



An Historical View of Barbershop Music and the Sight-Reading Methodology and Learning Practices of Early Championship Barbershop Quartet Singers, 1939-1963

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Abstract

The barbershop quartet has been a part of American music history since the late nineteenth century. Since that time, music sung by the barbershop quartet has been embraced by many as being American music in much the same way as jazz. The Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA) was formed in 1938. That organization has awarded championship status annually to its best quartets.

This paper presents a brief history of the barbershop quartet along with discussion of some major influences upon the style. Results of a survey of surviving members of the first 25 SPEBSQSA championship quartets are then examined.

Of the first 25 championship quartets, all members of the first nine quartets are deceased. Surviving members (N=43) of the remaining 16 championship quartets were surveyed with respect to their musical backgrounds, self-perceptions of music reading ability, and the sight-singing methods employed by these singers both before and long after winning top SPEBSQSA honors. Responses (N=32) indicated that singers viewed their personal music reading abilities as improved by their involvement with barbershop singing, yet approximately fifty percent of the respondents indicated that rote learning of parts (whether in the immediate company of another or via audiotape) was their major learning style. Results were

discussed in terms of a possible influence of tape machine culture and avenues for further research.

Barbershop singing is one of America's oldest musical genres. Yet little research focuses upon its past or its evolution to the present. After an historical review of the roots of barbershop singing, this article examines through survey data the sight-reading methodology and learning practices of the first 25 quartets to successfully earn the coveted gold medal in barbershop competition sponsored by the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

American music making has been known as a conglomerate of musical styles and resultant influences reflecting the makeup of the nation's population. In the infancy of the nation, the obvious influence of the Europeans as well as that of the African slaves made way for music making that was an evolution of the models that came before (Carlson, 1969; Henry, 2000; Hicks, 1988; Malafarina, 1983; Riedler, 1992). Jazz, the American musical, and later, rock and roll became icons of American music. The singing of barbershop

quartet music is one of these distinctly American music genres.

Prior to the proliferation of barbershop singing quartets in 19th Century America, there was a music tradition in the barbers' shops of England (Carlson, 1969; Hicks, 1988; Malafarina, 1983; Riedler, 1992). While this tradition included some singing, it appeared to be more instrumental in nature compared to the latter day vocal barbershop music in America (Carlson, 1969; Henry, 2000). The English barber would often have a viol or other such instrument(s) available for patron use.

Post-revolutionary America displayed independence in many ways, including an American-born style of singing in the barbershop. James Henry (2000) referred to the style characteristics of English barbers' music and that of American barbershop as being dissimilar in both texture and harmonic treatments. While the musical aspects of the British tradition differed from that of the American music making, its social tradition was influential at the very least.

In America, barbershop groups were known as early as 1843 when Dan Emmitt's Virginia Minstrels were popular. Others that followed included the Sable Harmonizers, Ethiopian Serenaders and the Harmoniums. By 1880, professional barbershop quartets were regularly performing in minstrel shows all over North America.

Hicks (1988) referred to the social climate that precipitated the barbershop as a gathering place. The working class had neither the means nor the inclination to be members of a men's club or other such expensive organization. The saloon was a gathering place for those of less culture while the tonsorial salon (barbershop) became the gathering place of the more highly regarded members of the community. According to Hicks (1988), "Someone would start a tune, maybe even the barber himself, and two or three customers might join in, not singing the melody, but vocalizing tones that harmonized with the melody" (p. 2).

Many family troupes started to sing during the 1880s and 1890s (Carlson, 1969). These groups performed many of the songs that have now become barbershop standards such as "Dixie" and "Old Dan Tucker." Hicks (1988) also referred to the black-slave tradition of singing by ear with harmonies that were improvised. A quartet tradition evolved, and the Black singers were known for their skill in vocal dexterity and improvisational techniques. While the Black quartets influenced the barbershop tradition (Henry, 2000), the latter was primarily centered on

both White culture and White participation as it continued to develop.

According to Hicks (1988), the Golden Age of Quartets occurred during the period 1890-1930. The proliferation of sheet music and the parlor piano helped create a singing society within the boundaries of America. Most people sang for entertainment during this time preceding radio and television. Family members often created entertainment for other family members by singing with community members and/or for each other. This period was a time when making music was considered to be as much of the entertainment as was listening to the resultant sounds.

