



Quartet Series, Part 4

by Brian Philbin

Developing and Presenting a Show Package

In this part of the quartet series, we'll look at developing and presenting a show package. There are many aspects to developing an entertaining grouping of songs and banter for the many potentially different venues you can encounter. However, this being an introduction to quartet development, we'll stick to the basics. The most important aspects of developing an entertaining show package—presuming you already have repertoire—are having a plan, practicing the plan, and being flexible.

Developing a performance plan is actually quite simple. Decide what kind of show you would like to have, choose songs from your repertoire that fit the plan, and then decide how many “breaks” you need from singing in order to accomplish it. There is a popular, standard routine which arranges songs and patter so that they occur in the following order: song, song, talk, song, song, talk, etc. This sequence works well, but there are also many variations.

Many of the successful quartets in the Society (those that do a 20-30 minute regular routine, generally the time most chapters are asking quartets to fill) agree that a feeling of flow is most important in developing the order and content of a quartet performance. With that in mind, here is a suggested show lineup that might work for you:

(1) Opener - (A chord buster)

(2) Uptune (One of your two best songs, perhaps? Funniest, most interesting, etc.)

BREAK - (Preferably a sure-fire joke or funny dialogue between two members.)

(3) Uptune (Novelty or rhythm/swing piece if #2 or #4 is not.)

BREAK - (Dialogue and/or joke; keep it tight and interesting.)

(4) Uptune or Ballad (Something different, though don't let down just yet.)

(5) Uptune (Bust another one! That is to say, something exciting!! Please don't hurt yourselves.)

(Possibly another BREAK, if short.)

(6) Ballad (Not a required element, but this is the best place to take an emotive turn.)

BREAK - (Final “thank you” to the audience/chapter, parting comments, etc.)

(7) Closer (Make it one of your two best songs.)

NO ENCORE! This is a point of contention for many performers. The paying audience has put up the

money that pays your fee in order to see your best performance. Therefore, you should perform your best songs and never jeopardize the fact that you have done your job well. Anything less than your best will cause the audience to remember a lackluster performance, as most audiences retain their final impression most vividly. You also want them to come back for more. It's your job to keep them interested enough to come to the afterglow or, better still, next year's show.

The flow is developed by keeping the audience interested and introducing different elements at the right time. After you have sung two different songs, speak to the audience (which you have not done prior to this) and then sing a different "type" of song from the first two. Wake them up again with another chord buster and then give them an emotive turn with a ballad. Finish it off by singing another exciting uptune and you're off.

This will make for about a 25-minute show. You can add songs if the time elapsed is shorter than that or develop shorter "break" material if it goes too long. Audiences, nowadays, are accustomed to watching television more than attending the theater or any other type of performance medium. As a result, they are accustomed to paying attention to their entertainment in 30-minute intervals (of which only 22 minutes is actual programming, the rest commercials). You can, with practice, go longer and maintain the audience's enthusiasm and attention, but this amount of time has consistently been determined to be the most successful. Adjusting to the audience to maximize entertainment potential is the focus, here. Developing a feel for audiences and their reactions to different pieces is the ultimate goal.

Rehearsal and experience will hone the package as a whole — rehearsal is most important to retain the flow. You want to avoid having that awkward moment when everyone is standing around trying to remember what to do next. Keep in mind how some quartets maintain flow in their shows and how, at times, it is even imperceptible as to when the pitch for the next song has been taken. The mark of a truly experienced quartet. A "seamless" performance, as it were, in which the spaces in between the songs are not evident because each duty has been anticipated as a result of familiarity with the order of events.

The thing to bear in mind about most barbershop shows is that you have been hired to do a job. That job is to:

1. Bring in the audience (draw from a different demographic than the chapter alone).
2. Entertain the audience (offer something different than the chorus portion of the show).
3. Give the audience a reason to want to come back next year (they'll tell two friends, and they'll tell two friends, and so on, and so on...)

Outside of barbershop shows, it is expected that we comport ourselves in a manner that will reflect credit upon the Society (Code of Ethics #2). Keeping this in mind, there is a bit more latitude for experimentation with your show package.

