



Quartet Series, Part 6

by Brian Philbin

Singing for Hire: The Real Story

Chances are, if you are in a barbershop quartet, at some point someone who knows this will ask you to sing for an event of some kind. Sometimes it's for a banquet, a private party or a barbershop chapter show. Each of these types of performances has its "pros and cons." We will discuss how to handle them in this article.

Once asked to become engaged to perform, information is usually exchanged regarding the *what*, *when* and *where*, and then the next question asked is usually, "How much do you charge?" There have been many varied (and sometimes heated) debates regarding what is fair and customary in this area. The best standards to use to gauge the answer (presuming you have a show plan in place and are well rehearsed for such an event) are the following questions you should ask yourselves:

1. How much of our time will this entail (including travel, wait time, make-up, warm-up...you get the idea)?
2. Does the day or evening that this occurs create a conflict for any of the members, and how much of a conflict is it?
3. How much do we enjoy performing and how will this experience enhance our perception of performing in general?
4. What is our time worth?
5. What opportunities might avail themselves as a direct result of the exposure of this performance?

These five questions tend to determine a couple of things — whether or not the performance is worth the effort and/or what kind of fee would make it worth that effort. Performances will always cut into your weekend, workday or family time in some way, so you should determine an appropriate fee to get you there and back for the allotted amount of time.

Furthermore, the opportunity for added exposure for your group is worth something. You should factor your desire to perform into the fee, as price will affect your ability to engage the performance. Not every group has a large budget for a couple of top-notch quartets. If your group is just beginning, then a nominal fee should be enough to get the group there and show off your act. Once you have had the opportunity to perform for a few groups, word of mouth will spread as to whether you were worth (or more than worth) the price paid. Only at this point should you start being more discerning about how much you charge for a gig. So let's just say a nominal fee is a good way to start for all concerned.

You may also decide to work toward a certain goal with the proceeds of your performance. Some quartets have donated a percentage or the whole of their fees toward Heartspring, Youth Harmony, etc. This is a laudable and rewarding goal (most are tax deductible, too) and one that should be considered by each group.

Once you have determined a fee, you should make it a rule to have all questions of this type go to the quartet manager (or contact man). This will allow the inquiring party to have one person who will answer questions about availability, fee, show content, etc. The fee can be flexible on a case-by-case basis. This is something each quartet must decide for itself.

Once the show date has been engaged, there are details to be worked out. What is the venue, what are the accommodations for warm up and changing outfits (if any), is there a public address system, etc.? In this way, the quartet is informed ahead of time and comfortable with what to expect.

There are also problems that can arise within the structure of a verbal agreement. The best way to avoid these is to develop a written agreement — use the Society bid form as a guideline and then include anything that you might expect to be furnished you. After reviewing this, the engaging party can revise as appropriate and return it to you. In this way, both sides are certain of what to expect because you've both put it in writing and signed your names to it. There are less surprises that way.

While the Society bid form outlines what the chapter/hiring entity expects of the quartet, it does NOT outline what is expected of the hiring entity/chapter. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the quartet to outline those expectations on their own in written form. There have been numerous instances when quartets show up for a headlining performance on an annual chapter show only to find no dressing room or make-up room, no place to hang clothes, etc. Furthermore, no one thought to have a check ready for the quartet since the treasurer was out of town the week of the show. Things like this are commonplace, so you shouldn't expect everything to be handled right automatically. This way, if there is a problem, you can discuss solutions and compromises with the contact man.

It is important to keep in mind the opportunities that will present themselves upon completion of a successful performance. Previous articles in this series have discussed how to choose music, develop a show package, and build a successful performance. This is where these come together and you find out how well you've planned. The audience response is important, so make note of it regardless of the size or type of audience. You will get an idea of which items work best within your package. Beforehand, it is important to be gracious and hospitable to everyone you meet. You never know from where or whom your next performance opportunity will come.

Speaking of performance opportunities, it is important to bring business cards to every function where you perform and keep them handy. Word of mouth is the most prominent form of advertising for quartets. Your business card stands in the forefront of marketing your quartet. If someone asks where you perform, how much you charge, etc., simply hand them the business card and ask them to contact the quartet manager (contact man). Give them two if they're so inclined. Don't be stingy with your only form of communication with those who have never seen you. That second card may be passed to the next group to hire you and present further opportunities.

Communication is key in this whole process. First, get information about your audience, the venue, the process, etc. Then, give as much information as possible afterward to those who want it. Knowing your audience and understanding the level of their response are forms of communication, as well. They are communicating their enjoyment, or lack thereof, and its level by their applause, laughter and other group responses.

Overall, singing for hire is only as enjoyable or successful as you choose to make it. Everything depends on your plan and how you execute it. If you seek out these opportunities and take advantage of them, you will find even more awaiting you than you expected. If you allow those chances to pass you by, then you will not likely encounter growth in opportunity.

In general, it is best to go in to any venture of this nature with your eyes wide open. Be aware of each opportunity and attempt to be able to recognize its value. It will always pay off tenfold if you manage to keep your eye on the long-term outcome.