

Quartet Tool Box

Paul Olguín, Facilitator

Putting it Together

Sources for singing mates

- Chapter or chorus
- Nearby (or nowadays, not-so-nearby) chapter or chorus
- Barbershop schools/conventions/shows
- Other singing organizations (church choirs/community choirs)
- Non-barbershoppers with other singing experience!
- Someone you really enjoy singing with who is trying a new voice part

Quartet “Dating”

Since being in a quartet is a very serious intimate relationship, it can be a good idea to do some quartet dating before you tie the knot.

- Asking - keep the invitation casual. Don't suggest that it's for any more than one time only.
- How many in your quartet? Gather more than four singers and try out various combinations – a sort of quartet speed dating experience.
- Have a good idea of who will lead the evening. If you don't know, assume it will be you. If you don't think there will be an effective leader among you, bring in a coach, teacher or chorus director to help you get going.
- Sing or learn some songs or tags that you already know.
- Learn some new tags and try to get them as good as you can.
- Have fun – enjoy this one time together.
- Try not to come to any conclusions during the evening.
- Follow up call or email everyone within the next couple of days and let them know how you felt about the evening. Answer the question, shall we get together again? Be honest.
- If not a quartet, perhaps you found your bass?
- Looking for two
- Auditioning for one

What Makes for a Good Match?

- Compatible group and individual goals
- Similar work ethic
- Voices that naturally work well together . . . or not
- Similar Skill Levels . . . or not
- From the same generation . . . or not
- Four people who get along well with one another . . . or not
- Similar availability (for rehearsals, shows, education, competition, etc.)
- Similar or compatible/flexible vision for the quartet
- Similar aptitude and desire for growth and improvement

Tying the Knot

- Call the question. Ask the group if everyone thinks that you might have a quartet.
- If everyone is not convinced, but still thinks there is a possibility, keep dating; but at some point you'll need to make a decision.
- Buying socks - celebrate your new association with some ritual or token.
- Make a commitment to the quartet that you can keep. (We will sing together through the Regional or District competition.)

Naming the Quartet

- Discuss and formulate your (from here the word “your” means “the quartet.”) vision for the quartet. Select a name that is an expression of that vision.
- Examples of great and not-so-great choices (Main Street, FRED, Frank the Dog, Musical Island Boys, Old School, Vocal Spectrum)
- Most quartets have neutral names that don't really say anything about the quartet. (Maxx Factor, Journey, Martini, Men in Black, Real Time, TNS) Though this is accepted practice in our organizations, it is far from ideal.
- Consider how your quartet name will appear in marketing materials for both barbershop and non-barbershop shows, if you hope to do shows. (Sold Out, Standing Room Only – not so good for market on a flier)
- Decide one or two things about your group that you want to communicate with your name. (We are a barbershop quartet. We sing all original material. We are all young. We have Victorian values. We want to help carry barbershop through the 21st Century. We are very funny. We are very entertaining. We are women. We are men.)
- Express your message in a succinct and catchy way that no one else has ever used or one that is no longer associated in the mind of the public with another group.
- Develop several options in case your favorite is taken.
- Register with your organization.

Selecting Repertoire

This is a vital early step in the quartet building process. It is also a process that you will continue throughout the life of the quartet. Your choices of repertoire can enhance or confuse the quartet identity. Your choices can accelerate or hamper your progress as a quartet. Great consideration should be taken when choosing the music that will be the soundtrack to your quartet's life.

Sources of Music

- Arrangements sung by quartet members in previous quartets
- Arrangements sung by other quartets
- Chapter or chorus songs
- Arrangements published by barbershop organizations
- Arrangements published by individual arrangers
- Commissioned new arrangements (established or developing arrangers)
- Arrangements done by your baritone or some other quartet member (as if)
- Commissioned new original songs
- Arrangements from acapella quartets outside of the barbershop world
- Other sources?

What to look for in music

- Within the vocal/musical/emotional capabilities of the quartet! Don't be afraid to make minor changes (depending on the arranger) to allow a chart to work for your four voices. Get an arranger to help you, if necessary.
- Music that features or highlights strengths and minimizes weaknesses
- Music that challenges, but does not overwhelm the quartet, facilitating its growth.
- Music that you will enjoy rehearsing, singing and performing
- Music that you suspect your audiences will enjoy

Your First Seven Songs

Start your quartet journey with seven songs, bringing them all up to speed at the same time. As a result you'll have four contest vehicles (necessary for men trying to qualify for International Competition) and enough songs for a 20 – 25 minute show package.

