

What is the “American QUAD”?

It’s a 2-part vocal project. In part 1 I introduce 4 songs in solo that can be sung in counter point. In part 2 a quartet sings each of these songs in an arrangement of different American genres.

What is “counter point”?

Counter point is a musical composition technique where 2 songs can be sung at the same time. Not melody and harmony, not a round (like row row row your boat), but 2 separate, stand-alone songs. As you may imagine, it’s difficult to compose in counter point, and the QUAD has 4 such songs.

Who composed these 4 counter point songs?

The 3 original songs (*The Five Pennies*, *Lullabye in Ragtime* and *Good Night Sleep Tight*) were composed by Sylvia Fine for a 1959 movie called *The Five Pennies*. She was married to Danny Kay who starred in the movie. Sylvia was not “in the business” like her husband, but rather a lyricist/composer and, as you can hear, a very good one.

... and the 4th song – The Gloaming?

I’ve always sung in, and “think” in quartets and wanted a 4th song – 1 for each singer. The first several composers I spoke with were not lyricists so I wrote the lyrics. After a lot of searching I finally found Jay Beard who was willing to try. He not only tried, but succeeded wonderfully!

Why did you choose the name “QUAD”?

Quad is Latin for “four” and everything in the project is four - 4 songs, 4 singers, 4/4 time, “QUAD” has 4 letters. We sing it in the key of Eb but we sing it a cappella, so by the time we finish we will probably be in the key of (counting fingers) A, B, C, D.

What about the “American” part of the American QUAD?

After I finally had my 4 songs in counter point, it only took about 5 minutes to sing, if you 1st introduce each song separately. While it’s very satisfying to sing, I felt like it was just too short after so much work. So I decided to take each song and commission an SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) arrangement in a different (but American) genre, each featuring one of the 4 voices. I chose Vocal Jazz, Southern Gospel, Doo Wop, and American Western. Of course, there are many others.

Sounds like a lot of planning.

Indeed, but my engineering mind loves to plan. I learned long ago that if you have a plan, while you may not accomplish everything in your plan, you will always be ahead of the guy with no plan. In this case I chose a dream for my plan. What better plan could there be for a project involving the heart? My dream was to have a product so good that it would be well received at the White House. That hasn’t happened yet but I’m still dreaming.

What inspired you to do this project?

I heard a Barbershop Quartet (there’s another American genre) perform *Lullabye in Ragtime* and immediately fell in love with it. At the time I sang in a BBS quartet and so we learned it and performed it every chance we got. I later discovered that this was 1 of 3 songs from *The Five Pennies* movie. I watched the movie and wanted to perform all 3. I had a lot of fun with 2 friends when we sang all 3 in counter point on a home recording but always wanted to do more with it. My wife had a stroke in 2015 and suddenly I needed to find more projects I could do at home. The American QUAD was perfect.

Tell us more about the movie – The Fife Pennies.

There was a famous band leader in the 30s named Red Nichols. He had a 5 piece he band called *The Five Pennies* - pretty clever - Red Nichols and Five Pennies! In short, he led a very interesting life and in 1959 Paramount released a movie of his life starring Danny Kay as Red, Louie Armstrong, Barbara Bel Geddes (JR’s mother from the 80s TV series *Dallas*), Tuesday Weld and others. Sylvia Fine, Danny’s wife, wrote the 3 counter point songs for the movie.

What do you like best about American QUAD?

The balance: 2 upbeat songs, 2 in slower tempo; 2 songs for the higher voices (soprano & tenor), 2 songs for the lower ones (alto & bass); each voice part is featured in its own song; the upper voices share both an upbeat and slower song, the same for the lower voices. Also, there is a common theme for all 4 songs. They all deal with that magical time at the end of the day, when your work is done and you're relaxing before going to sleep – lullabies, dreaming, bed time stories, etc. All the songs are simple and traditional but each has a special few measures in a minor key that really "sells" the song. I could go on.

What would you say was your greatest challenge or disappointment with the project?

I can think of two disappointments. First, one of my favorite gospel arrangers is Tom Fettke. At the time I was considering a gospel song. I took a wild shot at finding his contact information on line and, to my amazement, I found it! I spoke to him and offered him any of my four songs with which he felt he could do his best work. Much to my disappointment none of them moved him enough. Second, Tony Tennille of the 70s group The Captain and Tennille had moved to Lake Mary, FL (where I live) and I thought what a great alto voice for my quartet. But by the time I found her she had moved to AZ. The challenge for any singer would be the focus required to sing a song (even a simple one) while 3 other songs are being sung at the same time.

How long did the whole project take to complete?

Well I first got the idea of in the early 90s, but I started putting it together earnestly in February of 2017. I released it on my website January 31 (my father's birthday) 2020 – so just under 3 years. I was patient and tried hard to let the project follow its own "natural schedule", but for sure I did ride the wrong horse for too long a few times. I prayed for guidance regularly and believe I did a good job at following God's lead. He led me to some great "helpers".

How much did the project cost you, with commissions, recording, copy rights, etc., to fully put together?

Less than if I had golf for a hobby – ha!

I'm no singer but I think I hear some "bad notes" in your recordings.

Actually you hear quite a few. When I finally got all the sheet music, I was anxious to sing it. At the time I was not in a SATB quartet but I've been singing around town a long time and know a lot of singers. I found four who shared my passion for the project. The four of us had never sung together before. We only rehearsed twice and recorded it. No doubt, a regular quartet, that has been rehearsing and performing together for a long time would sound much better. After many years together each singer just "knows" what the other 3 are feeling and that tight harmony becomes easy and natural. I look forward to hearing those quartets perform it and hope they send me some tickets.

When will your recording quartet perform it again?

The singers on the recording are quite busy with other things and I believe we're not inclined to make the commitment for regular rehearsals and the burden pursuing paying clients. At present, we don't have any such plans.

What do you plan to do from here?

I feel that I've completed my work. I would love to see others enjoy it as much as we have. I really just planted a seed. The songs are quite simple and fun to sing. I only used four American genres – there are many more: Country, Rock & Roll, Bluegrass, Negro Spiritual, Classic – not to mention genres from other countries. I would love to see a Music Composition instructor give his/her students an assignment to expand on what I've started. I would really love to see other quartets enjoy performing it.