

Developing and Presenting a Show Package

By Brian Philbin – Bass of multiple medalist quartet, Metropolis

There are many aspects to developing an entertaining grouping of songs and banter for the many potentially different venues you may encounter. However, this being an introduction to such 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 generally simple, but there are many decisions to be made along the way. First, decide what kind of show you would like to have, choose songs from your repertoire that fit that approach and then decide how many “breaks” you need from singing in order to complete the show at a high level of performance. 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 can work 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 important in developing the order and content of a quartet performance. With that in mind, here's a template for a show lineup that can work in most instances if you have the material to fill it out:

- (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.)

Personally, I don't recommend an “encore” – you can't expect it or plan for the audience requesting one. This is a point of contention for some performers. Consider: the paying audience has put up the money that pays your fee & travel expenses in order to see your best performance. Therefore, you should perform your best songs here in the show package, not saving them for the afterglow or an encore and never jeopardize your ability to do your job well. 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.

Anything less than your absolute best can cause the audience to remember a lackluster performance, as most audiences retain their final impression most vividly. It's also possible that if you just come out and sing a song that doesn't really generate a great deal of interest, it might even negatively impact the overall impression of the quartet. If the audience absolutely,

positively demands that you return to the stage, you can always come out, sticking to one side of the stage and take a bow and exit again.

Further, consider that we dyed-in-the-wool barbershoppers love a really well-executed ballad. We're all pretty much Geeks that way. Your general audience, however, is neither as interested nor as forgiving as we might be about such things. Ballads in general (and barbershop ballads, particularly) can typically be seen by the general public as overworked, overdramatic, unnecessarily sentimental pieces. Even the inundated will usually welcome a great ballad but cringe at the entirety of one that has only a single, poorly executed chord. For those less familiar with the hobby, a well-performed ballad might interest a few, but the mass of the audience won't really appreciate it for its true worth. Save the ballads for the afterglow – that's where we'll see those whose appetites were whetted by a ballad on the show. It's also where we usually find other barbershoppers making up the general audience.

The thing to bear in mind about most barbershop chapter 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...).

Consider: Ted has sold tickets to his sister and her family, as well as his own family, who are also bringing his grandchildren. Ted can be simply excellent as when it comes to his part and his performance on stage, but it could very well be that there is nothing else in the course of the show that might interest, say, Ted's youngest granddaughter or his teenage nephew. If a quartet comes on and provides a performance that can endear a very wide cross-section of ages, cultures and tastes, Ted's nephew and granddaughter will be more apt to be eager to return the following year. Every show a headlining quartet performs is a growth opportunity.

This brings us back to content and flow.

Flow is developed by keeping the audience interested and introducing different elements at the right time. After you have sung the first two songs, speak to the audience (which you haven't done prior to this) and then move to 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 likely to spark interest in a considerable portion of the audience.

The "General Audience" is accustomed to watching television more than attending the theater or any other type of performance medium. As a result, they're 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 possible, but when you're beginning to develop a successful package, it's important to stick to the basics, 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. This is 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. Know what’s next and move directly to it – remove as much “dead space” as possible.

Keep in mind that, 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) and not foist our songs upon unsympathetic ears (CoE #6). Your presence as a quartet can sometimes be conspicuous – particularly if you’re in a public place with matching shirts or the like. They may mistake you for a bowling team, but it seems that, more often than not, the subject of a quartet comes up and the immediate temptation is to offer to sing a song. It’s not always the best thing to do. Let them ask you and ensure that it will be okay with everyone around you first. Once that’s been established, stick to one song and make it your best. Don’t wear out your welcome. I’ve seen this scenario play out far too many times. A quartet is invited to sing a song and then they sing until they aren’t welcome any longer. Trust that one song will be enough to interest anyone who is going to be interested. If someone asks for more, invite them to the local show or convention.

If you have no avenue, such as a chapter show, to present yourselves, a chapter afterglow is a good place to try out a beginning quartet or new routines for a considerable 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’re all used to having guests during our chapter meetings and they’re typically welcomed, in my experience. Having a guest quartet sing at break provides a nice intermission for chapter members and it’s a good place for you to start getting some audience response.

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. Likewise, singing in competition is also a performance and should be treated as such.

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 during a chapter show and it generally makes for a positive method of reinforcement for these pieces. You can place them into their appropriate slots in the above “show template.”

Also, consider that singing for a more sparse audience should always be a challenge. The task is to get a small audience to become immersed in your performance and the key is your enthusiasm.

