

## HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND ENTERTAIN PEOPLE

John Rosser

I know people in the choral world for whom ‘entertainment’ is a dirty word. To them – critics, conductors, even choristers – both the word and the concept seems to imply a lack of rigour or substance, and perhaps of appropriate gravity. “Let me entertain you” suggests the frothy, glitzy world of Hollywood, while the ‘entertainment industry’ has seedier connotations and ‘entertain and inform’ are used as virtual opposites. The implication is that if you’re being entertaining, you’re selling your soul to provide cheap thrills for the audience. Yet there is another meaning of entertainment that we all use without edge, and that’s in the sense of hosting or hospitality. When you entertain someone for dinner, you do your best to please and maybe even impress. You look after them.

In earlier iterations of this talk, I asked three groups of delegates what to them were some of the most important things about choral music. On the third occasion, an eager attendee – having read, I suspect, from my abstract that no-one had previously mentioned them till at least point ten – answered immediately: “We’re supposed to say *the audience*, aren’t we?” Yes. A choir spends most of its life rehearsing. And the rehearsal can be an utter joy in itself, as we strive for choral nirvana: words and notes in glorious harmony. Hence it’s easy to foster this experience and make it an end in itself; we’re tempted to become inward-focused and concentrate on all those many challenges and rewards incurred in just fashioning a happy choir. The sheer bulk of time is spent on us. Public performances can seem like a bit of an irritation in the midst of our rehearsing, rather than what we’re aiming for at the end of it.

At the risk of overstatement, I’m suggesting that our work takes so relatively long to coalesce, requiring such concentration on the component parts (language, meaning, diction, phrasing, tone, tuning, dynamics, *ad inf.*) and how they fit together, that it’s possible for individual singers in the choir to forget about the overall product – and specifically, how our audience receives it. *We* enjoy what we do, but why should *they*? What have we got going for us that should make the concertgoer actually want to ... go?

Here, a business consultant might embark on a SWOT analysis of choral music, examining its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The strengths, the positives, are relatively easy. We use voice as our instrument. We make sounds that fellow humans innately understand because they’re associated with language and with our earliest and most fundamental expressions of emotion, and these are then lifted and shaped by musical form. We add words, with all their associations, resonance and beauty; and from the blend comes drama, cultural context and spiritual depth. That should all be pretty seductive.

It’s tougher to identify weaknesses in the genre we love, and specifically why the audience might enjoy it less than we do, but a quick summary might include its lack of tonal variety (compared with orchestral music); its concerts of unconnected pieces; its perceived amateur status; and its esoteric, remote, highbrow nature. *We* know what a motet is, what *Dies irae* means, why Schoenberg is hard, why altos always sing the same note – but do *they*?

Threats, to all types of live performance, exist in abundance, with many stemming from our increasingly digitised world. There's little we can do about the proliferation of instantly-available, downloadable music, apart from making our 'real-time' versions more interesting and arresting, but the ever-increasing demand for visual stimulation in entertainment is one that we have to tackle, or be defeated by. From my admittedly limited observation, the audience that is happy to sit still and just listen for two hours is shrinking.

Some prefer to meet the challenge head-on. Eric Whitacre's virtual choir projects, 'flash choirs' singing in malls and going 'viral', podcasts, and the sheer number of choral clips available on YouTube now are all examples. But for me the opportunity lies, as it has always done, in how we prepare and present our staple fare – our concerts – and thereby how we entertain, in the sense of look after, our audience. It lies in thinking of our concerts (with a wild switch of metaphor) as a kind of 'choral theatre'.

Why theatre? Because the traditional theatrical arts, like opera, ballet and straight playmaking, know how to concentrate on the total package; they have to take assiduous care with what the audience both hears and sees, or they've failed. The Greek word *theatron* originally meant 'a place for seeing', and while that definition has a more obvious connection with visual performance, I suggest that it applies to the choral concert as well. Whether or not it's true that we live in a time of lessening attention spans, information and, yes, entertainment are certainly delivered to us in shorter and shorter images – soundbites; fast cuts; nervy, non-stop action. We can rail against it, but modern audiences have largely become allergic to drawn-out, visually-static performance.