- Opener – up-tune, familiar, short, recognizable, contest song, big tag
- Easy beat: a song with rhythm from start to finish, not overly complex, longer than opener, different flavor of tag from opener, contestable
- Mellow change of pace – different in musical language from first two songs, not contest barbershop, not vocally taxing, beautiful, mellow tag
- Solo: can be any kind of song that showcases the strongest performance aspect of the strongest soloist in the quartet, can be a vocal rest for the other three, length proportional to strength of soloist
- Barbershop Ballad – recognizable by the general public – a plus, not over-sung by the barbershop community – a plus, refer to “What to look for in music” above
- Comedy/Variety – song with dramatically different musical texture, upbeat, comical, showcase other voices/talents, many options here, could even be a comic contest song, could be a spiritual or patriotic song
- Closer – tour de force, the most spectacular and thrilling song you can handle well, well-developed and musically complex, likely contest up-tune, biggest tag

Developing your show package

The song types listed above can form the musical program of a 20 to 25 minutes show package. Unless your quartet is of International Medalist caliber or very, very entertaining, a guideline of 20 to 25 minutes is usually best, no longer.

Sing more - talk less

- Identify, develop and utilize all quartet personnel who possess engaging public speaking skills. If you have no one with this skill, develop someone in the quartet who is willing to work at acquiring the skill. (one word: Toastmasters)
- If you have a strong comedian, let him or her be funny within reason.
- Sing/Sing/Sing/Talk/Sing/Sing/Talk/Sing/Thanks/Sing (may talk after song 2)
- Plan and rehearse every emcee spot.
- If your emcee is comfortable being spontaneous, let him or her be spontaneous within the structure of a clear outline.
- Steer clear of corny jokes, especially long ones.
- Be “edu-taining” with your emcee spots – give your audience a take-away.
- Audiences member are rarely heard saying, “I wish they had talked more.”
- Rehearse your show package from start to finish several times.
- Use video recordings for immediate feedback.

Shorter spots

- Choose your very best stuff – four or five pieces of dynamite.
- Opener/Easy-beat or Change of pace/Talk/Solo/Variety/Talk/Closer
- Cameo: the most entertaining, most flattering one or two songs you've got – you never know if someone who might want to hire you is in the crowd.

Longer shows

- Extend with audience participation
- Community Singing
- Barbershop demonstration
- Additional, highly entertaining songs of ever-widening variety
- Proportionately additional talking

Chapter show afterglows

- Scale down the intensity of material for more intimate audience.
- A bit more humor, spontaneity and talking can help forge connection with chapter members and fans.
- Have a plan and execute it.
- Can provide a good opportunity to “audition” a song for placement in the show.

Know your audience

- Song selection can vary depending on whether you are singing for the Rotary or on the past champs show.
- Listen to how each audience reacts to each song – modify or replace songs for future performances that do not seem to be working.
- Rotate your repertoire over time – this encourages groups to bring you back.
- Be flexible – make on-the-spot adjustments to your package if the audience seems to demand it, or if the show producer requests it.
- Be aware – no audience wants to hear the same song on the same show – be aware of songs other groups are singing and make adjustments to your show as you are able.

Encores

- If you are doing your very best song last, and you give it all you have, you should not be capable of performing an encore.
- Only perform an encore if the show will truly not continue until you do, or if you fear for your physical safety.
- Try simply taking a bow first – this will usually appease the audience.
- If you **MUST** do an encore, consider something simple and brief.

Strolling Performances

- Short, recognizable up tempo songs work best.
- One song, then move on.
- Making connections – This type of intimate performance is a great chance to engage with enthusiasts. Give a highly appreciative listener your card. Invite him or her to come to your show or rehearsal. Maybe even teach him or her a simple tag.
- Pace yourself. Make sure you have a fifteen minute break every forty-five minutes.

Bad gigs

- Discovering the possibility in a less-than-ideal situation
- Getting through it as gracefully as possible – repeat: four hundred dollars . . .
- Saying “No!” as a last resort

Quartet deportment

- You represent the quartet at all times when you are “on the clock.”
- Discuss how you choose to interact with the public – barbershoppers, fans
- You are inseparable from the quartet to a certain degree at all times.
- Anti-social and undesirable behavior

Learning Music

One of the great joys and challenges of singing in a quartet is the process of learning new music. It is essential to the growth of the quartet, and will please your fans. Think of the first time you heard one of your favorite groups perform a new piece of music. The more efficient you are at learning music, the more music you can learn.

