

Ranges for choral singers: a guide for composers

(version for SATB choirs)

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For SATB choirs that cannot divide to SSAATTBB, stay in this range
 (see note 2)

Lowest seconds in **some** choirs Seconds only Low tessitura: don't expect forte **Comfort zone: can sing here all day** High tessitura: avoid extended passages Firsts only (and only if you have firsts) **Professional firsts only** **Professional soloists only:** ask them before you write it!

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

* see note on tenors & falsetto/head voice

1. Lowest range for altos and basses: this should be available from at least a few singers in most choirs that can do large challenging works (Mahler 8, Rachmaninov Vespers, that sort of thing) and in most professional groups with 4 or more per section, but in a smaller or amateur choir, don't use that range without checking first.
2. You can use the "seconds only" SAT ranges for choirs with only a single section if you double it with a lower part - they can usually get the notes but they'll be quiet.
- 3-4. Choirs will be totally happy with a piece that sits entirely in the "comfort zone" range, but we like variety within that range.
5. Long passages in the high tessitura can be very tiring and result in the voice 'drying out'; even more so for notes above this. Use sparingly. Going back to low range helps to recover, sometimes better than an extended rest. Try to avoid frequent movements in and out of the high tessitura. It's easier to sing loud than quiet up here.
- 6-7. The highest first tenor and first soprano notes will be very penetrating. If the choir only has a single section on a part and cannot divide, avoid the "firsts only" ranges.

* Tenors can use falsetto or full voice to hit high notes; you can write the highest part of the range (F# and above) loud or quiet, but try to avoid **mf** or **mp**.

Most tenor soloists will prefer to use chest voice throughout though, so the highest notes from a solo tenor will be very loud; all soloists will be loud in high ranges.

If you'd like to learn more about writing for choir or arrange a private consultation, please contact me at hutchingsmusic@hotmail.com.

I'm based in Edinburgh, Scotland, but can travel to give school/college/university masterclasses, or give advice by email and/or Skype.