



Barbershop Harmony Lesson Plan

A Unique Genre of Music Originating in the United States

Grade Level: 6 - 12

Suggested Time Allowance: 1 hour

Objectives:

1. Listen to and analyze short samples of music in the barbershop genre.
2. Consider the voice parts and ensembles types (quartet vs. chorus) within the genre.
3. Discuss the origin of barbershop music.
4. Experiment with "tag singing" a traditional way of sharing barbershop music.

Materials Required: Computer with Internet access, projector, speakers (or SMART Board)

Introduce Topic:

Have you ever heard of barbershop harmony? Have you ever seen a quartet or a chorus of all men or all women that sing popular songs a cappella, in four-part harmony? Do you think of it as something your grandparents or great grandparents would enjoy? Does the thought of barbershop harmony evoke thoughts of straw hats, striped vests and canes?

If so, you're thinking of the early days of barbershop. Like all music styles, barbershop harmony has expanded, adapted and evolved over time. As each generation exerts influence and takes new risks with a music style, the style continues to grow and change. What fun would it be if no one took any risks? We would never have any variety. What if Elvis hadn't pushed the envelope? Would we have any of the current pop/rap/rock/heavy metal styles that we have today? Everything that we know today came from somewhere or someone long ago. Barbershop harmony is no different and today it is a unique, American art form.



LoveNotes Quartet

2014 International Quartet Champion and 2007 Rising Star Quartet Champion
First quartet to win both the youth quartet contest (in 2007) and the standard quartet contest (in 2014)

See and Hear Quartet Examples:

Let's get your ears attuned to what barbershop harmony sounds like in its current form.

Play selected clips from the list of YouTube clips below:

Women's Quartet Examples:

1. LoveNotes Quartet from Sunnyvale, California
2014 Sweet Adelines International Quartet Champion and
2007 Sweet Adelines International Rising Star Quartet Contest Champion

No, No Norman

<https://youtu.be/9III9XDzNxc>

2. C'est La Vie quartet – 2015 Rising Star Youth Quartet Champions
Performed at the 2016 Sweet Adelines International Quartet competition

Exactly Like You and If You Love Me

<https://youtu.be/crao8wT9hVk>

The groups we just watched were quartets; that is, they were made up of four singers. This is one very popular way to sing barbershop harmony.

Voice Parts:

In barbershop harmony, both male and female voice parts are labeled similarly to the traditional, male choral voice parts. Unlike choral singing, where the top voice part usually has the melody, in barbershop harmony the top (or highest) voice part is a harmony part. We call that part the "tenor." The second voice down has the melody and it's called the "lead." The third voice down

is the "baritone" and the bottom voice is the "bass." If you usually sing Soprano I or Tenor I in your choir, you will sing Tenor in barbershop harmony. If you are a Soprano II or Tenor II you have the range of a Lead. If you are an Alto I or Baritone then you will sing Baritone, and if you are an Alto II or a Bass then you will sing Bass.

So, from highest to lowest, the parts are Tenor, Lead, Baritone and Bass.

See and Hear Chorus Examples:

These same voice parts apply to both quartets and choruses. We watched samples of quartets earlier. Now let's take a look at samples of choruses singing barbershop harmony. Listen for these things:

- Where do you hear the melody? Is it the highest voice, lowest voice, in between?
- Listen to the end of the song (called a "tag") where you'll usually hear chords that "lock and ring."

Play selected clips from the list of YouTube clips below:

Women’s Chorus Examples:

Scioto Valley Chorus from Dublin, Ohio
Lulu’s Back In Town (start listening at 3:59)
 Performed during the 2011 International Chorus Semifinals in
 Houston <http://youtu.be/OvliNz6gpdk>

Men’s chorus samples:

Ambassadors of Harmony from St. Louis, Missouri
 2009 Barbershop Harmony Society International Chorus Champion

76 Trombones
<http://youtu.be/QmDGntpZC3I>

As you can see, there are a wide variety of songs, tempi, choreography and costuming that can be showcased in the barbershop style.

Many choruses who sing barbershop harmony are affiliated with Sweet Adelines International, an association of female barbershop harmony singers. With choruses and quartets around the world, the organization provides education and competition opportunities for its members.

Singing in Barbershop Harmony

When singing, emphasis on healthy vocal approach includes never vocalizing beyond your comfortably produced range, using vibrato appropriate to the style of music you’re performing and using all registers and colors of your voice with proper vocal technique and production. In barbershop harmony, you’ll hear less vibrato used than in other genres of vocal music. The chord structures are unique in this art form as well, with notes in a chord voiced close together. Lastly, if you’re lucky, you might hear an overtone when listening to barbershop harmony. An overtone is a higher, unsung note, produced in the ear by the interaction of the frequencies being sung.

History of Barbershop Harmony

While barbershop harmony was actually sung in barbershops, it started on neighborhood street corners. Many of the old barbershop song lyrics bring feelings of nostalgia with their references to being back in a hometown and singing on a particular corner.

Thanks to the investigative work of music historian Lynn Abbott (“Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony”), we know that early barbershop like jazz, blues and gospel, was deeply interwoven with African-American culture.

Banned from whites-only concert halls and theaters, African-American men invented their own musical entertainment in private homes and the backrooms of black-owned barbershops, focusing on the pleasures of “cracking up a chord.” According to Abbott, “The basic idea was to improvise, linger on and bask in the immediate warmth of hair-raisingly unusual close-harmony chords.”

