

Barbershop  
Balance and How  
it Affects All  
Four Categories  
Handout

*Side* BY *Side*  
DIRECTORS' SEMINAR & JUDGE TRAINING  
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The term “vowel modification” is sometimes used to describe the intentional alteration of vowels to enhance barbershop balance and blend. This technique includes using a brighter, more forward approach to vowels produced on lower pitches and a more neutral approach to vowels at the high end of the tenor range. The sound judge will neither reward nor penalize for the specific use of this technique. If blend is not distorted and the overall sound is good, the score will reflect that quality. If in attempting to apply this technique the singer contrives the vocal mechanism, resulting in tension in the mouth, jaw or swallowing muscles, the sound judge will recognize the existence of faulty vocal production techniques and will score the performance accordingly.

### Chorus Blend

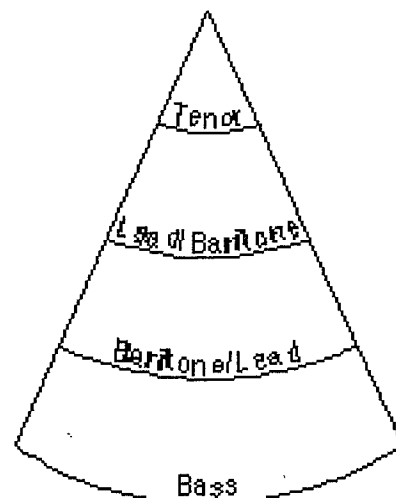
The same basic principles apply to evaluating the performance of either a chorus or quartet. A section should have unit sound and demonstrate section blend. Variation in vowel formation within any section will result in distortion of section blend. One single voice in any section or, indeed, in an entire chorus, can be so out of tune, so loud or so different in quality that it destroys the performance of the entire chorus.

In addition to listening for section blend, the sound judge also listens for section-to-section blend. For example, a well-blended bass section may have a brilliant, lively sound that might be entirely correct, but it may not blend with the mellow lead section. A common approach to vocal skills by all sections will minimize differences from section to section.

### BARBERSHOP BALANCE

Barbershop balance has certain characteristics that distinguish it from other styles of vocal music. Church or glee club music (SATB) is balanced cylindrically, all voices singing with equal weight and intensity. Progressive jazz (when sung in harmony) and modern harmony are sung with inverted-cone balance, i.e., the top voices sing with more weight and intensity and the lower voices sing with less weight and intensity. When a barbershop chord is in balance, the voices are purposely unequal in volume.

Using the visual concept of the cone, the sound judge can readily evaluate the balance of a performance. The principles of barbershop balance and singing through the cone, as experienced by individual voice parts, were discussed in the vocal production portion of the Guide to Vocal Skills. (Refer to section 1 pages 1-2.) It should be understood that balance is not merely a question of volume. To achieve optimum vocal balance, the voices to be balanced must first be blended. In the illustration, the lead and baritone are shown in alternating positions to serve as a reminder that both must lighten or broaden their tones as their position in the chord changes.



Occasionally one voice or voice section will appear to be overbalancing the rest. The sound judge will recognize that the voices in question are singing with techniques of good vocal production and the other voices/sections are not. In this case, the remaining voice-sections need to develop equal proficiency with the section that appears to be out of balance. Comments by the sound judge should be carefully worded lest they indicate that those singing correctly should use an inferior or incorrect method of tone production to achieve balance.

### Common Balance Problems

Tenor: Frequently, the tenor voice or section sings with a heavy quality, lending too much weight to the top of the chord. A tenor or tenor section whose quality does not complement that of the lower voices will generally appear to be out of balance. Conversely, when the tenor line goes below the lead line momentarily, tenors may fail to make the vocal adjustment required to fill the chord completely.