But the sounds of barbershopping, the art of singing barbershop quartet music, were unique. According to Hicks (1988):

Many of the popular songs from 1830 to 1895 were of 'do to do' melodic construction. That is, they tended to begin and end on the low key note (tonic or 'do') of the scale. This kind of song crowds the bass singer off his rightful voice register, forcing him to sing too far down in the tonal cellar. Toward the end of the 19th Century 'sol to sol' songs arrived, opening up room for the bass and top tenor to function (p. 4).

With the melody being predominantly sung by the top voice, tonic based songs were easily arranged for the glee club. Songs centered on the dominant, by contrast, allowed for the melody to be sung by the second tenor or "lead" voice with a harmony part being sung above it by the tenor. Many vocal bluegrass groups employed this voicing.

These unique sounds occasioned both more easily "woodshedded" songs and an explosion of harmony singing ensembles or quartets. This style primarily used a harmonic root movement that, once departed from the tonic, moved downward by the interval of a fifth until the harmony returned to the tonic chord. These progressions were accomplished through the prominent use of dominant seventh chords throughout the harmonization.

The decade of the 1890s brought with it more songs published in America than any decade in prior history (Siebenmorgan, 1983). Sheet music covers included photographs of the artists who first performed or presented the song. Public performance of these new compositions became crucial to having them sell. The song "Sweet Adeline," for example, did not sell particularly well

until the Quaker City Four performed it while in New York in 1903. As a result, the song became one of the all-time barbershop quartet classics. At the same time sheet music was popularized, Thomas Alva Edison invented the "talking machine" (Hicks, 1988). With this invention came the opportunity to reach a wider audience than public performances would allow, and quartets soon became recording artists of new songs. The first vocal group to record was the Manhasset Quartet, who in September 1891, recorded more than one dozen songs. Other earlier recording quartets included the Avon Comedy Four (Imperial Quartet), Peerless Quartet, the Columbia-Stellar Quartet and the Edison Quartet which became world renowned in 1896 as the Haydn Quartet (Carlson, 1969; Siebenmorgan, 1983).

The barbershop quartet flourished during the early twentieth century and was included in nearly every vaudeville show. These early barbershop groups would stand and sing with very little in the way of choreography added to their performances. Then, around 1920, quartets began adding dance steps such as clogging or soft shoe routines. The comedy quartets were another matter with slapstick and pratfalls abounding. These vaudeville acts were the professional offshoots of the homespun community groups sprinkled across the nation.

With the end of the 1920s came the near extinction of the barbershop quartet (Carlson, 1969; Hicks, 1988). Jazz was becoming more popular, along with a move toward using minor seventh chords by popular songwriters. The popularity of both of these trends was a move away from the harmonies found in the barbershop style. In addition, people became more mobile with the widespread use of the automobile, which helped to move people's interests outside of the home. The parlor piano was gradually replaced by the radio, and "crooners" came into vogue with the use of the microphone. By 1938, there were very few professional and amateur quartets left as compared to the 50 years prior (Hicks, 1988). For those who loved the art of barbershop singing, their craft was quickly fading into obscurity.

When two businessmen from Tulsa Oklahoma had a chance meeting at the Muehlbach Hotel in St. Louis, they had no idea they were to become the founders of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA or the Barbershop Society). Owen C. Cash and Rupert Hall talked of how they enjoyed harmonizing. They planned a meeting for fellow songsters in Tulsa. A letter was sent in April,

1938, which yielded 25 attendees. One week later, 70 men attended a second meeting. The fledgling organization erupted as it grew to 500 chapters and 21,771 members after ten years of existence. The fate of the genre was now in the hands of an organization and its membership.

Since the formation of SPEBSQSA, American barbershop music has evolved into a unique art form that boasts an aural tradition as its beginning (Ayling, 2000). This singing style, a product of social and musical phenomena, resulted in an organization dedicated to the singing of barbershop and the preservation of its style.

It is interesting to note that the Barbershop Society followed an already established tradition of competitions sponsored by civic groups and local government agencies in the 1930s (Ayling, 2000). This contest-based approach was incorporated into the newly formed Barbershop Society's events, and, as a result, much of its social and musical events centered on competition. As time went on, the influence of the Barbershop Society's judging system became more prevalent as competitors strove for winning scores. Change or the refinement of desired musical outcomes was beginning to influence an organization that predicated its existence on the preservation of a specific style of singing.

