

MAKING A BASIC BARBERSHOP ARRANGEMENT FROM SHEET MUSIC

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SONG SELECTION: In order to make a Barbershop arrangement, the song itself (that is, the lyrics, melody and harmony) must be suitable to the Barbershop style. In reviewing a piece of sheet music, consider the following factors:

Melody: the range should not exceed a 10th. Melodies with wider ranges will require "tinkering," like giving the melody for a few notes to the tenor or bass (this generally reduces the amount of Barbershop sound that can be produced). Also, the melody should not have too many big jumps, or too many accidentals, as both of these factors make good tuning difficult. Changing the melody from what is shown on the sheet music is discouraged.

Harmony (as shown in the piano accompaniment or chord symbols): major keys produce more Barbershop sound than minor keys. The harmonic pattern (that is, the roots of the chords) should generally progress around the circle of fifths, with a few deviations for harmonic interest. In addition to the three main chords in most songs (I, IV, and V), at least one other chord (such as II⁷ or VI⁷) should be featured at least once. In the completed arrangement, at least 1/3 of the chords should be Barbershop seventh chords (also called dominant sevenths, or major-minor sevenths).

Lyrics: should rhyme, have some interest (such as a story line, or an interesting series of images), and be "believable" (i.e., not trite).

ARRANGEMENT CONSTRUCTION: the basic approach is to "stay out of the way" of the *song*: enhance it, but don't obscure it. The audience should be able to listen to the song, not the arrangement.

Make an overall plan:

- Decide on the basic tempo (ad lib, swing, uptune).
- Define the "blocks" (intro, verses, choruses, repeats, tag), and put them in order.
- Select the key for each block, as determined by melody. The melody is always sung by the Lead, whose effective range lies from a low D to a high F. Note that many (most?) songs are enhanced by a key lift.

Write in all the "easy" (non-creative) things:

- Title, Lyrics by, Music by, Arranged by, publisher/date.
- Key signatures on all systems/scores, time signatures, lyrics.
- Melody line, directly from the sheet music.

Write in the basic harmonization:

- Tenor and lead are written an octave up from where sung; baritone and bass are written where sung.
- Write one chord (all four parts) at a time; be conscious of ease of voice-leading (e.g., the previous and following notes for each part).
- Leave room to write in swipes and echoes later.
- Use the chords from the piano accompaniment, unless:
 1. The harmony does not match the melody note (e.g., the piano chord does not contain the melody note); or,
 2. The harmony doesn't contain enough harmonic movement for forward motion; or,
 3. More-consonant chords can be substituted without overly distorting the "popular" harmony; e.g., Barbershop 7ths in place of diminished or augmented chords.
- It may be useful to first write in the appropriate chords for the "pillars" (held notes, or places where the harmony/root changes), for a block or section, then fill in the other chords.
- Voice part ranges and rules:
 1. Tenor: not below B \flat -below-middle C, not above D-above-high-C.
 2. Lead: not below D-below-middle-C, not above F-above-middle-C.
 3. Baritone: not below C-below-middle-C, not above E-above-middle-C.
 4. Basses: *roots and fifths only*; not below low-F, not above middle-C.

Ranges of the Voice Parts



5. **NOTE:** for arrangements for women's voices, raise each of the above range limits by a fourth (e.g., B \flat to E \flat). The tenor and lead parts are written where sung, the baritone and bass are written an octave lower. Usually, closer voicings (a 10th) rather than spread (13th or two octaves) sound better.
- For major and minor triads, augmented chords, and sixth chords, the bass and one other part should have roots (an octave apart).
 - All other chords should have four different notes.

Write in the embellishments (swipes, echoes, etc.). Use restraint: simple, not complex. Make sure there is "metrical room" for the embellishment, and also for breaths. Embellish each "long" melody note. The lead singer should generally not participate in the embellishment (no extra words or notes), because the melody will then be lost.

Review the completed arrangement. Don't be reluctant to change it, especially for overly-complex embellishments or voice-leading: if *you* can't sing it, then probably no one else can.