

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 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 you're about to get the best schooling a young'un can, 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 guys sounding like one guy. 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: You think four voices can only create four notes? Guess again. When you lock your voices into perfect tune with the same vowels you cannot 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: 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 that's louder than you have, 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: When you sing Barbershop, you're always only three guys (or gals) 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. You might think Barbershop is only old guys singing old

songs, but you're wrong. Sometimes the songs are new, sometimes the guys (and girls) 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 you if you do sing Barbershop, you'll be better than if you don't.

**Deke Sharon founded CASA (and other stuff), makes TV shows ("The Sing-Off"), movies ("Pitch Perfect"), sings (The House Jacks), produces albums (Straight No Chaser, Street Corner Symphony, Committed, Nota, Bubs), wrote a book (A Cappella Arranging), publishes sheet music (Hal Leonard), and custom arranges music (over 2,000 songs). You can find him at:
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