Lead: Leads often sing their part with equal weight and intensity, no matter what their position in the chord or in what portion of their range the note lies. The resultant problem depends on the capabilities of the other voice sections. If the other sections are strong, the leads will probably appear to be in balance on higher notes and underbalanced on lows. If the other sections are weak, the leads will probably appear to be in balance on lower notes and overbalanced on highs. Leads must remember that the approach to singing in the barbershop style requires more depth of tone and more volume on lows and a light, more lyrical tonal quality with less relative volume on highs — an approach exactly opposite to that used in classical singing.

Baritone: The most common baritone balance problem is similar to that of leads, except that baritones tend to sing most comfortably and, therefore, with most strength in the middle of their voice range. The baritone cannot rely only on her position in her overall range to indicate the volume or intensity required; her balance is also contingent upon her proximity to the lead note and whether she is above or below the lead. Baritones frequently sing many consecutive notes of the same pitch, while the lead moves between positions above and below the unchanging baritone note. It is the job of the baritone to adjust her balance within each chord, even though her note remains the same. When she sings below the lead, in the lower portion of her range, good balance requires that she sing with more depth of tone than would be used by the lead on that same pitch. When she is above the lead, in the upper portion of her range, good balance dictates that she sing with a lighter tone than would be used by the lead on that same pitch.

Bass: The most common bass balance problem is the inability to balance low tones properly. Because of the vocal range of the bass part, it is necessary for the basses to sing with more depth and volume as they descend in pitch. This problem is magnified when the group loses overall pitch. Conversely, the upper part of the bass range requires use of the head register for proper resonance.

It is relatively easy for any group, including one with limited vocal capability, to achieve balance on sustained chords. The real accomplishment lies in maintaining balance when chords move rapidly and when individual part lines are demanding. The ultimate in barbershop balance exists only when all chords in a given performance are properly balanced so as to provide a continuous impression of the cone-shaped sound. The sound judge will evaluate the performer's ability to balance all chords, not just those which were sustained. A complete, balanced chord sound should always be identifiable, even on passing chords.

### Intended Imbalance

When the melody leaves the lead voice, traditional balance is abandoned and the quality and authority normally found in the lead voice are transferred to the voice singing the melody. The sound judge will evaluate the degree of proficiency with which these melodic transfers are handled and subsequently balanced.

## ARTISTIC SOUND (0-30 points)

In summary, the barbershop sound is achieved by combining the components of correctly produced, blended voices singing with total accuracy and cone-shaped balance in a manner consistent with the barbershop style. The following paragraphs describe application of good vocal technique and correct blend and balance in such a manner as to achieve an artistic barbershop performance.

### ENERGIZED VOCAL LINE

An important characteristic of a barbershop performance is energized sound. Energy is an intangible quality that applies to all components of the sound category. A barbershop sound of above-average quality consists of tones possessing energy. A significant amount of that energy is derived from proper breath support, but a certain amount can also be attributed to a positive, confident mental attitude and to the quality of "life" imparted to the voice by a lifted facial countenance.

Artistic sound also has vitality. The best barbershop performance combines technical proficiency with artistic flexibility into a vital, energetic, barbershop sound.

An energized vocal line is achieved when the singer permits breath to be released, or managed, through the vocal cords in such a way that the vocal line demonstrates vitality and life. If the singer properly masters the elements of vocal production, an energized vocal line should result.

The sound judge will appropriately reward a sound that is correctly produced and energized. However, a performance that combines correct, energized vocal technique with a strong, positive mental commitment to the style and mood of the song will transform a technically correct performance from a matter of academic interest into an emotional experience for the listener. To convey the essence of the barbershop performance

## Barbershop Balance & How it Affects all Four Categories

### **Music:**

- Part balance to enable delivery of complete, clear, balanced chords.
- Balance in terms of tempo choice and variation appropriateness
- Balance in integrity of rhythmic components and how they satisfactorily fill in the time allotted to them
- Balance in terms of contrast of phrasing and dynamic plans; contrasts are a form of balance.
- Balance in terms of structural symmetry of arrangements and rhyme scheme

