



TUNE UP: The Bryn Mawr Mainliners come together in song.

## neighborhood ) Four-Part Finery

The Mainliners tune in and turn on to turn-of-the-century harmony. *By Eric W. Herr*

In an age when MTV, wireless Internet, and high-tech gadgetry rules, it's easy to see how some people might think a turn-of-the-century art form could quietly fade into oblivion along with the gramophone, two-bit haircuts and straight-edged razors. But definitely think twice before sharing that notion with the thousands of four-part barbershop crooners both here and around the world—who literally get goose bumps every time they ring a chord (that's insider lingo for harmonizing).

The reality is, barbershop harmony is doing just fine—and so is the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of BarberShop Quartet Singing in America

(or the Barbershop Harmony Society, for short). The Bryn Mawr Mainliners, one of the society's local chapters, was officially chartered in September 1963, holding their initial rehearsals at the Bryn Mawr Fire House on Lancaster Avenue, one of the stops along the Pennsylvania Railroad's "Mainline" route. Thus, the group's namesake, distinctive railroad logo and theme.

The Mainliners truly believe that what they do connects with all generations—and they've been on a mission to prove it for the last 44 years. Now under the direction of Rick Serpico, the group has more than 80 members. Its youngest, 26-year-old Noah Morrison, happened onto

barbershopping while at the Shore.

"A few years ago, my family was vacationing in Ocean City, and a chorus was performing on the boardwalk," he recalls. "The bottom line is that my dad said I might like it. I did. I surfed the Internet and found the harmony connection."

Morrison has already logged nearly 10 years with the society, singing baritone with the championship quartet New Release. "It's awesome," says the Unysis software engineer, who admits singing is definitely in his blood.

Noah's dad, David, joined the Mainliners after he did. Both now sing together in another quartet

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called Freshly Brewed, which recently took second place out of 15 competitors at a novice quartet contest in Rahway, N.J.

Four-part harmonizing unofficially took hold in the 1870s in barbershops, on street corners and at various social gatherings. It flourished during the heyday of minstrel and Vaudeville shows and well into the 1920s. It's a fascinating amalgamation of African-American, European and American music characterized by four voices. The tenor harmonizes above the lead singer (who provides the melody);

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the bass sings the low notes; and the baritone provides the in-between chords. The term "barbershop" popped up in 1910 with the publication of the song, "Play That Barbershop Chord."

Granted, putting a modern spin on—and changing perceptions about—an art form with its roots in the Gay '90s (as in 1890s) era, is a tall order. But it's tough to ignore a movement that, since 1938, has mushroomed into the world's largest men's singing organization. Current membership is in excess of 30,000, representing more than 800 chapters (choruses) and 1,800 registered quartets in North America alone. And there are numerous affiliate organizations in England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, South Africa, Japan and elsewhere.

"A lot of younger would-be members like Noah are tuning in because they are intrigued by the unique vocal harmonics as well as the newer music arranged in the barbershop style," says Mainliners associate music director Bill Oppenheim, naming songs by the Beatles, Simon & Garfunkel and the Beach Boys as a few of many examples.

**B**ack in the 1930s, Oklahoma tax attorney Owen C. Cash and accountant

Rupert Hall conjured up the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of BarberShop Quartet Singing in America's multi-lettered acronym to poke fun at the many so-called alphabet soup New Deal programs of the Roosevelt era. Who knew it would eventually boast such impressive membership numbers. Many of us likely got our first taste of barbershop harmony through Meredith Wilson's Broadway play and subsequent movie *The Music Man*, featuring 1950 society quartet champs the Buffalo Bills.

"The chord structure remains pretty much the same in many contemporary arrangements. That's what makes it barbershop," explains the Mainliners' Oppenheim. "But today's barbershop singing is executed with much more precision, and the arrangements tend to be more difficult, too. It's definitely a far cry from the stereotypical image of four guys on a street corner decked out in straw hats and arm garters crooning 'Sweet Adeline.'"

As an avid competitor on both the chorus and quartet circuits, 40-year Mainliner member Doug Searfoss has witnessed plenty of change. "The talent has escalated to an incredibly high level in recent years, as has the competitiveness," Searfoss says. "Now more than ever, the judges not only look for good singing skills in their scoring, but expect great stage presence and song interpretation, too."

As a former Ice Follies skater, Searfoss knows all about showmanship. In fact, he often shares useful tips with his fellow brethren.

But while the Mainliners have made significant strides, most members agree it takes a lot of energy, a lot of commitment and a lot of time to stay in the public eye and keep a good thing going.

"No doubt about it," says 21-year member Frank Cianciulli. "We've participated in a lot of activities over the years—not only within the community at large but in society competitions, too."

Cianciulli rattles off some high points, like hosting the 1977 International Chorus and Quartet competition in Philadelphia and four occasions when the Mainliners qualified to compete on the international stage in the 1990s. "It was pretty amazing—and at the same time a bit humbling—to think we had won the right to compete with just two dozen other choruses in world competition," he says.

Competitions aside, the Mainliners continue to entertain audiences at their annual shows, parades, sporting events and numerous retirement communities. They even performed at the Republican National Convention in 2000. Shows at numerous clubs and organizations, along with exposure in local newspapers and on TV and radio, have helped the group maintain a highly visible presence.

The Mainliners' Christmas show is scheduled for Dec. 8 at Conestoga High School. Another annual favorite is the society's Sing Valentine Program. "We split the chorus into quartets to send a singing Valentine message—along with flowers, candy and a card—to unsuspecting sweethearts at home, restaurants or work," says co-associate director Doug Pratt. "We'll often get upwards of 100 or more requests."

Keeping an eye on the future is always important. To that end, the Mainliners started a Youth in Harmony program in 1991. Project coordinator Dwight Florence, a one-time rocket scientist for General Electric, has been on the front lines, running free workshops at almost two-dozen area elementary, middle and high schools. "Let's face it, we need to keep a good thing going," he says. "And what better way to do it than to interest kids in this hobby we love so much, early on."

Chapter president Bob Maleno is another driving force in the program. "Our ultimate goal is to have these young people experience the joy of singing as a lifelong activity and have them give back to their communities through music," he says.

At 96 years young, charter member John Davidson still manages to come out to the Mainliners' Monday night rehearsals at Conestoga High School in Berwyn. It's Davidson—along with fellow charter members Dick Rothermel and Bob Hoban, 80 some odd others, and the woman's auxiliary group the Stokers—who continue to keep the Mainliners' locomotive on track. Show up at a rehearsal at 7:30 p.m. on any Monday, and you'll see men of all ages, shapes, sizes and walks of life.

"We have a great time and a lot of fun," says Hoban with a chuckle. "Besides, where else can you stand on the risers with a plumber on your left and a rocket scientist on your right."

To learn more about the Bryn Mawr Mainliners, visit [mainliners.org](http://mainliners.org). **MLT**