

THINGS I WISH SOMEONE HAD TOLD ME WHEN I FIRST STARTED

Many of you come to this group musically educated with years of “singing craft” under your belts. Good craft is good craft. Proper posture, breathing and pronunciation are universal elements of good singing. Here are some tips that may ease your transition into the unique style of barbershop.

Voice Parts:

From the “bottom up,” the four voices of barbershop harmony are bass, baritone, lead and tenor. The female bass sings in the contralto range, the baritone and lead are roughly in the alto range, and the tenor is in the soprano range.

The melody is usually sung by the leads. Bases generally provide the root of the chord, tenors add the “natural harmony,” and baritones take what’s left over to complete the chord. (Of course, this takes a highly talented person with a superior ear, as any baritone can tell you!)

Although the range is the same, a good soprano is not always a good barbershop tenor. In a choir, the soprano assumes the “take charge” role and everyone blends with her. In barbershop, the feisty lead takes this role and tenors must harmonize with her. Also, many sopranos have been trained to add colour and warmth to their voices through the use of vibrato, which is undesirable in a barbershop tenor.

Speaking of Vibrato:

Our singers work hard to keep this to a minimum, since chords cannot “lock” if voices are varying in pitch at different speeds. A slight vibrato or a tone produced with “colour” is desirable in the lead voice. However, 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, so 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. (Conversely, if you can’t hear yourself for the other voices around you, sing out!) A successful a cappella singer must listen to those around her, since we have no instrumental accompaniment to cover our discord.

Coning:

You probably sing high notes lightly and broaden the tone as you go lower into your range. A barbershop chorus strives to form a similar “sound cone.” (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 bases daily, but the theory is the same.)

The bases 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 (middle C to an octave above). 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 she has the range.

When the director asks tenors to back off, bases to come out, etc., she is trying to achieve the proper balance according to the cone.

Pronunciation, Enunciation and the Like:

Many of us sing or have sung in a church choir and have had it drilled into us that consonants must be exaggerated to be heard past the first few pews. We really have to “change hats” when we come to a Chorus rehearsal, because when singing barbershop harmony, the consonants take a back seat to the vowels! In fact, only the leads are encouraged to strongly enunciate final consonants. As a rule, other sections should stress vowels and back off the voice consonants.

We put 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 she’ll be happy to help you.)

Musical Interpretation:

Barbershop choruses take great liberty with musical notations, so don't be alarmed if what appears as a crotchet on the page is actually sung as a dotted minim. 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 her hands, barbershop singers interpret with their voices, faces and bodies. Total involvement is required to "sell" a song to an audience; our chorus members 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.

Our Customs:

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, about shoulder width apart. Do not lock your knees; standing with locked knees for an extended time can cause you to faint.

Position yourself so that you have a 'window' (you are centred between the two people on the riser below you, and can see the director). Stand as close to the front of the riser as possible.

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.

Talking on the Risers:

You may have to do as we say, not as we do. Musicians are not usually known for their reticence, and this group is no exception. However, 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. Likewise, if you hear your neighbour making a big mistake, don't attempt to correct her on the risers, bring it to the attention of her section leader during the break.

Perfume on the Risers

We ask all members to refrain from wearing perfume or other scented body products on chorus days, as they can cause an allergic response in some members which affects their ability to sing.

Punctuality

The physical warm-ups and vocal instruction at the beginning of each rehearsal are important. The director often chooses vocal exercises that are relevant to the songs we are working on. To get the most out of each rehearsal, we ask you to arrive punctually and to be standing on the risers at 7:30 pm ready to start. If you arrive late, please join us on the risers as quickly as possible so that you don't miss out. Everything else can wait until after rehearsal.

Mobile Phones

We ask that you turn your mobile phone off during rehearsal, or switch it to 'silent' mode, so that other chorus members are not distracted.

I 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 barbershop experience!