

Taking the Mystery Out of Bluegrass Harmony Parts

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When we teach our workshops, we find that talking about bluegrass harmony can be confusing for our students. Mostly this is just because the names of the parts, “tenor” and “baritone,” are the words that, in classical music, are used to describe vocal *ranges*. In classical or choral music, or if you’ve sung in a church and community choir, you learned that a tenor is a man with a high voice, and a baritone is a man with a medium-low voice.

In bluegrass harmony, “tenor” and “baritone” don’t refer to your vocal range at all. Instead, they describe whether the harmony is *above* or *below* the melody. The tenor is the *nearest* harmony part that can be sung above the melody, and the baritone is the *nearest* harmony part below the melody. This is regardless of the key or the vocal ranges of the singers. If a bluegrass trio is all women, they probably have alto and soprano voice *ranges*, but the *parts* they’re singing are still called lead, tenor and baritone.

The Bluegrass Harmony Sandwich

I call it the bluegrass harmony sandwich, because most often in a trio, the melody is sandwiched in the middle between the two harmony parts. It looks like this:

Tenor: The closest harmony above the melody

Lead: The melody

Baritone: The closest harmony below the melody

Stacking the Parts

When bluegrass singers talk about the “stack,” they’re saying that the lead may not always be in the middle. If the lead singer has the highest voice in the group, the lead can go on top and the other parts will stack up below. Like this:

Lead: The melody

Baritone: The closest harmony line below the melody

Low tenor: the tenor part sung one octave lower than usual, below the baritone

Or if the lead has a low voice, the stack can be this:

High Baritone: the baritone part sung one octave higher, above the tenor

Tenor: The closest harmony line above the melody

Lead: The melody

To take your harmony singing to the next level, check out our instructional CDs, [*How to Sing Harmony the Natural Way*](#) and [*Switch On Your Harmony Autopilot*](#). And as always, feel free to [contact us](#) if you have questions or if we can help you with your harmony singing!