

## **P.Ramlee Barbershop Quartets: Introducing an American Style of Singing through Malaysian Culture**

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### **Abstract**

This research in progress examines the process of arranging songs by P. Ramlee for a barbershop quartet. Barbershop quartet music is a distinctively American style of singing, but it is a very “low-tech” genre to perform, requiring no instruments, no electricity, and only four singers. Because of this, the potential to teach or demonstrate the style to those who cannot support elaborate sound setups. Barbershop quartet music provides one of the foundations for jazz and popular music and incorporates traditional Western harmony (both very present in popular music). However, because of its “American-ness” in the language (English) and dialect (American English), barbershop quartet music is nearly absent in Malaysia. Because P. Ramlee songs form a similar foundation of music in Malaysia as barbershop quartet music does in America, this research project involves the arranging of P. Ramlee songs for barbershop quartet. The presentation describes the presenter’s past experience in arranging pop music for barbershop quartets, how the P. Ramlee songs are selected for a repertoire (artist-led, qualitative, and quantitative), a brief description of “Bunyi Barbershop,” an arrangement in progress, and a description of the ultimate goal of the research: a songbook of P. Ramlee arrangements for barbershop quartet. The book will also contain a brief description and introduction to barbershop quartet music with the intention of introducing the musical style to the people of Malaysia through songs people know well.

**Keywords** P. Ramlee, Barbershop Quartet, Arrangement, Bunyi Gitar

### **1. Introduction**

This research in progress is the process of developing a repertoire of P. Ramlee songs as barbershop quartet arrangements. This paper provides the background of barbershop music, the reasons for the project, the current methodology and results, and the goal of the research. There are little to no barbershop quartets in Malaysia, and the author is using this project to introduce the style using arrangements of P. Ramlee songs. The paper describes the process of why and how these arrangements are selected and constructed.

### **2. P. Ramlee barbershop quartet arrangements**

#### **2.1. Barbershop Quartet Overview**

Barbershop quartet and barbershop singing are a terms to describe a singing ensemble of four men who sing in an a cappella “close harmony” style that originated in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The term originates from “barbers’ music” (“An Information Manual For Barbershop Quartets”) where the patrons waiting for their shave and haircut would

entertain themselves (and each other) by singing. Barbershop music is an ancestor of jazz, and subsequently, an ancestor of nearly all popular music. Barbershop also provides a link into the 19<sup>th</sup> century harmonies found in classical and popular music.

Barbershop music traditionally has a clear melody, nostalgic lyrics, and distinct harmony (“An Information Manual For Barbershop Quartets”). The two defining harmonic characteristics of barbershop quartet music are the close harmony and circle of fifths. “Close harmony” means the space between the notes’ pitches is “close.” For example, a C dominant 7 chord contains the notes C, E, G, and B-flat. In close harmony, the four notes (or, the top three) have no other notes in the chord between them. Conversely, open harmony skips a note in the chord. The same C dominant 7 chord as an open chord would be C, G, E, and B-flat, spanning nearly two octaves (see Figure 1). The appeal of the close harmony is frequently the “ringing” sound produced by accurate singing of the notes in a major (or dominant chord). Each of the notes is exactly a multiple of the root of a chord (if A is 110 Hz, then the notes that follow an A7 chord are 440, 550, 660, and 770 Hz).

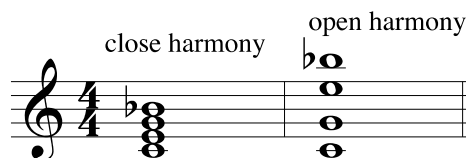


Figure 1 Illustrations of close and open harmony using a C7 chord

The second major feature of Barbershop Quartet music is the circle of fifths, which is a progression of harmony with roots in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The somewhat “unstableness” of a “barbershop seventh” chord feels resolved in Western music when it moves to a major chord a perfect fifth below the that chord. When the “resolved” chord is also a “barbershop seventh,” it can then resolve a perfect fifth below that chord, and so forth until the chord progression returns to the first chord. Barbershop quartet music does not go “all the way around” the circle of fifths, but typically jumps up to 5 chords away on the circle and then journeys back to the chord of the key signature, or tonic chord (see Figure 2).

