

THE BASICS

BARBERSHOP; A Cappella's Martial Art

By Deke Sharon

You're young, you're scrappy. You want to be the best. You started singing in school, like everyone – choir, maybe a couple of musicals. Karaoke with some friends, talent shows. Then some collegiate a cappella.

But you don't want to just be fine. That's not enough. You want to be great. You want technique, you want moves. You need to learn karate ... except contemporary a cappella doesn't have a traditional, refined martial art ... does it?

It does. It's called BARBERSHOP. And if you're a newbie, you're about to get the best schooling, including:

BLEND: There's no blend like a barbershop blend. They don't just match their vowels, they align their diphthongs as they sweep from one vowel to the next. Four voices (meaning men or women) sounding like one. Why does blend matter? Because each vowel has a very specific "fingerprint" – frequencies in the harmonic series – and when the vowels are perfectly aligned, it helps lock down tuning.

TUNING: You think four voices can only create four notes? Guess again. When you lock your voices into perfect tune with the same vowels, you not only create additional notes above yours, you can even create the perception of a bass note below the human vocal range. That's right, that's the vocal equivalent of some kind of dark arts ninja magic. But it works, and it happens every day, along with dynamics.

DYNAMICS: Pop music on the radio has had the life squashed out of it. Learn how to sing quieter than you thought you could, and make a group sound louder than you have before, without microphones. Did I mention that a perfectly aligned chord also reinforces itself, creating a boost in volume? More ninja skills. But we're not done yet, because you'll learn rubato.

RUBATO: In a pop song, the tempo rarely varies. In a barbershop performance, you'll be pushing and pulling time, not unlike an orchestra. But there's no conductor. You learn to feel the rhythm rise and fall; you learn to breathe as a unit as you perfect your phrasing.

PHRASING: When everyone's singing the lyrics, everyone's singing and augmenting the melody as a unit. Like a finely tuned dance troupe, each person's movements are linked to everyone else's, in perfect synchronicity. This requires precision, so you'll learn how to rehearse.

REHEARSE: Barbershop is built on the finest traditions and techniques of classical choral music, so you know you're learning proper vocal technique and centuries of good habits, which will lead to performance.

PERFORMANCE: There's no hiding in the back row in barbershop, and no autopilot. Songs are short, and every measure is a litany of rhythmic changes, rapidly aligning chords, juxtaposed dynamics — all delivered with a larger-than-life performing style that will push you to be present in every moment. But it's not all about performance; it's all about community.

COMMUNITY: When you sing barbershop, you're always only three ladies away from a song, because there's a common repertoire and a perpetual desire to sing. Everyone's on the same team playing the same game, and you always win.

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You might think barbershop is only older people singing old songs, but you're wrong. Sometimes the songs are new, sometimes the people are young, but you know what? There's a lot to be learned from your elders, and if a song has lasted a century, it's still around for a good reason.

I'm not saying you have to learn barbershop to be a great a cappella singer ... but I am promising if you do sing barbershop, you'll be better than if you don't. ■

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