

Barbershop Quartets

Barbershop music is usually performed by a group of four singers, or a quartet, without instruments. A typical barbershop quartet features one low voice and three higher ones. Each voice sings a different part. A high voice performs the song's melody while the others provide accompaniment. The singers aim to blend their voices together to create ringing harmonies.

The music gets its name from a location where this type of group singing was commonly heard, particularly in African-American communities: the barbershop. Since at least the nineteenth century, barbershops have served as community gathering places where people not only can get haircuts, but also meet for conversation and entertainment. Before radios were common, people created music in places like barbershops by singing it themselves. Customers waiting their turn in the barber's chair would sing popular, gospel, and folk songs together.



A barbershop quartet in 1909

Barbershop singing was popular in America between 1890 and 1930. It made its way from barbershops and street corners to music shops and theaters: both white and black groups, usually all male, sold records and traveled the country. In the 1930s, the popularity of barbershop quartets went into decline. There are, however, still some groups today who have kept this style of singing alive into the 21st century.

In the video:

You will hear two musical clips featuring barbershop quartets from the early 20th century.

1. The Columbia Quartet performing the song "(You're the Flower of My Heart) Sweet Adeline." This is a famous barbershop song that was written in 1904.
2. Polk Miller's Old South Quartette performing "Jerusalem Mornin'," a gospel song, in 1910.