



Assessing the Audience Impact of Choral Music Concerts

Executive Summary

Alan Brown, Sean Fenton, Kyle Marinshaw, Rebecca Ratzkin, Jason Tran, Mitch Menchaca

June 2016



Research Commissioned by Chorus America

With funding support from:

ArtsWave

Barr Foundation

The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation

GALA Choruses

Heinz Endowments

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Participating Choruses (listed alphabetically)

Bach Choir of Pittsburgh (PA)
Boston Children's Chorus (MA)
Cantus (MN)
Children's Festival Chorus of Pittsburgh (PA)
Choral Arts Society of Washington (DC)
Cincinnati Boychoir (OH)
Cincinnati May Festival (OH)
Gay Men's Chorus of Washington (DC)
Handel and Haydn Society (MA)
Houston Chamber Choir (TX)
Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia (PA)
Peninsula Women's Chorus (CA)
Pittsburgh Camerata (PA)
Pittsburgh Concert Chorale (PA)
The Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh (PA)
The Washington Chorus (DC)
San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (CA)
San Francisco Girls Chorus (CA)
Seattle Pro Musica (WA)
Toronto Mendelssohn Choir (ON)
Vocal Arts Ensemble (OH)
VocalEssence (MN)
Windy City Gay Chorus and Treble Quire (IL)



VocalEssence *WITNESS-Let Freedom Ring* 2015; Photo: Bruce Silcox



About Chorus America

Chorus America is the advocacy, research, and leadership development organization that advances the choral field. It supports and serves choral conductors, administrators, board members, and singers with tools, training, peer networking, and access so that choruses are better able to contribute to their communities.

More than 5,500 choruses, individuals, businesses, and organizations are members of Chorus America and have access to a wide array of programs, publications, and personal services developed for their benefit. These services strengthen their ability to build strong organizations that foster quality choral performances.

Chorus America has advanced its mission and served the field through groundbreaking research. Since 1998, its annual Chorus Operations Survey has provided essential benchmarking data on all aspects of chorus administration. The Chorus Impact Study, first conducted in 2003 and again in 2009, documented and illustrated many of the unique and important aspects of choruses, choral singers, and their impact on communities.

Chorus America is excited to share the results of this important work on audience impact and looks forward to developing additional resources for the field to build upon these findings.

www.chorusamerica.org

About WolfBrown

WolfBrown is at the forefront of planning, research and evaluation in the cultural sector, with a long history of producing groundbreaking studies on audience development, youth engagement, and arts participation. Through its [Intrinsic Impact](#) program, WolfBrown supports the efforts of over 100 performing arts organizations across the US to collect high quality feedback and demographic data from audiences.

www.wolfbrown.com



Executive Summary

Choral singing continues to be the most popular form of active participation in the performing arts. According to Chorus America's 2009 study of choral singers, there are about 12,000 professional and community choruses nationwide, at least 41,000 K-12 school choruses, and 216,000 religious choirs. Millions of Americans sing in choruses, and tens of millions of Americans have past experience singing in a chorus. The 2009 study also identified the many benefits of participation in a chorus to adults and children, and to their communities.¹

Yet, even more Americans have attended choral concerts as audience members. In fact, current and former choral singers constitute 64% of all audiences surveyed in this study, suggesting a virtuous circle of participation and attendance.

How are audiences affected by live choral music concerts? What can we conclude about the experiences they have? How do their experiences differ? Can we identify drivers of impact?

In 2013, Chorus America initiated discussions with WolfBrown to design a study to answer these questions and build a foundational understanding of the impact of attendance at choral concerts. A total of 23 choruses across North America participated in the study, including a cross section of youth and adult ensembles. Over the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons, 14,236 audience members at 136 different concert programs completed surveys about their experience.

To our knowledge this is the first national study of audiences for live choral music concerts, and the first attempt to systematically assess the impact of choral concerts on audiences. Results should be interpreted with caution. Although the 23 choruses that participated in the study represent a varied array of choruses and artistic work, they were not selected randomly, but through a field wide application process. Thus, results should not be understood as being representative of the whole choral field.

The study builds on a substantial body of past research conducted by WolfBrown and other researchers investigating the intrinsic impact of live arts programs (see Pages 29-30 in the full report).

¹ *The Chorus Impact Study: How Children, Adults and Communities Benefit from Choruses*, 2009, Chorus America



Personal relationships fuel the audience for choral concerts

Unlike other kinds of arts organizations like orchestras, operas, and ballet companies, many choruses generate a significant portion of their total audience by leveraging their singers' personal relationships with friends and family members. Among the four youth choruses surveyed, four in five respondents have a familial or friendship relationship with a young performer, and 54% are parents or grandparents.

