

Position Paper - Frequency of the Barbershop 7th

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One of the defining hallmarks of the barbershop style is the barbershop 7th chord (major-minor 7th (1-3-5-^b 7)). The previous ARR category description stated that arrangements should have a minimum of 33% barbershop 7th chords by duration (at first it was 35% and later lowered to 33%). The MUS category description continued this legacy requirement. The percentage was derived by taking arrangements that were considered solid barbershop and counting the frequency of 7th chords to the total number of beats.

The MUS category accepts a wider spectrum of songs for competition arranged in the barbershop style than the ARR category did. Most of them still do meet this criterion. However, there are a number of songs that fall short of this requirement, even though the songs are clearly and solidly barbershop. Barbershop singers and audiences accept them as barbershop, as do most of the judges. As a result, this criterion is no longer appropriate to assess stylistic suitability.

The MUS judge listens to the musicality of the performance through the filter of the barbershop style. The MUS judge addresses performance issues that are caused by elements of the arrangement that may be stylistically weak. Through this, the intent of featuring the hallmark of the barbershop 7th chord is maintained without a need to quantify the actual count.

At the heart of the barbershop 7th chord is the tri-tone interval (augmented 4th). In a barbershop 7th chord, the tri-tone is the interval between the 3rd and flatted 7th (^b7). We find this relationship not only in the barbershop 7th chord but also in the traditional dominant 9th chords used in barbershop (1-^b 7-2-3, 5-^b 7-2-3 of scale tones). The role of the tri-tone is critical in barbershop, as the energy of the tri-tone dissonance creates musical tension that seeks resolution. As a result, these songs will have a high frequency of barbershop 7th chords and provide the characteristic sound of barbershop.

Arrangements that have fewer barbershop 7th chords could result in several performance deficiencies. Arrangements that feature more minor triads and minor 7th chords could exhibit a lower consonance level. Quartets/choruses that do not possess high levels of tuning will have more problems and the score will likely be lower than an arrangement with a higher 7th count. Arrangements that do not have high circle of fifths motion will have less built-in tension. Quartets/choruses will have to work harder in order to overcome this weakness in the music. Delivery and thematic development will likely be lower, affecting both MUS and PRS. From an audience perspective, arrangements that are low in 7th chord count may not be as appealing as songs that are higher in 7th chord count.

As the MUS judge listens to a song/arrangement that is low in barbershop 7th chords, he will make a decision as to whether the arrangement is still characteristic of the barbershop style. Does it still create musical tension? Does it still provide opportunities for lock and ring? If so, then it is acceptable. Arrangements that do not provide for these attributes will likely result in a lower MUS score, and the MUS judge will identify the weakness of a low barbershop 7th chord count as part of the reason.