Swipes, echoes, call-and-response structures, and even the “barbershop seventh” chord itself likely

grew out of African-American improvisational singing.

Indeed, says arranger and historian Dr. David Wright, “our very name [barbershop] most likely comes from the African-American harmonizers.” In the late 19th and early 20th century, the label “barbershop quartet” was applied predominantly to African-American singers.

Jazz Era

Close harmony quartets temporarily lost their position in pop culture during the Jazz Age. New technology for recording made its debut in 1924, which made it possible to record entire orchestras and large ensembles. Moreover, as dancing became more popular with Americans and audiences sought newer ways to express themselves, barbershop harmony had less of a place. While barbershop harmony was in temporary decline as the world embraced these larger instrumental ensembles, a barbershop harmony revival was coming soon.

By the turn of the century, the barbershop quartet tradition was thriving through glee clubs, concert performances and parlor quartets. The barbershop style music that grew during this time was an amalgamation of America’s diverse musical cultures with close harmony traditions, each drawing from the other, incorporating music from minstrelsy, hymns, folk songs, parlor songs, spirituals, and early Tin Pan Alley and ragtime songs.

Recordings of Close Harmony Music

Today, we have access to music through many different avenues – digital downloads, CDs and YouTube to name a few – but in the early 1900s the success of a song depended on sales of sheet music to the general public. The songwriters of Tin Pan Alley, an area in New York City named as such by journalist Monroe H. Rosenfeld because the pianos there sounded like the rattling of tin pans, advertised their songs through performers and musicians. These songwriters were often European immigrants or children of immigrants, thus bringing additional influences that would be integrated into the barbershop sound. For their songs to become hits, these songwriters had to include memorable phrases and be written in the then-popular waltz time. With the advancement of technology, including Thomas Edison’s invention of his “talking machine,” however, new songs could be heard across the nation much more easily.

Edison expected his talking machine to make money as a dictation device, but as sales slowed down, distributors started experimenting with new uses and a coin operated music playback machine first appeared in a saloon in San Francisco. It was hugely successful and these nickel phonographs started showing up everywhere and were the primary way people heard recorded music. Edison’s Standard Phonograph was \$20 in 1896 and was bringing recorded music right into people’s homes. The limitations of the technology meant no more than four voices could be captured well and that singing in a low range made for the best sound, making the recording of men’s quartet performances perfect for these early machines. Close harmonies were also very suited to this method of recording and barbershop harmony was spread nationwide.

Birth of SPEBSQSA

This declining interest in barbershop singing in the 1930s led to the founding of the all-male Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing (SPEBSQSA) in America. SPEBSQSA, which was a tongue-in-cheek name meant to be a spoof of the many government acronyms of the time, was founded in Tulsa, Oklahoma by Owen C. Cash, a tax lawyer and Rupert Hall, an investment banker. Cash and Hall sent

invitations for a songfest to fourteen friends and asked them to bring guests. Twenty-six men attended the first meeting in April 1938. From there, the group began to grow quickly, spawning new chapters in Kansas City, St. Louis, and Hollywood. Today, the organization is called the Barbershop Harmony Society and has chapters in every state and province in the United States and Canada and in many other countries around the world.

Birth of Sweet Adelines International

During World War II, as many women were venturing into roles traditionally reserved for men, women's quartets started showing up at various events. Although there was no formal organization for women barbershoppers, many women who had relatives belonging to SPEBSQA started their own quartets and were often performing at the men's conventions. Debates began about whether or not the women should demand acceptance by the men or start their own society. At the 1945 SPEBSQA Convention, Edna Mae Anderson approached many barbershoppers' wives to see if they were interested in singing, and this is how Sweet Adelines International was born. The first meeting was held in Anderson's home in Tulsa, Oklahoma on July 13, 1945. In October, 1947, Sweet Adelines held their first annual convention and contest in Tulsa, and by 1950 they had over fifteen hundred members in thirty-five chapters, in fourteen states. Today Sweet Adelines members extend over five continents and belong to more than 500 choruses and 1,200 quartets, still with the commitment to spread the art form of barbershop harmony through education, competition and performance. This independent, nonprofit music education association is one of the world's largest singing organizations for women.

Tag Singing

Well now that we've got the history, and you've listened and watched several groups, it's your turn to sing! At the end of every barbershop song, there is a "tag" which is another name for the ending or *coda* of the song. Some tags are longer than others and most have been reworked multiple times to fit the singers' needs.

Visit www.barbershoptags.com to access a large catalog of barbershop tag arrangements. You can view the notated music while listening to just the tag so you can see and hear the changes that were made. Each voice part is isolated so you can learn just your part while hearing the other three sung lightly in the background. Give that one a try and see if you are more successful. If you're really brave, you can try it without the learning tracks! This is a great way to learn to sing a tag! Have fun with it.

Extension Activity:

- Start a barbershop quartet or chorus in your school.

Sweet Adelines International has free educational materials and music to get you started! For more information about materials for educators and the Young Women in Harmony Program, please visit www.youngwomeninharmony.com or contact the Education Department at Sweet Adelines International: education@sweetadelines.com.

Sweet Adelines International hosts two youth contests annually: Rising Star Quartet Contest and YWIH Chorus Video Contest. For information, please visit: www.youngwomeninharmony.com.

References

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