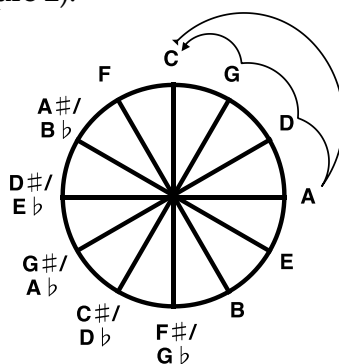


Figure 2 The circle of fifths, and an example of harmonies going from C to A, then resolving using chords in the circle of fifths

## 2.2. Why P. Ramlee barbershop?

Barbershop quartet music is practically non-existent in Malaysia. The nearest official chapters of the Barbershop Harmony Society are in Hong Kong and Australia (personal correspondence, 3 December 2014). It is also a style that is over a century old—both of its peaks of the 1900s and 1940s (“An Information Manual for Barbershop Quartets”) predate the country of Malaysia in

1957—so there is no historical connection. In addition, the words in barbershop quartet music are distinctly American, and in some cases archaic, which would make it difficult for Malaysians to fully understand the song they would be singing. These issues are almost all resolved with the arrangement of P. Ramlee songs in barbershop.

### 2.2.1. Simplicity of ensemble

One thing that gives the style a potential to spread is the simplicity of the ensemble. It only requires four singers with no instruments and no electronics. It can be performed from the smallest, informal settings to the largest concert hall. While the music is not necessarily simple to perform, the organization needed would be low and rehearsal space could be nearly anywhere.

### 2.2.2. Malaysian Identity in Popular Music

The first question may be “why P. Ramlee?” when arranging barbershop quartets in Malaysia. Barbershop quartet music provides a foundation for jazz, one of the most definitive styles of American music. P. Ramlee songs provide an early Malaysian musical identity. P. Ramlee songs seem to be the “musical father” of Malaysia popular music.

### 2.3. Author’s Past Barbershop Arrangements

Each year, the author releases a medley of popular music arranged as barbershop music on YouTube.com. He has been posting barbershop arrangements of popular music since 2008 (see Table 2). Frequently, the disconnection between the popular song and barbershop provides a sense of amusement because of the large amount of musical interpretation needed to convert a popular song into barbershop quartet. For example, in the most recent arrangement, converting the song “Timber” by Pitbull featuring Kesha (Arrington et al., 2013), only the melody remains (see Figure 3). All accompaniment has been removed from the original and replaced with voices. In addition, the harmonies have changed (see Figure 4).

**Table 1** Selected list of the author’s barbershop quartet arrangements

Song Title (Original song title if different, artist, year)	Year of arrangement on YouTube.com
Barbershop Star (Rockstar, Nickelback, 2006)	2008
Kiss Me Thru the Phone (Soulja Boy, 2008)	2009
Replay (Iyaz, 2010)	2010
Just the Way You Are (Bruno Mars, 2010)	2011
2012 Review Barbershop Revue (LMFAO, Carly Rae Jepsen, Fun, Gotye, Phillip Phillips, Rihanna, Alicia Keys, One Direction, Psy)	2012
2013 Review Barbershop Revue (Drake, Miley Cyrus, Will.i.am and Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Baauer, Macklemore, Pink, Robin Thicke, Lorde, Imagine Dragons, Avici, Swedish House Mafia, Daft Punk, Calvin Harris, Ylvis)	2013

Song Title (Original song title if different, artist, year)	Year of arrangement on YouTube.com
2014 Review Barbershop Revue (Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift, a Great Big World, Jason DeRulo and 2Chainz, Meghan Trainor, Rihanna, One Republic, Pitbull and Kesha, Katy Perry, Magic!, Pharrell Williams, John Legend, Fancy, Sam Smith, DJ Snake and Lil John)	2014



Figure 3 Author's transcription of the chorus of "Timber" by Pitbull featuring Kesha

Figure 4 The author's arrangement of "Timber" in his "2014 Review Barbershop Revue" medley

## 2.4. Methodology: Selection of Repertoire

This project uses a mixture of practice-led, qualitative, and quantitative. Initially filtering the vast repertoire down to 60 is a practice-led process. Narrowing the selections to 21 uses a quantitative approach. Finally, selecting the ultimate repertoire of eight songs is a qualitative approach. A failsafe is also in place in the event that an important song is wrongfully eliminated after reaching the qualitative stage. The arranging of the song is practice-led from my experience of arranging songs for barbershop quartet, and the final product of a repertoire book is practice-based.

### 2.4.1. Practice-led: from 120 to 60 songs

A repertoire of eight songs in a book is the goal, and there are over 120 songs in the P. Ramlee repertoire (Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid and Johari Salleh, 1994 and 1995). Because of this, an extensive filtering process was needed. Using the author's seven years of experience arranging for barbershop quartet, selection of the repertoire began selecting only songs that can be adapted for barbershop quartets. The first criterion is that the songs must be in a major key, as a defining characteristic of Barbershop music is the "ringing" major chord. The next filter was selecting songs only sung by one gender (usually a man). Barbershop is traditionally all men (or all women in the case of Sweet Adelines), and love songs are traditionally sung to a person outside the quartet. Another factor was judgment based on whether it could fit into barbershop. As an

example, Malay Asli music ornamentations would not translate well to barbershop. Even with all these filters, the number of P. Ramlee songs that were all men or a male solo, and in a major key numbered around 60.

