

TIPS ON WOODSHEDDING THE HARMONY PARTS

25 July 1996 (third revision 2 June 2005)

Authentic Woodshedding is defined as a Bass, Bari, and Tenor “discovering harmonies by ear” around a Lead’s sung melody without reference to a familiar or written Barbershop arrangement.

Barbershoppers have asked: Is woodshedding an art one has to be born with, or can it be learned?

As with most other skills, effective woodshedding is — and can indeed be — learned. A basic ability to feel Circle-of-Fifths (Barbershop) chord-progressions is necessary. Barbershoppers can gain this sense in several ways. Folks with jazz or piano backgrounds have a beginning advantage, as should anyone with a year or two of college-level Music Theory. Barbershoppers who have sung more than one voice part in their chorus or in quartets also have an initial leg up.

Barbershoppers who don’t read music, or whose first or only musical experience began when they entered Barbershopping, can also learn to woodshed. A basic understanding of scales and intervals (the space between one note and the next) is helpful. AHSOW strongly recommends that prospective woodshedders invest in the voice-part-predominant Barberpole Cat tapes produced by SPEBSQSA. The Barberpole Cat songs are especially strong and pure Barbershop. Listening to them intently and repeatedly will impart a strong sense of the *patterns* typical of each of the Barbershop voice-parts.

The very first thing to remember: Woodshedding is different from any other kind of singing that Barbershoppers do. In authentic woodshedding, there are **no wrong notes** — only “good,” “better,” and “best” notes. A “good” note is anything that comes out of your mouth, which means that you’re trying woodshedding, which is good. A “better” note conceivably belongs in the chord at hand, yet someone else may have more reasonable claim to it. A “best” note causes all four of you to smile at one another because you like the chord you’ve rung, and you can go on to the next chord.

Here are some realizations and hints about what the various harmony voices do:

*** BASS ***

>> The Barbershop **Bass** part is not always as low as someone new to the part might be tempted to sing it. (Barbershop is “close harmony.”) When the melody is on a lower note, the **Bass** usually has dibs on the highest sensible note that’s under the melody and is also still the lowest note in the chord.

>>The **Bass** can do the most for any chord, and for the Tenor and Bari, when he can sense when to sing a root or fifth (a “strong-feeling” note) of a chord and adjust to sing whichever one of those that the Lead *isn’t* singing, when the Lead is on one or the other. When singing a Barbershop-7th chord, the **Bass** is entitled to the highest possible Bass note that will not create an incomplete chord and which will not lock the Bari out of a note that the Bari should be singing. When the **Bass** sings a “strong note” (root or fifth) and is not doubling the Lead, the Bari will usually have a reasonable note left to sing.

>>The **Bass** often jumps the farthest of all the parts. Depending on what the melody does, the Bass will be obliged to move in intervals as small as a half- or whole-step (either up or down). He may also sing intervals as large as 4, 4.5, or 5 steps (either up or down) or by 6 or 7 steps (usually up).

>>In a “triad” chord (where only three of the four notes have different names), the **Bass** and one other part will be singing the fourth note (with the same name), an octave apart. Examples: In a “triad” chord with the notes B^b - F - B^b - D, the **Bass** will have the lower B^b and the Bari or Lead will have the higher one. In a “triad” chord with the notes E^b - G - B^b - E^b, the **Bass** and Tenor will sing the respective E^b notes.

*** TENOR ***

>>The Barbershop **Tenor** part is not always as high as one might be tempted to sing it. (Barbershop is “close harmony.”) When the melody is riding high, the **Tenor** generally has dibs on the lowest note above the melody that makes sense. The **Tenor** may sing a note below the melody, but this is very infrequent.

>>The **Tenor** rarely has to make *large* jumps from one note to the next.

>>Very generally speaking, the **Tenor** will usually have success when harmonizing in thirds above the melody. (If only one other singer were harmonizing along with a melody, this would be what would naturally happen.) The **Tenor** will generally be singing mainly thirds and sevenths of chords — and whichever of these the Bari is not singing, in most such cases.

*** BARITONE ***

>>The **Bari**, known in the early days of woodshedding as “fill-in,” will sing either below or above the melody.

>>Many beginning **Bari** woodsheddors tend to sing too high, or almost always above the melody. This obliges the Tenor to shoot for a note considerably higher than the note that the Tenor might naturally opt to sing. The **Bari** should be unafraid to sing below the melody as well as above it.

>>The **Bari** rarely has to make *large* jumps from one note to the next.

>>The **Bari** should seek an internal note in the chord that avoids doubling the melody-note and avoids doubling the Tenor note an octave down. The **Bari** should listen to the direction of the melody-line — if the melody is going upward, and especially if it *skips* upward, the Bari is likely going to go *down*, and vice-versa. When the Bass moves up, the **Bari** is likely to be pushed up.

>>When otherwise in doubt, the **Bari**'s salvation can be to sing the seventh of a chord.

*** LEAD (MELODY-SINGER) ***

>>When singing woodshed melodies, the **Melody-Singer** must apply a special set of skills beyond the skills required to sing “performance Lead.” See *Woodshedding “Lead” — Is This Possible?* (attached or available).

>>The savvy Woodshed **Lead** will *always* choose melodies to which written or familiar Barbershop arrangements do *not* commonly exist. This lessens the risk of replicating existing repertoire, and it enhances the experience and value of authentic woodshedding.

*** ALL ***

>>The gung-ho woodshedder (or anyone who wants more chances to sing with a wider range of harmonizers) will seek out and learn as many ear-harmonizable melodies and lyrics as possible. See *Woodshedding “Lead” — Is This Possible?* (attached or available).

>>The first rule of woodshedding is to **listen, listen, listen**. The second rule is to stay on the note you're on until your ear strongly suggests that you must move to another. Relax, **listen**, and move when required — either when you sense that the chord must change (has changed) from the one you were on, or when someone else is taking your most recent note, or when you sense otherwise that the chord being sung is somehow incomplete, or not fulfilling or “ringing.” Resist the temptation to “get fancy” for its own sake, and avoid unduly second-guessing yourself. Trust your ear!

>>Every woodshedder should be able to sing melodies when called upon. Pitch them where the singing is comfortable. Depending on the vocal ranges in your woodshed quartet, melodies “written” in B^b might be sung in any key from A^b (or even G) up to C.

>>Woodsheddors should be able to feel and create these basic chords, which make up the lion's share of the chords employed during woodshedding. Avoid sweating the chord names or types; inform your ear and brain about them once, then trust your ear to handle everything afterwards.

1. Major Triad: “My *wild* I-rish *rose*” (as in the Barberpole Cat version)
2. Barbershop 7th: “*My wild I-rish ro-ose*”
3. Diminished 7th: “The swee-test flow'r that gro-*o*-ows; *you may*”
4. Minor Triad: “Shine *on* me, in the ee-vning” (= the second time through).

>>Read *Woodshedding “Lead” — Is This Possible?* for additional important information about the art of woodshedding. See www.ahsow.org for more about AHSOW.