

MY BARBERSHOP HARMONY JOURNEY:

HOW THE HOBBY TRANSFORMED MY LIFE

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Introduction to My Barbershop Journey

My journey into the world of barbershop harmony was an unforeseen one that commenced in the structured corridors of classical music at the University of Saskatchewan. As a piano performance student, I dedicated countless hours to mastering the complexities of classical compositions. This rigorous training honed my technical proficiency and instilled in me a deep appreciation for the great composers. Despite the rich heritage of this musical form, I often felt a yearning for a different kind of musical expression. The disciplined and solitary nature of my piano studies left a space within me – an unexplored realm of music that yearned for a more communal and expressive outlet.

The transition from the solitary piano bench to the vibrant world of choral music marked the first major shift in my musical journey. Joining the University and Community Chorus opened my eyes to the power and beauty of collective singing. This ensemble was more than just a group of voices; it was a fusion of individual talents creating a harmonious whole that was greater than its parts. It was here that I first began to understand the intricacies of vocal music, from the fundamentals of sight singing to the subtle art of blending voices. My involvement in the chorus was a revelation, offering a glimpse into the transformative power of shared musical experiences.

My increasing involvement in the university's music scene led to an unexpected but gratifying development – being elected as the President of the University Music Students Association. This role was a significant responsibility, entrusting me with the task of representing my fellow music students and contributing to the enrichment of our collective musical experiences. It also provided a platform for me to foster a stronger sense of community among musicians. During this time, I met and interacted with a diverse group of music enthusiasts, including those who shared a passion for a lesser-known genre that would soon captivate my interest – barbershop music.

The pivotal moment that steered my musical path toward barbershop harmony occurred in an unexpected setting – a choir concert after-party. It was here, amidst the relaxed camaraderie of fellow musicians, that I was introduced to the captivating world of barbershop music. The experience of singing barbershop tags – the climactic, harmonically rich endings of songs – was a revelation. The rich chords, the precise tuning, and the thrill of achieving perfect harmony with others sparked a new passion within me. This style of music, with its emphasis on close harmony and emotional expression, offered a refreshing contrast to my classical training.

This newfound interest in barbershop music rapidly grew into a deep passion. As I delved further into this genre, engaging with fellow choir members who were seasoned barbershop singers, I began to appreciate the intricacies and challenges of this unique form of harmony. The transition from a classical musician to a barbershop enthusiast was not just a change in musical style; it was the adoption of a new musical identity. Barbershop music, with its focus on emotional connection, storytelling, and teamwork, resonated with my desire for a more expressive and communal form of music-making. It marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life, one where I would explore the depths of harmony and camaraderie in the vibrant world of barbershop singing.

Deepening My Musical Pursuits

My time at the University of Saskatchewan was marked not only by musical growth but also by an expanding role in the musical community. As the President of the University Music Students Association, I was thrust into a leadership role where I orchestrated events, advocated for student interests, and nurtured a sense of camaraderie among peers. This experience sharpened my organizational skills and deepened my appreciation for the collaborative nature of music, laying the groundwork for my future endeavors in barbershop music.

Joining The Greystone Singers, an esteemed choir group, marked a significant advancement in my vocal journey. This ensemble exposed me to a broad spectrum of musical styles and offered me the opportunity to perform with talented individuals who shared a passion for music. The European tour with The Greystone Singers was particularly instrumental in my growth, allowing me to bond with fellow musicians and explore the intricacies of vocal harmony in a new setting.

The European tour was a defining moment in my barbershop journey. It was here, amidst historic settings and shared musical experiences, that I further engaged in singing barbershop tags with the quartet members from the choir. My enthusiasm for barbershop harmony during these sessions caught the attention of the quartet members. This experience solidified my interest in barbershop music and showcased my potential to be a part of a barbershop quartet.

Following the tour, a vacancy arose in the Sharp Flats quartet, and I was invited to join as the tenor. This transition marked the beginning of a significant chapter in my musical life. My involvement with the Sharp Flats was not just about singing in harmony; it was a foray into the competitive world of barbershop music. Our participation in a barbershop contest was a thrilling experience that challenged us to hone our skills and blend our voices to create a harmonious and compelling performance. This contest, our first as a quartet, was a testament to our hard work and dedication, culminating in us winning the novice quartet award.

With my active participation in the Sharp Flats, barbershop harmony became a central focus of my musical life. This genre, which had begun as a newfound interest, evolved into a profound passion. The unique aspect of barbershop music, with its emphasis on close harmony and teamwork, resonated with me deeply. It marked a new phase in my musical journey, where I would explore the depth and breadth of barbershop music, influencing not only my performance but also my approach to music education and community involvement.

Embracing Challenges and Finding My Path

As I stepped into the world of substitute teaching after completing my music education degrees, I found myself at a crossroads. The structured environment of university was replaced by the unpredictable and dynamic world of different schools and classrooms. This period was marked by adaptation and exploration, as I navigated through various educational settings, teaching and interacting with a diverse group of students. However, it was during these substitute teaching days that barbershop music

unexpectedly resurfaced in my life, offering a new avenue to connect with students, particularly in high school choirs.

