

**Title:** Barbershop A Cappella Harmony

**Level:** Grades 6 - 12 (approximate age range 12-18)

**Suggested Time Allowance:** 2 - 4 hours

**Connection to a Culminating Activity:**

This lesson will help students foster a passion for performing, take vocal skills to the next level, create confident singing, preserve the barbershop a cappella harmony art form, and keep chords ringing!

**Overall Expectation:**

C1. Creating and Performing: apply the creative process to create and perform music for a variety of purposes, using the elements and techniques of music.

C2. Reflecting, Responding, and Analysing: apply the critical analysis process to communicate their feelings, ideas, and understandings in response to a variety of music and musical experiences.

C3. Exploring Forms and Cultural Contexts: demonstrate an understanding of a variety of musical genres and styles from the past and present, and their sociocultural and historical contexts.

**Specific Expectation:**

Sing in tune, from musical notation, unison music and music in two or more parts from a wide variety of cultures, styles, and historical periods.

**Learning Objectives:**

- Discuss and understand the history of barbershop a cappella harmony and how it has evolved over time
- Learn about the associated voice parts and their respective roles
- Observe performing quartets and choruses
- Learn a four voice part tag

**Success Criteria:**

- Engage the students in an interactive discussion
- Students are voice placed to determine which voice part they will learn for tag singing
- Learn and sing a four voice part tag
  - Virtual
    - Creation of individual audio/visual performance of the tag
      - Submission deadline approx up to one week post lesson
    - Recordings will be compiled into a group video by one of Lake Ontario Region 16 Sweet Adelines International associates to be played for the students
  - In Person
    - Perform and sing the learned four voice part tag together

**Prior Student Knowledge Required:**

No prior musical knowledge required

## Outline of Lesson

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

### Topic Introduction: (2 - 5 min)

Teacher prompts:

- How many of you have heard of the barbershop style of singing?
- Have you ever seen a quartet or a chorus 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 art form.

## History of Barbershop A Cappella Harmony: (7 - 10 min)

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. *Additional history book: "Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony" by Lynn Abbott*

Early barbershop with influences of 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 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.

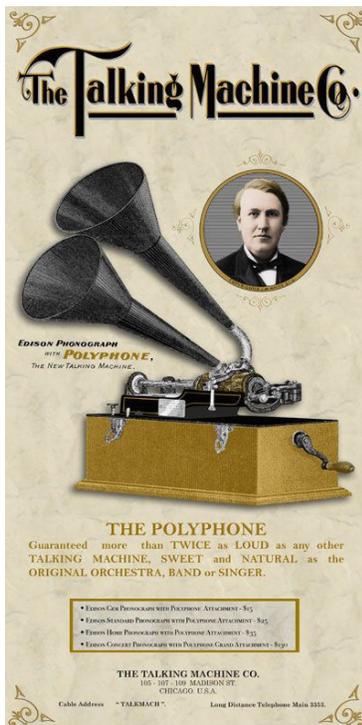
By the turn of the century, the barbershop quartet tradition was thriving through glee clubs, concert performances and parlor quartets. The barbershop style music that grew during this time was an amalgamation of America's diverse musical cultures with close harmony traditions, each drawing from the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

**Activity #1: (7 min)**

Here's a fun example of pop music [1980s - 2015] sung in the barbershop style:

**Main Street**

2017 Barbershop Harmony Society International Quartet Champions  
["The Good Ole Days – Pop Song Medley"](#)

**History Cont'd: (2 min)****Birth of SPEBSQSA**

The quartet we just listened to are members of the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS), previously known as SPEBSQSA. This organization started with



the declining interest in barbershop singing in the 1930s, which led to the founding of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of BarberShop 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.

**Activity #2: (15 min)**

Let's listen to another quartet example.

**LoveNotes**

2007 Sweet Adelines International Rising Star Quartet Champions  
 2014 Sweet Adelines International Quartet Champions  
["2014 Honolulu Quartet Finals Package"](#)

## History Cont'd: (2 min)

### Birth of Sweet Adelines International

This quartet are members of Sweet Adelines International (SAI). They are the first quartet to win both the youth quartet contest (in 2007) and the standard quartet contest (in 2014).



Let's dive into a bit of the history of SAI. 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 and people of other marginalized genders.



Edna Mae Anderson (Founder)

**Voice Parts and Their Roles: (5 - 10 min)**

In barbershop harmony, the voice parts are labeled similarly to the traditional, male choral voice parts. However, 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.

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.

**TENOR** is a harmony part sung consistently above the lead. The tenor should have a light, sweet, pure tone that will complement but not overpower or overshadow the lead voice. Occasionally you will have notes below the lead. When this happens, your tonal quality will need to change from being light and clear to being more full and round. Flexibility is the key and knowing when you need to change.

