

Down with Do, Re, and Mi; Up with 1,2, and 3. (June 2002)

As Barbershoppers most of us are of an age such that we were raised on do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, and do as the notes in the scale. 'Tis time to change. It is time cross the Rubicon of musical lexicography and come into the 21st century. Do, re, and mi are defined by Guido's scales, who ever the hell Guido is (probably the great granddaddy of the Godfather). It is either Latin or Italian in derivation. The first language is dead. The second, while famous for its operatic composers is not known for its contribution to Barbershop. In addition, if you don't start using numbers over 1, they too will soon be extinct in this 1010101010 world of computer bits and bytes.

So my fellow Barbershoppers, it is time for you to learn the numbering system that is in use today. More importantly, to learn what the numbers mean. Come into my parlor and let's look at intervals and such. Don't you dare put this down. You have been singing for more than four years now and if you don't know intervals and where they are, it is high time you should. Some of this has been covered before in "Cheerful Noise" but as that column seldom gets read, you may just have the pleasure of reading it here for the very first time.

In any chord, three notes played simultaneously, the lowest note is the root or tonic, or Number 1, of that chord in its first position. In the key of C, the C major chord is CEGC and the lowest C, like most of us, has these three names (root, tonic, and 1). Counting from there, the scale goes up the traditional eight notes. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7, and 8. The upper 8 can also be called 1 and usually is. However when the lower C is played and a D above the second C is included in the chord, this is a 9th, not a second. The lower D has dibs on being called the 2nd.

All well and good you say but what does this mean to me. It means that you must have in your musical brain, a very good ideas of the relationship of these notes to one another.

For instance, Tenors must know their thirds and their minor thirds particularly well because they have a lot of them. Baritones must know their 4th's and 5th's, and bases, their roots and their 5th's. All parts will have all intervals at some time or another, but these are very common in the parts as mentioned. So how do you get them?

First you can be born with perfect pitch. If your DNA did not bless you with that, you can select new parents, put them and your self in a time capsule, travel faster than the speed of light, and start all over again. Both Sears and Target were out of time capsules when last I checked so they are not to be found for ready money. Since you can utilize neither of these methods, you will have to resort to S.T. (Sly Tricks). And ta da, ta da, here are some suggestions.

Sing the start of the Marine's Hymn. "From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli." (Incidentally, there were only three marines present at this famous battle). Stop. Now sing the same tune with new words. One, three, five, five five, five, five, eight, five, three, four, five, five four, two, one. Then try singing by the numbers but sing a one on the same pitch as the starting one after every number. Or sing, "From one the one halls one of one...", each time returning to the base line one. You get the idea. Try your own method. Here are some other suggestions.

Sing, "Anchors away my boys." Then sing one, three, five six, three, six.

Sing, “Oh the girls in France they don’t wear...”. (If you don’t know this one, your coming of age has been sadly neglected. Contact me after practice.) Then, one, two, three-minor, two, one, one two, three-minor.

Sing taps. “Day is done, gone’s the sun.” That’s all. Then sing five, five, one, five one, three. (Some confusion might ensue here. The root of the chord is not the first word, “done” is on the root. “Day is” is on the 5th. Trust me.) Baritones, concentrate on the interval from “done” to “gone’s”. This is your interval from the key note to your Barbershop tune up note. This, in turn, is your musical home for the entire song.

So now you have the idea. The use of S.T. can get you a long ways. Listen to the intervals when you sing them. You can’t be singing Taps or bolstering marine recruitment when we sing. But if you do it several times, they will become ingrained. How far is it from mi to so, who knows? How far is it from ‘...(an)chors to a(way)...’ or “...the...” to “... halls of Monte...” you know. Sing them. Take them to your heart and carry them with you always. Go in peace and for goodness sake, go in harmony.

(Baritones, I know you want to sing about the girls in France. Here is the ploy you can use. Find your fifth on the barbershop tune up chord and starting with this as your note on “Oh”, “girls” will be our barbershop flatted 7th for that chord. Thus you can sing risqué songs in the guise of looking for that 7th chord. Technically, it is a minor 3rd above the 5th. What an excuse!)

Disclaimer: The above views are my own and not necessarily that of the Kenosha Mavens. To many singers, do, re, mi, etc. are sacred. So a word to the wise, don’t discuss politics, religion, or the virtues of Guido’s scales when dining with friends. Stick to safe topics like movies, sex, and the weather.

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