

So you've got a new Quartet?

Introduction

When starting a quartet there are some common questions that crop up again and again. The purpose of this guide is to answer some of those questions, answer some that you may not have thought of yet and gather together the wisdom of experienced quartets to help climb the ladders and avoid the snakes.

There's also some information and contacts others have found useful.

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1. Organising Your Quartet

a. **Friendship**

The most important factor in a quartet is friendship. If you get on with the other members you'll have more fun, you'll want to meet more and the camaraderie will help form a personality for the quartet, which your audiences will recognise, identify with and appreciate.

b. **Planning**

Plan ahead: plan what you want to do next week, next month, next year. Discuss your ambitions, how often you want to meet, whether you want to compete or just have fun, will you want to sing out. It's good to agree on your goals early, even if they change as your quartet progresses.

c. **Registering your quartet.**

You don't have to register your quartet. You could just keep singing for fun. You can compete in contests of many singing organisations without registering.

However, if you want to sing in a BABS contest (other than as a Youth quartet), you will have to register your quartet with BABS. In addition, all the quartet members will have to be full members of BABS, either through a BABS club or as a member of the Don Amos Club.

Another advantage of registering your quartet is that all the members who are also full member of BABS will be covered under the insurance scheme operated through Making Music. More information about the scheme can be obtained from BABS Director of Administration.

Find out about joining BABS or a BABS club here.

http://www.singbarbershop.com/how_to_join.htm

You can find out how to register your quartet here:

http://www.singbarbershop.com/quartet_locator.htm

Click the “Register” link near the top of the page.

For more information you can contact the quartet registrar directly via email on

quartetregistrar@singbarbershop.com.

2. Rehearsals

a. Planning

Planning your rehearsals week by week will help move things forward more quickly as you agree time frames for learning new songs and work on the same things in parallel. Plan some time to warm up, some time to work on craft, some time to work on new songs, run through repertoire and also some time just to sit and have a chat over a coffee. Time to communicate is important.

b. Craft

The craft elements of your rehearsals are important. Working on craft is not just for new quartets it's for every quartet. Even International Champion Quartets spend a lot of time rehearsing and improving their technique. When you're working on craft, learning notes, working on unity, identify that 'type' of rehearsal, as it may be useful for you to stand in a square to achieve the best results in these areas.

c. Performance

When you are rehearsing performance, rehearse in performance positions, with performance attitude and imagine your audience to be there. Rehearse getting onto the stage, linking between songs and getting off the stage. If you usually rehearse in a front room environment you may consider hiring a hall every once in a while to have enough space to rehearse these performance skills. Rehearsing in front of mirrors help's you see what you look like. Video recordings are also useful for this and can provide a valuable and interesting record of your quartet development.

d. Repertoire

Choosing repertoire is something you should do together and you should encourage everyone to have an input. You can get ideas from arrangers lists, from reviewing what has been sung previously in contest (Last 15 years US contest results <http://www.bsmdb.com/ContestList.php> and last 13 years UK contests at http://www.babs-education.info/judges/contests/stats_index.php) and by looking at web-sites of other groups, some of which may well have sound bites for you to listen to. Here are some links to arranger's home pages (US arrangers listing with links to home pages <http://www.harmonize.com/bbshop/arrangers.htm>). When choosing repertoire for contest it's a good idea to ask a Music Judge to check your chosen arrangement for contestability. You'll need to have a copy of the intended arrangement or a rendition of that arrangement to review. Once you have this, email the Music Category Director and ask for an assessment for contest. goj.music@babs-education.info

e. Fifth Ear

Having someone to listen to your quartet now and again is a good idea. Choose someone you like and whose opinions you respect and invite them along to listen and give their comments. They don't have to be an experienced coach to do this, maybe someone from your chorus?

f. Coaching

Coaching is important to quartet development at any level, as you can't do everything from within. Plan period coaching to suit your quartets needs. Consider having coaching in a hall rather than a front room. Don't wait until too close to an event or competition to get coaching. Consider coaching as a way of you getting new tools to self improve. Have an open and responsive attitude to coaching, you may get a wide spectrum of advice all heading for the same end results, it's up to you to decide what works for you. You may not get on well with all coaches, that's no-one's fault, just human nature. See section 3 on Coaching for how to find one!

g. Venues

It's good to rehearse in a venue that is large enough for you to spread out and perform in with space in front of you to rehearse in performance positions when you need it. If you don't have a suitable home available to accommodate rehearsals, Schools, Colleges, Village Halls, Church Halls, Community Centres, Arts Centres, Theatres, Leisure Centres and Hotels are some of the establishments that may have reasonably priced rooms to rent. Contact your local hotel and offer them some free entertainment for their guests and diners twice a year in exchange for using a room for weekly rehearsals.

h. Recording

Recording your rehearsals is always a good idea! You can review the recordings to monitor improvement, listen for things you may need to work on, get a feel for balance between the parts when there's no fifth ear there to help you, spot those elusive wrong notes not always easy to spot when you're singing. You can also send recent recordings to your coach in advance of your session with them to give them a flavour of how you are doing and help agree in advance on a plan for the coaching session. This last point is really useful as a good coach will be able to prepare more effectively if armed with a recent recording.

