The School Choral Program
Philosophy, Planning, Organizing, and Teaching

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In the evaluation on the previous page, I wanted to measure individual student progress and achievement by how well the Stravinsky text was learned. I chose the three dimensions I wished to evaluate: accuracy of vowels, accuracy of consonants, and appropriate color of the language. Once I decided on the dimensions to be measured, I wrote criterion three first for each scale. What is crucial to remember in the construction of these scales is that the middle criterion must represent what you believe the average singer in your choir is able to achieve. After the middle criterion was written, I then wrote the two above and the two below. Remember that the criteria must be written in non-overlapping fashion; that is, for a student to achieve a 4, he or she has achieved the criterion below, which has different content. This way, the judge or adjudicator must make a single, objective choice.

The process of assigning a rating to each of these scales is based on measurement of each student. It is important to remember that several scales contribute to an evaluation of a student’s abilities in an ensemble. The scale measures student achievement, but it is the teacher who takes that objective measurement and makes an informed, subjective summary of that student’s achievement.

Rating scales are highly effective for evaluating a choral ensemble performance. Used wisely and creatively, these rating scales can hold students accountable for the musical material covered.

**Achieving Blend through Standings of Singers and Rehearsal Room Chair Arrangements**

Perhaps no single technique available to a conductor can produce effects as dramatic and far-reaching as adjusting the seating arrangement of a choir to maximize both the acoustic of the rehearsal room and the overtone series of the voices within the choir. Many pitch and blend issues are the result of a lack of carefully planned seating arrangements designed for the choir. Good choral blend and good pitch cannot be achieved without some seating adjustments.

There is another more important reason, however, for incorporating acoustic standings into the rehearsal process. If seating arrangements are not created with the overtone series of the voices as the primary consideration, vocal damage could
result as it would be virtually impossible for voices, especially larger voices, to sing freely. If not seated in an acoustical setting that will maximize the specific overtone series of the choir, the larger voices will likely be accused of not blending or even singing out of tune. All of this can be avoided by carefully considering how to arrange the singers within the choir.

**Pros and Cons of Scattered Quartet Standings**

Many conductors use what are commonly referred to as “quartet standings,” or singing in quartets. There are many advantages to such an arrangement, although I prefer the arrangements presented in this chapter to quartet seatings. Quartet standings do accomplish the objective of opening up the choral sound by spreading larger voices throughout the choir and enhancing the need to listen more carefully. This is certainly a desirable rehearsal strategy to heighten both attention and listening within a rehearsal; however, it is more difficult for the conductor to influence musical factors when voice parts are spread throughout the choir.

The quartet standing attributed to Robert Shaw is actually a radical misinterpretation of what he intended for this arrangement. According to Weston Noble in the DVD *Achieving Choral Blend through Standing Position* (GIA Publications), Robert Shaw stood his choir vertically—not horizontally, as is done in the quartet standing procedure folklore suggests. Many choral conductors believe the quartet-scatter technique was to stand the entire choir in equally matched quartets. However, according to Weston Noble, Shaw supported finding the voices that would blend acoustically with one another using the procedure suggested in these pages and shown in the aforementioned DVD. After arranging his bass section and each succeeding section in rows, he would then stand them on the choral risers in the following fashion. (If there were eight basses, he would first find the best horizontal placement of the voices in each section.)

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  8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
  ←
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He would then arrange them on the risers vertically (not horizontally as is commonly believed) so the resultant standing would be:

B1 S1 T1 A1 B5 S5 T5 A5
B2 S2 T2 A2 B6 S6 T6 A6
B3 S3 T3 A3 B7 S7 T7 A7
B4 S4 T4 A4 B8 S8 T8 A8

Conductor

Visually, without any previous knowledge of a specific standing procedure, one would assume this arrangement represents a scattered quartet. In reality, it was Shaw’s wish to have the line arranged in such a vertical fashion. Rather than using quartet standings, consider the recommended seating arrangement presented on the next page: the “alto-in-front” arrangement.