The ramifications of a coexistence of both the preservation of an improvisatory style and contests that yielded greater musical accomplishment were real. The preservationists wanted the style to remain pure or unaffected by written arrangements and thus remain an improvisatory musical style. The more progressive barbershoppers wanted to see the style gain in increased musical performance levels by quartets through written arrangements and the performance influences of trained musicians. Consequently, there was an ever-increasing split in the barbershop community over these issues, a split that remains today.

This study centers on winners of the Barbershop Society's first 25 quartet championship contests, which occurred from 1939 through 1963. Figure 1 pictures three of the early championship groups.

No individuals were named a champion for a second time, thus yielding a population of 100 men. (It is interesting to note that currently, after 65 years of quartet competitions, only 13 champions have earned an additional gold medal while no one has earned more than two.) Currently there are 35 surviving champions from this group of 100 male vocalists. Six quartets have only one remaining



Figure 1. Three Early Championship Quartets: The Barflies (1939), the Flat Foot Four (1940), and the Elastic Four (1942)

survivor and all singers from nine of the 25 quartets studied are deceased. Consequently, it is important and vital to the music community to annotate the historical significance of these men's accomplishments and their impact upon the barbershop style.

METHOD

In an effort to gain an understanding of the self-reported perception of the influences that music education, sight-reading training, and sight-reading methodology had on the first 25 international

champion quartets, a survey/questionnaire was developed and sent to all 42 of the then-surviving quartet members and one longtime replacement member.

The survey's first section included questions on the quartet's inception, names of its members and contact information on the deceased members' surviving family. Additional information was gathered from surviving family members. Anecdotal accounts were also requested for each quartet. Questions then were asked about the group's personal musical backgrounds. Each performer was asked about his music reading ability prior to and after becoming a barbershop singer. Additionally, these champions were asked about their use of different music learning techniques in an effort to better understand how their involvement in barbershop singing may or may not have affected their reading abilities. A second section of the survey asked for repertoire titles and recording information so as to chronicle both the literature and performance style used by these groups. The third section, "Deceased Quartet Questionnaire," included many of the same questions that appeared in section one. This section was centered on information about the six quartets whose members had all died prior to the questionnaire being mailed. By having this information supplied by the surviving quartet members of the first 25 years of the Barbershop Society, contemporaries of the deceased men imparted some first-hand knowledge about these groups.

RESULTS

Questionnaires developed for the study yielded new information on the history of the barbershop quartet. Of the 43 questionnaires that were sent out to the surviving members of these championship groups, 32 of them were returned at a response rate of 74.4%. Of these, 16 quartets or 84.2% of the available quartets (member or members living) were represented. Those 16 quartets represented the most recent champions from 1948 through 1963. Parts One and Two of the questionnaire yielded higher response rates as the information sought was specific to the respondent. The Deceased Questionnaire yielded lower rates of response from the living members asked to complete it. This lower response rate appeared to be a result of a lack of familiarity with the deceased quartet members. It was likely due also, in part, to the majority of the deceased quartet members being the earliest champions of the Barbershop Society. In other

words, this singing society was new in the late 1930s and early 1940s and familiarity with its first champions was a result of membership only. In the earlier days of the Barbershop Society, the membership and geography covered by the organization was small. As it grew, so did the familiarity and fame of its champions from both outside and from within. Many of the respondents were not members of the Barbershop Society while these deceased quartets were actively performing.

From the 32 quartet men who returned the questionnaire, only five of them returned information on the deceased champions (15.6%) even though the return rate for Part One was at 100% and Part Two at 65.6%. These return rates were calculated according to returned questionnaires that provided additional information to the study. In other words, each blank questionnaire was treated as a non-response. In the discussion that follows, percentages will be based on the total number of respondents (N=32).

Questions regarding the musical background of the quartet members were answered with varied results. All respondents answered the question as to his own musical background, with 81.2% providing information about the background of their deceased members. Even so, the respondents did not comment on every one of their departed singers. It would appear that many of these older quartet men did not inquire into the past of their fellow quartet members nor had many of the deceased singers shared their previous musical training.