### **Expression:**

- Balance of pulse, rhythmic delivery/emphasis/no emphasis
- Contrast of dynamics that enhance lyrical delivery
- Dynamic flow and power and movement to climax
- Balance of moods conveyed
- Appropriate allotment of word sounds

### **Showmanship:**

- Natural, planned choreography that enhances (balances) the musical presentation
- Costuming and appearance that enhances (balances) the musical presentation
- The balance of all out raw energy and artistic restraint

### **Sound:**

- Bass/lead match; baritone fill; tenor relation to lead and ratio of size to bass
- Balance of vocal registers—our harmony relates to the natural cone of the human voice: resonators in chest, throat, mouth and sinuses—progressively lighter
- Matched resonating spaces and choices
- Cone of Parts
- Cone of Range
- Chord balance/size

## **Lock and Ring:** Overtone structure; reinforcement of partials

Breath support

Open resonance

Blend and match of vowel resonance

Air and space

Clarity of tone

Accuracy

--Intervals

--Pitch

Lift off and float

Tuning octaves—high octave light and slightly sharp so that 5<sup>th</sup> can appear; 5<sup>th</sup> slightly sharp so third can appear. 7<sup>th</sup>—root and 7<sup>th</sup> need to be strong other parts slightly sharp and full; swipe tuning especially important

Place in chord

Pythagorean tuning

Sparkling, ever-present lead line

Synch/unit

Balance

Place in chord

## **What can you do?**

- Weekly coach
- Part Balance Golden mean—35%/35%/20%/10%
- Best singers are Leads—brilliant authority in all parts of range; Basses sing with melodic authority; Baritones and their skills make it barbershop; Tenors sing with bell-like clarity and are the true harmonizers and key keepers
- Understand balance of parts; ratio between tenor and bass
- Appropriate duets: lead/baritone; lead/bass; lead/tenor; tenor/bass; bass/baritone
- Cultivating multi-part singers
- Cultivating part specialists with more craft and understanding
- Understand riser placement for vocal synergy
- Understand part placement in cone
- Understand singing cone of range
- Understand chord structure

## **BARBERSHOP CONCEPTS: *HOW WE SANG TODAY***

### **Measures 1-8:**

Octave locks: *-mor-*, *-row-*, *day* (first chord), *pray*—strongest octave voicing

Some 7<sup>th</sup> chords: *to-*, *-er*, *and*, *be*, *to-*, *geth*—final three in strongest voicing

### **Pythagorean tuning opportunities:**

- Scale step 3—D: leads/baritones
- Scale step 6—G; basses/leads
- Scale step 7—A, tenor
- Accidentals going north—Tenors on B natural in measures 6-7

### **Measures 24-36:**

Open and closed voicings—“family” vs. “sister” chords

Flow of musical line up and down

Good singing area for all parts

### **Other factors:**

Measures 17, 27—Bass octave leaps

Measures 17-20—Baris accidental tuning challenges

Measures 33-36—Descending line in bass; relative balance; baritone tuning; lead hanger elevation; tenor strong in measure 34

Baritones above and below leads throughout this song

7<sup>th</sup> chords on these vowels: OH, EH, AH, UN

### **Breath plan:**

Structure (AABB)

Measures 1-16—Declarative assertion of three “givens”

Measures 17-24—Imperatives and declarative assertion

Measures 25-36—Re-assertion and affirmation with parallel repetition of *I'm glad we laughed, I'm glad we loved, I'm glad we sang*—cf with lyrics in measures 21-22

Two meanings of the word *How*

**Other aspects that can be taught:** Lyrical expression, word sounds, chord balance, part lines, intervals, rubato, dynamics

## Barbershop Technique

**The Tenor Voice** with its distinctive qualities, lightness and almost bell-like clarity, has sufficient maturity of sound to complement the other voices. Lyric sopranos generally make good barbershop tenors. Since the tenor part is sung primarily above the lead (the natural harmony part sung high), the voice must be capable of singing high notes (e'-f'') with consistent quality and control. Unlike the soprano voice, the barbershop tenor uses very little vibrato; any vibrato should be almost imperceptible.

