How to be a great barbershop baritone

How to be a great baritone starts with how to be a better baritone. Application of the below principles can enhance your enjoyment of the hobby and will make barbershop harmony more enjoyable for those with whom you sing. These tips are directed to the quartet baritone, but most of them apply to chorus work, too.

At-home preparation

The best thing you can do is to strive to consistently create a beautiful tone that is freely produced and well supported. You must be more aware of what’s going on as the quartet sings and grow your ability to have your voice behave as you’d like. Most of your effort needs to be spent at home in preparation. Once that becomes habit, you can do some very enjoyable work at quartet rehearsal.

Learn some music theory. Your awareness will grow tremendously when you study your music. Learn what part of each chord you’re singing. This helps with tuning, but mainly teaches you how to balance each chord so it’ll ring. The Society’s Theory of Barbershop Harmony publication (Harmony Marketplace, item #4037) is a good beginning. The Harmony University music theory courses are also available for free at www.barbershop.org under the education tab.

Learn and apply these rules of thumb. Sing a bit louder the lower you sing and a bit quieter the higher you sing. Even better, sing more like a bass the lower you sing, more like a lead in the mid range, and more like a tenor in your upper range. Note the “pillar” chords, or the held chords. Are you high or low in your range? Adjust accordingly. Are you singing the root or 5th of the chord? Then sing slightly more bass-like. Are you singing the 3rd or 7th or another less foundational note? Sing slightly more tenor-like.

Sing a bit every day. Only then will your voice behave as you’d like. Vocalize throughout your range in a free and relaxed way. This can be as simple as singing scales, but be sure to stay loose. On the lower third of your range, relax and produce a ringing, bass-like tone without any pushing or tension. In the middle third, focus on making a lead-like sound that rings and is still warm and pretty. Most of us struggle with our upper range, which needs the most relaxation as you produce a pleasing, tenor-like tone. Again, sing quieter as you go higher. That bell-like tenor sound is ideal.

Fine tune vocal color and volume. Here’s a useful exercise: starting on C in your middle range, sing six beats on a count of 12, getting slightly louder on each beat. On the last six beats get slightly quieter until on 12 you’re back where you started. Then do the reverse: get quieter for six and then getting louder for six. Repeat at half steps up or down as needed. Next, try more advanced versions where you become steadily more bass-like or more tenor-like for those first six beats. Notice the repeated use of “slightly.” Never sing to any extreme that introduces tension or strain. Sing as loud or soft (or as bass- or tenor-like) as you can while keeping your tone relaxed and pretty.

Making the most of rehearsal

Now comes the really fun stuff! A quartet bar’s main role is to weave the threads of three different duets into the fabric of the quartet’s unit sound. Bar is barbershop harmony’s most unique voice part. At any moment in the song, you should be ready to duet with your bass, lead or tenor. At rehearsal, take the time to duet each song with each part.

Bass duet. Become aware of how your proximity to his notes changes throughout the song. As you approach his notes, try to have your voice sound as much like his as it can while singing relaxed and in good quality. (That tip alone goes a long way.) Also, as your notes approach the bass notes, try to match his volume, which usually means becoming a bit louder. Be aware of when you’re singing a root/5th relationship or an octave with your bass so that your great match on these chords really pops the overtones.

Fine tune your pitch. Your awareness will grow as you recognize the melody. Those who match measure 4 in proper key will be considered for section leader.

Your Music Team At Work
Lead duet. In these duets, you need to know when your notes are pretty close to his, when you're quite a bit below him, and when he's low and you're high. The closer you are to the lead, the more you need to sound like his twin. When just slightly above him, take a little of the edge off so he doesn't have to fight to be easily heard. When right below him, volume is less of a worry because the higher note is more easily heard; but still be sure to not out-sing him. When quite a bit below him, you're probably better off focusing on the bass duet. When he's low and you're high, you'll be keying in to the tenor. (Incidentally, the main reason any voice part duets with the lead is to sound more like his voice, to try to treat each word sound the same way he does, and to be exactly in synch with his timing. Duets help each part support the lead's artistic approach.)

Tenor duet. Many fear this duet because so many tenor notes seem to clash with the baritone notes. If you strive to make this duet the most beautiful, your quartet will sound wonderful. Again, be aware of when your notes approach his. When you're up near the tenor and the lead is down near the bass, try to sound like your tenor. In the trademark Barbershop 7th Chord, the tenor has the root of the chord, the baritone (or lead) is one note below him on the 7th, the lead (or baritone) is quite a bit lower on the 3rd, and the bass is down low on the 5th. The singers of the root and 7th need to sound like twins and be equal in volume. Generally, the baritone singing near the tenor wants to match his tone and volume.

Mark your music. Use highlighters of three different colors to mark where you should focus on the bass, lead or tenor duets. If it's not clear which guy to stick with, go with the lead.

Be sure the lead is always heard. Sometimes, everyone is low and the lead is below you. Here you just need to make sure that the lead is easily heard. Sometimes everyone is up high and the temptation is to sing really loud. You don't need to. Just sing as relaxed and pretty as you can.

Summary
You'll tend to sound more like a tenor in your upper range, like a lead in your mid range, and a bass in your lower range. At rehearsal, you can fine-tune this to sound like your tenor, lead and bass. If you also know what part of the chord you're singing, you can give a little extra to the root any time and strengthen the 5th of the chord, especially when singing below the lead. When weaving these duets through the song becomes second nature, you'll be able to focus on performing artistically from the heart. Then you'll truly be on the path to becoming a great baritone.