Chorus Riser Placement

Or - Why do I stand where I do?

By Pat LeVezu for Bay Area Showcase Chorus

There are many factors which enter into the placement of each chorus member on the risers. The chorus must sound the best it can and also must look the best possible. Since our primary purpose is to sing, we generally give precedence to sound. The chorus sound must be blended, balanced, energized and accurate - among other characteristics. The placement of each voice can affect each of these areas.

The front row requires voices which are accurate, blend easily, and can maintain good vocal continuity while executing intricately choreographed moves.

The second row should contain voices similar to the front row in quality. The top two rows ideally should contain the strongest (most powerful) voices in the chorus, and must sing accurately. The top row should have the higher, brighter chorus voices. The third row will have a more mellow blending quality, but plenty of strength to help augment the typically lighter first and second row sounds. Less accomplished singers sometimes need to hear their own part in order to sing with confidence and will be placed where they can hear someone else singing their part.

Each side of the chorus should be balanced with similar total volume and vocal quality. The listener hearing "stereo" should get the same effect in each ear! From any normal audience point, the total sound should have the same quality (balance, blend, timbre, etc.)

In addition to the requirements regarding sound, the visual arrangement of the chorus is important to the audience. Back row faces and arm movements are among the most important in the chorus. Good hair styling and makeup are essential. The front row often needs special ability to do dancing movements while singing, must exhibit a sense of rhythm and must have good facial expression and energy. In some choruses front row people must know something about standard dance techniques and are expected to attend extra rehearsals to hone that skill. The front row must also maintain a well fitted costume in impeccable condition meeting all the requirements for hem length and fit since these will be quite evident to the audience.

Persons on the ends of the risers need to meet the same requirements as the front row, but require more skill in executing the moves since they must be done in the limited space of the risers. They will probably be more evident visually to the audience than anyone else in the chorus.

In addition, we know that each of you would like to stand beside someone whose height is similar to her own and, of course, shouldn't be placed behind someone who is taller.

...And then she shouldn't be placed in front of anyone who sings wrong notes or under pitch

...or behind someone who does choreography moves incorrectly

...or anywhere she isn't used to standing in rehearsal at a performance

...or on the top row if she's afraid of falling off

...or next to someone she doesn't like

...or on stage left if her right ear is weak

...or where she can't see the director, even if the director moves around while directing

...or where she can't get down to go to the bathroom during rehearsal

...or where her mother can't see her during a performance

...or etc., etc., etc.

Does this give you any idea of what it takes to determine the riser placement for a chorus? Of course it's impossible to find the ideal location for everyone. (The entire tenor section just can't be on the front row even if they're cute and sing perfectly!)

As we stated in the first paragraph, the chorus sound takes precedence over all other. This is the director's challenge in placing chorus members on the risers.

Every position in the chorus is important. The place you stand will impact the total sound and visual impact of the chorus. When you're missing from your own place, there is an impact on those who stand near you and also on the total chorus sound. Enjoy the spot you've been assigned and help to make your chorus create a wonderful barbershop sound.

Work sheet for riser placement