**The Lead Voice** generally carries the melody line of the song, so she must sing with authority. Ideally the lead voice has clarity, brilliance, depth, maturity and a sense of "style" which will set her voice apart from others. She utilizes a sufficient amount of vibrato to add interest to the tone, but not so much as to distort chord accuracy. Since the lead sings in the same range as the baritone (G - c''), the quality of her voice will make the distinction. She sings primarily in the chest register but, for consistency, it is important that she be able to make the transition easily from chest to head register and that quality remain consistent. The lead voice should be capable of a wide range of expressive dynamics.

**The Bass Voice** must also possess the ability to sing with authority, for it is she who puts a solid foundation on every single chord. The bass voice must have a mellow, melodic quality, but with sufficient weight to add the desirable bass timbre to the group sound. She must be capable of sufficient volume and projection on her lowest tones so that the firm foundation of the bass sound is not overshadowed by the other parts. The average bass range is C - f'. (Note: high school girls' range may be E-flat to g'.)

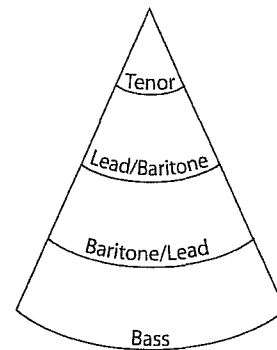
**The Baritone Voice** is the important fourth tone of the chord and she must be the most flexible in vocal quality. She sings in the same range as the lead (G - c'') but with less clarity; in most arrangements she sings in the lower portion of her range more frequently than in the upper. Though consistency of quality between head and chest registers is desirable, it is less important here than in the lead voice for this transition to be made imperceptibly, for the baritone actually sings with two voices. When she is below the lead she sings with a depth of tone that fills the gap between bass and lead; when she is above the lead her quality becomes more tenor-like, so as not to overshadow the melody. Proper handling of the intricacies of the baritone part plays an important role in achieving the lock and ring characteristic of a barbershop sound.



## Achieving Balance

The barbershop style is characterized by a strong, solid UNIT sound created by cone-shaped balance with blend of four voices. With proper balance and blend, good harmony accuracy and clarity of tone, a quartet or chorus will achieve the “locked, ringing” sound we want to hear.

The drawing of the cone-shaped barbershop sound represents both the volume and quality each voice or voice part should produce within the quartet or chorus. Because of the acoustical properties of sound, high tones have more carrying power than low tones. Therefore, it is necessary for the top voice (usually the tenor) to sing with less volume than the lower one, and the lowest voice (usually the bass) to sing louder than the others. The lead and baritone basically sing about the same volume; but the lead's voice, because of its distinctive style and personality, will be more prominent in the chord.



The cone also demonstrates that each part, progressing from the tenor down, must sing with more depth and breadth of tone, allowing more chest quality to predominate in the lower voices. Not only does the cone illustrate the quality relationship of voices within a quartet, it is also a good visual example of the adjustment of each voice part from the lower mechanism (chest voice) to the upper (head voice). At the top of the cone, the singer must allow more head resonance or the tone becomes dark and heavy, or thin and strained...unpretty. As we go to the lower part of the vocal range, the added depth we desire is achieved by a stronger balance of chest tone than is generally used in more formal styles of singing.

The cone shape of the barbershop sound is only the beginning and not always the be-all and end-all of producing UNIT sound. Some groups sing with more or less acuity within the cone and still produce a unit sound. Other factors influencing the unit sound are a) clarity of tone production; b) blend; c) harmony accuracy. With the right combination of these factors, the quartet or chorus is able to set up the right conditions for creating strong overtones. The closer to perfection the groups come to creating overtones, the stronger sensation the listener gets that they are “locking and ringing” chords.