If you have no such avenue to present yourselves, the afterglow is a good place to try out a new routine or a new quartet for a large audience. Take your quartet around to other chapters' afterglows and ask if there will be room for a guest quartet on the program. Usually, there is room for a new group — you can even call ahead to the afterglow program chairman, if you know who it is for that chapter. Another place is fellow chapters' meetings. We are all used to having guests during our chapter meetings and they're always welcomed — having a guest quartet sing at break provides a nice intermission for chapter members — and it's a good place to start getting some audience response.

Singing for a sparse audience should be a challenge — the task is to get the small audience to become immersed in the performance — the key is your enthusiasm. Likewise, singing in competition is also a performance and should be treated as such. Every opportunity you have to be "on stage" (referring to any time in front of an audience — stage or not), regardless of its length, is an opportunity to expose

someone in the audience to your group for the first time. First impressions are important, as they may be the last opportunity you have to make any impression at all.

Speaking of competition, your show is a good venue for practicing your competition songs and making them entertaining. You will get true responses to your songs and your plan, and it generally makes for a positive method of reinforcement for your competition pieces. You can place them into their appropriate slots in the above “show template.”

On that same note, there are some “land mines” in performing that you do not want to step on.

1. NEVER introduce a song in a manner that uses its title. For example, “ Now we’d like to sing [song title] for you, we really like [song title], so here’s [song title].” You should tell the audience what the upcoming song means to you and/or the members of the quartet, tell a story about the first time you heard the song, etc. — something along those lines.
2. NEVER become aggressive toward the members of your group or the audience in your act. It makes the audience uncomfortable, even when done for comedic effect. (Anyone remember Andy Kaufman’s wrestling act? Leave the slapstick and anti-comedy to trained professionals. Even they rarely do it well themselves. Your audience has come to see you and hear music sung in the barbershop style.)
3. NEVER intrude upon the audience’s enjoyment. If they are having a good time watching what you are doing, chances are they will have less gratification if they are required to participate in your part of the show. That’s your job and they paid to see you do it! Innocuous references to the audience and its members, however are fairly safe.
4. NEVER perform a “bit” that has not been absolutely memorized. An introduction or line needs just as much preparation as a song in your show. One wouldn’t sing a song without knowing the words. It’s just as inadvisable to perform a joke, introduction, or bit that one has not committed to memory.
5. NEVER perform a questionable introduction or bit that has not been analyzed and given some kind of approval from someone outside the quartet. You might try it out on a family member, coach, or someone whose opinion you trust in order to get a broader view of what type of response this piece will garner. ALWAYS remember that your performance is something you give to the audience, and that their applause and acceptance are their gift to you. They have a choice in whether or not to give that gift. Once you are on stage, you’re committed and have no other choice.

If there were many times the space available to write on this subject, I could share much more of my knowledge of stage and theatrical presentation as it relates to musical theater and barbershop performing. Suffice to say, a lot can be learned by examining other groups—barbershop or not—and other forms of entertainment (stand-up, musical theater, sitcom television, film, etc.). There will always be aspects of other performances that you will find comfortable and that will reflect your strengths as a performer. Incorporating them in your own unique way leads to artistic growth. Seek out other avenues of entertainment. Take in a play or another type of show that will be new to you. Experience art and it will reward you as a performer.

Finally, in developing a show package, the most important element is that it reflects your quartet and its members. The show is nothing if the audience has not “connected” with you in some fashion. Whether through your unique sense of humor or a moment within one of the pieces, it is important to develop a rapport with the audience and give of yourself in some way. They should feel as if they have spent a comfortable half hour with a close friend and, at the same time, feel as if they were 10 years old and seeing something for the first time. If you reflect upon your favorite performances, you will see that this description relates very closely to what you personally have experienced at those times — that feeling of wonderment that can only be achieved in a secure environment. That is how we all need to make our audiences feel. It’s what they paid for in the first place and, well, the customer is always right. Right?