

Can We Sit Anywhere?

Answers to this perennial student question...

—submitted by Dr. Scott Fredrickson



By properly arranging the seating, you can help your singers learn their individual parts, allow them to hear all the other voice parts, create a homogeneous sound within a section, and blend sections into a well-balanced choral sound. Seating arrangements are an important factor in the efficient use of rehearsal time and should be chosen for their suitability to the type of music being performed.

SECTIONAL SEATING

This is the most common, but not always the most effective seating arrangement used by choral groups. In much of contemporary pop and jazz literature, chromatic and dissonant textures are frequently employed. For rehearsing this kind of music, the following arrangement has proven useful:

Sopranos	Basses
Tenors	Altos
Director	

Several things can be accomplished with this seating arrangement :

- Sopranos are in the back so that the other voice parts can tune their parts to the melody, and match phrasing.
- Basses are in the back so that the other voice parts can hear the lowest note, or root, and tune to it.
- Tenors and altos are as far apart. These voice parts often create the dissonance frequently found in pop and jazz music. Allowing them to gain confidence within their own part, away from conflicting parts, shortens the rehearsal time.

When problems arise within the section seating arrangement, consider these suggestions:

- Place weaker sections closer to the front of the choir, and closer to the piano.
- Voices whose quality will stand out from the rest of the choir should not be placed in the front row.
- Place stronger voices toward the center of each section.
- Place readers close to stronger singers.

Sectional seating is best used in large group settings, and when individual voice part control is required, as in polyphonic music. There are, however, some drawbacks to this kind of arrangement:

- Individuals become less important when surrounded by others singing exactly the same part.
- Weaker singers tend not to grow musically because they learn to depend on stronger ones to carry their part.

SMALL GROUPS

Quartets and other small group arrangements are useful when individual competence and confidence in one's part is required. Such seating arrangements may be used to accomplish several things:

- Confidence is built in the individual singers by giving them the responsibility to hold up their end of the music so that the quartet sounds complete.
- If an individual sings flat, for example, the likelihood of loss of pitch for the entire choir is reduced. This effect is related to the sub-unit nature of the quartet within the larger unit of the choir. Individuals singing flat within a section are likely to drag down the entire ensemble by lowering their own section; they are less likely to do so when seated nearest people who are not singing the same notes.

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Create more efficient rehearsals through seating arrangements that work—from the book “Popular Choral Handbook,” published by ScottMusic.com. © 2004 ScottMusic.com

- Although, at first, the music will be learned more slowly, it will eventually be learned faster because quartet singing fosters independence, self-reliance, and increased concentration.
- The choir members become accustomed to singing in small groups while provided with the security of hearing their own part sung somewhere else in the room.
- A transition is made between normal larger group rehearsals and special small group sectionals, alleviating fear of the latter.
- Choir members listen to the other voice parts within their small group and learn to blend.

SCRAMBLED SEATING

This method of seating is best used on an infrequent basis to increase awareness and interest in the other voice parts and to improve pitch consciousness. Several things can be accomplished by this arrangement:

- Students improve sight-reading skills.
- Increased self-reliance is fostered.
- Improvement is heard in the overall blend because of the homogeneous mixing of the various voice parts.

This arrangement has one negative side effect. With individual voice parts spread across the entire group, such items as section cueing, phrasing, and dynamics are more difficult to address.

CIRCULAR SEATING

This is the best arrangement for small group rehearsal. The importance of circular seating arrangements is clearly reflected in the German term for a singing society. Singkreise literally means singing circles. All singers can hear the music as the director hears it, and individual musicianship is enhanced because singers can gauge the placement of their part into the overall blend of the piece. With greater eye contact, team spirit is enhanced and the piece is rendered with a greater sense of unity and purpose.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Seating arrangements are an important factor in the efficient use of rehearsal time. A three-step method, utilizing several formations, has proved to be very helpful:

- Seat the best ears in the middle of each section, weaker ears in the outer area, and strong ears at the very ends.
- Employ sectional seating to secure pitches and build initial confidence.
- Switch to mixed quartet arrangements to develop musical interplay. Circular arrangement is also excellent for this purpose.
- Return to original plan to refine sectional contributions.

Many choral directors fall into the habit of using the same standard seating arrangement for all rehearsals and concerts, regardless of circumstances. When you vary rehearsal and performance arrangements, ear development is enhanced and greater musical control is achieved. ◇

—Dr. Scott Fredrickson is president of ScottMusic.com and VocalJazz.com and author of the new book “Popular Choral Handbook.”



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EVENTS & DEADLINES

- November 15 All-State Choirs Program deadline.
- December 7 Convention and Collegiate All-State Programs deadline.
- January 13 WCDA Board Meeting, Appleton
- January 13, 14, 15 WCDA 2005 Convention, Appleton
- March 29 Deadline for Spring/Summer Soundings.
- July 19, 20, 21 "Singspiel," La Crosse.
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