

# Some Further Remarks On Placement in Classical Singing

by John Sigerson

July 26—It would be obvious to the informed reader of Lyndon LaRouche's remarks above, that the concept of "placement" that LaRouche is presenting extends far beyond the typical music instructor's usual understanding of that term.

For the benefit of those who may not be familiar with even the restricted use of the concept: Placement is one of the many fruits of the Italian Renaissance of the Fifteenth Century which rescued western civilization from the chaos and mass death of the preceding century, and which saw the birth of modern science through the work of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), supported by composers of polyphonic vocal music such as Guillaume Dufay (1397-1474), and later successors such as Josquin des Prez (1450-1521). New potentials of the human singing voice were discovered and developed, as most prominently celebrated in the meticulous sculptures by Luca della Robbia (1399-1482) on the choir stall of the Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral in Florence, showing a choir of singers with such accuracy that one can, when viewing those figures, identify the species of each singer's voice—bass, tenor, alto, soprano—and even the particular vowel which each is singing.

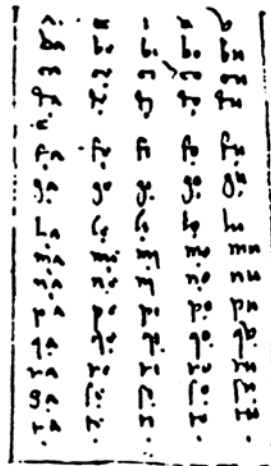
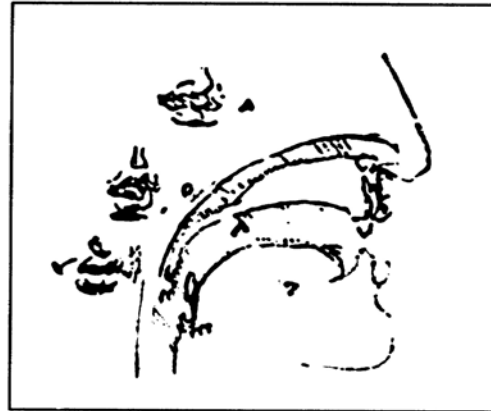
As Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) documented in one of his notebook sketches, the singing of each vowel was associated with a specific “placement,” which is not a physical location *per se*, but rather is a mental image of a particular location in the singer’s head, which the singer imagines in order to “place” each voiced syllable in such a way that not only can it be sustained with maximum beauty, but also towards which the singer can easily move from a preceding intoned vowel, and then move with equal ease to the succeeding one.

Therefore, even in this restricted sense, proper placement is never just a matter of “where” to sing individual notes, but rather it is a mental aid for moving the voice as one proceeds through a musical-poetic phrase.

The concept is not restricted to singers. Great speakers (think of Franklin D. Roosevelt, or Martin Luther King) would employ the same concept of placement—something which, if you haven’t noticed, is completely lacking in recent Presidents and public figures! Even players of musical instruments employ this concept—especially those who have not forgotten that musical instruments are not just mechanical things, but must always be coerced into imitating and extending the best qualities of the human singing voice. An instrumentalist who cannot, or will not make their instrument “sing,” is a failed artist.

Over the centuries since the Italian Renaissance, many singers and singing teachers have promoted their own particular schemas for exactly “where” the voice must be placed, depending on (a) the vowel (or voiced consonant) being sung, (b) the species of the singer’s voice, and (c) the vocal register required to sing the note (and its passage). These schemas are often useful as a starting-point for the beginner; however, as the singer gains more familiarity with the peculiarities of his or her own voice, the thoughtful singer will develop his or her own personal mental map of placement. Singers, on the other hand, who insist on continuing to cling to a fixed mental schema, are never able to develop the freedom of placement which is absolutely required in order to convey a true musical idea to an audience.

I should also add at this point, that as the result of Johannes Kepler’s discovery of the principles of the Solar System—principles which include the same con-



a	e	i	o	u
ba	be	bi	bo	bu
ca	ce	ci	co	cu
da	de	di	do	du
e				
fa	fe	fi	fo	fu
ga	ge	gi	go	gu
la	le	li	lo	lu
ma	me	mi	mo	mu
na	ne	ni	no	nu
pa	pe	pi	po	pu
qa	qe	qi	qo	qu
ra	re	ri	ro	ru
sa	se	si	so	su
ta	te	ti	to	tu

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*The drawing and listing here comes from Leonardo da Vinci’s “Anatomy Manuscripts,” in which he studied how human language reflects the natural beauty of the universe. The drawing shows Leonardo’s concept of where in the mouth the various vowels are produced.*

cept of placement and registration as described above!—it became irrefutable to the best singers and composers that vocal placement requires that the values of the musical scale be tuned such that “middle C” is located very close to 256 cycles per second. This “natural” or “scientific” tuning, which later came to be known as the “Verdi tuning” because Giuseppe Verdi insisted upon it, uniquely locates the main register-shifts around the points of maximum “stress” in the well-tempered musical domain.