#### 2.4.2. Quantitative: from 40 to 21 songs

The next selection process was an informal survey of the songs' popularity. Searching on YouTube.com for the view count of the most viewed videos of both the song (see Table 3) and the film (see Table 4) the song originated conveyed a rather accurate idea of what songs are well known. Determining the popularity of the movie was also conducted through a survey of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), combining not only the rating (out of 10), but also the number of votes that contributed to the rating (see Table 5). From these several factors, the top 21 were selected.

**Table 2** P. Ramlee songs from list of 60 with most views on YouTube.com as of 24 February 2015

Song Title	YouTube.com view count as of 24 Feb 2015
Dari Nak Dara Rindu	641,546
Sua Sue Kemuning	361,250
Maafkan Kami	330,975
Bila Mama Pakai Celana	326,863
Tidurlah Permasuri	223,067
Getaran Jiwa	195,510
Ubat	188,535
Do Re Mi	187,639

**Table 3** P. Ramlee films with the most view on YouTube.com as of 25 February 2015

Film Title	YouTube.com view count as of 24 Feb 2015
Seniman Bujang Lapok	1,116,318
Bujang Lapok	956,834
Do Re Mi	885,073
Pendekar Bujang Lapok	704,598
Laskemana Do Re Mi	678,795
Madu Tiga	379,064
Nasib Do Re Mi	344,844
Tiga Abdul	319,349

**Table 4** Number of ratings and average rating of P. Ramlee films (out of 10) on IMDb.com

Film Title	Number of Ratings on IMDb.com	Average rating on IMDb.com	Number x Rating
Pendekar Bujang Lapok	104	6.7	696.8
Bujang Lapok	82	7.8	639.6
Seniman Bujang Lapok	79	7.9	624.1
Tiga Abdul	62	8.1	502.2
Madu Tiga	61	7.7	469.7

#### 2.4.3. Qualitative (in-progress): from 21 to 8

While these arrangements could be for performers of any age, the goal was to ascertain what P. Ramlee songs with which university students (or around that age) are familiar because of the author's proximity to performers of that age. Using the list of 21 songs, a survey was sent to students (see Table 6). This survey contains the song title, the movie from which the song

originates, a YouTube.com link of the song, and a scale to describe the students' knowledge. This scale is from zero to four with descriptors, where zero is no knowledge, and four is memorized or well enough that no link is needed. At the moment this survey is still ongoing, but early results are confirming many of YouTube.com and IMDB.com statistics.

**Table 5** Survey of 21 (as of 5 April 2015) students asking which P. Ramlee songs they know best  
(Source: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/WYK32SR>)

Question: "How well do you know these songs by P. Ramlee?"	Song Title (Film, year of release)	Average rating (0-4)
0: Not at all	Pok Pok Pok Bujang Lapok (Pendekar Bujang Lapok, 1959)	3.62
1: A little	Bunyi Gitar (Tiga Abdul, 1964)	3.60
2: Yes, but not well	Getaran Jiwa (Antara Dua Darjat, 1960)	3.60
3: Well, but not memorised	Maafkan Kami (Pendekar Bujang Lapok, 1959)	3.57
4: Can sing the song without watching the video	Do Re Mi (Do Re Mi, 1966)	3.30
	Menceceh Bujang Lapok (Seniman Bujang Lapok, 1961)	3.30
	Sua Sue Kemuning (Nasib Do Re Mi, 1966)	3.10
	Ubat (Do Re Mi, 1966)	2.95

Students are also asked to list which of the songs on the survey they feel are the most important. By far, the most selected is "Getaran Jiwa," with twelve mentions, and the second most is "Bunyi Gitar" with four.

#### 2.4.4. Failsafe: Qualitative Revival of Previously Eliminated Songs

To cover the more subjective aspect, the survey contains one more question: "Which is the most important P. Ramlee song *not* from the list that you think should be included?" This allows for errors in the author's previous filtering process. Two songs were chosen by three students each: "Jeritan Batinku" and "Ai Ai Twist." Unfortunately, "Jeritan Batinku" is in a minor key, but "Ai Ai Twist" —as an upbeat song in a major key with many vocal harmonies would make a good barbershop quartet and will be added to the repertoire.