**LEAD** is the melody and must be sung with authority, clarity and consistent quality throughout the lead's range. The lead sings with limited vibrato to add color and warmth to the sound. With too much use of vibrato, the chord will not “lock” or “ring” or produce the unique, full and “expanded” sound that is characteristic of barbershop harmony. The lead is responsible for conveying the interpretation, emotion and inflections of the song. On the rarer occasions when the melody line is in another part, which may be only for a few notes, the lead will need to be aware to lighten the vocal quality to allow the melody

to shine wherever it is being sung. If you are in a quartet, the others will follow your lead. In a chorus, we all follow the director.

**BARITONE** covers approximately the same range as lead. Primarily sung below the lead but sometimes sung above, depending on where the melody is situated, baritones must constantly adjust their balance to accommodate their position in the chord. They must have a good ear.

**BASS** is the lowest note in the barbershop chord. Singers should have a rich, mellow voice and generally sing the root and fifth of each chord. The bass sings a relatively straight, well-produced tone with a minimum of vibrato. A bass sings with a heavier tone quality than the others and generally with more volume, to fill out the “cone.” The bass part provides the foundation of each chord.

Traditional male voice range for barbershop:

*\*Please note that the subscript 8 located under the treble clef is to indicate that it should be sung an octave lower than written.*

Musical notation for traditional male voice range in barbershop. The notation shows two staves: Tenor/Lead (treble clef) and Bari/Bass (bass clef). The Tenor/Lead staff has a subscript 8 below the clef. The Bari/Bass staff has a superscript 8 above the clef. The notes are: Tenor (G4), Lead (A4), Baritone (B4), Bass (C5).

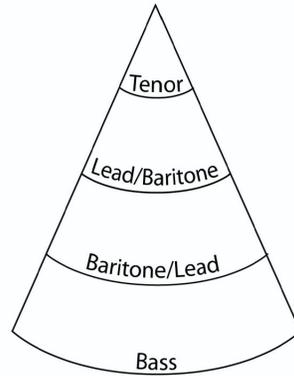
Traditional female voice range for barbershop:

*\*Please note that the superscript 8 located above the bass clef is to indicate that it should be sung an octave higher than written.*

Musical notation for traditional female voice range in barbershop. The notation shows two staves: Tenor/Lead (treble clef) and Bari/Bass (bass clef). The Bari/Bass staff has a superscript 8 above the clef. The notes are: Tenor (G4), Lead (A4), Baritone (B4), Bass (C5).

## THE BARBERSHOP CONE:

Barbershop harmonies have a different balance than the traditional cylindrical balance of SATB or SSAA ensemble music. The top voices sing with less weight and intensity than the lower voices.



### Activity #3: (20 min)

Listen to a few more examples to get the students' ears attuned to what barbershop harmony sounds like in its current form.

#### **C'est La Vie**

2015 SAI Rising Star Youth Quartet Champions  
["Exactly Like You" and "If You Love Me"](#)

#### **Wildfire**

2019 BHS Collegiate Quartet Champions  
[Wildfire - You've Got a Friend in Me \[from Toy Story\]](#)

#### **Half & Half**

["9 to 5"](#)

#### **Signature**

2019 BHS International Quartet Champions  
["Listen" \(from Dreamgirls\)](#)

#### **The Ladies**

["Something's Gotta Give"](#)

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.

See and Hear Chorus Examples: (30 - 40 min)

These same voice parts apply to both quartets and choruses. 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."
- Prompt students to discuss how they felt about each example.

**Diablo Vista Chorus**

2019 SAI Harmony Classic Division AA

["The Greatest Show" \(first song - stop at 4:30\)](#)

**Ambassadors of Harmony**

2016 BHS International Chorus Champions

["Chaplin Medley"](#)

**North Metro Chorus**

2019 SAI Lake Ontario Region 16 Chorus Champions

2018 SAI Chorus Champions

["Toy Soldiers Package"](#)

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

Sweet Adelines International hosts two youth contests annually: Rising Star Quartet Contest and YWIH Chorus Video Contest. Camps, festivals and educational events are also put on annually. The most recent camp included learning and performing Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper's "Shallow" from A Star Is Born.

**Lake Ontario Region 16 YWIH Virtual A Cappella Camp 2021**

["Shallow"](#)

#### **Activity #4:**

**(10 - 30 min depending on class size, approx. 1 - 2 min per student)**

Finding the right part for your voice is the initial step.

- Have each student sing a simple melody such as Happy Birthday to determine their initial comfort starting point/range
- Have each student sing a solfege scale within the approximate ranges listed above to further test part suitability
- Group students by part determined for preparation of activity #5

#### **Activity #5: (30 - 60 min)**

##### 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](http://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 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.

- Choose one or two tags to learn as a class
- Listen and view
- Sing

### **Activity #6 (Optional Extension Activity):**

Start or join a barbershop quartet or chorus in your area. The following links have educational materials to get you started!

<https://sweetadelines.com/>

<https://www.barbershop.org/>

<http://www.saregion16.com/>

For more information, please contact:

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