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

1. DON'T 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. AVOID becoming 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.). Also, consider any pratfalls and how real they might seem to the audience. It's difficult to laugh at someone falling down if one is far too “real” for the audience to feel like their “in” on the joke.
3. DON'T intrude upon the audience's enjoyment. If they're having a good time watching what you're doing, chances are they will have less gratification if they're 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 are fairly safe, however, this is territory that is best ventured into once the group has developed a fair amount of security within its own performance.
4. DON'T perform a “bit” that hasn't been thoroughly 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 you haven't committed to memory.
5. DON'T perform a questionable introduction or bit that hasn't been analyzed and given some kind of approval from someone trustworthy from outside the quartet. You might try it out on a family member, coach or just someone whose opinion you trust in order to get a broader view of what type of response the piece will garner.
6. 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 – you have no other choice.

If there were many times the space available to write on this subject, I would gladly share much more information on stage and theatrical presentation as it relates to musical theater and barbershop performing. Suffice it 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 upon your quartet and its individual members. The show is nothing if the audience hasn't "connected" with you in some fashion. Whether through your unique sense of humor or a moment within one of the pieces, a particularly well performed ballad or just experiencing the performance as a whole, 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 (a security derived from the competence of the performer). That's 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?

Preparing for a Performance

Information on the Standing Ovation Program, by Chuck Alexander

So, your quartet has been asked to be the featured group on a local chapter show. In preparation, you have practiced your repertoire, set the order that the songs are going to be performed, maybe even worked with your coach on some vocal aspects and finally, selected your show attire. Have you forgotten anything?

Did you consider contacting your DVP of Music & Performance or your District Standing Ovation Chairman to have a certified reviewer attend the show to provide you with for a written review of your quartet's performance?

If you are not aware of the Standing Ovation Program (SOP), it provides both choruses and quartets the opportunity to receive input as to how a performance can be enhanced ultimately to have the audience recognize the performers through a spontaneous standing ovation.

Consider the SOP reviewer as a coach. They are trained to address quality of the sound system, your entrances and exits, your attire, music selection, order that the songs were performed, level and quality of singing, non singing commentary and an overall evaluation of the audience's reception to the performance. Reviewers provide insight as fellow barbershoppers but are taught to seek comments directly from patrons in attendance. The reviewers are NOT judges and are NOT to score each song. They are to evaluate the overall performance and make comments and recommendations as to how the next appearance can be improved.

Is there a cost for this service and program? The answer is "no". The district covers the cost to have a reviewer in attendance. If you are performing at a chapter show, they are asked to provide two free tickets to the reviewer and are also encouraged to have a review done on their part of the performance. The written report is confidential and is seen by only the quartet. No copies are filed with the district or the society.

So, the next time your quartet is involved in a show, why not consider having a Standing Ovation Review done of the performance. The program has been in existence for some time. It works! Give it a try.

If you need more information on this program, drop me a line at chuckalexander@rogers.com.

Chuck Alexander
BHS Music & Performance Committee Vice-Chair – SOP

New Music Coming Out for your Quartet!

Finding the right music for your ensemble can often be a challenge. The Barbershop Harmony Society's Music Publication Sub-Committee meets once each year and among several other responsibilities, reviews new arrangement submissions, popular arrangements that have yet to be published, and other hidden gems and puts together the "Music Premier Series."

Past issues are available for purchase at <http://harmonymarketplace.stores.yahoo.net/muprse.html>

The next two issues will contain the following arrangements:

2009-B Release for May or June

All Dressed Up With A Broken Heart- Tom Gentry

Alleluia- Jim Henry (Larry Gatlin)

Beach Boys Medley- Steve Delehanty

Dear Hearts And Gentle People- Bill Mitchell (Boston Common)

Happy Days and Lonely Nights- Earl Moon

That's Life - Kevin Keller

2010-A for this fall

Careless- Buzz Haeger

I'm Feelin' Fine- Joe Liles & Carl Walters

The Little Boy- Tom Gentry

My Honey's Lovin' Arms- Don Gray

Sweet Mae- Bob Jones (Most Happy Fellows)

Taking A Chance on Love- Ed Waesche (Power Play)

Another function of the committee is to take a look at many of our unpublished pieces and put together a list of attainable, singable, fun arrangements. Below are just a few of their suggestions.

Blue Skies- Ed Waesche

Climb Every Mountain- Steve Delehanty

Dancin' Down In Dixieland- Mel Knight

Fanny- Mel Knight

Gonna Build A Mountain- Waesche & Hale

Gotta Go- Kevin Keller

I Wish That I Could Hide Inside This Letter- Kevin Keller

Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho- Dave Briner and Dave Dettinger

Mister Bass man- Buzz Haeger

Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree- Steve Delehanty

Say It Isn't So- Steve Delehanty

Sweet Violets- Tom Gentry

Teddy Bear-Aaron Dale

Whatever Happened To Melody- Dave Briner

Witchcraft- Dave Briner

Keep the Whole World Singing!