In a Nutshell: What Makes Barbershop Sound Different From Other Singing Styles?

Excerpts from an article by Jon Nicholas

Reason #1: The Melody Is In The Middle

The melody of a song is the part that people hum or whistle when they have a song stuck in their heads. If there's a sing-a-long, most people involved will sing the melody, since that's what they know best. When people sing *Happy Birthday To You,* it's the melody that's heard most prominently.

Now, with most styles of singing, the melody is usually the highest part. In church hymnals and most choral music, for example, the sopranos have the melody and all the harmony parts are sung on lower notes. The altos are right below the melody, then the tenors, and finally, singing those very low notes, the basses.

In barbershop, the melody is usually not the highest part. The tenor sings above the melody, then comes the lead (he sings the melody) and baritone, who are constantly swapping places, and finally the bass who, once again, sings those very low notes.

Barbershop is not the only style that utilizes this structure (gospel quartets also use it), but it's the first element that starts to separate it from other styles.

Reason #2: The Dominant Seventh Chord

A musical chord is when more than one note is sung or played at the same time. In barbershop, there are four singing parts, so most of the time we hear four-part chords, and one of those four-part chords is called the Dominant Seventh.

Down through the years, chords have been given names to help musicians communicate more efficiently. Since I'm keeping things simple here, I'm not going to explain why one of the chords was named the Dominant Seventh, but suffice it to say that this particular chord is so prevalent in barbershop music that it has come to be known as the Barbershop Seventh Chord to many musicians.

The dominant seventh chord is found in virtually every musical style of the western hemisphere, but in barbershop, this chord is used as often as possible. In a typical, traditional song, 35 to 60% of the chords are dominant sevenths.

Reason #3: Ear Singing

Though many early barbershop quartets (the late 1800s to the early 1900s) used musical instruments to accompany their singing, most modern quartets sing in the *a cappella* style, which means without instrumental accompaniment.

The reason they prefer singing a cappella is because they can "bend" notes in order to make the chords sound better.

On musical instruments, notes are separated in equal distances from each other. I won't go into the details about why, since I'm keeping it simple.

Chords sound better, though, when some of their notes are altered a bit. The reason why is because sound waves are involved, and sound waves don't follow a simple mathematical system. The human brain can detect when a chord "locks" into place, and most singers, with experience, can automatically adjust their notes slightly up or down to make a chord sound better than when played on an instrument. A locked chord is called so because once achieved, the singer feels vocally locked into place. It's a strange sensation, actually, because it becomes difficult to move up or down once the chord has locked.

Although bending notes like this is technically known as *Just Intonation,* in barbershop circles it's often called *ear singing.* Each of the four singers must listen to the other parts while singing their own. By using their ears (listening), they are able to determine when to raise or lower a note in order to achieve a locked chord.

Reason #4: Overtones

If you listen to a really good barbershop quartet, you may find yourself wondering who is singing those amazingly high notes. You can pick out the note the tenor is singing, but there are notes even higher coming out of the group. Sometimes the notes are so high, you can't believe a grown man could sing them. Well, that's because they aren't singing them. You're hearing *overtones.*

An overtone is a natural phenomenon that occurs when sound waves rub against each other and produce a higher note. Overtones are occurring all around us every day, but most of the time we don't notice them because they are fleeting and usually soft in volume. In a well-tuned barbershop quartet, however, overtones are enhanced, even to the point where the loudest note is not being sung by any of the four singers.

Since each voice can produce its own overtones, it's quite possible to have a five, six, or even an eight-part chord being sung by four people. Any time that overtones can be heard during a song, barbershoppers, if you will, call this *expanded sound.*

Expanded sound is a wonderful experience for both the listener and the singer. Listeners are treated to a sound that cannot be duplicated on a typical musical instrument. One of the most common effects of listening to this sound (especially when it involves the above-mentioned barbershop seventh chord) is the rise of goose bumps on the skin. I've heard countless people tell me this after a performance. The singers, on the other hand, are feeling something that is hard to describe. It simply must be experienced to be understood. By the way, another benefit of this phenomenon is that the singer can relax his volume a bit because the over-all volume has now increased with the addition of the overtones.

Unlike most singers in other musical styles, barbershoppers actively work towards producing overtones.

More at:

http://jonnicholas.hubpages.com/hub/In-A-Nutshell-What-Makes-Barbershop-Sound-Different-From-Other-Singing-Styles