

# Singing in a Quartet Good for the Soul — *Improves Performance and Vocal Skills*



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Like many of you, when I joined this organization I had no idea what I was getting into! I knew I loved the sound of the chorus on that first night. I knew I would have to memorize music, dance a little and sing something called baritone. I was hooked on the barbershop experience from the first rehearsal, but I really didn't know the half of it because I hadn't yet discovered quartet singing.

Barbershop music originated with quartets. Our art form is founded on four voices, each carrying its own part, creating improvised harmonizations and embellishments around a popular melody without the aid of instruments or written music. This is four voices, each bringing a critical piece to the barbershop puzzle, creating something larger than the sum of its parts. Of course, I knew none of this. I simply admired the chapter quartets I had seen during my brief membership. When some chorus friends suggested we form a quartet, I was excited! I switched to tenor, and we muddled through the process of learning a song together. When we managed to ring a chord, it was absolutely thrilling! My first group wasn't together long — I don't think

we even had a name — but my barbershop life was forever altered.

Soon I was asked to step into another quartet that needed a tenor. This time our goal was to compete at the upcoming regional contest. We had costumes — fancy dresses with gold bows — and competition-worthy music. As part of our preparation, chorus leaders coached us. There I received my first individual attention outside of a PVI. It included both personal vocal instruction and basic instruction in the barbershop craft, instruction tailored to my specific needs as a new singer and performer.

In that quartet I also performed for my chorus for the first time. I still remember it clearly! My knees shook so badly that I was convinced they were distracting to everyone watching. My upper lip took on a trembling life of its own, and I was quite certain my heart would pound right out of my chest. Somehow, the chorus loved us anyway. We performed regularly for them during our preparation, and my anxiety subsided somewhat as I acquired some experience. One day I discovered that if I didn't wear my contact lenses, I couldn't see the audience at all, which helped my stage nerves considerably! In the spring of 1989 I crossed the quartet contest stage for the

**My first competing quartet, THE LEADING EDGE, from 1989. I cannot even see the person taking this picture, I am so blind without my glasses! Worked like a charm for calming my nerves on stage.**

first time, literally blind to the audience's reaction, and sang my oblivious heart out. We placed second but my real victory was in rising above my performance fears, however unconventionally. The next time I stood in the comfort of my entire chorus, my knees didn't shake, my lip didn't quiver, and my heart beat its usual steady thump-thump — and I wore my lenses. Chorus was no longer a scary place for performance.

We all have different motivations for getting started in the fun of foursomes: personal improvement objectives, an opportunity to make new friends or a musical vision that must be expressed. While quartet singing is an optional aspect of our hobby, it provides a world of benefit to those who choose to pursue it. Some of those benefits include:

### **Tailored Personal Vocal Instruction**

When we are on the chorus risers, we receive vocal instruction appropriate to the overall chorus product. As individuals, we have to sort through that input to determine our personal assignments. When you stand in a foursome, you receive input meant especially for you. The personal awareness created by this individually tailored input is immensely helpful when processing the (necessarily) generic messages provided to you in the chorus environment.

### **Tailored Personal Performance Instruction**

If you're checking out in the ballad, messing up choreography in the uptune or presenting a less than upright vocal posture, rest assured — you will learn about it in quartet! Whether a coach points it out or you observe it yourself in the videos you create while preparing for performance, it's the kind of intensive personal attention we don't always receive in chorus. There's no

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there are many side-benefits to quartet life including:

### **Friendship and Belonging**

Some of my closest friends in life are former quartet-mates. The intimacy of making music together is incredibly bonding. Why else would you buy matching pajamas with three other women?

### **Managing Performance Anxiety**

Knowing

other performer to hide behind in a quartet. It's all you.

### **Transformational Performance Experience**

One of my quartets made giving performances a major fundraising goal. One year we did more than 25 holiday gigs. We learned to gracefully handle unusual environments, unfamiliar equipment and even our own performance errors. We learned how to relate to different types of audiences. When one member couldn't make it for a birthday-gram, we improvised and sang a trio. We learned that art happens in the moment and that trust between performers is essential to create those moments. The sheer intensity of the quartet experience accelerates your growth as a performer considerably.

### **Exposure to Thought Leaders and Role Models**

Quartet singers meet those with amazing talent because of the opportunities presented only to quartets. Early in my barbershop career, I was privileged to receive input from people like Carolyn Butler, Bobby Grey Jr. and members of my region's music faculty. More recently, I've worked with some of the premier talent in our organization today. If you love barbershop, meeting these people alone is inspiring, but getting input from them directly is incredibly informative. Choruses and regional schools often reserve time for visiting faculty to work with local quartets. It's an amazing learning opportunity not available to most chorus members.

Beyond vocal and performance learning,

that my quartet was relying on me forced me to look at what was behind my performance anxiety. I have read books and explored techniques that I would not have done but for my quartets. This education has aided me in quartet, in chorus, in my coaching engagements and even in my professional life.

### **Developing Specialized Skills**

It was one of my early quartets that first insisted I arrange a song for them. Quartets can provide a safe environment to try out fledgling skills such as choreography creation, coaching, arranging and other skills that benefit our barbershop lives.

Are all of these skills transferable to chorus life? You bet! Should everyone reading this article run right out and form a quartet? Well, not everyone has the resources or the inclination to devote time to a quartet. But I encourage you to think about how you might incorporate a little quartet experience into your chorus life. Maybe you could learn a tag at your next afterglow or step into an established quartet for a song you all know and see how you do. Or perhaps the next time you play tag quartet at chorus (i.e. a pick-up quartet where you jump up and replace a singer mid-song by tapping her on the shoulder), you push yourself to get up there and sing! Whether you are all in and enthusiastically putting together your new foursome or just taking your first baby steps in the quartet world, I wish you a rewarding journey. You will surprise yourself in the capabilities you discover, and you'll most certainly experience significant musical and personal growth. **PP**

## **How To Build A Quartet**

Look for compatible musical capabilities and personal objectives when assembling a new quartet. Similar capabilities will allow you to grow together as a foursome. Similar objectives will keep you rowing the boat in the same direction. Being in a quartet can be an intense experience. Common values are also helpful in maintaining strong interpersonal relationships.

Ask someone you respect to listen to you before you commit to being a foursome. This can help you identify early priorities. A fifth ear can also help keep the selection process objective for you and the other singers.

Consider other capabilities. Do you have someone who enjoys putting together packages? Someone who knows a bit of music theory? Someone with a flair for fashion? If you're missing an internal skill, that's OK — but you may have to hire help, so it can mean extra costs.

Choose music appropriate to your capabilities for a more successful experience. Ask for help if you need it — coaches, directors and chorus leaders are all happy to get you started on the right foot.

Unlike choruses, quartets are temporary organizations. Some last less than a year, some last more than 20 years. The important thing is that you are compatible, have common objectives, and can produce an acceptable product if you intend to sing in public. Above all, enjoy the experience!