Curved Seating Arrangements

No matter what seating arrangement is used, it is crucial that the arrangement is severely curved in the shape of a U. Such an arrangement maximizes hearing within the ensemble. A more straight or flat arrangement poses two problems: First, the singers will find it more difficult to hear each other, and consequently, intonation will suffer. Second, singers who sit in a more horizontal fashion will find it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a blended sound. A choir sitting in such a horizontal arrangement will send the sound directly into the rehearsal room or concert hall. If any mixing of the sound is to occur, the choir is beholden to the acoustic of the room. If the choir sings in a sharply curved formation, where the outsides of the choir are almost facing each other, a mixing of the sound will take place before it enters the rehearsal room or concert hall. Orchestras rehearse and play in a curved formation for that reason. Have you ever seen a large symphony orchestra sit horizontally, similar to the way a choir stands on risers?
"Alto-in-Front" Seating Arrangement

Five years ago, I rediscovered this seating arrangement and have never returned to a traditional block arrangement for rehearsals or concerts. I was introduced to this concept by Weston Noble. Consider the seating arrangement shown below for an SATB choir using a curved formation. The singers marked in boldface type represent the beginning of the section as determined when an acoustical standing is done (as detailed later in this chapter).

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
T1 & T1 & T1 & T1 & T1 & T2 & T2 & T2 \\
S1 & S1 & S1 & S1 & S1 & S2 & S2 & S2 \\
\text{Conductor} & \text{Conductor} \\
\end{array}
\]

Both arrangements are remarkably effective. The acoustical surroundings and the ability of the singers will determine which is best. Weston Noble prefers the arrangement with the basses in the third row because it places the bass sound immediately behind the soprano sound and ensures better tuning. Also, in addition to the altos being able to hear much better, their presence at the front of the choir acts as a scrim and takes the edge off of the soprano sound.
Adaptation of the Modified Seating Arrangement for Treble Choirs

The overriding principle with the “alto in the front” seating arrangement is that the alto section is at the front of the ensemble. This same principle can be applied to treble choirs. While the acoustic of the rehearsal or performance space will influence the placement of the other parts, the alto section should always be in front. In most situations, the first soprano should occupy the middle row, and the second soprano should occupy the back row. Beginning singers for each section determined by the acoustical standing procedure that follows are indicated in boldface type.

S2  S2  S2  S2  S2  S2  S2  \textbf{S2}
S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  \textbf{S1}
A1  A1  A1  A1  A1  \textbf{A2}  A2  A2  A2  \textbf{A2}

Conductor

Acoustic Standing Procedure for All Choirs

Overtones within a voice, which are the by-products of resonances, are the core of any vocal sound. Overtone series are as varied as individual fingerprints. The paradigm that follows attempts to explain this.

Each voice possesses its own unique overtone series, which defines its own special timbre. That overtone series can be likened to various types of combs. Some combs have larger teeth that are more widely spaced; others have teeth that are narrower and spaced closer together. A comb with wider-spaced teeth will fit together with a comb that has more narrowly spaced teeth. The goal is to get two combs that fit together with complementary teeth. The teeth are representative of the overtones in each voice. You want singers sitting adjacent to each other whose overtone series are complementary or interlocking. When this is accomplished, a natural blend is elicited from singers that does not require them to compromise their vocal technique and allows for the best intonation possible. Singers who are sitting next to unlikely acoustical matches will produce an aural manifestation that
is either too loud or out of tune, or both. When seated in an inferior acoustic position within a choir, there is little a singer can do without causing vocal damage to either blend or fix the pitch. The only hope is for the conductor to be highly skilled in deciding the optimal acoustic seating for the choir. The following are steps you should follow for an acoustically maximized seating arrangement for the choir:

1. The first time this is done, explain the principles to the choir and have the rest of the choir watch and listen to the proceeding.

2. Seat each section individually. That is, seat the alto 1 section separately from the alto 2 section.

3. Select the beginning singer for each section. The position for each of these singers in each section is indicated in boldface type in the diagrams above. The beginning singer can, in fact, be any singer in the section. If the conductor desires a brighter or a taller, narrower sound, then that voice type should be chosen. If a rounder or darker color is desired, then the section should begin with that voice type. To determine which singer that should be, have each singer sing in solo the first phrase of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” (Other vocalises can be used; however, that one is most “honest” because it contains many dictional problems. If singers can sing in tune with each other on a more complex dictional challenge, then it ensures better success of the standing arrangement.)