All the great Classical composers from Johann Sebastian Bach onward used this scientific “natural” tuning as their mental reference-point for composing for the voice, even at times when the instruments available to them may have been tuned differently. For an in-depth examination of these principles of



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Famed Italian baritone Piero Cappuccilli demonstrates Classical tuning during an April 1988 conference on tuning sponsored by the Schiller Institute.

tuning and registration, see the book which I co-authored, *A Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration*.<sup>1</sup>

### True Placement

Therefore, even in its more restricted sense, only human beings consciously employ placement. Animals—and human beings who insist on acting like animals—simply push out sounds as an immediate expression of their wants and needs, with no *forethought* given to *how* the vocalization is to be shaped.

LaRouche’s concept, moreover, goes far beyond this, because he identifies placement as unique to human *creative* mentation, and to the communication of principles which increase the human species’ mastery of our Solar System, and of our Galaxy, and beyond!

This kind of placement is therefore something very special. It is the true gate, as it were, into the realm of the empyreal, or what some may identify as “deeply religious.” Even though the great works of Classical polyphony of Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms cry out for it, it is

1. *A Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration* is available for purchase, along with extra features, on DVD, at the LaRouche Publications store, [store.larouchepub.com](http://store.larouchepub.com).

but rarely encountered in musical performances today,—though many have attempted to “fake it.” That is not only the fault of the performers, but also of modern “dumbed-down” and jaded audiences, who want to hear “new, more exciting sounds,” but are deaf to the placement of true music—placement which, in fact, is entirely in the mind, and, thus, soundless.

Precisely because this placement is beyond the ken of most people today, LaRouche’s recommendation has always been to focus on a handful of

the very best examples of it in audio recordings of past times, when it was still being employed by the few “hold-outs” still committed to keeping alive true Classical composition, which had all but expired with the death of Johannes Brahms in 1897.

Most notable among these are the post-World War II recordings of Schubert’s Symphony No. 9 as performed by Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954). Another is the 1950 recording of *Vier ernste Gesänge* (*Four Serious Songs*) by Brahms, performed under Furtwängler’s tutelage by the young baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Yet another is Furtwängler’s 1938 recording of Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6, a recording which played an important role in LaRouche’s own thinking, because it demonstrates how even a lesser composer such as Tchaikovsky (whom Furtwängler once described as a *ein halb-Symphoniker*—“a halfway symphonist”) could be brought to Classical levels of placement under a placement-master’s hand.

And to complete this handful of recordings, there are those of the best singers of Classical German *Lieder* (songs), most notably Heinrich Schlusnus (1888-1952).

Like in a bright light, it may take your mental eyes some time to adjust to hearing not just the sounds of these recordings, but rather the soundless ideas behind, or between the sounds. Here is not the place to offer a



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*The author leads a men's chorus, singing the Prisoners' chorus from Beethoven's Fidelio, in New Jersey on July 24, 2015.*

sions), and to create a *unity of purpose* which can be none other than raising the moral quality of human culture in general. In that sense, achieving placement is therefore an intensely “political” challenge!

To put a fine point on it: A chorus consisting primarily of singers who believe that a President Obama is “not all that bad,” will *never* be able to achieve true placement! And likewise with a chorus of people who “like Classical music,” but who then go home and

detailed discussion of these recordings; that is best left to study groups, listening and discussing together—far better than private listening on a computer or portable device.

But, a hint on Schubert's Symphony No. 9: Terribly banal modern performances of this work are frequently heard on so-called Classical radio stations. However, your first experience of Furtwängler's performance of this huge symphony might be overwhelming. Take your time! In the second movement, for example, familiarize yourself with its various phases, and then listen carefully to how Furtwängler moves from one phase to the next. That's where you will experience true placement in action.

Those in the greater New York area have an additional opportunity to study Schubert's great symphony: They can attend the Saturday “Manhattan Project” dialogues with Lyndon LaRouche, which always begin with a choral voyage of discovery led by its choral director Diane Sare.

### **The Manhattan Project's Choral Voice**

In today's collapsing culture, merely coming together to sing choral works, even those by great Classical composers, is not enough to achieve true placement. That is because the singers generally have come together for private reasons, and are never really challenged to rise above their private concerns (or obses-

“relax” to the most degenerate kinds of popular filth.

This is not some sort of “moral code” to be adhered to “for the sake of the cause,” but rather is an inescapable feature of the perilous condition of humanity today. Dropping one's addiction to popular culture may seem difficult, but as with any addiction, beating it will be the only certain way to reverse the otherwise inevitable collapse of our culture, and the probable extinction of human civilization in a thermonuclear holocaust.

Hand-in-hand with this unity of purpose goes the vocal unity of each choral section—bass, tenor, alto, soprano—and sub-section. The individual singer must be willing to surrender his or her own self-imposed limitations—“I can only sing that passage when I sing it loud!”—“How dare you ask me to sing with more/less vibrato on that passage!”—to the requirements of the placement of the choral voice. In some cases, this may even require the singer to completely re-examine and revise his or her firmly held concept of “This is the only way I can place my voice.” Singers need to be able to laugh as they overcome their own limitations; and there must be free and open discussions of these matters, with no backbiting or gossip permitted.

Such is the climate that can foster the attitude which, as LaRouche states, “is the basis for morality” of chorus and audience alike.