



# Voice Parts in Barbershop Singing

There are certain things you may want to know depending on the part you will be singing. Most singers are familiar with the SATB or SSAA chorus music, where the melody is usually in the First Soprano line, above all others. The voice parts in barbershop harmony for women have different names and functions than they do in other SATB or SSAA vocal styles. The **LEAD** voice generally sings the melody and is below the **TENOR** harmony; the **TENOR** part sings the highest note in the chord; the **BARITONE** part fills in the all-important missing note in a chord that may be above and below the melody; the **BASS** part supplies the harmonic foundation (root or fifth) of the chord. Similar to choral music, minimal vibrato should be apparent in barbershop singing. Wide and obvious vibratos tend to hamper the “lock and ring” that we look for in our chords.

- **Tenor** is a harmony part sung consistently above the lead. The tenor should have a light, sweet pure tone that will complement but not overpower or overshadow the lead voice. Light lyric sopranos generally make good tenors.
- **Lead** is the melody and must be sung with authority, clarity and consistent quality throughout the lead's range. The lead sings with limited vibrato to add color and warmth to the sound. With too much use of vibrato, the chord will not “lock” or “ring” or produce the unique, full and “expanded” sound that is characteristic of barbershop harmony. The lead is responsible for conveying the interpretation, emotion and inflections of the song.
- **Baritone** covers approximately the same range as lead. The voice part is similar to the equivalent of an Alto I except that baritone harmony notes cross the lead notes. Primarily sung below the lead but sometimes sung above, depending on where the melody is situated, baritones must constantly adjust their balance to accommodate their position in the chord. They must have a good ear.
- **Bass** is the lowest note in the barbershop chord. Singers should have a rich, mellow voice and generally sing the root and fifth of each chord. The bass sings a relatively straight, well-produced tone with a minimum of vibrato. The range is comparable to that of a contralto or Alto II in traditional choral music. Similar to the baritone, this part is written in the bass clef an octave lower than it is actually sung. A bass sings with a heavier tone quality than the others and generally with more volume, to fill out the “cone.” The bass part provides the foundation of each chord.

## BARBERSHOP BALANCE

Proper barbershop balance requires all parts and harmonies to play together. The lead and baritone voices switch places in the diagram to remind us they need to adjust their tone based on where they are in the chord. The tenor and bass voice need to find a balance while still keeping their voices free and flexible. Basses should avoid trying to be the loudest, and instead focus on creating a rich, full sound without straining. Even though tenors are at the top of the volcano, they are not the “quietest” voice. They still need to sing with strength and clear tone, while paying attention to how loudly or softly they should sing.

