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All singers welcome to try barbershop harmony

After more than 40 years making men's barbershop harmony in Hastings, The Chordsmen Chorus will be adding some new voices: women.

A June 2018 change in the bylaws of the 20,000-member Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS) opened its membership to women after 80 years as an all-male organization. Each local chapter is free to design its own blend of men's, women's, and mixed-harmony groups.

“At this stage, we could go in several directions,” said Bill Boone, the chapter president. “Our first and most important goal is to make a welcoming atmosphere for all singers. We’ll be singing some music designed for mixed voices, along with our traditional men’s voicings that fit women’s voices on the higher parts. Eventually, with enough interest, we might spin off a new women’s chorus, too.”

The most important thing, Boone says, is to start with a culture of acceptance. “We’re here for people who *want* to sing -- not just people with gigantic *American Idol* voices. We can help you find your own voice, be confident of it, and share that great feeling of making harmony together.”

A preliminary meeting welcoming women -- ALL singers, really, at last -- will be held on Tuesday, October 22 at 7:00 pm at the Hastings Community Center. All singers are welcome.

An American musical tradition, and an evolving culture of service

Barbershop harmony was born in the late 1800s in African American communities of the South, particularly in the New Orleans, the birthplace of its cousins, jazz and gospel. Some early printed references to the general term “barbershop” don’t actually distinguish it as solely for men’s voices, although early phonograph recordings created a general perception of it as belonging to white male quartets. The 1938 founding of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA), and subsequent women’s organizations Sweet Adelines International (1945) and Harmony, Inc. (1959), locked in the separation of sexes musically and culturally.

“From the standpoint of really making an impact on the world, we came to realize that our core values -- freedom of artistic expression, person-to-person harmony, service to our communities -- were bigger than we’ve allowed ourselves to fully express as a men’s-only organization,” says Marty Monson, CEO of the Society. The Barbershop Harmony Society’s response has been to expand its strategic vision to include “Everyone in Harmony,” a sweeping commitment to be inclusive across lines of race, gender, orientation, age -- everything. “The bridges we build between singers, and with our audiences, make the world a better place. Research shows that singing together makes individuals healthier, communities better -- a better world all around.”

BHS is already deeply invested in impact. Thanks to donors through Harmony Foundation International, the Society expends more than \$1 million annually in grants that support music education and community music. Its partnerships with the The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) and the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) underscore its deep commitment to choral programs at all levels.

Locally, the Chordsmen are active, too, by supporting regional Harmony Explosion camps for high school students.

Social and cultural change

The resurgence of vocal music in the past twenty years -- by way of the pop a cappella scene, TV singing contests, and high profile movies like *Pitch Perfect* -- has propelled interest in close-harmony singing, and young people see that harmony is for everyone, not strictly single-sex groups.

Barbershop offers a path to singing for life, and new combinations will provide greater choice.

The BHS expansion to encompass women is still in its earliest phases. Many technical and legal aspects are still being worked out, and chapters will not be fully positioned to admit women until January 2019 at the earliest.

The Hastings Chordsmen are ready. "We want everyone to be able to experience the joy of making music together," saysd Bill Boone. "You have a voice, and it's beautiful. We'll help you unlock it, in whatever combination fits you best."

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