

## Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia: Giving Audiences a Voice

[Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia](#) is a 138-year-old symphonic chorus that regularly performs choral music of varied cultures, traditions, periods and style.

### Project

The project was to engage audiences in new ways before, during and after performances in part by encouraging them to actively participate in concerts through singing and other ways of joining in.

In its proposal, Mendelssohn Club pointed out that audiences at classical music performances are passive and silent, constrained to applause at the conclusion as their only “polite” responses to the experience. Artistic Director Alan Harler said, “I would be so happy if our audiences could feel encouraged and empowered to respond emotionally and physically to our performances.”

#### *Research Into Action Findings Used by the Mendelssohn Club*

- Personal practice is a gateway to attendance. There is a strong correlation between personal creative practice and higher levels of attendance.
- Social connection is a benefit. Arts organizations have an enormous opportunity to increase cultural engagement simply by facilitating social connection.

### Activities

Mendelssohn Club included ways to involve audiences as participants in all of its concerts during the project. As an example, in one concert Artistic Director Harler chose a range of choral works to give audience members a variety ways to participate. The works were the Duruflé *Requiem*, Leonard Bernstein’s *The Lark* and a new work by composer Rollo Dilworth.

To prepare the audience and build excitement for the concert, Mendelssohn Club staff sent out e-mail blasts, made posts on Facebook and Twitter, had choral members blog about the performance, did a radio interview and put up fliers around the city about the opportunity for audience participation. The choral group also held an open rehearsal in which audience members could practice; some 18 people attended.

In addition, in a [You Tube](#) video posted in the weeks before the concert, Artistic Director Harler taught audience members how to sing Gregorian chants during the Duruflé requiem.

*At a Baptist church on a Sunday afternoon, well-dressed audience members file in and find a place to sit in one of the church pews. Artistic Director Alan Harler takes his place in front of the 150-member chorus and does something a little different. Today, he tells the audience, you will have a chance to play an active role in each of the three pieces the chorus is*

*performing. To start off, Harler tells the group about the first composer, Maurice Duruflé, who grew up steeped in Gregorian chants.*

*“We thought it would be good to sing the chants so you can hear them more clearly as the soul of Duruflé’s Requiem,” he says. “By singing it, maybe you can hear this piece better. It doesn’t matter if you can’t read music, you can pick it up. You can relax. I’ll turn and let you know when to sing.”*

*After a brief mini-rehearsal with the audience, Harler signals the chorus to begin, motioning the audience when it is their turn to sing the chant. About two-thirds of the audience members appear to be singing, aided by 30 members of the College of New Jersey College Chorale who are scattered throughout the church and have practiced the chants in advance.*

*“Beautiful!” Harler says at the end of the piece. “Congratulations. You were wonderful.”*

*Later in the concert the audience acts as a crowd by shouting in a Joan of Arc piece and then makes the sound of rain during an original composition based on a traditional African American spiritual.*

*When the concert ends, several audience members are enthusiastic about the opportunity to participate. One said it helped to create a “partnership” with the chorus. Others said that they liked the different ways to participate (i.e., one did not have to be a good singer to be part of the chorus). A chorus member described it as the best experience he had had in ten years of being part of the chorus.*

## Results

- **Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia is approaching the way it presents its work from a new perspective.** “This project forced our organization to ask very hard questions about what we are going to present to our audiences,” said Janelle McCoy, Mendelssohn Club’s executive director. “We are no longer in an environment where we can push content and people will passively consume it. This season made us think about all the ways to engage audiences. It was a tipping point. For every program the overlaying question we always ask is how do we engage the audience? How do we invite them in? I don’t think we ever had those conversations.”
- **Mendelssohn Club saw evidence of increased audience engagement through survey feedback and a large increase in auditions.** In the past year, for example, the organization has seen a dramatic increase in audition requests, mostly coming from younger people, McCoy said. Some 75 people asked to audition for the chorus with little to no advertising, compared to about 10-12 who typically audition each year. McCoy suspects that some of the interest is coming from the organization’s increased outreach on Facebook, YouTube and other social media. The number of attendees at concerts has remained about the same.

*“I’m dealing with too many variables to say bluntly that audiences are going up,” McCoy said. “But there are elements that point to an upward trend. I think it’s a longer trajectory that we are looking for.”*

## Challenges

Finding the balance between artistic excellence and audience involvement can be difficult. Some audience members at the Duruflé concert said it was important that audience participation was not an add-on but rather integral to the piece. One member said she felt that the Gregorian chants were an example of superfluous audience participation. Artistic Director Harler, meanwhile, said that he knew of two regular attendees who likely did not come to the performance because they were afraid they would be forced to participate. Some people, Harler said, want to passively experience music.

One long-time choral member was skeptical about audience participation. He said that in another concert that featured the Brahms *Requiem* he had worked hard to learn the piece and then, to his annoyance, audience members often came in at the wrong places. At this concert, he sat in the audience and was more positive about the experience. He believed this approach should be used as an occasional, rather than regular, part of the performances.

## Lessons Learned

When Mendelssohn Club sought peers nationally from whom they might compare community involvement, they were able to validate their findings with the Weill Institute of Music at Carnegie Hall, who also has a participatory community series. Both organizations shared these best practices:

- **Create an environment in which audiences get to know the essence of your organization.** Mendelssohn Club undertook a variety of ways, both low and high-tech, to create a more intimate connection with their audiences. The club began holding receptions after each concert in which audience members could mingle with one another and chorus members to chat about the performances. The organization also posted YouTube videos and blogs that gave an insider look at the chorus to generate interest in the organization.
- **Build in flexibility by creating different entry points for engagement—i.e., online, at a concert or open rehearsals.** Different audiences have different ways that they want to connect with an organization. For some, Facebook, blogs and YouTube videos are a good way to engage. Others prefer to receive direct mail, meet choral members after a concert or attend an open rehearsal. It's important to have multiple avenues for audiences to connect with an organization in order to meet them where they are.
- **Challenge your audiences.** Mendelssohn Club often chooses difficult pieces to perform such as the Brahms's *Requiem*. The organization chooses such pieces not necessarily because they are challenging but because they were so beautiful. Audiences, however, showed that they were eager to try more difficult pieces.

## Next Steps

Mendelssohn Club developed this project in conjunction with a new strategic plan and will continue to incorporate audience participation in its concerts in the coming three years.

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