

Case Study

Three Choirs Festival



Age-Friendly

We are an annual music festival, over 300 years old, taking place for eight days at the end of July and moving each year between our host cities of Worcester, Hereford and Gloucester. The city cathedrals resounding to the world's finest choral music, performed by our festival chorus and orchestra-in-residence, the Philharmonia, is at the heart of a diverse programme of events.

Featuring over 75 ticketed events encompassing chamber music, jazz, talks, exhibitions, a cappella choral groups, lunches and outings alongside the services and flagship cathedral concerts, the festival schedule is busy (with events running from breakfast to late-night almost every day). Audiences come from around the world and stay for days or even the whole week, so there is also a vibrant 'festival village' where people meet, eat, relax and enjoy free performances.

How did it aim to reach or have relevance to older audiences? What impact did you want it to have on the size or profile of your visitor base?

The festival has relied for many years on a network of volunteer committees, organisers and helpers. Inevitably, many retired people have contributed to these roles, and they continue to assist with all aspects of the festival despite the establishment of a professional administrative team over the past two decades. The festival has grown out of these local communities and many of our audience have attended the festival for many years. We don't actively *target* an older audience, but we know we have one – in the survey following our recent festival, 90% of respondents



identified themselves as 55 or over (18% were over 75), and 70% described themselves as retired. What this means is that we need to think carefully about tailoring the visitor experience to the needs of an older audience – we have a system for arranging preferential parking for wheelchair users and those with limited mobility, arrange coaches to any venue a mile or more from the main festival site, and have a seated, canteen-style pre-concert dinner option that allows a relaxed sit-down meal and an opportunity to meet other festival goers for those visiting alone. We also provide an on-site 'quiet room' where people can take some time away from the busy festival site for a snooze or an undisturbed cup of tea. All of these things are enhancements to the main draw: a fantastically high-quality and diverse range of events. What is abundantly clear is that while many of our attendees are roughly the same generation, their musical tastes are wide-ranging and their musical passions deeply held and treasured.



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

We survey our audience after each festival, and also provide comment books around the site for impromptu thoughts and for those who don't engage with us through online platforms. We always ask about both the artistic content and the facilities and catering we've provided using satisfaction scales and also invite free comments. There are always good suggestions for improvements.

What other objectives were you hoping to achieve?

Above all we want people to enjoy the music, and feel as though they're welcomed in the community of festival goers and performers. Many of our loyal audience talk about how the friendships they make at the festival have endured year after year – it's one of the things that makes the event special.

One really big win for us this year was a change in seating provider – although only marginal, we had wider, slightly softer chairs that 'tip-up' slightly differently, so there's

more space to move down a row of seats – a very valuable thing for those less steady on their feet!

Were there opportunities for this activity to be intergenerational?

Music is intergenerational! The youngest performer on our platform this year was 8 year's old, and the oldest was 92. But we also stage family events which are designed to be enjoyed by all ages. This year, for example, we had a family Come and Sing, and we find that children are just as likely to come along with their grandparents as their mums and dads. It was also lovely to meet members of the audience who had brought children and grandchildren along to share in the music they loved. We also offer free access to cathedral rehearsals for all accompanied children – it's a great way to introduce the music without worrying about 'audience etiquette'.

What worked well, what challenges did you face?

We know we don't get everything right! It's especially hard to maintain a consistency of production when each festival takes place in a new city, and one particular area that we'll be trying to improve next year is making sure there are more toilets available with step free access (not only the facilities themselves, but thinking about the routes people take to get there). But overall, the festival had a fantastic atmosphere, and lots of happy faces. The weather this year was also kind to us – with slightly cooler weather, we had far fewer incidents of fainting and dehydration!

What have been the most important things you have learned?

We learn every year, and we'll keep on learning. This year was particularly wet, so we got a good test of our wet weather planning, and we also saw some progress being made on things we wanted to improve from the previous years (such as improving the options for pre-concert food).

What will you do differently next time?

We'll be starting all over again in a different city, so we'll have to redesign the location and supply of all our facilities. We also want to get information out to volunteers sooner, and rethink the way we organise rotas.

"I have returned home after spending time at the festival- four evening concerts in the Cathedral - with an elderly friend who has mobility issues and uses a wheelchair. I am writing to congratulate you and all your volunteers on how efficiently, thoughtfully and sensitively they helped us both to really enjoy our visit and the music. Please do convey my thanks to all concerned when you have your "washing up" meeting. They really made a difference !!" *An email following our recent festival from HH, a concert goer.*

Top Tips for engaging older audiences:

- Walk your routes - from the car park, around a site, from seat-to-toilet or bar-to-programme seller. It's hard to get it perfect, but if your audience is reassured that the experience before, during and after an event is going to be comfortable, they're more likely to come back
- Older audiences have often been to a lot of events, and they have a lot of ideas. Give opportunities to gather feedback.
- Make the most of their passion and enthusiasm - as volunteers, ambassadors, trustees or simply as part of your vibrant and welcoming audience.

“As I experienced last year, this Festival has been off the charts in terms of music making at its highest level. What makes it so special are the cathedral acoustics, the extraordinary level of musicianship from soloists, choirs and orchestra; and the camaraderie that is built among the audience members... Yup, you guessed it—I've already booked my hotel in Hereford for next year's Three Choirs Festival!” *KC, USA blogger,* <http://insanity.blogs.lchwelcome.org>

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