My introduction of barbershop tags to the high school choirs was met with unexpected enthusiasm. These brief sessions of harmony and chord-ringing became something the students eagerly anticipated. Witnessing their excitement and engagement with barbershop harmony sparked a realization in me – there was a latent potential for this musical form in educational settings, a potential that was largely untapped. This realization was further reinforced when a student inquired about a dedicated group for barbershop singing. The seed of an idea was planted – what if I could start a youth barbershop chorus?

The idea soon turned into a reality. I founded the Saskatoon Youth Barbershop Chorus, a venture that was both exhilarating and daunting. Starting a chorus from scratch, especially in a genre relatively unknown to my community, posed numerous challenges. Recruitment and retention were initially difficult, as barbershop singing was a novel concept for many students. However, my passion for this art form and the belief in its value for youth education drove me forward. The chorus was not just about teaching music; it was about building a community, fostering teamwork, and nurturing a love for harmonious singing among young individuals.

Stepping onto the National Stage

The journey with the Saskatoon Youth Barbershop Chorus marked the beginning of an exciting narrative in the world of barbershop music. When Dave Pearce from Regina reached out with the idea of combining our efforts, it led to the creation of the Prairie Chords. This unified youth barbershop chorus brought together young singers from across Saskatchewan. As their director, I was tasked with melding diverse talents into a cohesive unit. This role tested and honed my abilities, not just in musical direction but in leadership and mentorship, fostering a sense of unity and purpose among the group.

Our debut at the Midwinter Convention in Costa Mesa was just the beginning. The subsequent years saw us take the stage at two more Midwinter Conventions - in 2019 at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee, and in 2020 at the Florida Theatre in Jacksonville, Florida. Each performance was a milestone, reflecting our growth and the expanding scope of our musical journey. These conventions were not only performance opportunities but invaluable learning experiences, exposing us to the larger barbershop community and its rich tapestry of talent and tradition.

Throughout this journey, the unwavering support from the Land O' Lakes District and the Sing Canada Harmony Foundation was pivotal. Their belief in our potential and the financial backing they provided played a critical role in nurturing the talents of these young singers. It was this support that facilitated the transformation of the Saskatoon Youth Barbershop Chorus into Acoustic Theory, a more inclusive and diverse ensemble. This transition was a reflection of the evolving spirit of barbershop – where harmony transcends boundaries and unites voices in a rich tapestry of sound. I am deeply grateful for their support, which has been instrumental in bringing these enriching experiences to the youth and allowing me to lead them onto prestigious national stages.

A Journey of Learning and Growth

In 2018, my journey took a transformative turn with my attendance at Harmony University in Nashville. This gathering was a convergence of the barbershop community's most passionate and skilled individuals, offering an unparalleled opportunity for learning and growth. The array of workshops and classes, led by esteemed professionals, provided not just technical skills but also a deeper appreciation for the art of barbershop harmony. It was here that I realized the true potential of barbershop music as a tool for education and community building. The week-long immersion in this environment reshaped my approach to music, teaching me the importance of blending vocal precision with emotional expression and community connection.

In 2019, my dedication to promoting barbershop music in youth education was recognized with the prestigious Canadian Music Educators' Association's Young Builders Award. This award was a milestone, marking my contributions to the field of music education. It was a moment that underscored the importance of my work and reinforced my belief in the value of barbershop music as an educational tool. This accolade not only honored my past efforts but also fueled my future endeavors, reminding me of the impact that passionate teaching and innovative musical approaches can have on young minds.

Taking on the role of chair of the Youth In Harmony Committee of the Land O' Lakes District in 2020 was a significant leap in my barbershop journey. Following in the footsteps of Jim Rasmus, a revered figure in the community, was both an honor and a daunting task. This role required me to apply not only my musical knowledge but also my skills in leadership, organization, and strategic planning. The position entailed advocating for youth involvement in barbershop music, creating pathways for their participation, and ensuring that the legacy of barbershop harmony continues to flourish in the hands of the next generation.

In this leadership role, I had the privilege of receiving mentorship and guidance from Jay Altof, the District President of the Land O' Lakes District. Jay's patience and wisdom were invaluable as I navigated the complexities of this new position. His mentorship helped me overcome the initial learning curve, providing me with insights and support that were critical in shaping my approach to fostering youth barbershop. Jay's leadership style, marked by empathy and understanding, served as a model for me, teaching me the nuances of effective leadership in a community-based organization.

My time as chair has been a period of navigating new challenges and fostering the growth of barbershop music among the youth. I have strived to connect the timeless appeal of barbershop harmony with the dynamic interests of young singers, finding innovative ways to engage them in this art form. This role has involved working closely with music educators, organizing events and workshops, and creating platforms where young voices can experience the joy and camaraderie of barbershop singing. These efforts have been driven by a vision to make barbershop music more accessible and appealing to younger audiences, ensuring its continued relevance and growth.