### 2.5. "Bunyi Barbershop"

The arranging of songs by P. Ramlee into barbershop uses both practice-led and practice-based approaches. "Bunyi Barbershop," is a barbershop arrangement of "Bunyi Gitar" from the film *Tiga Abdul*. This song has a very high view count on YouTube.com and was one of the most well-known selections in the student survey.

#### 2.5.1. Adaptation

Because the original song is a rock "twist" song, the word "gitar" would not fit in a voices only presentation. The word in title and lyrics is changed from "gitar" to "barbershop" (see Figure 5) and "Guitar solo" has also been replaced with "harmoni babershop." In a performance, "Bunyi Gitar" could begin with a skit similar to how the song is presented in *Tiga Abdul*, where instead of the instruments introduced, the singers introduce the part of the barbershop quartet. The lead

could begin to sing “Bunyi Gitar” before another singer stops and reminds them that there are no instruments, after which the quartet would proceed to sing the arrangement with the substitutions.

The musical score is for two staves, Treble and Bass clef. It includes lyrics and performance instructions. The tempo is marked "Fast, in tempo". The key signature has one flat (B-flat major). The score starts at measure 10. The lyrics are: "Ooh" (measures 10-11), "1.Oh bu-nyi bar-ber - shop" (measures 12-13), and "2.Su ung gu - u me - er" (measures 14-15). The instruction "\*all 8th/quaver echoes staccato" is placed above the score. The lyrics "1.Oh bu nyi - i bar-ber-" and "2.Su ung gu - u me - er" are placed above the notes in measures 14-15.

Figure 5 The entrance of “Bunyi Barbershop” in the arrangement

### 2.5.2. Form

“Bunyi Gitar” contains an A section and B section. The A section largely has a call-and-response format, similar to the original song. In this case, the lead singer is answered by the three other singers (rather than the band in the original). The answers are also in the same rhythmic patterns of the original, but answered with the same lyrics rather than imitating instruments. The B section serves as a contrast to the A section by changing the key signature and by employing a melody with longer, more fluidly connected notes. The long notes in the B section in the barbershop arrangement are answered with less punctuated responses.

### 2.5.3. Harmony

Because barbershop harmony is essential to a barbershop arrangement, original harmonies of the original song were removed, and the barbershop harmonies were applied to the existing melody. For example, the original song contains two chords per phrase, where barbershop music changes with the melody, resulting in a chord change with nearly every note.

Section B of the original song changes to a different mode with the same base tone but in a different mode (F mixolydian), where in the barbershop arrangement, the key is altered to fit the barbershop harmony (B-flat major). The shifting harmonies in the end of the B section are very compatible with barbershop harmony, as the circle of fifths can be implemented to get the song from the new key (B-flat) back to the original key (F) in the chorus.

### 2.5.4. Tag

In Barbershop music, the tag is a short closing section, usually slower than the main sections. The chords in the tag typically shift slowly and finally resolve to a long, resolved chord (see Figure 6). In “Bunyi Gitar,” the long resolved chord is approached with slides or *glissandi* (see Figure 7).



Figure 6 The tag of "Auntie Skinner's Chicken Dinner" (Fields, 1915)

Figure 7 The tag in "Bunyi Barbershop"

## 2.6. Final Goal: a P. Ramlee Barbershop Songbook

The ultimate goal of the research is a product, a book of P. Ramlee barbershop quartets. This product, in addition to containing the notated songs, will also include a brief description of barbershop quartet music in both English and Malay to help the performers inspired by the introduction and teaching methods from the Barbershop Harmony Society in the United States. The book will also include either a CD or a digitally accessible file from the publisher. The audio will contain performances of the song as well as individual tracks of each part in context. Barbershop quartets in the United States do not require the ability to read music as an informal learning process of singing, and because music is more aurally transmitted in Malaysia, the audio of will be very beneficial to Malaysians who cannot read notation.

## 3. Conclusion

Because of the familiar songs and the low cost, the potential to perform and spread the arrangements is enormous. Four people with no equipment could perform anywhere people are willing to listen: schools, parks, concert halls, and even barbershops. It also has the potential to expand the barbershop repertoire beyond American music. If this project proves to be successful, then perhaps it could expand to other genres in Malaysia, or other music around Southeast Asia. The main challenge in this project is the learning process of the style for singers in Malaysia. Singing four-part harmonies is not as embedded into the culture as it is in the United States and may require more rehearsal to understand. Another potential challenge is the uncertainty of the reception of the music, as barbershop music will be entirely new to most of the local listeners. There are several potential applications in education. It is a practical application in teaching harmony in Western music. It can also serve as a guide to teach Western music notation. The ultimate goal is that the audience will enjoy new, but old, interpretations of songs they know.



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