

February 9, 2005

BARBERSHOP STYLE or Do You Hear What I Hear?

**By
Harriette Walters**

Barbershop Style - What is Your Definition?

The barbershop style of music sounds entirely different from any other style of music. And unless you know exactly what you are listening to, you may not be aware why.

The music is specifically and creatively characterized and arranged with four part and complete chords, including mostly major triads, dominant 7ths and dominant 9ths. Other chords are used in passing as required by the implied harmonies. The melody is carried by the lead voice, while the highest voice sings a harmony part. There are two other parts contributing to our unique harmony. Musical characteristics, deliberately designed by the arranger are used so the delivery is like no other ensemble or choral performance.

The melody line carried by the lead voice is singable and the harmonies (tenor, baritone, and bass) are strong, so as to give the illusion of full accompaniment, which also gives multiple dimensions to the performance. A barbershop arranger also considers the rise and fall of the melody line, arranging so as to enhance the melody, and imply a natural and expressive dynamic plan. There is a natural forward motion in the delivery which is also inherent in the arrangement. There is a constant build and release of tension throughout each arrangement which when executed with a high level of vocal skills, creates a truly emotional experience for the listener, as well as the performer.

If you have a strong barbershop arrangement, it is easy to sing in the truest sense of the style. A barbershop arrangement is your “roadmap”, so to speak. Therefore, it is essential to select an arrangement that suits your ensemble by showcasing your strengths, and minimizing your weaknesses. Precision, in combination with an artistic delivery overflowing with finesse, is essential to the characteristics of barbershop style. The better the understanding of all the essentials of barbershop style, the higher the level of skill can be achieved. The higher the level we are able to achieve to execute these elements, the more impressive and unforgettable our barbershop performances will be.

Let’s get back to our definition of barbershop style. Whatever your definition is, it should include several characteristics, and their definitions.

Musical Characteristics

Embellishments and Swipes – Embellishments should be creative, yet subtle at times and outstanding at other times, depending on the intent and arrangement. Barbershop swipes should be handled confidently, and with artistry. Swipes should be executed so that if we could see them, they would “look” like the shape of an hourglass. That is, the originating note should be connected to the final note, while seamlessly incorporating all notes in between. The speed of the swipe can vary and should be planned and determined purposefully. When two or more voice parts are executing a swipe at the same time, the execution, speed, etc. should be planned and synchronized. In preparation for the swipe, the sound should be lifted and expanded. The swipe is then executed, and at the end, the sound should grow and be energized once again.

Transitions / Exchanges – Transitions between sections of songs are incorporated into barbershop arrangements to create interest and excitement. The effective use of transitions is critical to establishing unity and congruency in the delivery of the song. These transitions or exchanges should not be overlooked as they are an essential element in our music that sets us apart from others. They can be difficult to execute, requiring great stamina, to obtain the desired musicality throughout the piece. However, if you have ever heard a performance where the musical storyline keeps building, and the excitement and involvement you feel as an audience continues to grow with each passing phrase, you can be sure the performers are utilizing transitions to their fullest and intended use. There is no substitute for generating such exhilaration!

Melodic Variations / Transfers – While the lead singer carries the melody most of the time, a barbershop arrangement may transfer the melody line to another voice part, for various reasons. The melody note must be included in all barbershop chords. However, sometimes the melody note will be out of the best range for the lead voice part. The arranger will then transfer the melody to another voice part, adding interest, variation, texture, and color to the performance. Once again, when executed effectively, the listener is only aware of the excitement and the mood created, not the technical aspect of the diversion. These alternate voicings should be opportunities to maximize the difference in melody transfer, which will maximize the performance as well.

Meter and Rhythmic Variation – The meter in barbershop style delivery is usually simple and symmetrical. It is important to maintain the appropriate and intended meter and pulse when singing a tempo song. The ability to maintain tempo is artistry at its best, and requires skill as well as an understanding of how to achieve this and why it is important. Variations in tempo should be used sparingly and skillfully, so as not to draw attention to the actual tempo change, but to enhance the musical delivery of the song. When you have experienced a performance where tempo has been executed effectively at a high level, your awareness and reaction can be physical, as well as emotional.

Dynamic Variation – Singing with dynamic flexibility is much more difficult than it sounds. A barbershop singer requires a great degree of skill to be able to execute dynamic levels flawlessly, while maintaining the balance and blend of the ensemble, throughout all the dynamic ranges. The tone production must be consistent and steady, and the quality must be maintained. If you use the musical arrangement as your guide, the intended dynamic plan will be evident. The plan should then be adapted to the presentation, taking into consideration the skill level of the performing group, as well as the intended message. Creating dynamic variances can be a powerful tool in interpreting music, in the barbershop art form.

The following *Intuitive Characteristics*, demonstrated by and emanating from the chorus director, can be utilized to enhance the performance of the chorus:

Interpretive Freedom – Barbershop style is characterized by the artistic departure of strict tempos in delivery and execution. This should be based on the abilities and individual style of each performer, utilizing arrangements appropriate to the performing group.

Energy Transfer in Performance - Energy transfer to the audience occurs in our performances when all the executed techniques are being utilized appropriately in concert with strong physical and emotional commitment of the performer. This is something that is not necessarily seen by the audience, but felt. Energy transfer assists in telling the tale by using effective dynamics, to convey mood changes.

Textures, Colors – We often use the term “painting a picture” when referring to our music. This occurs as our singers utilize different techniques to add textures and color to the sound. It may mean managing air flow to add varying levels of vocal energy, varying degrees of vocal placement: effective use of “word sounds” (i.e. make a whisper sound like a whisper, a dance feel like a dance, a cloud sound like a cloud). These effects enhance the performance, adding yet even more dimensions.

Emotional Connection – *The performer is truly the only connection to the audience during a performance, thus carrying the emotional message of each song.*

The artistic potential is unlimited when the director and performers are not held to only the printed music. The ultimate performance experience of “being in the moment” will happen when all the techniques are in place, and the performers (including the director) are free to allow the emotion of the music to be created right then and there. Yes, everyone is aware of the plan. However, setting the stage should only happen initially. Once a picture is created, each performance will differ as skills develop. And with a full commitment from everyone, there will be freedom to make each performance its own unique experience.

In order to better understand and appreciate the outstanding characteristics of barbershop style as compared with other choral music, one should experience performances of all choral and group ensembles, both a cappella and those with instrumental accompaniment.

Some examples of other choral groups are as follows:

- A. Soprano I
Soprano II
Alto I
Alto II
- B. Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass
- C. Bulgarian Women’s Chorus
- D. Doo Wop a cappella
- E. Mormon Tabernacle Choir
- F. Vienna Boys Choir

To further understand and experience the dazzling differences and characteristics of barbershop style, listen only to all different types of choral singing, leaving the Barbershop sample for last. While you are listening, ask yourself these questions: What do you hear? Why? *What is the Director attempting to execute? What is the feeling the Director is trying to create?* Not only will you have a vivid mental image of the sound of barbershop style, but your reaction to the music will be visceral, leaving you few words to describe the experience.

Once you fully realize the impact all the characteristics of barbershop style have on the musical product, the more you will be able to utilize all the tools available to you, to maximize the barbershop experience. Not only do we want to make our choruses and quartets the very best they can be, we want to share this with everyone we possibly can, continually enticing singers to join our organization and become part of US! Barbershop style at its best incorporates all of the necessary technical aspects mentioned earlier in its creation. However, when experiencing the music, there is absolutely nothing technical about it. It is emotional, spiritual, moving, and tells a story that you immediately become part of. And once you become part of the story, the story never ends.