As I continue in my role as chair, I am guided by a sense of responsibility to uphold and build upon Jim Rasmus's legacy. My goal is to create a vibrant, inclusive barbershop community for young singers, one that not only teaches them about harmony and vocal technique but also about teamwork, respect, and the joy of collective music-making. This journey is not just about preserving a musical tradition; it's about adapting and evolving it to resonate with new generations. With every step, I am reminded of the

power of music to unite, inspire, and transform, and I remain committed to bringing these experiences to as many young individuals as possible.

Shaping My Educational Philosophy

My involvement in barbershop music has profoundly shaped my philosophy as a music educator. The inclusive nature of barbershop, where every voice matters and contributes to the harmony, mirrors my approach in the classroom. I strive to create a learning environment where each student feels valued and is given the opportunity to contribute and grow.

Barbershop music, with its emphasis on collaboration and community, has taught me the importance of nurturing not just musical skills but also interpersonal relationships among students. This approach has shown me that effective teaching goes beyond imparting knowledge; it's about fostering a sense of belonging and teamwork.

My vision for music education is one where traditional methods coexist with innovative approaches like barbershop. I believe that incorporating barbershop music into school curriculums can enrich students' musical experiences, offering them a unique avenue for creative expression and personal growth. The goal is to develop well-rounded individuals who not only appreciate music but also the values of inclusivity, teamwork, and community.

Envisioning the Future of Barbershop in Education

As I look back on my journey with barbershop music, I see a vibrant evolution that parallels my own growth. Barbershop harmony, an art form deeply rooted in American musical tradition, has shown its resilience and adaptability over time. Its evolution from a predominantly adult, male-oriented genre to an inclusive and diverse community reflects a broader shift in societal values. This journey inspires me to think about the future of barbershop, particularly in educational contexts, where it has the potential to play a transformative role.

One of the critical factors in making barbershop appealing to the younger generation is the adaptation of contemporary music into barbershop arrangements. This approach not only keeps the genre fresh and relevant but also connects more directly with the interests and experiences of young people. By bridging the gap between traditional barbershop and modern music, we can attract a broader and more diverse group of students to this art form, ensuring its continued growth and vitality.

My hope for the future of Youth Barbershop in Schools is twofold: increased appreciation of the art form and recognition of its value in enhancing overall choral programs. I envision a future where barbershop is not an outlier in music education but a core component, celebrated for its unique contributions to vocal harmony, teamwork, and community building. My dream is to see barbershop music thrive in schools, fostering a new generation of singers who carry forward its rich legacy with their own innovations and styles.

Personal Philosophy and Call to Action

My journey through the realms of barbershop and education has led me to a personal philosophy that balances tradition with innovation. I believe that the future of barbershop music lies in respecting its rich history while embracing change and inclusivity. This philosophy extends to my approach in education, where I advocate for a holistic experience that values every individual's contribution and fosters a supportive learning environment.

Barbershop music offers more than just musical skills; it provides a platform for personal development and community engagement. For many of my students, barbershop has been a gateway to continue their musical journey beyond the high school years. It offers an accessible and engaging alternative to traditional choirs, making music approachable and enjoyable for a wider range of students.

I urge my fellow barbershoppers and music educators to take an active role in nurturing youth involvement in barbershop. This means not just welcoming young singers into our community but actively supporting their growth and development. It's time to reach out to schools, offer resources, and create opportunities for young people to experience the joy of barbershop harmony. Let's work together to ensure the vibrant future of this wonderful art form, building a legacy that resonates with every chord and every voice.

Conclusion: Harmonizing the Past with the Future

As I stand at this juncture of my journey, looking back at the winding path that has led me to this point, I am filled with a sense of gratitude and purpose. My journey through the world of barbershop music has been more than just a musical exploration; it has been a journey of personal discovery, growth, and a deepening commitment to the power of education and community.

Barbershop music, with its rich harmonies and communal spirit, has not only enriched my life but also provided a unique lens through which I view the world of music education. It has taught me the value of inclusivity, the importance of nurturing individual talents, and the joy of bringing people together in harmony. These lessons have become integral to my approach as an educator, guiding me to foster environments where students can grow, not just as musicians, but as confident, collaborative, and compassionate individuals.

Looking ahead, I am excited about the possibilities that lie in intertwining the traditional with the contemporary, the old with the new. My aspiration is to see barbershop music continue to evolve and flourish, especially within the realm of education. By embracing this art form, we can offer the next generation a unique musical experience that combines skill development with the joy of singing together, building lifelong connections.

My journey thus far has been a testament to the transformative power of music. As I continue on this path, my hope is to inspire others to explore the vibrant world of barbershop music, to discover its potential, and to contribute to its ever-unfolding story. Let us harmonize the past with the future, creating a melody that resonates across generations, fostering a love for barbershop music that endures and inspires.