Among audiences for adult choruses, 36% of respondents, on average, have any sort of relationship with a performer. The figure jumps to 56% for the three LGBTQ choruses in the cohort. Here, the predominant relationship is not familial but one of friendship. As might be expected, audiences for concerts by volunteer singers tend to be more relationship-driven (50%), while audiences for concerts by paid singers are less relationship-driven (25%). LGBTQ choruses are particularly effective at attracting singers' co-workers and colleagues (12%).

Social motivations drive first-time attendance; musical motivations lead to more impactful experiences

First-time attendees to a given chorus's programs are more likely than frequent attendees to cite social motivations, especially "because someone invited you" and



Boston Children's Chorus, 13th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Tribute Concert: Raw Truth; Photo: Gretchen Helene Photography

"to spend quality time with family members." Here we see the importance of social invitations in driving first-time attendance. Social motivations are also paramount for holiday concerts, which is hardly surprising.

Programs featuring full-length classical works (e.g.,

oratorios, requiems, masses) are associated with program-specific motivations ("revisiting a familiar work" and "hearing the work of a specific composer"). For example, eight in 10 respondents at a concert of Mozart's *Requiem in D Minor* attended "to revisit a familiar work." The promise of hearing a treasured work is a significant motivation. It also suggests high expectations born of familiarity, especially given the number of singers in the audience.

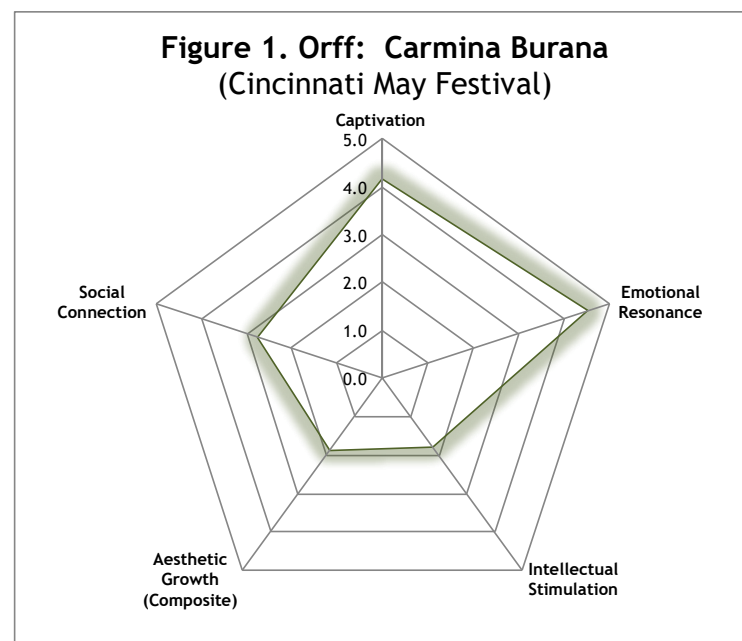
Programs featuring new or unfamiliar music tend to attract people who want to discover something new. For example, three quarters of survey respondents for Houston Chamber Choir's *Mexicantos* program (billed as "five centuries of Mexican choral treasures") attended "to discover music you haven't heard before."

Results underscore the fundamental relationship between audiences and the artistic programs they choose to attend: the audience is a reflection of what's on stage. In curating programs, artistic directors are not just selecting repertoire but also curating their chorus's constituency.

Other analysis suggests a predictive relationship between specific motivations and specific impacts – audience members tend to achieve the outcomes they're looking for. Those who show up with social intentions tend to have less impactful experiences compared to those whose expectations are calibrated to the musical program.

Audiences are deeply affected by the artistic work

Respondents answered a series of mandatory and optional questions about the impact of their experience at the concert, including several open-ended questions. The primary constructs of impact investigated in the study are: Captivation; Emotional Resonance; Intellectual Stimulation; Aesthetic Enrichment; and Social Bridging and Bonding.



Bridging and Bonding. Within each of these constructs several indicators were available, one of which was mandatory.

Using these constructs we are able to characterize the impact "footprints" of individual programs, and can see larger patterns in terms of the kinds of programs that generate different kinds of impacts. Figure 1, for example, provides a snapshot of reported impacts for a

