

Achieving Better Choral Blend Through Voicing the Choir

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I. Why Place Voices?

- 1) Voices should be placed in the ensemble so that each person can feel free to sing with his or her unique voice at all times.
- 2) Placing voices avoids the necessity of forcing blend on the ensemble. You will have less problems with achieving a pleasing blend and much less need for requiring exact mouth shapes, etc.
- 3) Problems related to intonation will be less than in an ensemble in which the members are not voiced. Much of our ensembles' intonation problems are caused by acoustical phenomena rather than faulty ears. It then becomes the director's responsibility to improve intonation through better vowel matching or moving singers to other positions within the ensemble.
- 4) You will have less need to change the blend of the ensemble through drastic measures such as "straight tone" singing. Although judicious use of non vibrato singing is appropriate and necessary at times, excessive use of this device can be detrimental to your singers' vocal health.

II. Placement of Voices:

There are many ways to place the voices within an ensemble and most of these methods have a purpose or reason behind them. Here are a few principles I use when placing voices in the vocal ensembles at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

- 1) Place like voices together:
 - Front Row – reserved for the softest or mellowest voices which are secure in pitch. This row sets a tonal front for the choir and allows these softer voices to sing to their best audible advantage.
 - Second Row – place the more vibrant voices in this row. Be sure that these singers have secure pitch and a well focused tone. They should also be good blending voices and have the ability to listen to those around them.
 - Third and Fourth Rows – place the most vibrant voices of the choir. These include solo voices, overly bright or heavy voices, loud voices, and voices with wide or unusual vibratos.

2) Placement of “problem voices”:

Problem voices include uncertain singers or singers with wide vibratos, insecure pitch, or tone colors that cannot be modified.

- Do not place these voice types on the very end of a row, but towards the outside edges of a row. When these voice types are on the very end they tend to stick out and the audience will hear them more readily.
- Do not place these voice types in the very center of the choir. This also is an area that tends to stick out to the audience as well.
- Do not place these voice types on rows 1 or 2 if possible.
- Place voices with wide or unusual vibratos towards the back of the choir

One drawback of placing all of these voices in a couple of rows is matching vibratos and timbres in a pleasing way. With a little work and some trial and error on your part, most voices can be placed in a satisfactory manner.

3) Additional voice matching tips:

- Listen for the “beats” in the sound when two singers are singing together. This phenomenon is heard when strings of a piano or on a guitar are tuned together. If this “beating” occurs, I know that the voices don’t fit together.
- I try to put the responsibility to some degree back on the singers once I have placed them. If a singer comes up and says they can’t sing next to a person, then I usually move them to another location.
- Ultimately, I rely on my ears to place the voices in my ensemble. Even if two singers’ voices should work together according to one of the principles listed above, and they don’t, I won’t place them together. This process is not an exact science. Your ears will tell you what sounds best, and what I like probably will not be the exact sound that you will choose.

III. Voice Placement Procedure at Colorado State University – Pueblo:

In the audition process at the beginning of the school year, I determine not only the voice part each singer will sing, but I also determine reading ability, intonation difficulties, vibrato type, volume and strength of the voice, and overall color or tone quality of each individual voice.

During the first week or two of rehearsal I allow students to stand where they feel comfortable within sections. At the end of that time period, I will begin the voicing process. I usually keep the ladies one day for about 20-30 minutes and then on another day I will keep the men for about the same length of time for the voicing process. I feel that it is important to wait for a couple of weeks to voice because it allows new members

of the ensemble to adjust to the group and this allows you to hear their real tone quality during the voicing process.

- The sections are arranged the way they will stand in parts in rehearsal and performance. I focus on each *divisi* group within the section first (1st sopranos, then 2nd sopranos, for example).
- I begin by having the entire row sing a vocalizing exercise together to get an overall feel for the sound. I may have some preplanned voices to move at the outset. I will then work down the row, usually in groups of 4 or 5 singers until I have moved voices into the most advantageous placement for the singer as well as the choir. I sometimes have to hear smaller groups of 2 or 3 singers at a time to really hear the problem areas. I try to only do this for my more advanced choirs because they are more secure singers and not as intimidated by singing alone. I follow the same procedure for additional rows and then move on to another section.
- I use the following vocal exercise that Anton Armstrong, director of St. Olaf Choir, uses:

This is a great exercise because it uses open vowels and allows the singer to sing with ease. It also allows you to place the exercise in the voice to determine how singers make adjustments going into the upper register. For sopranos and tenors, I have them sing the exercise in the key of E Major. For altos and basses, I have them sing the exercise in the key of C Major.

In conclusion, should you decide to incorporate choir voicing into your vocal ensemble, be prepared for some initial resistance. All choir members, whether old or young, have definite ideas about where they like to stand within the ensemble. Some insist on standing on the front row or on the outer edges of the row or simply want to stand by their best friend. You will need to do some preparation work with them and assure them that this is for the benefit of the entire ensemble. No one voice is better or worse than another, but each has unique characteristics that can contribute to the ensemble in a very important way. Each individual has a place in the choir where they can sing and sound their best. After students try this a few times, they will truly be excited to find that place where they can sing and be comfortable within the ensemble.

Bibliography

Sharp, Timothy W. *Precision Conducting: Achieving Choral Blend and Balance*. Dayton, Ohio: Roger Dean Publishing Co., a division of Lorenz Corp., 2005.