Barbershop Harmony: What’s a Tag?

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Introduction

Since the 1950’s, Barbershop has been a fringe musical culture in the United States. After years of studying classical harmonic structure, I hoped to take my analytical skills and discover what it is about barbershop harmony makes it so unique. As suggested by the Barbershop Harmony Societies own theory program, I studied tags from many different pieces, rather than analyzing full charts (works of barbershop music) in order to understand the elements of barbershop harmony.

So, What’s A Tag?
• Specialized coda, featuring words and sometimes thematic melody.
• A virtuosic opportunity for singers to show off.
• Short enough to facilitate easy teaching and social interaction between “barbershoper’s”

Methods

Collaboration was integral to this project. Dr. Chenette met with me regularly gave guidance and further instruction to improve analytical skills.

1. Research history, culture, and previous studies on barbershop
2. Select and analyze tags.
3. Discuss findings with Dr. Chenette
4. Compare and contrast tags
5. Justify differences
6. Organize tags based on findings
7. Attend a Barbershop Festival
8. Present findings in a Lecture-Recital

Results

Four typical harmonic practices that characterize barbershop:
• The Hollywood Cadence: IV, ii\(\frac{7}{6}\), I
• Secondary Chords: V\(\frac{7}{5}\)/V, and vii\(\frac{7}{5}\)/V
• Circle of Fifth Progressions: iv-\(\frac{7}{5}\)-\(\frac{7}{5}\)-I
• The Unexpected: False Endings and Sudden Key Changes

Barbershop was a cultural music of African-Americans in the post-Civil War South, and shares much with early Jazz. Enjoyed wild popularity before the 1920’s. Revived by wealthy whites as a Neo-Victorian hobby in the late 1930’s.

Figure 1 – Analyzed Tags

Examples of tags from left to right in rows: The Hollywood Cadence in Sleepy Time Down South, Secondary Chords in When I’m Gone, Circle of Fifths Progressions in I Love to Sing ‘Em, and a Sudden Key Change through a deceptive cadence in Lost.

Study conducted for Bachelor of Arts Capstone Project.

Figure 2 – Post Office Quartet

The members of the Post Office Quartet were able to come together from across three states to provide live examples at the Lecture-Recital.

Conclusions

Barbershop harmony has evolved with the culture of the United States, albeit on the fringes of society. The music is rich and harmonically complex and warrants further study and analysis. Suggested further studies include why certain chords are valued over others in barbershop composition, the different harmonic anomalies created through close harmony, straight tone singing, and just tuning, and the effects of creating small ensembles of singers (such as a Barbershop Quartet) within a larger ensemble.