

Positioning Singers for Optimal Sound

Dr. John Warren, Director of Choral Activities, Syracuse University

With each choir I conduct I strive for the most uniform sound while allowing singers to sing comfortably and naturally. Several studies, plus my experience as a singer and conductor, have convinced me that acoustically positioning choir members fosters a better tone and a more comfortable place for each singer to sing. This article presents a sequential procedure for placing your singers to produce the best sound.

Weston Noble is a pioneer of this process, as he demonstrated in a DVD entitled *Achieving Choral Blend Through Standing Position*, available from GIA Publications. Jo-Michael Scheibe, Chair of Choral and Sacred Music at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, uses a somewhat different system, which I learned as a student at the University of Miami. Scheibe credits Weston Noble, his wife Mary, who is a voice teacher, and years of experience for what he does.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- 1. Place each section individually away from the rest of the choir.** There is no need to take the entire choir's time while working with a single section. Moreover, it is necessary to hear pairs of singers at a time. Singers will be less self-conscious in a small group of the same voice part.
- 2. It is unnecessary for anyone to sing alone.** The conductor can hear well enough in pairs or small groups. Reassure timid singers of this.
- 3. Allow singers to give feedback about differences they hear or which position is more comfortable.** Finding the

most comfortable position for each singer is a goal of the process and singers' input is necessary to achieve this. However, the conductor must maintain control of the situation.

4. **Use a simple, legato, mid-range melody for each section.** The phrase should be simple so that everyone can sing it with confidence right away. It should be legato so that the conductor can hear the sustained quality of the voice. It should be mid-range so that it is comfortable for every singer. The melody *America* works well and is easy to transpose. One may also select a phrase from the current repertoire of the choir.
5. **Remind singers to sing comfortably.** They should not hold back, attempting to blend. The idea is to find the most natural blend. Nor is this a good time for them to show off the size of their voices.
6. **Explain this is not a qualitative, rating system, but an attempt to find the best sound for the section and the most comfortable place for each singer.** It is important to say this early and often. I like to say "It is not like picking a kickball team, but trying to match sounds."

THE PROCESS

1. **Begin with the section standing in a randomly ordered single row or semi-circle. Sing the melody a few times.**

Singing the melody together a few times encourages confidence. As they do this the conductor moves around in front of them, listening to individual voices.

2. **Have groups of 3 and 4 sing the melody.**

This lets you further identify each voice.

3. **Select a pair or trio of voices that will sound good together or produce the sound you want to hear from this section.**

4. Try this pair or trio in every combination.

Amazingly, even switching places with 2 singers can dramatically alter the composite sound.

5. Pick one additional similar voice and try it in each spot (at one end, in the centre, and on the other end) until the best sound is identified.

6. Repeat this process with each singer until all are placed.

7. Listen to the section all together.

A fun thing to do is to have the singers switch back to the random order, then immediately go to the placed order to hear the juxtaposition of the sounds. Do the singers hear a difference? Try reversing the order, too.

8. Divide the section into rows if desired. Experiment to hear which arrangement of rows sounds best.

Pay attention to which voices will be on the end of rows of the choir. These singers will tend to be heard more, so usually lighter voices work better.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Heavy to Light Continuum

I often find that the order becomes a continuum of sound from heavy to light. This is not always true, but it does occur frequently. At the initial audition, some conductors rank singers within a section by the weight of the voice to create a position for each singer. This can be effective too, but I prefer hearing singers together. The order sometimes results in a bright to dark continuum of sound.

2. Unique Voices

It helps to place unique voices last, since you will have the most options for placement. These voices rarely work on the

ends of rows. Sometimes you will discover a “buffer” voice – one that seems to help blend the unique voice into the section’s sound. Sometimes this is a similar voice, but sometimes it can be a contrasting one. For instance, in some cases placing an especially bright voice next to an overly dark one creates a good, resonant, uniform tone.