Have each singer sing at a *piu forte* volume. The keys listed below should be used for this procedure; they place the singers in the middle of their voices. In addition, they require singers to sing over their lifts or breaks. Consequently, weaknesses of each voice are immediately exposed so as not to wreak havoc upon the standing arrangement when literature is employed.
A-flat     first soprano
G-flat     second soprano
D-flat     first alto
B-flat     second alto
G         first tenor
G-flat     second tenor
D-flat     baritone
B-flat     bass

4. After the beginning singer has been selected for the section, you need to determine which singer will stand in the position next to the beginning singer. The direction in which the line is built depends upon the choral arrangement to be used. For example, if you are using the set-up with alto voices in the front row, then the soprano 1 section should be built to the right of the beginning singer. In the same SATB arrangement, you would seat the alto 2 section to the left of the beginning singer. Build each section in a straight line.

5. Hear each singer sing in combination with the beginning singer. The rules for choosing the best acoustical match for each succeeding singer are as follows:
   • Have singers sing *più forte*. They should not attempt to blend with the singer next to them. Encourage singers to sing with a healthy, supported, free, and vibrant sound—the sound that is their sound.
   • Tell singers to listen but make no attempt to blend. Be aware of the “friend factor.” Many times, singers who are singing next to a friend will make an attempt to blend by either under-singing or possibly singing off the breath, which will give an inaccurate result in the standing procedure. Be attentive to this, and emphasize that while
the singers should listen to everyone else except themselves, they should not attempt to blend into the sectional sound. Permit singers, however, to close the vowel (wrap their lips around the sound) in an attempt to fit in with the sectional sound.

- Avoid singers who seem to cause rhythmic “sluggishness.” Some singers, when tried in various positions within the line, seem to cause the rhythm to become sluggish or lethargic. Do not allow these singers to sing in that position, regardless of whether they sing in tune. Over a period of time, that rhythmic laziness will carry over into the sectional sound and cause intonation problems within the section. Use those singers who best enhance or create a rhythmically vital and alive sound.

- Select the singer who sings best in tune with the rest of the line. If there are several singers who sing in tune with the beginning singer, choose the one who is most in tune. If there are several who sing in tune, then and only then can you make a decision based upon the color of the sound.

Note: Many people believe you should place the singers with better ears near the center of the ensemble to produce the “pitch core” of the choir. However, if stronger ears are placed at the center of the ensemble, this will actually weaken the pitch stability of the entire ensemble. If you apply the procedure recommended here, then stronger singers will naturally be placed throughout the ensemble. Also, weaker singers will end up in position between two stronger singers.

6. When the next voice has been determined, have those two voices sing with each remaining singer in the section. To arrive at the next singer, repeat the procedure above. Select the singer who sings best in tune with the two singers already
chosen. Proceed singer by singer until all the singers have been placed.

7. When you have placed the entire section, put the singer who is in the final position in the beginning singer position. The beginning singer you chose would then occupy the second place in the line. When you do this, you will often find that the sound of the entire line will improve dramatically. If it does, then that is the final standing for the line. If the composite sound is worse, then return the singer to the final position at the end of the line. Number the line consecutively starting with the beginning singer. For example, if numbering

--- (section built to the left) ---

S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1
15  14  13  12  11  10  9   8   7   6   5   4   3   2   1

No matter the arrangement used, be sure to keep the numerical order intact when placing singers on risers. If it is not possible to keep the entire section in a single row, then the numeric order can be broken, but it must come into the center each time the line is broken. For example, if the section has to be placed in two rows:

--- (section built to the left) ---

15  14  13  12  11  10  9   8
7   6   5   4   3   2   1
If the section needs to be divided into three rows:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
15 & 14 & 13 & 12 & 11 \\
\hline
10 & 9 & 8 & 7 & 6 \\
\hline
5 & 4 & 3 & 2 & 1 \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

*Never use the numbers in these alternating directions:*

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
11 & 12 & 13 & 14 & 15 \\
\hline
6 & 7 & 8 & 9 & 10 \\
\hline
5 & 4 & 3 & 2 & 1 \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

You can split the section in as many rows as needed as long as you always come back to center!

