





PLATFORM FOR SUCCESS: Getting the most from Portable Staging

By Stacy Hanson

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While the audience is focusing on precise choreography and beautiful music, show choir directors know that success literally rests upon the portable staging used to display their groups' talents. Conversations with several directors across the country find that they count on portable staging to address three important, interrelated issues: creativity, confidence and convenience.

ENABLING CREATIVITY

A portable stage should facilitate the same innovation and imagination that fuels great show choirs. Flexibility is a vital attribute, facilitated by multiple levels and configurations, along with custom options.

"One trend I see is portable staging becoming more modular," says Dan Neece, Band Director at Enterprise High School in Redding, California, and Director of the Enterprise Starship show choir.

Starship uses 4' x 8' platforms with interchangeable legs of various heights, often creating a staggered, staircase effect by placing three of each platform's six legs on the adjacent platform, instead of all six legs on the floor.

"We like to go simple, and stacking the risers gives us more versatility," explains Neece. "We can easily fit on almost any stage and keep the same look." On large stages, the platforms are pulled almost all the way out. In smaller venues, platforms are pushed closer together, while still creating steps.

"If I was starting a new show choir program today, I'd buy platforms in every size and configuration possible, including sixteen 4' x 8' platforms," advises Neece. "Once you have the equipment, you can have fun playing around."

One unique aspect of Starship to be accommodated by staging is almost an equal number of instrumentalists and vocalists—approximately fifty students total.

"I'm a big promoter of live music—it gives dancers more kick—and I like the Earth, Wind & Fire look," Neece explains, adding that band members often sing along on ballads. This synergy also fuels recruiting because Starship members must also play in the concert band.

Neece works closely with the choir director and believes it's a win-win to share talent. "I think schools should strive to foster more cooperation," he says, adding that his concert band includes 35 choir members.

When developing a show's theme, staging platforms with simple, clean lines provide a "blank slate"—a modern, streamlined look without the distracting understructure of scaffolding-type stages.



INSPIRING CONFIDENCE

Before there's a need for portable staging, of course there needs to be a show choir to stage.

"There's always a battle between traditional choir and show choir," remarks Cydney Dixon, District Director of Music who also teaches choir and band at Lower Lake High School (LLHS) in Lower Lake, California.

She credits Neece for the encouragement to create LLHS' show choir. Since meeting in college, the two have maintained professional contact over the years. Starship frequently performs at LLHS, and years ago Neece often visited to work with Dixon's older elementary students. Like Starship, LLHS' show choir incorporates a large number of instrumentalists.

"Once you start a show choir, you'll keep going because the kids love it," comments Dixon. Biggs of FAME agrees that show choirs are growing in popularity; FAME has seen a 40 percent increase in participation over just the past three years.

To help nurture this growth, in its Show Choir Summit program, FAME educates attendees about essential equipment for show choir, with portable staging at the top of the list. "It really maximizes a group's presentation," Biggs adds.

Along with its aesthetic impact, portable staging also reinforces a show choir's confidence level, specifically by its stability and reliability. With the high energy and movement common in many routines, portable staging has a foundational importance to a show choir's success: everything depends on it.

The active movement and choreography, from energetic jumping and hip-hop dancing to gentle swaying and everything in between, puts stress on staging. Collectively, a 50-member high school choir can easily weigh more than three tons!

"Because our staging provides excellent stability, all our show choirs can perform full dance numbers without any worries about safety," says Dan Baker, Choir Director and Music Department Chair at Northridge High School in Middlebury, Indiana. "We've

competed without our platforms at other locations, and our choir almost literally danced the risers off of the stage!"

Baker says their platforms are used often—in the auditorium for performances and in the choir room daily for both dance and show choir rehearsals. Northridge's three show choirs number more than 200 students; they generally use four rows of four 4' x 8' platforms each, at 8", 16", 24" and 32" height.

"We often travel and tour with our dance risers," Baker explains. "Our first performance this season was outdoors in a park, where the inconsistent flooring made the risers invaluable."

