



Audience Engagement on the Choral Agenda

Overview of the European Tenso Network conference in Porto

Audience engagement has been a buzzword in classical music for a long time, and one that was supposed to provide companies with an answer to dwindling attendance, ageing audiences and museum-like fossilisation, putting a stop to the classical music 'crisis'. But a glance at the organisational charts of most German music institutions will show that these efforts are no mere passing fad: all major opera houses, established orchestras, well-known festivals and many independent ensembles have long since included audience engagement as an independent department.

The same glance across the international, professional choral scene is surprising, as most searches for education departments or innovative audience engagement projects will be fruitless, with only a few (but excellent) exceptions. Babette Greiner, director of the Tenso network for professional chamber choirs, denies the suggestion that this is the subject of neglect: 'There are plenty of choirs working hard. Sadly though, their efforts and projects are often lost to public view and go unnoticed. Our aim as a network is to make them visible, so that other choirs can be inspired too.' Because it is precisely choirs that stand to benefit most: while staged concerts can present a challenge to orchestral musicians, choral singers need not think about how to stage the movement of a double-bass, set of timpani, or – God forbid – a harp. Nor are expensive class sets of instruments required for school projects: all children already have everything they need.

The challenge to choral music

However, the road to artistic and child-friendly use of the voice, as well as the art of getting young people interested in music, presents its own set of unique challenges. Chamber choirs in particular can run up against organisational, staffing and financial limits, which makes the lack of dedicated audience engagement departments hardly surprising. 'We want to encourage our members and the choral scene, and give them the tools they need to develop more projects that appeal to children and young adults – tools to show choirs that the high quality of their musical performance won't be affected', Greiner insists. She also made audience engagement the subject of the annual Tenso Professionals Meeting this year. By taking this step, the network – which, in addition to the networking of its members has also committed itself to contemporary choral music and the recruitment of new blood – has given of a clear signal.

The choice of venue in Portugal was certainly no coincidence. The *Casa da Música* concert hall was celebrating its tenth birthday, and presented an overwhelming programme to match the notion of public openness already evident in the building's architecture. As part of the conference, classical programme director Rui Pereira and education manager Jorge Prendas offered glimpses into the concert hall's work. The fact that these projects, famous throughout Europe, were entrusted to the institution's artistic directors was cause to sit up and take notice. While audience engagement departments often lead an isolated, satellite existence within their organisations and must even fight internally for their goals and objectives, embedment within one Artistic and Education department (where the artistic and education legs are hierarchically treated as equals) seems to have provided fertile ground. Although vocal audience engagement plays a less prominent role, the breadth, quality and innovation of their education projects was astounding, and a clear demonstration of what audience engagement is, and what it can achieve. Concrete methods for incorporating this work in a choral context were illustrated by further best practices of the English chamber choir, 'The Sixteen'. England's position as a forerunner in audience engagement is no longer a secret. Deeply embedded in both culture and politics, the music and engagement scene places great importance on collaboration. Nearly all of the choir's engagement projects, for example, are conducted in conjunction with other institutions, enabling a broader reach.

Audience engagement is also an integrated management component at 'The Sixteen', and the group offers a wide variety of projects for audiences aged 0-18. The Schools' Matinee project (part of the national SingUp! vocal movement is structurally very similar in many respects to the large-scale *Cantània* singing project by the *L'Auditori* concert hall in Barcelona. Both of these projects demonstrate a substantial and sustainable effect, and target the initial and continued training of primary school pupils' vocal competencies. *L'Auditori* boasts a history of 26 years' experience, and has already exported the model to Germany, Italy, Belgium, Mexico and Venezuela. This type of basic vocal education is the sign of a positive trend: one need only think of the numerous projects in Germany such as Primacanta, Carusos and SMS (*Singen macht Spaß*, or 'Singing is fun'). This trend must be viewed critically in terms of its balance, however, as it does bear the risk of causing shifts in political responsibilities and blurring the lines. The critical question is often raised of whether investments in music-teacher training should not be increased, instead of earmarking funds for the educational budgets of performing groups. The answer could lie in an effective and considered balance, as both areas are symbiotically related.

The invitation of young Finnish audience engagement and business specialist Jussi Rauvola bears witness to the breadth of both the conference's coverage and the organisers' vision: his company, Kipinä Productions (metaphorically translated as 'spark'), uses workshops to offer advanced teacher training, team-building and leadership, concept development and marketing strategies for professional musicians and ensembles. It is precisely in the field of audience engagement that orchestral and choral musicians often feel at a loss when suddenly, after years of security within the communal body of their ensembles, they need to use, say, Guillaume de Machaut's *Messe de Notre Dame* to make sparks fly in front of 30 schoolchildren. 'What we are actually trying to do is support our customers in such a way that they no longer require our services, which is hardly very

enterprising,' Rauvola jokes, referring with analytical clarity to the changing needs of society and the hierarchical communication structures of traditional concert formats.

Staged concerts

Dutch director and singer Marc Pantus broached another important aspect of audience engagement: staged concerts. Although the presentation – as compared to the previous ones – was lacking clear structure, the hypothesis that staged concerts should primarily contribute to the ideal of contemplative listening was taken up with gusto. The discussion revealed various fundamental and contrasting musical concepts behind the assumption that the autonomy of music not only remains unaffected, but can even be enriched through the addition of extra layers of experience. As an example of this kind of 'extra-sensory' staging, fitting reference was made to the pioneering work by the Berliner Rundfunkchor, whose scenic and spatial interpretation of Johannes Brahms' *A German Requiem* as a 'human requiem' opened up new dimensions of perception to its audiences.

These types of discussions, and the conference as a whole, were permeated by the sonorous bass voice of moderator Neil Wallace. With his specialist expertise as programme director of the *De Doelen* concert hall and his experience as co-founder of the Haarlem International Koorbiennale, he challenged the participants to use a SWOT analysis to think about the challenges and USPs (unique selling points) of choral music. Transfer effects such as an emergent sense of community or development of personality, ever-present in the discourse surrounding audience engagement and cultural education, were also part of the result of this analysis. An idea seen as progressive by comparison, however, was that of increased composer engagement through commissions, in order to exploit both the spatial flexibility of choirs and the accessibility of singing through the compositional unification of amateur singers and professional ensembles – and in so doing, to counteract the status of choral music as the forgotten step-child of the scene dominated by orchestras.

'For our choir, the most important message from Porto actually took us back to the essence: audience engagement can be an integral part of the organisation, provided you are prepared to see it as an attitude. For then it can be a source of potential, inspiration and creativity for singers, employees and audiences alike. And creativity is ultimately at the root of all answers, however problematic the questions or challenges may be,' summarises Tido Visser, manager of the world-renowned Nederlands Kamerkoor. And indeed: if this message can penetrate even the levels of management that influence the direction taken by choirs, we should be excited about what will grow from the ideas that have taken root at the conference. One thing is for certain: the field is ready.

(c) Clara Schürle

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