Assess, improve, expand on your current available learning methods

- Learning tracks
- Reading music
- Pounding it out on the piano (someone inside or outside the quartet)
- Computer programs and other technology (one word: Casio SK-1)
- Learning notes and words outside of rehearsal
- Memorizing notes and words

Beyond the notes and words

Once you have “mastered” the words and notes, you are in the position to begin to create music. Barbershop singers use powerful harmonies, heartfelt musical expressions and every expressive muscle in their bodies to tell story through the medium of song. Conceiving, planning and mastering these skills is essential to creating a moving performance.

Enabling all of the chords to ring with increasing regularity

- Melody in just intonation with tonal center
- Perfect intervals perfectly tuned
- “Color” intervals (mostly sevenths and thirds) slotted masterfully
- Resonance matched
- Vowels matched
- Diction (word sounds) matched
- Chords balanced

Developing and implementing an interpretation plan

- Using velocity and dynamic variation to move the story forward
- Using word emphasis to make a point
- Understanding and highlighting the shapes within the music and story
- Rubato and freestyle

Creating visual enhancements

- Using our bodies to tell story
- Getting rhythm into the body

- Removing unwanted distractions
- Avoiding generic, meaningless gestures
- Using natural, believable, theatrical gestures to amplify the story
- Strive to be able to direct every muscle in your body, including (and perhaps, especially) your facial muscles.

Delivering the story from the heart

- Commit yourself to every word, phrase, rhythm, note and chord.
- “Be” the song rather than “acting” the song.
- The audience will know and appreciate when you are being real.

Coaches and Other Teachers

There are many talented men and women who offer their services as a quartet coach or teacher. They are essential in providing a “fifth ear;” someone who can hear the entire quartet sound and suggest adjustments or improvements. They can bring new concepts and awareness to a quartet. Since most of a quartet's rehearsal time is likely spent with just the four singers, it's also advisable to utilize each quartet member as an outside ear.

Inside coaching

- Never coach the quartet while you are singing – focus on singing, not listening.
- Have someone (often the one who perceived a problem, and usually not the lead) step out of the quartet and listen to the other three, offering strategies for improvement.
- Avoid making personal attacks or interpreting criticism as a personal attack.
- Remember that all suggestions for improvement are welcomed, well-intended and made in spirit of love and support.
- Harmony parts coach the lead (tuning, vocal production, diction, interpretation)
- Baritone and Tenor coach Lead/Bass duet (tuning, synchronization, vocal production, matching)
- All versions of two coaching two
- All versions of one coaching three
- Audio and video recording!!!

Outside coaching/teaching

- Asking someone to coach your quartet – don't assume anything
- To pay or not to pay
- The difference between a “coach” and a “teacher.”
- The “best” coach/teacher may not be the best coach/teacher for your quartet in its current state of development.
- Work with someone who has something you want.
- Consider providing an opportunity for “coach development.”
- Using more than one coach/teacher – pros and cons
- Trusting your coach – trusting yourselves
- Expressions of gratitude – public, private, material
- Letting go of a coach

Costumes and Uniforms

The acquisition and care of costumes and uniforms is essential to any quartet. Below are several points to consider before heading out to the mall or ordering something online.

Sources of apparel

- Retail stores (Burlington Coat Factory or Leroy's on Pike St. in Seattle for men)
- Catalogs and online resources
- Custom made costumes

Choose a costume of uniform that is appropriate for the venue and audience

- Stage worthy
- Comfortable
- Versatile
- Affordable
- Casual costumes
- Travel costumes
- Something that is flattering to every member
- Well-fitting on every member
- Challenges of a-typical sized quartet members
- Compliments the quartet identity (Main Street, Musical Island Boys)
- Impactful, but not distracting (audience thinks, what wonderful costumes and then does not think about them again during the performance)
- Care of costumes

Competition

Many barbershop singers spend a great amount of time and energy working toward the contest experience. For most quartets this amounts to only four to six minutes of performance, one time each year, for which competitors incur great expense. Make the most of it!

Preparation

- Think of it as your very brief shot within a long show
- Let go of the result – it is out of your control. Mental energy spent dwelling on a contest result is wasted energy. Ask any championship performer.
- Select the two (or more) songs that will best highlight your strongest skills.
- Try to select songs that other quartets are not likely to be singing in the same competition, or, heaven forbid, immediately before your performance.
- Visualize your perfect performance on the contest stage.
- If possible, do a walk-on prior to the competition.