Remember that the position of the beginning voice determines the direction in which the row stands on the risers. As an example, if you were seating alto 2 using the “alto in the front” arrangement, then your line would be as follows:

(build to the singers’ left)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
A2 & A2 & A2 & A2 & A2 & A2 & A2 & A2 \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 \\
\end{array}
\]

**Turning Order Inside Out to Change Sound**

Once the standing has been completed, if you turn the row inside out, the result will be the opposite color the row had before the reversal. For example, if the final row is numbered:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

The inside out order would be:

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

With younger or inexperienced choirs, it is possible to change the tone color by reversing the rows in this manner. For example, if a standing is done with a Renaissance tone color in mind, then reversing the row will most likely produce a darker tone color suitable for Romantic music.

A word of caution: When standing next to taller singers, shorter singers will not be able to sing in tune regardless of their music aptitude. Since the sound is above them, they cannot hear it accurately to sing in tune. The only solution for shorter singers is to have them stand on boxes that will put them at an equal level with taller singers. The opposite is also true. Taller singers will need to stand on a lower step of the riser if they are to sing in tune. Left unattended, neither shorter nor taller singers will be able to blend into the composite choral sound.

**Acoustical Auditions for Highly Select Ensembles**

In addition to using musical criteria to choose voices for select ensembles, final placement within the ensemble should be awarded only after an acoustical standing procedure is done. This means no singer should be awarded a place in the final roster of the ensemble unless each voice can be acoustically stood within the ensemble. This not only ensures that the final ensemble can sing in tune, but it also implies that even larger voices will “blend” without sacrificing their vocal technique.

**Seating Arrangement for Large SATB Choirs**

The advantage of the set-up shown on the next page is twofold. First, it allows for men to be grouped together. Second, the pitch centers of the choir, the outer parts, are placed adjacent to each other: S1, B2, T1.
Seating Arrangement for Choirs with Fewer Men

Conductors are encouraged to experiment with standing arrangements for choirs with less-than-balanced voicings. Do not be afraid to try something out of the ordinary. Just remember that the rule of thumb should always be to choose a standing arrangement that will sound the best.

When dealing with the acoustics of a room, choose the standing arrangement that will maximize the sound of the choir. As a rule of thumb, place men's voices in the center of the set-up, and surround those voices with the female voices. Also remember to curve the set-up as much as possible. The bold-faced voice parts below signify placement of for the beginning voice of the part.

Conductor

Transferring Seating Arrangements from Rehearsal Space to Concert Space

Many times an acoustic standing arrangement is sabotaged when transferred to choral risers or a chancel set-up using existing seating. The rule of thumb should always be to take the seating arrangement you decided upon and mold it to resemble, as closely as possible, an open-ended box with sharp corners. The reason for this is simple. Such an arrangement allows for the set-up to mix the
sound before it goes into the hall rather than the hall mixing the choir's sound for you. Be less concerned with the look of the choir and more concerned with how the choir sounds. Also, experiment with placement on the stage or in the chancel. Try the arrangement near the back wall, then more forward, and choose the one that sounds best. Such arrangements with choral risers will require you to place the risers at right angles, which will expose holes at the right angles. The arrangement shown on the following page:

```
T1  T1  T1  T1  T1  T1  T2  T2  T2  T2  T2  T2
S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S1  S2  S2  S2  S2  S2  S2
A1  A1  A1  A1  A1  A1  A2  A2  A2  A2  A2  A2
Conductor
```

becomes this arrangement in concerts:

```
T1  T1  T2  T2  T2
S1  S1  S1  S2  S2  S2
A1  A1  A2  A2
B1  T1  S1  A1  A2  S2  T2  B2
B1  T1  S1  A1  A2  S2  T2  B2
B1  T1  S1  A1  A2  S2  T2  B2
B1  T1  S1  A1  A2  S2  T2  B2
Conductor
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Notice the placement of the beginning voices in this arrangement. The numeric order, then, would proceed from the beginning voice outward in each section. Voice parts in bold face inward, or turn 45 degrees inward during concerts. The piano, if used, should be placed in the center of the choir.