

SO YOU WANT TO SING IN A QUARTET ?

You went to your first Barbershop show last year and were inspired by the big chorus with its neat uniforms, the fabulous harmony, and the thrilling sound of a hundred manly voices. The next week you went to the chapter's guest night, joined up, passed the audition, and began the long, hard road of learning your part in the chorus repertoire. You've sung in this year's show, gone to contest, enjoyed the thrill of competition, but now you want to try quarteting.

Quartets Require Different Skills

The thing is, quartet singing is different from chorus singing and the skills required are different. First, let's talk about the things that are the same. The melody and harmonies are the same. There is a need for every part to sing on pitch. Presentation (interpretation) uses louds and softs as well as timing changes to give meaning to the song. Visual presentation uses facial expression, posture and gestures to augment the interpretation of the song. Knowing this, you feel that it would be relatively easy to get three other guys from the chorus who know the chorus songs and start right

in performing as a quartet. Not so fast! The S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A. has published a quartet manual that tells all about the organizational and administrative tasks, as well as some general hints about vocal production and blend. That's a good place to start. But probably no one will ever tell you what the differences are between a chorus singer and a quartet singer. Much of what follows is common sense, but quartets seem to struggle with it and have to find out for themselves:

1. The harmony singers follow the Lead, and not the Director.
2. The harmony singers tune to the Lead, rather than some remote tonal center. (More about tuning later).
3. The song is interpreted by the Lead singer rather than the Chorus Director. (The quartet agrees upon a plan for interpretation and the Lead carries out the plan as the harmony singers follow.)
4. Posture and gestures (stage presence, or visual presentation) come not from mimicking the director, but from an agreed upon plan for the quartet, and by cues from the Lead using peripheral vision.
5. Word and note accuracy requirements are much higher. A missed note or word from a quartet singer sticks out like a sore thumb.

Tuning

The harmony singers tune to the Lead by varying the following aspects of the voice:

1. **Pitch.** Lots of stuff has been written about singing on pitch. Most of us have to deliberately sing above the pitch that we hear in our ear from our own voice, in order to make the pitch sound right to the listener out in front. Sing along with your favorite quartet's tape, adjust your pitch to fit in with the ringing chord, and see for yourself.
2. **Volume.** (Loudness or softness). This is the key to balance. You need an ear out in front to determine balance, until you learn what it sounds like within the quartet.
3. **Vowel.** Sometimes a mismatch here sounds like a pitch error. Practice unison singing to correct vowel mismatches.
4. **Placement.** (Source of sound generation) This characteristic is the most difficult to discuss. From low in the throat, the most mellow, fuzzy sound is generated. From right behind the nose,

the most bright, brilliant, harsh, twangy, brassy sound is generated. The quartet singer needs to exercise this range of different placements in order to adjust to the Lead's placement, and maximize the ringing of the chord.

You know the quartet is tuning properly when all the chords really ring, or when singing in unison sounds like one voice. As a matter of fact, practicing unison singing is a good quartet drill, even though it is boring. Practicing duets is another tuning drill that pays big dividends, especially when the other quartet members can listen in and give helpful hints. This brings up another point. What you hear inside a quartet is not what the audience or the microphone picks up out in front. So don't make the mistake of coaching from inside the quartet, but get a knowledgeable ear or a tape recorder to help you improve.

Quartet Progress

Here are the steps a quartet takes as it progresses:

1. Learn the words and notes. (Duh!) Not to insult anyone's intelligence, but tuning and ringing chords don't begin until the words and notes are memorized and the quartet is off the paper. Also, see above for accuracy requirements.
2. Learn to focus on the Lead.
3. Learn to tune to the Lead by adjusting pitch, volume, vowel, and placement.
4. Learn to follow the Lead's attacks and releases. After this step is down pat, the quartet finds that it is following and supporting the interpretation plan agreed upon by the quartet, and sung by the Lead.
5. Plan and learn posture, gestures, and facial expression to support and augment the interpretation.

Now you are ready to step out to perform in front of the chapter, and even the public. Let's look at this progress backwards. You aren't ready to work on visual presentation until you have the interpretation, attacks & releases, louds & softs, meter & timing changes locked in. You aren't ready to work on interpretation until you have the tuning locked in and the chords are ringing like crazy. You aren't ready to work on tuning until you have the words & notes memorized and can sing through the song without error. It will take some time and a lot of hard work to get to a reasonable performance level. A newly formed quartet with experienced quartet members can take several months to learn to perform together at a standard that their individual experience indicates. It will probably take much longer for the beginner quartet, mostly because of the time required in learning to follow and tune to the Lead.