It is interesting to look at the data gleaned from questions on whether the respondent could read music prior to joining his quartet and the perceived effect singing in his quartet had upon the improvement of those skills. When asked about their music reading ability, 73.3% said they could already read music upon joining their quartet. The singers who responded negatively to that question were split with half of them learning to read after joining their quartet and the other half remaining as non-readers. The question, "Has your association with barbershopping improved your music reading ability?" brought new information to light as 96.5% of those who responded to the question (n=29) felt that their personal ability to read music improved as a result of their involvement with barbershop singing.

Six questions focused on the methods used by these champions in music reading. Each question, by way of a five point Likert scale from 1 representing "always" through 5 representing "never," asked the respondent how he used a specific method of reading at the time of his winning the championship as well as at the time of his response. The response rate was 93.7% (n=30) for these questions. By using the sum of two points of the scale representing "Always" and "Mostly" (1 & 2), the learning styles reported by these respondents were compared between when they won the championship and at the time of their response.

As indicated in Figure 2, rote learning and singing by ear were the predominant methods used at the time of these champions winning the gold medal.

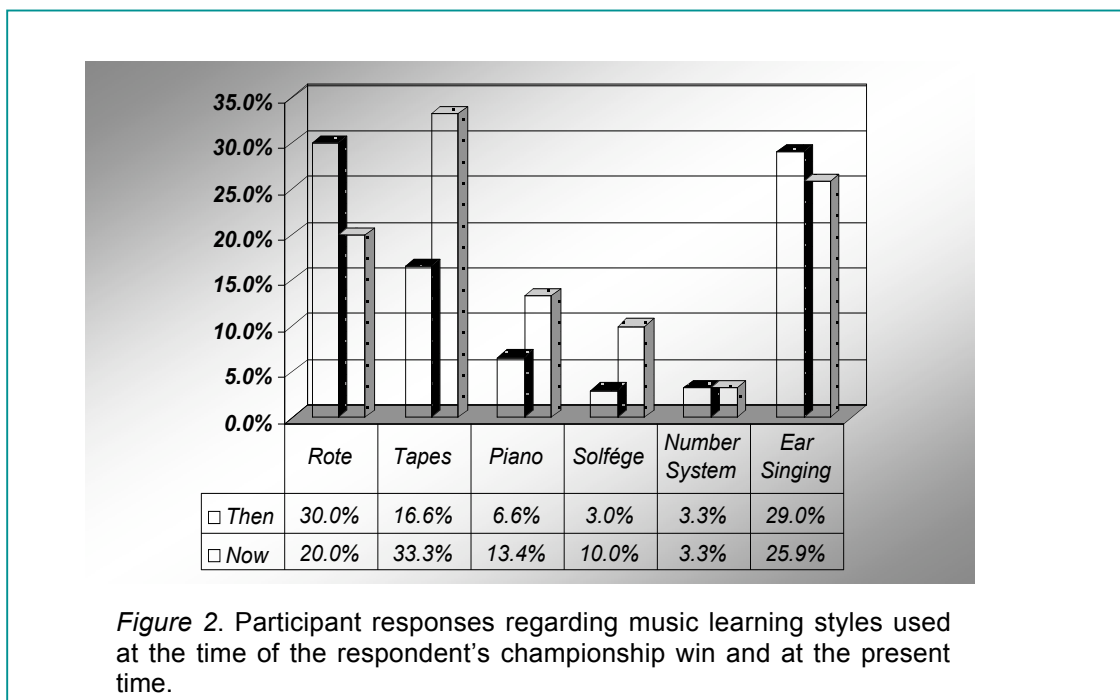


Figure 2. Participant responses regarding music learning styles used at the time of the respondent's championship win and at the present time.

This trend changed for these men as the poll for today's methodology favors the use of learning tapes followed by ear singing. This shift in preferred learning method brings to question the role and importance of the tape recorder in how people learn their vocal parts for ensemble singing and how it may have affected the reading abilities of the "tape machine culture." Further study on this topic may yield a better understanding of the effects of the tape machine on an otherwise ear and rote oriented vocal culture.

In questions relating to the performance practices of these quartets, it is interesting to note that the majority of these groups used barbershop arrangers. According to those surveyed, 87.5 % of the quartets from 1948-1963 used written arrangements. Although there were no living respondents from the earlier quartets, researched accounts suggest that these groups arranged much of their performance pieces by ear. The 1942 champions, the Elastic Four, were the first real exceptions to this trend as quartet member, Frank Thorne, arranged all of their performance pieces from the quartet's inception.

