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For some people, barbershop singing conjures up images of men in straw boaters and stripy blazers. But think again - barbershop singing is undergoing a real renaissance nationally and here in Bristol. Sarah King, who joined ladies chorus Bristol Fashion last year, sings the praises of the barbershop chorus .

For a city its size, Bristol has a wealth of barbershop talent with a gold medal-winning men's chorus and three ladies choruses. But what exactly is barbershop singing?

It's a style of performance with four different voice parts singing in close harmony a cappella (or unaccompanied). The leads sing the melody or the 'tune'. Then there are three harmony parts. The basses sing the lowest notes and provide the support for the song. The tenors sing the top notes to give the song its sparkle. The baritones (which include me) complete the chord.

The challenge is to get the chords coming together with the right dynamics and emotion so the audience is transported by the beautiful sound. Get all that right and the rewards are hugely satisfying for both the singer and the audience.

Like all singing, it's fun, it's sociable and it's good for you, helping to combat stress and improve memory. The chorus sings at functions across the South West and perform in national competitions so there's always something new to learn and aim for. There's also a strong family feel amongst the chorus that goes way beyond the singing.

We're always looking out for new members so if you think barbershop singing might be for you, come along to a Bristol Fashion rehearsal one Thursday evening. We're particularly looking for ladies with low voices to join our bass section. Visit www.bristol-fashion.org.uk for more information.

A cut above

Barbershop singing was originally a men's pastime that began in the 17th century when customers waiting for a haircut would strum on simple instruments, hence the name. Playing instruments was replaced by singing and then the tradition spread across the Atlantic. It nearly died out between the two world wars as movies, dance bands and radio took over but re-emerged in the UK in the 1960s and is thriving once more as new audiences discover the beauty of four part singing.

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