

Barbershop Music

Part of what differentiates barbershop from other a cappella music is the way in which it is arranged. Although strict barbershop gives the most powerful potential, looser arrangements can have more audience appeal, so a mixture in your repertoire is desirable.

Structure of Barbershop Music

Barbershop is essentially tonal, triadic harmony in the major mode. Harmonisation uses the following 11 chords:

- Those based on the major triad:
 - Major triad
 - Dominant 7th
 - Dominant 9th
 - Major 6th
 - Major 7th
 - Major 9th
- Those based on the minor triad:
 - Minor triad
 - Minor 6th
 - Minor 7th
- Symmetrical chords:
 - Augmented triad
 - Diminished 7th

The melody is carried primarily by the lead voice, while the highest voice sings a harmony part. This structure supports and enhances the overtone-producing characteristics of the major triad, dom 7th and dom 9th chords. These 3 chords provide the predominant harmonic flavor of arrangements.

Some music is just not suited to this style of arrangement, and using non-barbershop harmonization will result in an a cappella arrangement which cannot be used in competition, and cannot be called barbershop. Variety can be fun!

Uptunes

Usually structured: Intro – chorus – tag
 Verse – chorus – tag
 Intro – chorus – verse – chorus – tag

What tempo is the song? Swing, downbeat, backbeat? Does it have a stomp section?

Intro and tag are usually ad lib. Sometimes an “interlude” or internal verse can be done ad lib with a return to tempo afterwards. Make sure each ad lib section really sets up the tempo starts.

Where a song is repetitive, use dynamic or rhythmic variation to keep the energy flowing.

Ballads

Usually structured: Intro/Verse – “Hook”/Chorus – Climax – Tag

Emphasise lyric message and melodic structure of the song as you decide your phrasing. Dynamics should be appropriate to the emotional message, should enhance the impact of that message and should be effectively performed by the group.

Selecting Music For Your Group

The characteristics of each voice part, either individual or chorus section, can affect music choice. Individual ranges and blend between parts can affect your choice where there may be large separation between two parts (usually lead-tenor or bass-baritone). The abilities of the group need to be taken into consideration when looking at music. Some of the “features” to note include:

- Part Ranges
- Melodic line movement and relationship to other parts
- Embellishment / Interpretive promise
 - Vertical chord movement vs Patter
 - End of phrase chord movement / key changes
 - Echoes and slides
 - Where is the climax?
 - Non-lead melody
 - Words
 - Strong ending for uptune
- Difficulty rating
 - Rated by international
 - Fast / wordy tempo song?
 - Melody based on the Doh / incidence of accidentals
 - Athletic voice leading
 - Tempo / rhythmic intricacy