



Quartet Series, Part 3

by Brian Philbin

Developing a Repertoire

This is one of the single most difficult jobs a quartet has to undertake. Finding music can always be difficult. The key is to break the job down into its component parts. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How many pieces of music are you looking for?
2. What is the purpose of the piece (show, competition, etc.)?

Once you have asked yourself these questions, stick with the answers. If you're looking for one piece of music, then look for one piece of music and stick with the parameters you've set for yourself and the piece. The idea here is to make the task as goal oriented as possible — then, once you've finished you can set a new task. Don't get distracted by other songs in the process — list them for future reference, but make certain that you get the job at hand done first.

A couple of questions to ask yourself as you're looking through music:

1. Is this music appropriate to the voices in the quartet?
2. Is this music appropriate to the quartet and its image?

These parameters will help you to rule out music that will not work for you and your quartet, and also save time in rehearsal. You may not feel capable of making these decisions on your own, so make certain you have the ability to ask the advice of someone who is more comfortable making those determinations if this is the case.

If you are searching by song title, a few other questions:

1. Has it already been arranged?
2. Do you want an arrangement that is specific to your group?
3. If so, is there anyone you know capable of arranging it for you?

If you know of prolific arrangers whose music you are interested in, you might write them and send them a self-addressed, stamped envelope to request their arrangement lists or have them send some suggested pieces. Make certain to include a description of the type of songs you're interested in, and even perhaps the vocal ranges of your members. This way the arrangers can determine whether or not an arrangement is appropriate for your quartet or not. You can find any member's address through the Society Office in Kenosha. Have your member number ready to identify yourself, as they don't usually give out addresses to just anyone who calls.

Once you have collected a few tunes that everyone agrees on, you should determine what purpose the music serves. A few more questions to ask:

1. Is the song and its arrangement appropriate for contest?
2. Does it fit well into your plan for performances?
3. Does your performance of the song generate the image that you and your cohorts wish to project?

All of the above questions have their own purpose in leading you to determine appropriate pieces for the quartet. However, they are all limiting factors. That is to say, they all narrow the scope of your search. If you should wish to do something out of the ordinary for your group, then by all means, do so. It is always a good idea to stretch your wings and find something different. A few questions in this area:

1. Is there any song that everyone has always wanted to sing?
2. Is there an interpretive measure or different spin that any of your members have always thought was overlooked by other quartets on a certain piece?
3. Is there a solo that one member has always wanted to sing?

These questions will lead you and yours toward your group's "guilty pleasures." It could also mean an entirely new direction for your group, musically speaking. All of these questions are designed to find the unexpected directions that your group might be capable of taking.

One suggestion: While you should always "keep it barbershop" when searching for competition pieces, you should never limit the scope of your performance music. Barbershoppers come from all walks of life and so do the members of every audience. While you can't please everyone, you can always choose music that suits your own collective tastes — this will give you enough variety to touch the folks in the audience who share your group's tastes.

Examine the questions suggested in this article and see what you might choose to do if taken in these different directions. Be bold, experiment and, most of all, enjoy your music.