It is better for those with larger voices to be near others with large voices. The same is true for smaller voices. I expect we all have experienced the frustration of not being able to hear ourselves in a choir or of having to hold back so much we are hardly singing at all. Chances are this will be worked out in this process, but it is important to note. In my experience, singers with especially large or unique voices truly appreciate this process and benefit greatly from it. They are happier in rehearsal and performance because they feel more comfortable and that they can sing.

3. Divisi

How you handle this depends on the size, makeup, and experience level of your choir. If your choir is large enough to have 8 or so singers on each divided part (S1, S2, A1, etc.), then go through the placement process with each divided part. If your choir rarely sings music with divided parts, place the students in standard sections and move individuals as needed when parts divide. Moving a few singers will not drastically affect the sound. Often the divisi works out with the voice matching process. Usually my firsts and seconds end up in the same part of the section, respectively, with a few exceptions. If a singer is far removed from her/his part and needs to be closer to another singer, I will move them for a time or for a certain work.

4. Choose Tone Over Height

This placement system ignores height as a consideration. Hopefully, there is enough room wherever the choir sings to

create a “window” for every singer to see the conductor. Sometimes circumstances do not allow for this. In that case move an individual or two as necessary.

VOICE MATCHING FOR MIXED ARRANGEMENTS

- 1. Choose a simple, legato, mid-range, mixed piece (4-part for SATB choirs).**

A chorale, hymn, or part-song can work well. Unison will not work because of the ranges of voice parts.

- 2. Match a soprano and a bass.**

This will take some experimentation to find the best combination. Usually, similarly weighted voices sound good together.

- 3. Add a tenor next to the soprano and an alto next to the bass (TSBA or ABST).**

CONSIDERATIONS FOR MIXED ARRANGEMENTS

- 1. Honestly, I do not take the time to go through this process again to determine a mixed arrangement.**

I have already heard the singers' individual auditions as well as in section placement, so I find that I know the voices well enough to create good sounding quartets; moreover, voice matching impacts sectional formations more, because in a mixed formation adjacent singers are not singing the same part with the same overtone series.

- 2. Placing quartets on risers**

With any riser formation, if there is a shell or other hard surface directly behind the risers, I believe you hear the singers in the back row more than those in other rows. (This is why when I have fewer men than women I put all the men in the back. Balance is better and more women are able to hear the men than when they are in the centre between sections of

women.) So, with mixed formations I put the sound I want to hear in the back row. They will be heard better by the audience, and their sound will influence the singers in front of them.

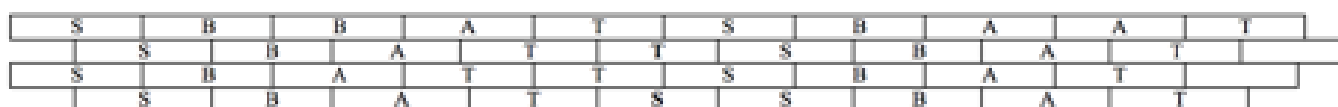
3. Larger or unique voices work better in interior positions.

4. The front row is a wild card.

How much the front row is heard varies with each hall. In some they stand out; in others they are swallowed. Experiment with who sounds best in front. Often this is not the best place for unique voices.

5. Make sure singers can hear their own part as well as others.

I use a “ribbon” formation when the choir is mixed. By varying the order of quartets or staggering the start of each row, it is possible to create a ribbon of each section vertically, while the singers are in quartets horizontally. This mixed formation allows you to place weaker singers in front of a stronger member of their section.



I often adjust the formation depending on the music. Sectional formations tend to create the most uniform sound within each section. Mixed arrangements encourage the most homogenous sound in the entire choir. More unique placements can be created to fit certain pieces.

CONCLUSION

Where singers stand in relation to each other greatly affects the sound of sections and full choirs. This process is one method of arriving at the most uniform sound for the choir and the most comfortable place for each singer to sing. At its

heart, the process is experimentation. Even after going through each step, it is necessary to continue to experiment to find the best sound. Moreover, different acoustics in different halls require experimentation as well.