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Barbershop Quartet Singing: A Continuing Tradition

The year is 1938. The Great Depression is on its ninth long year. Amidst the alphabet soup of federal agencies appears one more – the SPEBSQSA (Snyder 13-14). Rupert Hall and Owen C. Cash invited fourteen friends to come sing with them on April 11, 1938 at the Tulsa Club in Tulsa, OK (*Barbershop*). Twenty-six showed up, and seventy showed up the following week at the Hotel Tulsa (*Barbershop*). Fast-forward to today, when the Barbershop Harmony Society (still officially known as the SPEBSQSA) boasts nearly 25,000 members in both the United States and Canada (*Barbershop*). How, then, did such a specific genre of vocal music acquire such widespread and enduring popularity from such humble and unassuming beginnings? How, then, did we get from then to now?

Although the sound of a barbershop quartet is iconic and instantly recognisable to those who know it, there are specific musical characteristics that make it what it is. First, by definition, there are four voices – as it would simply not be a quartet otherwise. Traditionally, the barbershop quartet is male, although there are also female quartets – often known as “Sweet Adeline quartets” after the first such society (*Sweet*). However, for sake of scope this paper will contain itself to male barbershop quartets, as is traditionally understood. Each of the four voices has a distinct role. The lead part (with a typical range of E below middle C to G above) typically carries the melody and must therefore have “authority, clarity, and a consistent quality throughout [...] his range” (*Greater*). The tenor part (middle C to D an octave above)

harmonizes above the lead and must have a lighter, more transparent tone to not overpower the melody (*Greater*). The bass (A an octave and a half below middle C to D above) provides the lowest notes of chords, giving the other three a foundation to sing over (*Greater*). Finally, the baritone (D below middle C to F above) sings approximately in the same range as the lead; since they may harmonise above or below, they must be extremely accurate (*Greater*).

In addition to these clearly defined roles, the style that constitutes “authentic” barbershop music is carefully defined: “Barbershop harmony is a style of unaccompanied vocal music characterized by consonant four-part chords for every melody note in a predominately homophonic texture” (*Barbershop*). The overall form must be “balanced and symmetrical”, the meter standard, melody easily singable, and the lyrics understandable (*Barbershop*). Most importantly, the harmony must be predominately consonant, focusing on major triads and particularly dominant-seventh (“barbershop seventh”) chords – at the risk of disqualification in official competitions (*Barbershop*)!

All of these characteristics harken back to the historical tradition embodied and perpetuated by the first meeting of the SPEBSQSA in April 1938. Although the origins of barbershop singing are lost to history, it has a number of antecedents in American culture of the turn of the twentieth century. Popular songs had barbershop-style easily-singable melodies, and amateur singers would often improvise harmonies to these tunes “at parties, on street corners – and in barber shops, which were popular gathering places” (*Greater*). Additionally, there was a strong African American influence on barbershop, as evidenced by its prominence in minstrel and Vaudeville shows (*Greater*). However, the creation of the Society allowed for the gathering and standardization of barbershop practice. Within three years, the Society had over 2,000 members and had performed at the 1940 World’s Fair in New York City (Snyder 15).

From the beginning, the Society was an informal sort of affair, simply created for men to have fun singing together. However, as it grew, various elements of formality crept in, all of which were at the time (and some of which still are) the subject of debate. The first contest was held in June 1939 in Tulsa, hosting 150 men from seven states (Snyder 17). This tradition of friendly competition has continued to the present day, with trained judges judging competitions held in several categories at the district and international levels (*Barbershop*). One of these categories is for Chorus – a phenomenon that has caused widespread controversy in the barbershop community, particularly when it overtakes quartet singing in some districts (Snyder 28-29). Although the art of barbershop singing is still predominately an American art, international groups (including Great Britain and Sweden) have also joined these competitions (Snyder 24).

With a stable international membership of around 37,000 men by the 1990s (Snyder 30), it is only natural that such differences would arise. However, some trends are more universal throughout the Society. Throughout the 1950s, family and friends increasingly attended the previously male-only events, and the Society began to encourage full-family participation, scheduling family-friendly events at conventions (Snyder 25). Perhaps most importantly, the Society came to recognize education as one of its foremost goals, first by holding quartet clinics and teaching basic music theory to its members (Snyder 26). This soon developed into Harmony College, a weeklong program held at college campuses dedicated to educating people in “barbershop craft” (Snyder 27). The program is still going strong today every summer at Belmont University in Nashville, TN (*Barbershop*).

Although membership has dropped to 22,000 in 2014 (*Barbershop*), the barbershop movement is still going strong. By judging competitions based on traditional barbershop values,

these traditions have survived alive and well into the twenty-first century. Recent winners include the quartets Masterpiece, Musical Island Boys (from Australia and New Zealand!), and Instant Classic (*Barbershop*). Although these groups have clearly obtained notoriety, most barbershop activity is still a very local affair, consisting simply of men who enjoy singing together. Thus, funding occurs on a local level however is most convenient for the group and community – although the Society does offer grants that members can apply for. The Society also maintains an extensive catalog of barbershop music (a 142-page .pdf document with very small print, in fact) (*Barbershop*) and is likely the best place to obtain music for all your barbershop needs.

As far as making music goes, starting a barbershop quartet requires relatively little effort – find three pals, buy some cheap music (or pick a tune and make it up yourself, as they did in the good old days!), and that’s all there is to it. With so many resources and fellow barbershoppers available, there’s really no reason not to perpetuate the old traditions and become a part of history!

Appendix 1 – Links to Recordings

- A wide variety of recordings can be found on the Barbershop Harmony Society's official YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/BarbershopHarmony38>

- Musical Island Boys, the 2014 International Quartet Champions:

<https://musicalislandboys.wordpress.com/watch/>

- Masterpiece Quartet, the 2013 International Quartet Champions:

<http://www.masterpiecequartet.com/video>

Works Cited

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