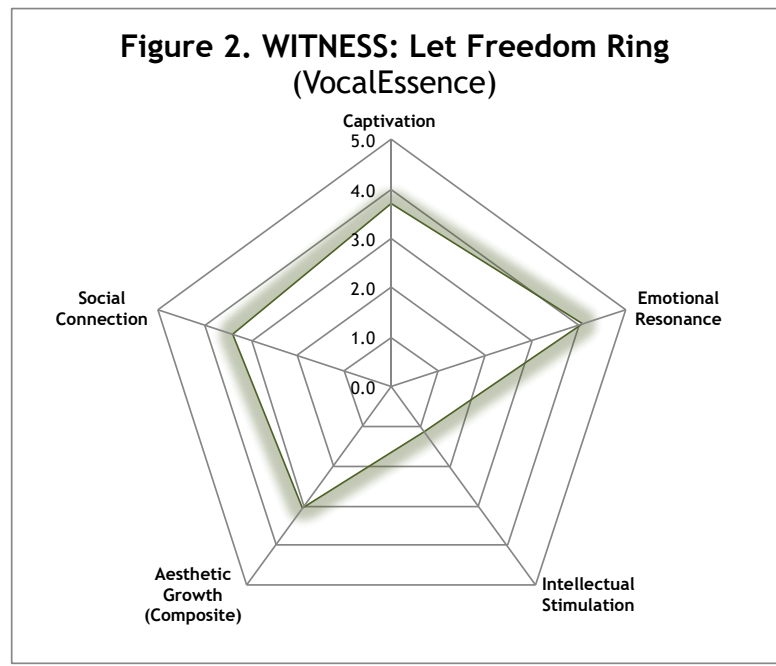
performance of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* by the May Festival Chorus and Cincinnati Symphony. Many of the programs of full-length classical works are notable for generating high levels of Captivation and Emotional Resonance.

Contrast this with the impact footprint of *WITNESS: Let Freedom Ring*, a concert produced by VocalEssence saluting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with guest artist Sounds of Blackness (Figure 2), where we see high levels of social connection and Aesthetic Enrichment.

An open-ended question asked respondents to list up to six specific words describing how they felt during or after the concert. Over 34,400 individual words were submitted, representing 3,061 unique words. Analysis of this data reveals seven underlying veins of affect²:

1. Amusement (happiness, joy, thrill, festivity)
2. Fulfillment and gratitude (contentedness, satisfaction, grateful, appreciative)
3. Spiritual awareness (inspired, uplifted, meditative)
4. Captivation, focus and stimulation (amazement, awe, excited, engaged)
5. Relaxation (calmness, serenity)
6. Pensiveness (reflective, thoughtful, curious)
7. Empowerment (proud)

The significant volume of data on felt emotions allows for analysis of variations in affect across specific artistic programs, types of programs, and types of choruses,



which may be found in the body of the report. Subtle but important differences can be observed between programs of full-length classical works (emphasis on spirituality, serenity), thematic programs (emphasis on fulfillment, sympathy, reflection), programs by youth choruses (emphasis on feelings of pride), and holiday programs (emphasis

on happiness, relaxation).

² Using the definition of “affect” used in the field of psychiatry: “an immediately expressed and observed emotion.”



Audiences seek “curatorial insight”

The primary approach to measuring Intellectual Stimulation was to ask respondents if they left the concert with unanswered questions. Across all programs surveyed, 29% indicated they left with “a few questions” and 3% indicated that they left with “a lot of questions.” Current and former singers in the audience were much more likely to have questions.

Over 3,400 respondents answered an open-ended follow-up question asking, “What were one or two of your questions?” Results for a cross-section of choruses and programs were coded to facilitate analysis. The top four categories of questions were:

<u>Category of Question</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Questions about program choices and overall design.....	22%
<i>Predominantly questions about the theme or selection of pieces</i>	
Questions about the singers/choir members	19%
<i>Predominantly questions about the singers’ feelings, or how they learned the pieces</i>	
Questions about the repertory/pieces on the program	18%
<i>Predominantly questions about the history/origin of the pieces on the program</i>	
Questions about the texts/lyrics.....	16%
<i>Mostly questions about singing in foreign languages, foreign texts</i>	

We have seen a similar phenomenon in other studies, especially studies of orchestra audiences. Audiences want to know the backstory on program design – why specific pieces were selected to be on the same program – what inspired the artistic director to choose a certain piece, or to interpret a piece the way s/he did. By and large, results suggest that audiences are far more interested in curatorial insight than they are in biographical information about the ensemble, composer or soloists.

When they occur, Social Bridging and Bonding outcomes are symbiotic and powerful

Feelings of social connection varied greatly across programs. Programs of sacred music were less likely to generate feelings of social connection, while programs of a participatory nature (e.g., sing-a-longs), MLK tribute programs, programs featuring guest artists drawn from the community, and programs by youth choruses were more likely to engender feelings of social connection.

Feelings of social connectedness are strongly predictive of Emotional Resonance and overall impact, but are statistically unrelated to measures of Intellectual Stimulation.

Although not mandatory, several choruses asked questions indicating Social Bridging (i.e., gaining exposure to the beliefs and customs of a group other than your own) and Social Bonding (i.e., building a network of people within your own group). Audiences at concerts by youth ensembles reported categorically higher levels of Social Bonding, which is understandable given the high incidence of familial and friendship relationships between audience members and the young performers.



