

Let's Talk Method

Placement

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In this new installment of *Let's Talk Method* I would like to explore an important and often downplayed aspect of our profession: placement. The strategies and techniques to place our singers have repeatedly proven to be one of the most important logistical decisions a conductor must make. Every ensemble has different needs according to their rehearsing and concert venues, their size, their technical abilities, their repertoire, and also their conductor's preferences. However, here are some general ideas that might help in the decisions making process of our extensive community of conductors worldwide.

Some ensembles are able to select their members based on an audition process and other ensembles accept any and all singers that approach them with the interest and passion for choral singing. Regardless of this fact, every conductor should take the time to hear each member individually and try to find the most appropriate combination of singers within the space. For each chorister the conductor should pay attention to a wide array of qualities in the voice (such as depth, brightness, power, breathiness, vibrato, among many others), intonation abilities, tonal memory, and without this being the least important, behavior and personality traits. This poses a tremendously complex matrix of variables that frequently leads to no perfect solution.

Weston Noble is the Johnson Professor Emeritus of Music at

Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. He has an extensive career in successful performing, especially with Luther College's Nordic Choir. One of his most celebrated traits in choral performances is the tone quality he is able to achieve with his ensembles. He expresses that one of the decisions that helps to attain a better quality in the ensemble is the placement of the singers. Steven Demorest collected ten of Noble's lectures in a monograph entitled *Creating the Special World* published by GIA Publications. The fifth lecture collected in this work talks about auditions and placement. Here, Noble describes his voice placement procedure:

"What ingredients determine blend between singers and the choir in totality? One must consider tone color, vibrato, pitch, physical height, size of tone, and rhythm. To evaluate the presence or absence of these factors the following general guidelines might be used.

- *Find two people who have a natural vocal blend and have them sing together. These voices are your model pair.*
- *Having established a model pair, bring a third individual. This singer sings first to the left and then to the right of the first singer. Each time only the first and third singers are performing. The same process is repeated with the second singer. This person may become the new first singer, be placed between the model pair, be the new third singer, or none of the above.*
- *When you have the best spot, have all three sing together and then bring in a fourth individual and go through the same procedure. Ideally, each singer should blend with both the person on the right and the left—not just one individual.*
- *After the entire section has been placed in order, you might try flip-flopping them in a mirror image and*

hearing the entire section just to check the blend both ways. Sometimes the result is surprising!"

When applying this procedure, I have found that darker voices tend to unify better and faster with brighter voices. So in the end I tend to organize each section with a succession of voices that looks like this:

dark-bright-dark-bright-dark-bright-dark-bright-dark

In many occasions a section cannot be placed as one single line. When splitting the line in two, the same alternation tends to foster a good unification of the voices. It could look something like this:

dark-bright-dark-bright-dark-bright-dark

bright-dark-bright-dark-bright-dark-bright

A conductor might want to choose a similar alternating pattern when placing the singers based on other important traits such as size and power of the voice, size and speed of vibrato, intonation abilities, music reading and solfege abilities, behavior and personality features, or simply based on experience. By alternating choristers based on their individual characteristics a conductor can create the ideal conditions for all singers to excel in their educational process and musical achievements, at the same time that he might be fostering an ideal unification of the voices resulting in a successful choral result.

Now that every section has been organized, the conductor must think of placing the sections to build the resulting ensemble. Much has been written about this and many publications offer alternative “maps” for building the ensemble. Here are some general ideas:

For treble voices

- Consider placing the Soprano 1 and the piano on the same side to improve overall intonation:

| | | |
|-----------|-----------|------|
| Soprano 1 | Soprano 2 | Alto |
|-----------|-----------|------|

Piano (usually placed to the left of the conductor so the lid can open to the audience)

- Consider placing the Altos between both Soprano sections to improve intonation (top and bottom notes of chords will then be together):

| | | |
|-----------|------|-----------|
| Soprano 1 | Alto | Soprano 2 |
|-----------|------|-----------|

- Consider placing the Soprano 1 in the middle to improve balance and unification throughout the ensemble:

| | | |
|-----------|-----------|------|
| Soprano 2 | Soprano 1 | Alto |
|-----------|-----------|------|

For mixed voices

- Consider placing the Soprano section and the piano on the same side to improve overall intonation:

| | |
|---------|------|
| Tenor | Bass |
| Soprano | Alto |

Piano (usually placed to the left of the conductor so the lid can open to the audience)

- Consider placing the Bass section behind the Soprano

section to improve intonation (top and bottom notes of chords are together):

| | |
|---------|-------|
| Bass | Tenor |
| Soprano | Alto |

- Consider blocks instead of lines:

| | | | |
|---------|------|-------|------|
| Soprano | Alto | Tenor | Bass |
|---------|------|-------|------|

- Consider placing the Soprano and Bass sections together and in the middle to improve intonation and balance:

| | | | |
|------|---------|------|-------|
| Alto | Soprano | Bass | Tenor |
|------|---------|------|-------|

- All these 4-part mixed-voice structures can be split to create 8-part structures. The two ways of splitting that are most used are shown below and can be applied to any of the structures shown above:

Split by lines:

| | |
|-----------|----------|
| Tenor 2 | Bass |
| Tenor 1 | Baritone |
| Soprano 2 | Alto 2 |
| Soprano 1 | Alto 1 |

Split by blocks:

| | | | |
|-----------|-----------|----------|--------|
| Tenor 1 | Tenor 2 | Baritone | Bass |
| Soprano 1 | Soprano 2 | Alto 1 | Alto 2 |

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Mixed formations

- Consider mixing each section only:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 |
| T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 |
| S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 |
| S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 |

- Consider mixing each side of the choir independently:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 |
| S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 |
| T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | T2 | T1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 | B2 | B1 |
| S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | S2 | S1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 | A2 | A1 |

or

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A |
| S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |
| T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A |
| S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |

- Consider mixing the entire ensemble:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B |
| A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S |
| T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A |
| B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T | B | S | A | T |

or

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A |
| S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T |
| B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A |
| S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T | S | T |

Or any combination of all of the above.

Nowadays there is a strong tendency in many ensembles to not have fixed formations and to use the entire stage, and even the aisles in the audience, to create complete musical productions that combine singing, dancing, movement, and lighting. In these cases the possibilities for placement are infinite and are intimately related to the concept of the show and the repertoire selected. This is just another possibility conductors have to create a unique musical experience with their ensembles. In other words, choirs could choose to perform a portion of the concert with traditional formations such as the ones described above (and even switching between several formations), and then break the structures and perform in a free-standing formation or even moving during the performance.

These ideas on placement might help create practical solutions for certain ensembles, might encourage some conductors to explore new boundaries outside established traditions, or may just simply spark creative designs for innovative concert productions. In any which case, it is important to keep in mind that placement is another tool that conductors have to improve the quality of their ensembles, understanding the core principle that decisions that consider placement must contribute to the musical process and must not be taken capriciously, in which case could hinder the overall success of the musical enterprise.