Considering such demanding usage on the staging, directors should choose portable staging wisely after examining alternatives and reviewing manufacturers' performance specifications; in some situations, it might be appropriate to request third-party test data. Of course, staging platforms should be engineered to meet applicable building codes, including for load capacity and lateral stability; deck-to-deck and deck-to-leg connections should be solid. To minimize headaches, directors should seek peer recommendations and also consider the equipment used by organizations that tour frequently.

During FAME's busy spring season, for example, their semi trucks travel more than 12,000 miles across the country, hauling staging, lighting and other equipment. At each location, up to 25 show choirs may perform on the stage daily.

"As a producer, our biggest concern is the safety of our performers," comments Biggs. "We consider the platforms we use to be the most durable in the industry and the easiest to handle."

PROVIDING CONVENIENCE

It's in the day-to-day operation that the true value of portable staging is demonstrated. Stability and strength are requirements, but user-friendly convenience is also essential. Staging should enable easy, fast setups and quick changeovers—even between songs.

Customization is also easily possible: This can include skirting, from formal to flashy, or creative ideas like the disco set Starship made several years ago. They attached plastic panels under the platforms, where skirting would go, and installed lights behind them. "It worked slick and made a cool effect," recalls Neece.

This season their show will include a lot of projection, featuring a screen above the drummer. The band will be on risers on both sides, equal to the screen's height.

"Everyone's higher than we've been before, which I think is a trend," Neece comments. "Bigger, higher, bolder—the whole band is out there with nowhere to hide."

The increased visibility of all performers, made possible by staging, is an important factor that aids judging at competitions.

"Without staging, directors could put their 'bubblers' in the front row and their groups would likely show very well," claims Joel Biggs, President and Executive Producer of FAME Events. "Now every single performer can be evaluated... from choreography to facial expressions," he says. "Everyone must be at the top of their game."

Along with participating in competitions or festivals, social media like YouTube and TV shows like "Glee" and "America's Got Talent" make it easier for directors to gain creative inspiration from seeing a variety of show choirs perform.

Personal advice also makes a big impact, whether about specific choreography and staging effects or even just the confidence to launch a show choir in the first place.

An example from California illustrates one way that seeds of new show choirs are planted.



“Our school doesn’t have a permanent stage, so our use of portable staging hinges on the performance space and the music,” explains Dixon. “I’m looking to create different visual and musical effects.”

Along with facilitating aesthetic freedom, portable staging also offers practical benefits. “If I can’t hear a certain singing part, I may put those kids up on a stage with mics in front of them,” Dixon explains. The staging focuses these singers, better enabling their voices to be picked up by the microphone.

Intuitive operation of staging is important, as the handling is usually done by students or parent volunteers.

“We’re a very visual society...people appreciate seeing variety,” says Susan Scheibler, Choir Director and Fine Arts Coordinator at Blue Valley Southwest High School in Overland Park, Kansas. In planning her show choir’s numbers, Scheibler strives to use all areas of the stage, so audience members aren’t facing one direction all the time. Some pieces involve dynamic movement, others only minimal—a style she describes as “choralography”.

“Without resetting the whole stage, we can easily create different looks rather simply,” Scheibler explains, adding that they feature soloists or small groups on mini stages made from lightweight, modular theatre rehearsal furniture.

Another modular solution some show choirs use to create variety is a multi-position platform that quickly folds into

seated or standing risers, or functions as a flat stage 12” high. As standing risers, these platforms can also serve as steps to access larger stages.

For basic staging, FAME competitions start with a standard, 16-platform setup—4’ x 8’ platforms arranged four deep by four wide, but Biggs notes that many groups reconfigure them, such as turning platforms sideways. At competitions, timing is tight and delays can result in lost points.

Whether or not show choirs visit national competitions or festivals, most still tour locally and therefore depend on the convenience of staging equipment that travels easily to promote and enhance their program.

Dixon’s show choir visits Southern California every other year, but its primary travel is within district boundaries. They perform for up to eight local elementary schools annually, an outreach effort that also aids recruiting. Dixon’s show choir is also invited to perform for local service

organizations like Rotary, particularly around Christmas and in the spring.

“We do a lot to support community groups, and in turn we ask them for financial support,” explains Dixon. “It’s a win-win situation.”

For successful show choirs, memorable performances are made possible by staging platforms that deliver in three important areas: creativity, confidence and convenience. The results can be inspiring! 

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