Nearly 84% of these championship singers received coaching prior to winning the gold medal. After their win, the amount of coaching declined to 45%. Without further study, one can only surmise why this change in coaching occurred. This change may be a good topic for further inquiry.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The quartet singers studied knew more of their own musical backgrounds than that of their fellow ensemble members. The singers viewed their personal music reading abilities as improved as a result of their involvement with barbershop singing. At the time of their winning the SPEBSQSA championship these quartet members' reported learning styles were primarily by rote followed by "woodshedding" (singing by ear). Later, the reported trend changed to a preference of using audio taped models for learning their parts, with woodshedding remaining the second preferred mode of part learning.

It is clear that the champion barbershop quartet singer viewed his own reading ability as improved over the time spent singing barbershop music. Whether there is a relationship between the two can be only a matter for speculation without further

research. Research into the possible effects that singing barbershop harmony may have upon an individual's sight-singing ability could yield valuable new information.

A related research topic would be to investigate the actual sight-singing ability of surviving and current barbershop quartet champions rather than rely upon their self-perceptions. A quantitative study to measure true sight-singing ability of participants could yield interesting data not yet available. Concurrently, the ability of participants to discern both melodic and harmonic pitch should be investigated both with and without the presence of involvement in a championship barbershop quartet. Further research is needed to explore the possible effects that singing in this idiom may have upon one's ability to hear minute pitch variances. Moreover, a singer's ability to adjust in vocal performance while tuning harmonically to variances in surrounding harmonies can be explored.

In 1946-47, the introduction and proliferation of the tape machine in America changed or was a medium for change in the learning styles of the champions studied. Both the tape machine and piano were cited as being used at twice the frequency as a learning medium today than at the time of winning the championship. No distinction was made between a piano and electronic keyboard. It would appear that this use of the tape machine and piano grew out of both the availability of the tape recorder and keyboard and of their increased affordability through changing technology.

The Barbershop Society and its champions appeared to be influenced by social and cultural stimuli. According to Henry (2000), the organization itself was a product of White America while many of the musical influences were of African-American origin. Questionnaire queries about the musical or personal backgrounds of fellow quartet members revealed that this type of information was relatively unknown. It appeared that the solicitation of such personal information by fellow quartet members may have been considered intrusive or impolite in those days. The scope of the organization was small in its infancy in both geography and social influence. As the Barbershop Society grew, so did its influence upon the genre.

Historically speaking, the Barbershop Society has undergone many changes in its 66 years. The effect the judging system had upon the performance outcomes appears to be strong (Hicks, 1988). Quartets consistently prepared for competition using

the guidelines that the judging system handed down. Sometimes these guidelines were but suggestions based on seeing what performance practices were rewarded from year to year. Others were published guidelines that were circulated and adhered to.

What constituted barbershop harmony has changed greatly over these years. The effects of change or adaptation of accepted norms to and by the Barbershop Society's judges would be an excellent basis for further study of these influences upon the barbershop singing genre.

The Association of International Champions (AIC) is an organization comprised of champion quartet singers from the Barbershop Society and affiliate members who have served as long term replacement members within champion quartets. The AIC is doing excellent work in preserving the history of its quartets by producing a series of vintage champion quartet performances on digital media as well as by maintaining a comprehensive web site.

The Barbershop Society itself maintains the Heritage Hall Museum and the Old Songs Library. In researching this topic along with the history of the 25 champion quartets of the Barbershop Society, thousands of personal papers, interview transcripts, recordings and related archives supplied primary sources. While many were germane to this paper, others provided credibility to the sources quoted. Additionally, more than half of the participants were interviewed in an effort to glean as much information as possible while these primary sources were still available. Both the Heritage Hall Museum and the Old Songs Library are available resources for would-be researchers of recorded and physical artifacts pertaining to the study of the American barbershop singing genre.

The opportunity to research the International Champions of the post 1963 Barbershop Society is relatively high as the number of deceased members over this 40-year span of time is only seven. With primary sources readily available, these resources need to be tapped soon or we will lose the insight of these superior performers. The barbershop genre has been a work in progress not unlike any other type of music. It is imperative that we learn from those who are the icons of performance practice while their knowledge is available to be documented.

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