



Case Study Bristol Choral Society

Mini Messiah - A Family Concert

Mini Messiah is a 50 minute long, afternoon performance of selected movements from Handel's famous oratorio. The ethos behind it is to introduce the work to children, whilst maintaining a standard of performance that will make the concert appeal to all members of the family. Movements are carefully selected and as well as the chorus, all four soloists and the orchestra are also showcased. BCS' Musical Director Adrian Partington introduces all the vocal parts and the instruments, as well as the music itself. A unique selling point of this performance is that both Chorus and soloists sing completely from memory, allowing them to engage easily with the audience.

How did it aim to reach families? What impact did you want it to have on the size or profile of your family audience/visitor base?

Although BCS has for a long time been in Education work, our Messiah concert day opened up an opportunity for us to easily programme a regular family event and start to build an audience base for future work. Through this concert, we wanted to create an informal environment, where both children and adults alike feel totally at ease. Children often come down to the front and stand behind Adrian whilst he is conducting or really engage with the soloists while they are singing, and this is completely encouraged. As already mentioned, the standard of music making is very high, so the concert should appeal on all levels. We advertise the concert in primary schools, on family websites and through mothers groups. We have also started to build our own family concert e-bulletin list which enables us to send targeted e-mail campaigns to past attendees. Children's tickets are free, and adults tickets are priced very reasonably (under £10), Hopefully, this keeps the concert accessible to the widest possible demographic of audience.

What tools did you use to measure this impact? What key indicator did you use to measure this impact?

As already mentioned we have performed Mini Messiah every year for the last four years, and during this time our audience has got bigger each year. Last December we had around 140 people in for the performance, and the atmosphere was absolutely fantastic. The children came up on the stage at the end and the orchestra were absolutely brilliant, talking to the children about their instruments and demonstrating them. We hope to analyse the box office data more closely in the future. This will help us to establish where our audience is coming from and what we might need to do to attract a larger/broader audience.

What other objectives were you hoping to achieve?

We want to introduce Classical music to children at an early age in an engaging way, whilst giving a solid performance base to our wider education remit.

BCS runs an Apprentice Scheme for teenagers to see what it is like singing in a large choir. Many of these teenagers sing in the Mini Messiah concert which is a really nice link.

As well as the Apprentice Scheme BCS also works closely with primary schools in Bristol through the 'Bristol Sings Music' project, headed up by Laurie Stewart. Our involvement in this project enabled the Choral Society to put on Alexander Le Strange's 'Zimbe' last year, at the Colston Hall. This performance involved 300 primary school children from across the city. The concert was a huge success, and the fact that we have been developing a family audience through the regular Mini Messiah concerts really helped.

Please 'watch this space', as we are planning to do Alexander Le Strange's new piece 'Ahoy! Sing for the Mary Rose', in the not too distant future.

How did resources provided by FAC support your activity?

BCS have only been signed up to the Family Arts Campaign and its Family Arts Standards for a very short time, but we hope that in the future we will be able to benefit from the resources. We would particularly like some advice on simple, inexpensive family marketing strategies, and how to analyse their success.

What worked well, what challenges did you face?

The formula for our Mini Messiah concerts has developed over the last four years. They have always been well received, and we have always received positive comments regarding the friendly atmosphere, and the engaging and professional music standards. One customer last year sent us this message:

'Just wanted to say thank you so much for yesterday's Mini Messiah concert. We took my parents and our three children (5, 7, 9) and we all loved it. What amazed me was that even though there was a huge amount of noise from children all over the hall, there were still many moments of spine-tingling wonder; I frequently found that I'd somehow tuned out all the extraneous noise and had only heard the music. Adrian, the way you talked the audience through what was happening, and broke down the instrumental and choral parts, was wonderful. Your manner was just brilliant. I was not the only one of our party moved to tears at the end. What a joyful, glorious experience. Thank you all very much indeed.'

Our biggest challenge has been that some of the Colston Hall stewards just don't seem to understand the nature of the concert. This is something that we can liaise with the Hall about, to improve for future performances.

What have been the most important things you have learned?

To go with the flow - this performance is all about engaging young people with Classical music and encouraging them to express themselves. If this means that they shout, sing, run around, or dance in the aisles, this should most definitely be encouraged!

What will you do differently next time?

Over the last four year's we seem to have developed a winning formula, and attending the concert seems to have become part of many families Christmas celebrations.

I think that the most important thing is that we try and keep the performance fresh. The main way we achieve this is by selecting different movements to be performed each year. Also, year on year Adrian builds on his addresses to the audience, trying to say new and interesting things about the music, instruments and singers.

Tips for engaging families:

Try to keep things fresh and go with the flow. You cannot take things too seriously when you are confronted with a huge hall full of young children, so try to engage them as directly as possible and enjoy it.

Robert Convey

Chair: Bristol Choral Society