Day of the contest

- Get plenty of rest
- Hydrate
- Stick close to your normal diet
- Get your blood flowing – go for a walk or whatever exercise you normally do
- Get a thorough warm-up
- Take care of yourself and your quartet – your quartet host may have other priorities. Don't rush or let someone try to rush you.

- Breathe
- Get those butterflies flying in formation

On the stage

- Be present in every moment
- Gently bring yourself back into the song WHEN your mind wanders (or worries!)
- Instantly let go of and forgive yourself or your quartet mate for any “imperfections” you may notice along the way.
- Breathe deeply through your nose in between songs.

Once you leave the stage

- Immediately after you sing, acknowledge the positive things you noticed about your individual performance, the quartet performance or the audience reaction.
- Remind each other how much you love singing together.
- Forgive or reassure one another for anything that didn't go quite as planned.
- Go out to your people and allow them to thank you for the gift you gave them.
- Do not apologize or make excuses. Simply say “thank you.”
- Enjoy the gifts of the other quartets' performances when possible.
- Evaluations – record or take notes, be gracious and grateful, can be great growth opportunity
- De-brief and move forward . . . or move on

Improving the Quartet

Have you ever noticed how few quartets or quartet performers ever break through to a new level? With any new quartet, there is a learning curve in the first couple of years where you learn how to sing together and how to get along with one another. Eventually you may have exhausted the knowledge of the quartet members and coaches and earned the same scores in competition at least twice in a row. I believe the only way to break through to a higher level of performance (if that is your goal) is to change the rehearsal and practice behaviors of the quartet, and more importantly, of the individuals in the quartet. Below are some imagined ways that this might be accomplished.

Singing

- Private voice lessons
- Daily focused vocalizing (at least 30 minutes, the more the better)
- Daily focused practice on quartet music (15 minutes/day makes a huge difference)
- Unison singing
- Duet singing

Musicianship

- Increase your knowledge of the language of music.
- Study music theory, especially as it relates to barbershop harmony.
- Experience and analyze great performances – extract qualities and apply them to your expression of music.
- Cross train – sing other complementary styles of music.
- Use available technology – iPhone/online apps, keyboards, computer programs.

Performance

- Study acting
- Study dance and movement

- Experience and analyze great performances – extract qualities and apply them to your own performance.
- Utilize coaches from outside the barbershop world – freshen and enhance our knowledge gene pool.

The Magic of Collaboration

Obviously, singing in a barbershop quartet is a collaborative endeavor. Understand and practice the principles of collaboration, and your quartet will reap huge rewards.

- Come to believe that what can be created by the four (or more) of you will be superior to anything that any one of you could create.
- Diversity of opinions, views and approaches are a plus.
- Don't be too attached to your individual ideas – when they don't work for the quartet, you won't be so hurt; when they are embraced, you won't be so proud.
- Turn every decision into a quartet (or team) decision.
- Collaboration encourages individual growth – letting go of your idea makes room for new ideas.
- Whenever possible, try out a potential solution rather than condemning it without investigation.
- Become aware of the emergence of the “quartet mind” or “quartet consciousness” – you will learn to love it and trust in it; it can help bring your singing and performance to another level.

Keeping it Together

One of the greatest challenges facing most quartets is the challenge of staying together. There can be many forces working in the lives of four (eight, if you count spouses and each member has one) people that can end the life of a quartet. Sometimes irreconcilable differences are uncovered and acknowledged. Sometimes a change of career will cause a move across the country or a change in availability. Many challenges can be overcome, and if the quartet has an especially good vocal and/or inter-personal chemistry, every attempt should be made to overcome them. One factor that can be most helpful in the improvement of a quartet is the concept of “time and grade,” which is something that can only be achieved by staying together. Even if you change one voice part, it can be very much like starting from scratch, or at least taking several steps back.

Inter-personal Conflicts

- Acceptance your quartet mates for who they are and how they are
- Encourage and invite personal growth in yourself and your quartet mates.
- Personal growth requires awareness, desire, patience, persistence and vigilance.
- Communication – many conflicts are caused by ineffective communication.
- Avoid talking about a quartet member when he or she is not present.
- Some volatility and conflict can provide essential creative energy.
- Passionately discuss differences of opinion.
- Strive for consensus – once you agree and decide on something; everyone gets behind the decision 100%, even if it's not the result that he or she, as an individual, may have wanted when the discussion began.

- Seek outside (possibly professional) help for conflicts that are persistent or ones that you cannot resolve between you. Use a coach or a trusted friend.

