



**Quartet Series, Part 7**  
by Brian Philbin

## **Getting Coached: The Quartet Learning Process**

Quartet rehearsal with the members working together learning music and plying their craft is a laudable effort, but every once in awhile a trained outside ear can do a lot to help. Anyone who has ever been involved in a search for a chorus director is aware of the many and varied styles of teaching music and singing brought forth by each candidate. Different results occur...it all depends on the candidate's ability to teach and motivate the singers and, in turn, the singers' abilities to grasp the concepts presented.

### **Seek and ye shall find.**

You can find a quartet coach in a similar manner. It's not that difficult. Just ask someone whose opinion you regard, or perhaps you might even know a category judge or a director who you feel can help. Ask around and find out who is available and whom others have found to be helpful. This approach is your first step toward setting up a coaching session. Beyond that, it's simply a matter of coordinating schedules between the quartet and the coach.

### **Is the coach committed?**

The quartet coach is a long-established part of quartet singing. The degree of success varies as widely as the singers and coaches involved. Successful coaching requires a certain degree of commitment. Of course, the coach has to be committed to communicating well, motivating the quartet members, and developing a rapport that nurtures musical growth on the part of the performers.

### **Is the quartet committed?**

The quartet must be committed on an entirely different level. It is here that the success or failure of a coaching session is often determined. Common goals for the quartet are the hallmark of success for this kind of endeavor. The precepts below serve as guidelines for approaching the coaching session. If they are followed, your level of success can only be limited by your imagination.

- ***Improve the quartet.*** Although some think this is a given, it is not always discussed or agreed upon. A personal goal may interfere with the overall success of the quartet in any given session. Likewise, a non-uniform approach to a task set before the group may cause confusion and slow the progress of the session.

- ***Listen to the coach in a polite and attentive manner.*** It is incumbent upon the quartet members to pay strict attention to everything the coach has to offer and eliminate superfluous comments. The coach's time is valuable and so the limited time spent at the session should be respected. Discussion of events of the session can take place later at a quartet rehearsal. Whether or not you feel as though you can communicate an idea to the quartet better is not at issue. It is far more important to trust that the members of your group are grasping the concept and attempting it, as well as trusting the coach to recognize what level of success is attained with each try.

The coach will often work a phrase at a time in order to illustrate a point, making additional comments each time you complete the phrase. If you interrupt the flow of the exchange (sing, coach comment, sing, coach

comment, sing, etc.) by adding your own comment just as you are about to begin the phrase (sing, coach comment, quartet member comment, sing, coach comment, quartet member comment, sing, etc.), it slows the process greatly and diffuses the immediacy of the coach's instructions. This may create an air of drudgery, sapping the energy the members are attempting to put into the phrase.

- ***Sing YOUR own part and do YOUR own job.*** This is very important to the success of the session. The comments received are vital to your improvement. Remember them and apply them each time. Singing your part and doing your job are the most important tasks of the day. Likewise, no member can do his job fully while concerning himself with the activities of the other members. The coach is in charge during the session. Defer to his judgment. If he is coaching singing or music and a member is concentrating on choreography at the moment, leave it up to the coach to decide whether or not it is important enough to comment on. Do your own job, not anyone else's; otherwise you are cheating yourself out of learning how well you can perform.
- ***Perform at the highest individual level possible.*** Improving depends on taking your abilities to the next highest level. The higher the level you start out at, the higher the level you will attain in a great deal less time. The learning process will allow you to then improve above and beyond your current personal best.
- ***Take personal interest in achieving everything the coach asks of each member.*** The coach will attempt to improve on what he sees and hears. The best way to approach the coach's requests is with an attitude of "I can do that." Avoid the pitfall of pride getting in the way of your achievements. Too many sessions have their momentum come to a grinding halt when a member insists to the coach, "I'm already doing that" or "I'm doing as much as I can." Most likely, the coach would not ask something of the member if it wasn't attainable or if there wasn't more to be done. If you are self-motivated, chances are you are more likely to achieve every one of the coach's expectations. That kind of achievement is much more impressive than telling the coach that you're already accomplishing what he's just asked of you.

### **Do it all!**

This is a must!! Each member should simply commit to trying everything that the coach has to offer. There are several reasons for this.

- ***It's polite.*** He is the guest and you've asked him to accommodate you with his time and energy...no reason you can't do the same.
- ***It's necessary to the learning process.*** You don't want to miss out on a technique simply because you didn't want to try it, or it seemed silly, or you didn't think it would help. You'll never have any idea what you can accomplish if you don't give it an honest try.
- ***It doesn't cost you anything to make an attempt.*** In fact, your coach might be a part of a mini-HEP school for which you paid a registration fee. In this case, the more you get to try, the less each technique has actually cost you.
- ***You will succeed.*** The coach is trying to give you anything and everything he can to help you. It is never reasonable to expect that you'll keep everything you've gone over in the session. In fact, the coach might not even expect to see visible results of some of the exercises that he has introduced. The expectation is that the quartet will leave the session and use those items that are most helpful to the quartet. Concern yourself with finding out everything possible that might help you in some way. Once the session is over, don't worry about the ones your group, as a whole, doesn't find helpful. After you have decided something is helpful, make sure you apply it every time you rehearse or perform it.

Beyond these recommendations you must use your tenacity, talent and creativity to enhance everything that the coach gives you. Remember, he's the coach — you're the creative performer. How you use the knowledge given to you is your responsibility and will ultimately determine how well the coaching session went.