3. Coaching

a. Where to find a coach?

BABS holds a register of coaches, for more information please contact the Director of Music services at musicservicesdirector@singbarbershop.com.

b. Who to choose as your coach?

Choosing a coach to contact is not always straightforward. The most important factors are that you get on well with your coach, that you enjoy their coaching and that you get positive progress from your coaching sessions. Finding the right coach for your group may involve a certain amount of trial and error. Recommendation by another quartet is a good thing but bear in mind that just because a group didn't get on first time with a particular coach doesn't mean that you will, so stay open minded. Some coaches are also judges and these coaches may tend to specialise in coaching within their own category are, singing, presentation or music. This is useful to know but as a newer quartet you should make sure your chosen coach is experienced in coaching vocal technique and singing basics.

c. How much does coaching cost?

Not all coaches charge a fee and those that do charge a fee are not necessarily better than those who don't. You should expect to reimburse a coach for all expenses and this may well include a mileage rate for their car travel, probably somewhere between 30p and 45p per mile. Coaches fees can range greatly (£20 to £120 a night + expenses) so make sure you have asked how much you will need to pay before you book with a coach. A top US coach may charge as much as £200 plus expenses for an evening and more for a full day.

d. Coaching Events?

There are events, which your quartet can attend to get coaching. BABS Harmony College, typically held over a Friday, Saturday and Sunday in August, has a quartet-coaching stream where you can get coaching from some of the UK's top quartet coaches. (http://www.singbarbershop.com/harmony_college.htm). Occasionally, there are other quartet coaching events held, which are generally publicised in BABS Harmony Express magazine (Editor marketingdirector@singbarbershop.com and on the BABS Website (<http://www.singbarbershop.com>))

4. Singing Out

a. When should we start doing sing outs?

BABS Code of Conduct suggests that we should not inflict our singing on unsympathetic ears. This is a good basis for when and where to start singing out. Start performing to audiences as soon as you can...it's the best experience you can get! Your first audiences will probably be your friends and family, club members on chorus rehearsal night and your fifth ear or coach. Singing to these sympathetic audiences will help build your confidence and improve your performance technique. Listen to feedback and use it to help your quartet development. When you have rehearsed performing to a good standard you will want to sing to wider audiences. How about doing some busking? You'll need to make sure you have permission, if needed, from the local authority but busking can be a great way of singing for fun, with a limited and fairly new repertoire as your audience changes every 5 minutes. Chorus shows are also a good way to get stage experience. When you think you are ready for a 2 song spot let your chorus show organisers know and let them listen to you before you commit to the show. Once you have established some performance confidence you may feel you want to approach local organisations holding shows to be a part of their event. See more in next section. If you are recording your rehearsals you will have a pretty good idea of how your quartet is progressing and when will be the right time to start singing out in public. If you enjoy listening to your own singing the chances are others will too!

b. How do we get singouts?

You can get singouts by contacting local groups who organise shows for entertainment and or fundraising:- Local Charitable Groups, Churches, School PTAs, Women's Institute, Round Table, Free Masons. You can get sing outs from other local clubs looking to put on club shows. You can get singouts from local Entertainment Agents whose details you can get from the internet or local directories.

c. How much should we charge?

How much you charge varies greatly according to the event. If your quartet is invited to appear on a club show you might well consider this to be an invitation you could accept with no fee or expenses only. If singing for a charity or other fundraiser you might consider charging anywhere from £40 for a single 3 song spot up to £200 to £400 pounds for two 20 minute spots as a major part of a profit making show. If working for an agency you will probably start your fees around £400 but often this will include expenses so if you singing out for profit make sure you work out how much time and money the sing out will actually cost you before accepting.

5. Contest

a. When should we compete?

Singing in contest is great experience. Your first will be nerve wracking and you will get better as your quartet improves and develops, so why not start early. When singing in contest, all singing genres look for the same fundamental qualities:- Is it in tune, are you singing the right notes, is your performance enjoyable to listen to. Once you are ticking these boxes you may think that it would be fun to compete. Of course you can compete whenever you like, but rehearsing your performance to a standard of consistent in tune singing before competing will avoid disappointment for you and your audiences in contest.

b. Where can we compete?