Changes in Life Circumstances

- New job – can create decreased availability of rehearsal and vacation time.
- Relocation – do you become a “long-distance” quartet, replace the relocating member or relocate the rest of the quartet?
- Change in significant other status – new spouse does not like barbershop or the amount of time it takes for rehearsals and performances.
- Addition of children
- Changing needs of children or spouse
- Health issues
- Whether the solution is compromise, replacement or termination, talk it over thoroughly and consider trying various options before calling it quits.

Long-distance quartetting

- Usually only top-level quartets
- Different rehearsal patterns
- Individual practice/work is essential
- Can be very expensive
- Various reasons

Quartet Business

Money

- Bank accounts
- Taxes and accounting
- Tax ID vs. Individual
- Legitimate quartet expenses – costumes, cleaning, coaches, charts, chow
- Collecting and paying sales tax
- Disbursement of money to quartet members
- Paying for coaches, schools, conventions
- Arrangers, Royalties

Travel

- Select a travel coordinator (possibly a spouse) or engage a travel agency for travel needs.
- Decide on per diem or if the quartet will pay all expenses
- Communicate about travel behaviors, needs and desires.
- Customer loyalty programs

Marketing

- Quartet website
- Social networking
- Face to face
- Image and branding
- Business cards and logos
- Professional (in quality, at least) action publicity photograph
- Donated performances

- Maximizing marketing opportunities
- Publicity package for soliciting shows
- Working with show chairpersons to create a win-win
- Contest appearances
- Show performances
- Merchandise sales and give-aways (CDs, T-shirts, buttons, stickers)
- Contracts – it's best to have one for every performance, even freebies

Producing a Recording

Once a quartet has been around a while, has learned a bunch of songs and has developed a fan base, those fans will start asking the quartet if they are going to record a CD. The pros and cons of embarking on such a project are well worth considering.

Pros

- A keepsake for your friends, fans and family – your quartet becomes a part of the soundtrack of their lives
- A potential source of revenue from CD sales or internet downloads
- A marketing tool for potential new fans or “employers”
- A potential cause of musical (and inter-personal) growth as you go through the process recording and producing a recording
- Acquisition of new skills – you will learn the meaning of the term “recording artist.”
- Advances in recording software and digital recorder technology can provide very low-cost recording options.

Cons

- It can cost a lot of money (\$2,000.00 on the cheap and up to \$20,000.00 or more, depending on your production values)
- It takes a lot of time and energy – always much longer than you think it will.
- People might buy it, listen to it, hate it, and then turn it into a coaster or mobile.
- Someone might give it an unfavorable public review.
- You might not like it or be able to listen to it without cringing.

Paying Royalties

- Most handled through Harry Fox Agency
- Many copyright owners are not represented by HFA

Internet Distribution

- iTunes
- naked voice records
- others

CD Production

- on-line companies – request samples of their work and cross your fingers
- local companies
- do-it-yourself

Calling it Quits

Very few quartets actually stay together “till death do they part,” yet very few quartets are able to talk about the end of the quartet before it happens. We're not trained to enter into most relationships with the knowledge that someday they will come to an end, much less create a plan for it. Often the end of a quartet comes as a dramatic shock, at least to some of the members. Feelings can be hurt, and what should become an enduring, sweet friendship based on years of wonderful, shared experiences can turn into something else. Having an exit plan can prove very helpful.

Drafting a prenuptial agreement

- Agree in advance how assets will be divided
- Clear communication in advance helps avoid conflict in the future
- What if one person quits?

Re-commit on a regular basis

- Commit your dedication and participation through a certain goal or period of time
- Re-commit (or not) for another “tour” after this goal or time period is reached.

Having “the talk”

- Be honest with loving kindness.
- Avoid personal attacks or accusations.
- Speak from your point of view: “I'm not feeling musically satisfied.”
- Be clear about your intentions, but open to having your mind changed.

Letting a quartet member go

- Usually a problem in one member is obvious to all, even that member.
- Try to resolve the situation.
- Set goals and measure results.
- Invite him or her to leave the quartet.
- If the separation is not mutually agreeable, you may consider engaging an attorney or mediator – this is more important if there are significant assets involved.

Liquidating assets

- Cash
- CDs or other promotional materials
- Uniforms
- Sound equipment

Changing the nature of your relationship

- Possibility of reunion
- Willingness to sing together at barbershop events just for old time's sake
- Getting together from time to time just for fun