

Tips for a Successful Saxophone Quartet

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I've been fortunate to have been a member of the Bayou Saxophone Ensemble for these past twenty-three years. Wow! Seems a long time, and it is for any musical group.

We've come up with some suggestions to help make your quartet successful.

First, to have a viable sax quartet you need, no, not four, but five or six players. Not everyone can get time off from work, or is otherwise available for playing engagements. You will need some swing players, players that can play all saxes, and can read well enough to sit in any chair. No, not "sight reading", but if you have already played a piece on any instrument you have learned enough about it, repeats, DS, DC, phrasing, etc, to play any part.

MUSIC! I am my groups arranger, and I'm sure you will find that some of your members can arrange, too. But there is still a lot of good music for sax quartet available. There are many free charts on the web which are very good, too. Finding music is not a problem.

Let me suggest that if a piece is very difficult, where it will take a year or more to work up, it will not be played by your group. That's just the reality of the situation. But you can still find music that is interesting that does not sound like it came from an elementary school beginning band book.

If it is the type of music that music majors in college have to be forced to attend recitals to listen to under penalty of failing grades, don't play it. Find music for general audiences. You can slip in a little light classical here and there. We play Dixieland, Ragtime, Jazz, Swing, Pop, some marches, and a little light classical. Most of all, we play FUN music. Fun to play, fun to listen to. Most audiences would rather hear the Disney Sax Quartet (ToonTown Tuners) play Four Brothers or In the Mood than Giant Steps.

Have available in your book good arrangements (and rehearse well) of Happy Birthday and the National Anthem. You will be called upon to perform these. Rehearse and play them well. Don't get cute and improvise. Just play well.

Have a separate Christmas book. It is time to begin rehearsing this now. You should find "Christmas Carols for Saxophone Quartet" by Lloyd Conley (J. W. Pepper and others). These are 12 traditional Christmas pieces that are short, have very interesting harmonies and key modulations, the lead bounces around from instrument to instrument (mark where you have lead with a highlighter!), and are just very enjoyable. We've never had a complaint about any of these being "too jazzy" or otherwise offending anyone, and you know how people can be about religious or Christmas music. This folio alone will give you a good 30-35 minutes worth of music.

<http://www.jwpepper.com/10006107.item#.Ve7kLn12GSc>

<http://www.sheetmusicplus.com/ensembles/saxophone-quartet/lloyd-conley/500134+1703053>

So, how do you wrangle all of this? My suggestion to you is this process. Whoever is leader, or librarian of the group receives the music and the very first thing to be done is to check each page 2, page 3, etc, to see that it is (a) marked with the title of the piece, (b) the instrument, and (c) the page number. These three pieces of information need to be at the top of those pages. If not, type it or hand write it on the original copies. Go on,

it's your music, you can write on it if you wish. I cannot tell you the amount of wasted music I have seen that the pages did not have this information and made it all unplayable.

The librarian immediately copies the music and places the copies in the books. The originals are archived in a filing cabinet, each arrangement/composition in its own manila envelope appropriately marked with title and instrumentation (SATB, AATB, etc), and placed in alphabetical order. Do not waste time putting all the jazz together, putting the marches together, etc. Exception, put Christmas/seasonal music together.

Now let's discuss "the book". I suggest the playing copies be placed in non-glare plastic sleeves in 3-ring binders. You can get these with a clear pocket in front into which you can slide a piece of printed card stock with the part info. I have some pdf's I would be glad to share with you for each of Soprano/Alto I, Alto II, Tenor, Optional Tenor (for quintets), Bari. Email at tenorman1952@yahoo.com.

Place each part in strict alphabetical order. Use a separate binder for the Christmas/seasonal book.

Do not try to get cheap on the plastic sleeves, placing a page of one piece backed up to the last page of the previous piece in the same sleeve. As new music is added pages will get separated and chaos will reign. Each piece should get its own sleeves.

For a three page piece where there are no good page turn opportunities you can trim the edge of the sleeve of page 3, and using 2" wide heavy packing tape, tape the trimmed page 3 sleeve to the outer edge of page 2, forming a "fold-out" page.

Music kept in binders like this will not blow away in the wind. It is easy to just clothes-pin the pages. And the pages may be marked with highlighters, pencils, as needed. They are copies.

At no time are the players allowed to take the books home. You can't perform with three books and one forgotten at home. The group leader (and one will be appointed as such) will keep the books in his possession at all times. If a player needs to take music home to practice copies can be made for that purpose. **THIS IS A HARD AND FAST RULE.** The answer is always NO, you can't take the book.

You know those little silver wire music stands? They are unsuitable to sax quartet use. I suggest you just bite the bullet and buy some good, heavy music stands. I will recommend those from Manhasset over all others. They have withstood the test of time. There is nothing that can go wrong with them that five seconds with a small crescent wrench can't fix. Check tension of the desk swivel and tightness of the base every time you use them. Keeping a little 6" crescent wrench, or an open end wrench of the correct size in your box with the books is not a bad idea.

We seldom require a PA system, and even when we do it is usually provided. I do have a PA, and I will recommend if you do buy a PA that you will need at least 100 watts, you certainly don't need much more, with a pair of speakers with preferably 15" woofers (no smaller than 12") and horn tweeter. Four (or more) mics, let me recommend the good old Shure SM-58, and boom type stands. But put a PA system on the back burner, don't rush out and buy one. I doubt we have had to use my PA, which I used with my R&B band, more than 4 or 5 times in the past 23 years.

A dolly. A good metal, not plastic dolly... the kind you can convert to a 4-wheel cart.

Gig bags have no place in traveling. Whoever thought they were a good idea is sadly mistaken. Good hard shell cases are a must. And I recommend the use of key clamps, too.

We like to travel together in one member's van. We have magnetic signs for the sides of the van that identify our group, and this has helped when we have to explain to security why we need access to the back door of the theatre. For anything unusual, out of town, make sure all members get a map and detailed instructions of where to meet upon arrival. Have each others' cell phone numbers in your phone contact list. Have the name and phone number of your contact or event organizer at the concert venue.

I know, this does not tell you how to rehearse and perform. That's the easy part. It's all these other details that can trip you up.