have sung high notes lightly and broaden the tone as you go lower into your range.
- A barbershop chorus strives to form a similar “sound cone.”
- Eg. picture the familiar food group pyramid with grains on the bottom, fruits/vegetables next, then meats, and finally fats.
- This is not to suggest that tenors are fat, or that we need six servings of basses daily, but the theory is the same.
- The basses at the bottom of the cone provide a broad foundation.
- Baritones are next on the cone, but must remember to “lighten” when they occasionally sing above the leads.
- Similarly, leads must “broaden” when they go below the baritones.
- Both baritones and leads will do a lot of mixing of “head voices” and “chest voices” as they sing in the middle register.

- If you are unfamiliar with these terms, don't worry; you'll hear more.
- Tenors need to be “light” — a “heavy” tenor might be better suited to the lead section if he has the range.
- When the director asks tenors to back off, basses to come out, etc., he is trying to achieve the proper balance according to the cone.

Pronunciation, Enunciation and the Like

- Many of us may sing in the choir of a large church and have had it drilled into us that consonants must be exaggerated to be heard past the first few pews.
- You really have to “change hats” when you come to a Blender rehearsal
- In barbershop singing, the consonants take a back seat to the vowels!
- Only the leads are encouraged to strongly enunciate final consonants.
- As a rule, other sections should stress vowels and back off the voice consonants.
- There is a lot of emphasis on vowel-matching. Even if the notes are correct, a chord will sometimes fail to “ring” if the singers' vowels are mismatched. (If you want more explanation on this, see your section leader after rehearsal and he will be happy to help you.)

Musical Interpretation

- Barbershoppers take great liberty with musical notations, so don't be alarmed if what appears as a quarter note on the page is actually sung as a dotted half.
- Changes in arrangements to adjust them to suit individual performers are frequently made and are acceptable if minor in nature.
- Learn to be flexible if your director decides to throw in a key change or reassign another voice part.
- While the director interprets a song through his hands, barbershop singers interpret with their voices, faces and bodies.
- Total involvement is required to “sell” a song to an audience.
- Barbershoppers must be actors as well as singers.
- If singers lean slightly forward (from the ankles, not the waist) they're not tipsy (we hope), they're “energizing” to add excitement to the performance.

Standing

- We stand on risers during most of the rehearsal.
- The majority of us firmly believe this is because our director enjoys tormenting us - but the official explanation is that standing promotes good singing through good posture, builds our stamina so that we're comfortable standing during performances, and is simply a good discipline.
- Proper stance is achieved with the chin held level, shoulders down and relaxed, pelvis tilted slightly forward, knees slightly bent and feet firmly on the floor, a few inches apart.
- Depending on which side of the chorus you're on, place your 'outside' foot slightly forward. (Do not lock your knees; standing this way for an extended time can cause you to faint.)
- If standing throughout the rehearsal is physically impossible for you, please let us know.
- We'd rather have a good singer in a chair than not at all.

We hope this answers some of your questions and helps you feel at home. We're delighted to have you, and want you to have a great singing experience!