If other stage-dwelling artforms are concerned about what their punters have to look at, why shouldn't we be? Venue, lighting and stage design strike me as more important than the uniform we're wearing, because they can have such an effect on music's mood, and the way in which the audience perceives it. A song sung in a soft blue glow becomes a very different thing when the lighting gel is changed to blood red. You can choose to stick to a clean, neutral "concert white" state or to a bare stage, but by doing so you tell your audience to turn off their eyes and take all their sensory stimulation from the music. If you're making that (brave) choice, it should be a conscious one.

A rather more recent, Wikipedia-derived(!) description of theatre is as 'live performers creating a self-contained drama'. Choristers can forget that they too are live performers. Our concert attendees have actually paid to hear something different from the perfect (or perfectly edited) but disembodied choir on their sound system. Presumably they want us to bring personality and sparkle to the music, to convey that thrill of creating something on the spot – with all its inherent dangers – as they listen, and watch! And there are many ways to be alive on stage without always calling in the choreographer. Varied staging, where choristers move regularly in between pieces, gives the audience different pictures to look at, and altered standing positions or body angles can break the shoulder-to-shoulder monotony. Stillness works too, as do facial expressions that convey feeling for the song's emotions rather than concern about its notes. These are details. Taken together, though, they can help the concert, as a theatrically unified collection of songs, become its own play – a 'self-contained drama'. Full-length oratorios and cantatas of course have this advantage already, but some chamber choral concerts contain

more than 20 works crying out for a dramatic or thematic link. The choral repertoire consists largely of miniatures and while that gives us many chances to grab the audience, it's also easy to see why they can become bored, dazed or disillusioned with too large and unrelated a selection of works. However, if we envisage the whole concert as a work of theatre, over and above the meaning of each of the songs in it, we can engage the audience much more actively and truly entertain them.

Themes are the most obvious way of achieving this. A programme of pieces, organised around and commenting on a literary, philosophical or dramatically-inspired topic, works very well, even though they may hail from a wide variety of eras, genres and countries. The "commenting on" bit is important: catch-all titles like *Songs from the Past* or *Music of Many Lands* are too wide to allow any dynamic interplay between song and theme. The selection must be vibrant. Songs that are dramatic or funny or tell a story encourage the audience to stay involved; more so than a succession of ethereally beautiful works. And brackets of pieces that resonate, or perhaps jar, with each other also keep them on the edge of their seat rather than slumped in it. Somebody once told me that they preferred orchestral concerts because no-one talked from the stage. I don't think we in Choralville can afford to be that pure, or precious. The fact that we sing words does make our music less abstract and therefore, perversely, more in need of explanation, as those words are often poetical, obscure or in a different language. We can explain them in a programme note, but so much potential for direct communication with the audience is lost that way. To give a well-known example, Finzi's *My spirit sang all day* sets a Robert Bridges poem whose every other line ends with the word 'joy'. Listeners could of course be informed in a written note that Finzi's wife's name was Joy, but that offers them no opportunity to share either sentimental sigh or ironic grin, depending on taste, with a live speaker. It needn't be the conductor, but having someone talk to the audience, opening a small window for them into our arcane world and suggesting one or two things to listen for, is just part of being hospitable.

We can opt not to bother with any of this and just sing for our own pleasure, as a kind of musical appreciation society. But if we want an audience, we need to bring them to our artform and show them why they should enjoy it as much as we do. Choral music needs a context and the concept of choral theatre offers us a way to present that context in an attractive and holistic way. To tweak Dale Carnegie's original statement even further, we'll win friends – that is, paying supporters – by entertaining them.

*John Rosser is founder and musical director of the highly innovative chamber choir Viva Voce, Associate Conductor and Chorus Master for the NBR New Zealand Opera and immediate past Chair of the New Zealand Choral Federation. This article is a reworking of talks he gave at NZCF's Sing Aotearoa 09 and at ANCA's Choralfest 2010.*