

Definition of Barbershop Harmony

Barbershop harmony is a style of unaccompanied vocal music characterized by consonant four-part chords for every melody note. Occasional brief passages may be sung by fewer than four voice parts.

The voice parts are tenor, lead, baritone, and bass. The melody is consistently sung by the lead, with tenor harmonizing above the melody, bass singing primarily roots and fifths, and the baritone completing the chord either above or below the melody. The melody may be sung occasionally by the bass or tenor to avoid awkward voice leading and in introductions or tags (codas).

Barbershop music features major, minor, and dominant seventh chords, resolving primarily around the circle of fifths. Sixth, ninth, and major seventh chords are avoided except where demanded by the melody, while chords containing the minor second interval are not used. The basic harmonization may be embellished with additional chord progressions to provide harmonic interest and rhythmic momentum, to carry over between phrases, or to introduce or close the song effectively.

Barbershop interpretive style permits relatively wide liberties in the treatment of note values—staying within proper musical form—and uses changes in tempo and dynamics to create a mood more effectively.

Relative to an established sense of tonality, the melody line and harmony parts are enharmonically adjusted in pitch to produce an optimum consonant sound. The resulting pitch relationships are often considerably at variance with those defined by the equal temperament of fixed-pitch instruments. Use of similar word sounds in good quality and of optimum volume relationships by each voice part further enhances the sensation of consonance by mutual reinforcement of harmonics (overtones) to produce the unique full “expanded” sound that is characteristic of barbershop harmony.

Characteristics of the Barbershop Style

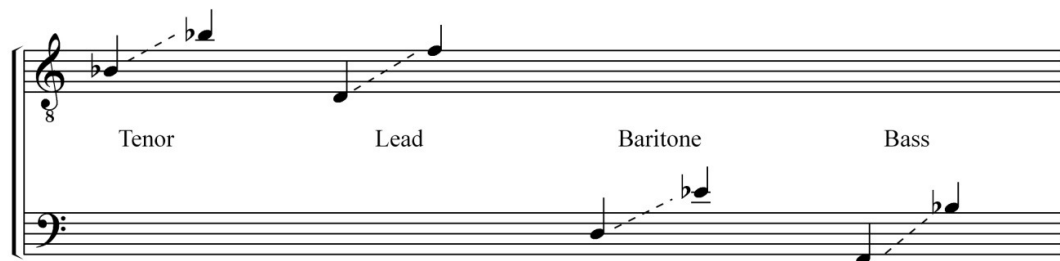
Barbershop, like any singing style, emphasizes proper vocal technique. Several factors, however, make this form of music unique.

Vocal range

The voice parts are tenor, lead, baritone, and bass. The melody is consistently sung in the second voice down: the lead (2nd tenor).

Below is a chart showing the vocal ranges of the four parts used in barbershop music.

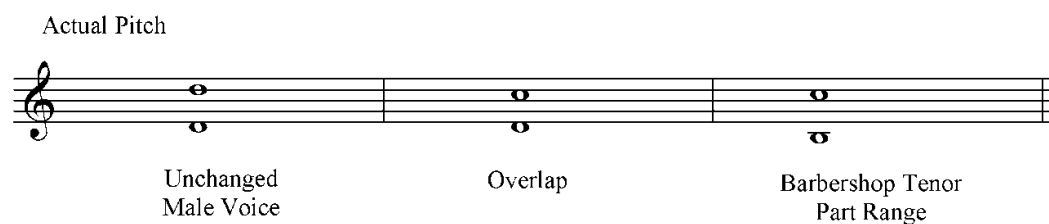
**Note that barbershop notation uses the men's treble clef.*



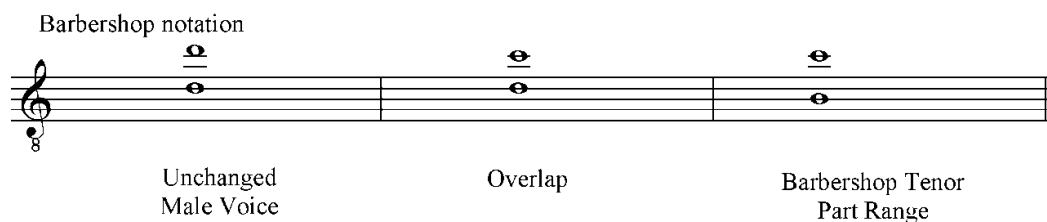
A word or two should be said about the adolescent voice. Although a number of authors discuss several classifications of young voices, for barbershop purposes we limit these to three: the unchanged voice, the changing voice, and the changed voice.

Unchanged male voice

The *unchanged* male voice can sing an approximate range from d^1 to d^2 . Compare this to the range of the barbershop tenor:



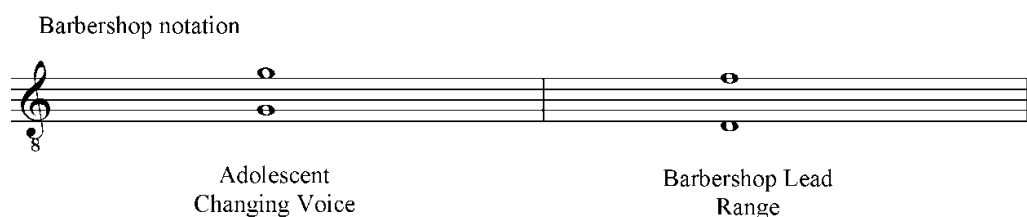
Notice that seven tones are common to both (overlap). Please remember that the examples shown above are written in actual pitch. Below is the same information printed in barbershop notation, with the small 8 under the treble clef sign to indicate that it sounds an octave lower than what is written:



It becomes evident that the unchanged male voice should be assigned only to the barbershop tenor part. There are many arrangements in which the tenor part stays comfortably in the unchanged voice range. Young barbershop tenors must be cautioned to never force the low notes to match the full voice of a mature tenor, but rather to sing with a light, head voice quality at all times.

Changing male voice

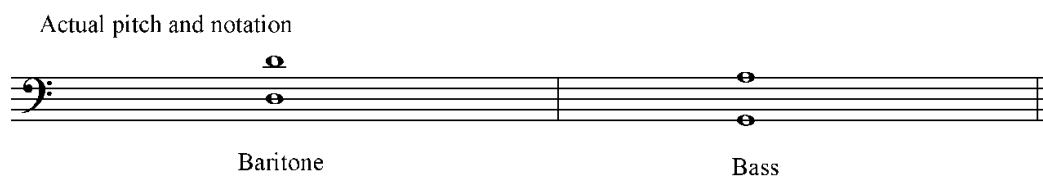
The adolescent *changing* voice has an approximate comfortable range of g to g¹:



As you can see, the changing voice is appropriate to the barbershop lead part, but he is probably unable to handle the entire range. Unless the singer uses his head voice, he will not be able to reach the highest lead notes comfortably. In addition, he should avoid singing below his normal range because it could cause bad habits, such as swallowing the tone or tightening of the throat. Available in the *Barbershop Arrangements Catalog* are a number of arrangements that will accommodate the limited range of the changing voice. Also, because the songs are sung unaccompanied, transposing them to a more comfortable key often solves this problem, so long as the other parts are still within comfortable ranges.

Changed male voice

The adolescent *changed* voice includes baritone and occasionally a true bass. The comfortable ranges are shown in actual pitch:



In all young singers, be aware of and correct any extraneous vocal production tension. Some of the signs are a wrinkled brow, strained neck muscles, a jutting jaw, or pained expression.