The experienced quartet goes through the same steps of progress with each new song they learn. They already are competent in focusing on the Lead, following and tuning, so the progress is much faster. Some quartets make up a presentation plan first, before they memorize the arrangement, to get to a performance level more quickly. This way they avoid re-learning interpretation, although the harmony singers should be prepared to follow whatever interpretation the Lead feels at performance time.

The Presentation Plan

Interpretation (audio presentation) and visual presentation make the performance interesting for the audience. Loud, fast and bright (forward placement) give intensity and excitement to the sound. Soft, slow and mellow (back placement) give tenderness and pensiveness to the sound.

The rate at which diphthongs are turned has an effect, too. In the visual presentation, the facial expression seems to be the most effective for the quartet, because the audience usually is close enough to see the faces. Also, lowering the posture and leaning together towards the center suggests tenderness or sorrow, while rising up and leaning forward and away from center suggests excitement. These are just some of the techniques to use in performing the presentation plan. The quartet should discuss the places in the song that they feel would be enhanced by using these techniques. Although everyone should have an input, the Lead has the burden to put them into practice, so he has to agree. If everyone agrees, the performance goes much better. Agreeing on a mental picture or scenario tends to make the techniques more instinctive, and can bring dramatic results to your performance.

Learning to Lead

Anyone who can sing the melody of a song can lead a quartet, right? Wrong! It is really hard to be a leader if nobody follows. So how do you get a quartet to follow? One drill seems to work pretty well. Take a song that the quartet knows and likes, and make a caricature out of the interpretation as a game for the harmony singers to practice their skills in following the Lead.

This also gives the Lead practice in interpretation by exercising large variations in volume, placement and timing. As the harmony parts gain skill in following the Lead, the Lead gains confidence in his performance. Imagine trying to learn to steer a car if you turn the wheel and the car doesn't turn. Disaster! The more responsive the car, the faster you learn to steer. When the harmony singers learn to be very responsive to the Lead and he develops the ability to sell the song, the quartet is on its way. Transferring focus from the chorus director to the Lead is the biggest difference between the chorus singer and the quartet singer.

Sometimes the melody is sung by one of the harmony singers, and he becomes the substitute Lead. An example is during the end of a tag where the Tenor is on the melody, and the Lead becomes a harmony singer. Another example would be when the Lead sustains a note in the melody and the harmony parts sing a swipe, the Bass becomes the secondary Lead and the Tenor and Bari follow the Bass. During duet swipes or echos, the protocol should be: Lead, then Bass, then Tenor, then Bari. Sorry, Bari, we're always last in line.

Coaching

Before you find a coach, it is important that you record the quartet and listen to the playback several times to decide for yourselves where the problems might be. Each man has a tendency to listen to himself first, and to find his own areas for improvement. After that, all four can focus on the total sound and look for tuning problems, attacks and releases, etc.

Then find a knowledgeable coach that you think could give the quartet some help. The coach should echo what you already have heard from your recording. This way he gains credibility with you, and you will be more willing to make the changes he recommends. A good coach reinforces the good things he hears before he gets down and dirty with the areas for improvement. We all need encouragement when we sing, and you should feel good about the coaching session, and be motivated to improve. Try your hardest to do what the coach recommends, even if it makes you uncomfortable. His ear is in a better location than yours, and he may very well be more knowledgeable. Interpretation is the area that probably is the most difficult to deal with in a coaching session. Everyone has his idea about how the song should be interpreted, but remember, the burden is on the Lead. If the Lead doesn't feel things that way, he probably won't be able to sell the song that way. However, try the coach's interpretation ideas as best you can. You might like 'em.

Sing-outs

Several years ago, Lou Perry gave a talk at the Mid-Winter convention about the ideal forum for quartet singers. Like chamber music, quartets are best suited for big living rooms or small theaters with 30 to 100 people, or so. Much bigger than that, and you need mics & amps & binoc's. And a Big Chorus. The quartet should consider carefully where, and for which audience they accept a sing-out. Also, experience shows that we Barbershoppers are "chord hounds" and love to sing ballads, but audiences get bored with ballads.

So, consider limiting ballads to 2 out of 10, with the rest being Gut Busters, Toe Tappers, Comedies, or Old Favorites, which the audience will know. A well selected program, performed competently, will give your quartet as much fun as you can have as a Barbershopper.

Remember, s.P.E.b.s.Q.s.a. And ring a few with us!

Jim Milner
August, 1998
Society member since 1978
jrmilner@cox.net