BABS holds an annual quartet contest at BABS Convention in May. This contest is for registered BABS quartets only. A preliminary round usually held in October precedes the contest. Winners of BABS National Contests are put forward to represent BABS in International Contest. Barbershop contests are publicised in Harmony Express and on the BABS Web Site. To enter you will need to enter for the preliminary round contest drawer by a certain date set every year, usually around. For information on how to enter email the BABS contest manager at goj_contest_man@babs-education.info. To view the full BABS Contest Rules see: (<http://babs-education.info/judges/handbook/rules.php>)

The Irish Association of Barbershop Singers has an International Section at their convention open to entries from any country. (<http://www.irishbarbershop.com>)

Have a look at other organisations for information on their own contests:-
<http://www.singbarbershop.com/links.htm>

There are many other contests held across the UK and abroad. These are usually Music Festivals, some of which have specific categories for Barbershop Groups to enter and some of which have a selection of other categories you might consider entering to compete against groups from other musical genres. The best resource to identify suitable festivals is the Internet. Use a search engine for “music festival” (then the year) for extensive listings. When entering a Music Festival make sure to read the organisers rules and entrance criteria.

c. What are Barbershop Judges looking for?

Barbershop contest is judged by judges in 3 specific categories; music, presentation and singing. You can get a full picture of 'which judge is looking for what qualities' by reading the 3 category descriptions available in the reference section of the guild of judges web site. (<http://babs-education.info/judges/reference/index.php>)

Here is a summary of the judging 'brief' for each category:-

Singing - Singing is defined as quality, in-tune vocalization accomplished with a high degree of unity, ensemble consistency and artistry. The Singing judge evaluates the degree to which the performer achieves artistic singing in the barbershop style.

Presentation - Presentation is defined as the net impact of the performance upon the audience. The Presentation judge evaluates to what degree the audience is entertained through the performer's communication of the story/message/theme in its musical and visual setting.

Music – The Music Judge judges the song and arrangement, as performed, it's suitability to the barbershop style and the artistry and musicianship with which the performer brings the song to life.

6. Making a CD

a. Some Basics

Making a CD can be good fun; it enables you to share your music with more people; you can use it for marketing your quartet; you could also use it to raise funds for your quartet. You can, of course, make recordings of your quartet at any time.

If you are recording a CD for your own benefit only, then the content of the CD and even the quality consistence of your performance may not be so important.

If you intend to sell your CDs or use them for marketing purposes it's worth remembering that a CD will only record what you do...it won't make you sound any better than you are, so rehearsing the material to a good standard is the first step. This discipline is also a great way of honing your repertoire.

Most CDs for commercial purposes have an average of 12 tracks and contain a variety of songs, from ballads to up-tunes and comedy songs. If using comedy songs you should consider whether the comedic value of the song relies on visual humour as this will not work so well on an Audio CD.

Allow plenty of rehearsal time leading up to the actual recording, as it always takes longer than you think to iron out the odd duff bar in a song. During the rehearsals leading up to the CD recording session record your rehearsals and review them for odd mistakes you may have previously missed.

You will need to obtain copyright permission and pay Mechanical Copyright fees for songs reproduced on your CD.

Allow enough time to record your CD. 6 or 7 songs a day is going well.

b. Costs

The cost of producing a CD depends greatly on what you want to end up with as a finished product. You might want to consider these options.

Record the CD yourself with a good MP3 recorder – No recording cost

Employ a mobile recording professional to record in your venue – from £120 a day

Use a professional recording venue - £35 to £50 per hour

Mix and produce the recorded material yourself – No production cost

Pay the recording professional to help mix and produce - £15 to £30 per hour

Design and print the sleeve artwork and text yourself – No costs

Pay the recording professional to design and print the sleeve artwork – cost varies

Copyright and Mechanical Copyright fees – Could average £50 per song

As a rule of thumb you should be able to get 500 CDs recorded, produced and packaged for around £1 per CD. Smaller volumes could cost more and larger volumes less. Add to this any copyright costs.

Barbershop CDs generally sell from around £5 to around £15 the latter being for a professionally recorded, produced and packaged CD from a popular quartet.

c. Venue

Most Barbershop recordings are not made at professional venues. Here are some aspects of a potential venue you should consider: The cost; acoustics – the venue should provide an adequate amount, but not too much ambient reverberation; make sure the venue will be quiet enough to record in on the day (No aircraft, road noise, adjacent schools, local events, grass cutting other users, maintenance work.)

Often a recording engineer will suggest recording in a totally dead environment with no ambient reverberation. Be aware that this is not necessarily conducive for a good barbershop recording as we rely on some 'fold back' for our ear tuning. Recording in an environment that sounds and feels very different to your usual rehearsal venue may prove difficult.

Take a knowledgeable and trusted fifth ear with you to listen and help with the recording sessions. There is a tendency to be over critical when recording and a fifth ear can help keep a reality check. How about your usual coach or fifth ear?

d. Marketing a CD for profit

If you are making a CD to sell then think about how and well you are going to sell it. There is a relatively small market for Barbershop recordings, which is also fairly easy to target. You can put an advert in Harmony Express by emailing the editor at marketingdirector@singbarbershop.com. You might want to pre-advertise your CD in this way and take forward orders. This would get you some idea of how many CD's you should produce and also generate funds to help pay for the recording.