

# Doing An Arrangement

## Two Ways Of Performing A Song In Public.

1. You all sing together in unison as loudly and as precisely as you can manage, starting together and finishing together.
2. You arrange the song deciding who will take the lead, deciding when people come in, deciding when they're going to drop out, whether or not there's going to be any solos or instrumentals and how it's going to end.

Which of these two approaches do you think will engage your audience?

It's a no brainer, really. But where to start? As my parting gift to you here's a few ideas.

## Know your song before you start.

It sounds a simple requirement but it still astonishes me how many people go to ukulele groups, pick up a song sheet, and without a by your leave expect to do the piece justice first play. It's always better to arrange something you already know, so play it as simply as you can a few times before trying anything clever.

## Get somebody to lead the arrangement

By this I don't mean doing the solo part, although that might happen. I mean one person who does some preparation before it comes to the group. The leader needs to do a bit of homework on the song so that in any subsequent discussion about arrangements somebody present (i.e. the leader) can hold forth with some authority.

## Preparation.

Piss Poor Preparation leads to Piss Poor Performance.

I would suggest:-

1. Doing a bit of research on the interweb thing. Who else has done the song? What other ukulele groups have done it? Are there any clips? Are we going to emulate anybody in our performance (e.g. Wuthering Heights as performed by George Formby) or do we want to make it our own?
2. Play the song through to yourself. How complicated is the chord structure? Can it be

simplified? Is it in the right key? Should it be transposed to something more suitable for the group?

3. If necessary redraft the song sheet. Some song sheets are confusing in their layout. Some chord progressions are unnecessarily complicated.

### **Introduction to The Group**

The leader for the song needs to introduce it to the group, outlining how he or she feels it should be done perhaps by giving a solo performance to the group. This should be followed by a play through. If it proves a bit tricky then play it through a number of times until the group is happy with it.

### **Discussion and Ownership**

There needs to be a discussion at this stage as to the merits of the song and an appraisal of how realistic it is for the group. The group needs to be frank about applying certain criteria.

- Is it in the right key for everybody?
- Is it straightforward enough?
- Have we got all the right words in the right place?
- Do we want to do it as a homage to somebody, or do we want to do our own thing?
- Is it corny, or what?

## **THE ARRANGEMENT**

This is the fun bit

### **Who sings it?**

This depends on the song. A song with a chorus invites solos or duets for the verses. Some songs have lists of ideas (e.g. Lily The Pink, A Pub With No Beer) and would sound good if a fresh soloist takes on the next verse. In other songs it might be a strong arrangement to start the song as a solo with other singers coming in after the verse first. In other songs you may want everybody to drop out leaving a soloist to play by themselves. Remember, nowhere is it written down in stone that everybody has to sing all the time. Decide what is right for the song?

### **Who plays along?**

Again what is right for the song? A useful device is to start the introduction as a solo and one or two instruments coming in as the song starts and then build up steadily until everybody is involved. There are songs which might demand a special approach. We have discussed whether only banjo ukes should be used on "Oh Susannah". Remember, nowhere is it written down in stone that everybody has to play all the time.

If you decide on an instrumental, it is vital to identify who is going to take on the instrumental and how. An instrumental can be done as a solo or a duet, or it can be a series of solos with one solo leading to another. What it should **not** be is two or more egos trying to out do all the other players. Plan what you are going to do and who will do it. Agree to it, and then stick to the agreement.

### **Singing Unaccompanied**

There are times when this is a good idea. Some songs invite opportunities where everybody drops out of playing but carries on singing. It's great fun, but you need some confidence to take it on. However a useful device is during rehearsal to run through the songs unaccompanied in order to give the voice parts a bit of attention and to build confidence in the singing. There are some good singers in the group, and the odd session concentrating on the vocals might encourage the development of singing in parts. What are the chances of collaborating with the U3A Singers to improve on this?

## **OTHER TIPS**

### **LESS IS MORE**

Please don't fall in to the trap of believing that complexity is good in itself. It doesn't need to be complicated, it just needs to be well performed. If a song doesn't need to have everybody singing and everybody playing all the time, then ask people to sit it out. When doing a gig it is often necessary to have the odd number where players just listen and enjoy the band. On the excellent DVD you all kindly gave me of UOGB in Sydney it was a fairly common occurrence for members of the band to sit certain songs out. Why not try it?

This also applies to musical accompaniment. If you don't need to play every note then why do it. When singing verses, for instance, it may only be necessary to strum once or twice a line. Why play all the time if it's not necessary.

### **LIGHT AND SHADE**

This applies to individual songs as it does to the performance as a whole. It's about variety, and with the variety comes interest.

When planning a set bring together a variety of styles and approaches.

- Band Songs (everybody together), Bye Bye Love, Living Doll, Oh Boy etc.
- Songs with a story, Story of My Life, Black Velvet Band
- Songs with Lists, Messing About On the River, Lily The Pink, A Pub With No Beer.
- Showcase Pieces, It's A working Man I am, Dirty Old Town, something slow and sentimental done as a solo.
- A Medley.
- A Show Stopper, to finish the set. Something that we're really good at and have 110% confidence when playing it.
- 

When applying light and shade to an individual song you look at the song as a whole. Taking Dirty Old Town as an example, it starts quietly as a solo, builds up during the course of the song with the determination to chop it down like an old dead tree, before going to a quiet final verse as a solo. Light and Shade, light and shade. Look for opportunities to do this with other songs.

## **MAINTAIN A CRITICAL FACULTY**

This is the happy band, and long may it remain the case. However, it should not be the sad, happy band. It is important when offering your efforts to the public to plan to leave them wanting more, rather than wishing they had less. If after hearing an arrangement the feeling is that it would be embarrassing to be caught playing that piece in public, then say so. Any discomfort you may feel in sharing that within the safety of a private band session is nothing compared with the embarrassment you will feel when you perform it in public. Taking a pride in your performance does take hard work, but it also takes artistic integrity. That means if something isn't good enough, you have to recognise it and say so.

## **ARRANGING A MEDLEY**

When arranging a medley all of the above applies, but there is an additional handy tip. Build up familiarity with the songs *before* you bring them together. It will be handier if all the songs are in the same key. Practice them all separately until everybody is completely happy with them. Then you bring them together, not necessarily as whole songs within the medley but as sample verses. You know how this is done.

Historically what has happened is we have attempted medleys written by other bands, which is fine as long as we were wholly conversant with the material, but often there's been something we are not familiar with lurking there like a rake in the long grass ready to hit you when you weren't expecting it.

## **EYES AND TEETH**

When you're smiling when you're smiling, the whole world smiles with you. If you expect others to enjoy your performance you have got to enjoy it yourself.

Andy

19.9.15