Testing the theory that audiences of a specific cultural background would report higher levels of Social Bonding at concerts featuring the music of that culture, results for Social Bonding were cross-tabulated by racial/ethnic group for a cohort of six concert programs celebrating African American music and artists. African American respondents at these events reported significantly higher levels of Social Bonding. Similarly, Hispanic respondents at two concerts celebrating Mexican culture reported significantly higher levels of Social Bonding compared to non-Hispanics.

Most significantly, the two indicators of Social Bridging and Social Bonding outcomes were found to move together. Programs that trigger one tend to trigger the other.



VocalEssence ¡Cantaré! Concert, 2015; Photo: Bruce Silcox

This reinforces the idea that Social Bridging and Social Bonding are, in fact, opposite sides of the same coin.

In sum, audience members who experience Social Bridging and Social Bonding outcomes are more likely to have memorable, satisfying experiences at choral concerts.

Aside from the implications for

program design, this points to the pivotal role that marketing plays in drawing a diverse mix of audiences to culturally-focused programs, such that both types of social outcomes can occur in the same space, at the same time.

Different artistic programs generate different impacts on audiences

We have always known that different artistic programs have different impacts on audiences, and that the impact of artistic work is situational and inherently contextual in reference to the audience receiving it. Reflecting on the totality of impact data using factor analysis, correlations and analysis of coded qualitative data, one can see natural groupings of artistic programs based on the patterns of impact they generate (in no particular order):

- Full length classical works (oratorios, requiem, masses) and other programs of mixed sacred repertoire, which tend to generate higher impacts on the emotional/spiritual dimension, and which tend to attract more seasoned audiences;



- Culturally-focused programs, including MLK tribute programs, often with guest artists or community ensembles, which tend to generate Social Bridging and Social Bonding outcomes, but also Emotional Resonance;
- Programs of popular music and the more light-hearted holiday programs, which tend to generate feelings of happiness and social connection, and which often serve as pathways into the world of choral music;
- Thematic programs featuring works revolving around a political topic or social issue, and programs featuring the music of diverse cultural traditions, which tend to generate higher levels of Aesthetic Enrichment and Intellectual Stimulation;
- Programs of music of a more ethereal, solemn or ambient nature, which tend to generate feelings of pensiveness, serenity, and contemplation, but are generally associated with lower levels of Captivation.

Involved audience members report higher levels of impact

Audience participation is positively associated with impact. Of the four types of audience participation tested in the survey, “singing along to the music” – the most common form of audience participation (50% incidence, overall) – is least predictive of overall impact. “Clapping along to the music” (21%) is associated with social connection and overall impact. As might be expected, “talking to someone you don’t know” (32%) is a strong predictor of social connection and also a predictor of other impacts.

Consider that nearly 30% of all audience members reported “dancing or moving to the music” – a self-activated form of audience participation. Much of this “moving” is done at holiday programs, but also at programs featuring music in the Gospel tradition. Also, above average percentages of audience members reported “moving” (in their seats, presumably) to pieces like Handel’s *Messiah* and Mozart’s *Requiem in D Minor*, especially among former singers. Perhaps their familiarity with these pieces triggers a physical reaction to the work – embodying the music, literally, by physically swaying, “conducting” with one’s head or arms, or otherwise moving in one’s seat. Regardless, choruses would be well advised to facilitate the conditions in which audience members are comfortable enough to “move” in their seats, given the linkage to impact. (There were numerous complaints about uncomfortable seating, particularly in churches.)

In situations and contexts where it makes sense, the research finds that different approaches to audience participation can amplify different kinds of impact, particularly social connection.

The language of impact allows for conversation about programming and mission fulfillment

As a postscript, we acknowledge that the research entirely sidesteps the matter of “artistic quality,” which generally refers to perceptions of musicianship, technical



proficiency and quality of interpretation. In other studies, we've found that audience adjudications of artistic quality are so subjective as to be unhelpful, and, in any case, that notions of artistic quality are encompassed in the indicators of Captivation and Emotional Resonance.

The study's focus on impact, as opposed to satisfaction, is intended to shift conversation away from whether audiences "liked" or "disliked" a program, and instead explore how they were affected by it. This recognizes and values the artistic vision of music directors as the primary force behind programming decisions, while still allowing for meaningful conversation about audiences.

In addition to the research findings discussed in this report, the study served a dual purpose of building the capacity of participating choruses and the choral field more generally to design and conduct surveys. A great deal was learned about data collection methods and response rates. The tools developed for this study, including the survey design template and data collection guidelines, are available to the entire membership of Chorus America.

The hard work of countless board and staff members made this study possible, and, ultimately, the audience members who invested time and energy by completing a survey. We hope this research spawns continued discourse and critical reflection on how audiences construct meaning and memory from concerts of choral music, and how choruses can curate impacts through thoughtful program design.

