

Case Study

The Relaxed Concert Town Hall, Birmingham



Family Arts Campaign

Children with Autism, learning disabilities and sensory and communication disorders should have access to the same life-enhancing opportunities as their peers. This is why in 2014, as part of the [Family Arts Campaign](#), Town Hall & Symphony Hall (THSH) introduced a specialist programme of Relaxed Performances for families, including those with autistic family members, in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

Each production within the Relaxed Performances Programme was carefully designed to meet the needs of children with Autism. This involved making a variety of changes to their typical performance model, the set-up of their venue, and the training of staff.

Though THSH had previously presented three relaxed theatre productions to great success, the idea of bringing the concept into a musical context was new ground for the organisation and for the arts sector in general, and would provide the opportunity to further develop an audience for relaxed performances.

In order to realise their vision of a Relaxed Performance within an outstanding concert hall environment, THSH approached [Autism West Midlands](#) (AWM) and [Orchestra of the Swan](#) to work collaboratively on a Relaxed Concert. The creative team worked with James Rowney, a young ventriloquist with Autism, who compered the concert, and AWM provided high quality staff training for the operations team at THSH. The team also produced specific introductory materials to prepare attenders for what they would see and hear at the concert.

The main challenge in developing the programme was reaching and communicating with a target audience who had never engaged with THSH before and therefore had no direct links to the organisation. Working with AWM proved invaluable in reaching new networks and audiences, which drove ticket sales. Chris Proctor, Programme Manager at Town Hall Symphony Hall, suggests working alongside a charity that represents and advocates for the awareness of the condition you are working with. Access to expertise, training and learning opportunities are invaluable, along with marketing sensitively to the needs of your specific audience.

'We relished the opportunity that you gave us to go out as a family and not worry about what people around us thought. We listened to a world class orchestra in a very relaxed and welcoming atmosphere and we are very grateful'. - Family member

Key indicators of success were growth in audience numbers after several relaxed performances and the positive response from audiences and families. The shows were open to all, not just young people with autism, and the environment has proved particularly welcoming to families. The programme has created a greater feeling of inclusivity and on-going feedback from everyone involved is encouraged and responded to. THSH also use the [Family Arts Standards](#) to maintain this level of trust with their family audience, as well as to label specific events that are particularly designed for families.