

Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Thomas Leech

Director of the Schools Singing Programme, Diocese of Leeds

Consultant, National Schools Singing Programme

Musical Director, Bradford Festival Choral Society

tom@thomasleech.com

www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk

www.nssp.org.uk

www.bradfordfestivalchoralsociety.org.uk

www.thomasleech.com



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Session structure:

- Expanding the age range: What does this mean, and does it matter?
- Who is going to join our choir?
- Recruiting new members and developing relationships to enable this.
- Retaining new members.
- How do our older singers feel about this?
- Case studies - Bradford Festival Choral Society / Diocese of Leeds Music.
- Has anyone asked what the singers think?
- Audiences - repertoire - teaching.
- Safeguarding.
- Key takeaways.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

What does this mean? Does it matter? (WHY does it matter comes later) 2 minutes!

Linking generations

Learning experiences-
goes both ways!

YES... it matters. Bringing people together. Singing is there for everyone, nobody should be afraid to try it. Whatever age you are. Reducing barriers. Eliminating barriers. Good for everyone's health

It is important

3 lost decades between age 18 and c45 (or older in the south east- people having their families later) Need good websites to get the info out there. Repertoire not relevant to this.

Difficult! Good to have singers of all ages, hard to bring them together in one group! Maybe separate groups that come together for performance?

Important for all different types of genre and rep in the youth choirs so singer have a good range of options later. Why should people be deprived of singing for 30years. We need to offer the best.

Music is important for all age groups. Bringing one generation in can also bring other generations. It introduces different types of music (and cultures, and history).



Diocese of Leeds Music



Bridging the gap

WHY does it matter? 2 minutes!

Helps prevent choir getting stuck with one age range (increasingly older.)

Any thing that promotes mental and physical good health is good, for all ages.

Keeping the attitudes and points of view broad and rich within the group

Injecting enthusiasm, different experiences.

interpersonal skills; for younger people to learn to interact with adults who aren't related to them as peers

Long standing choirs - continuity concerns. Sustaining something bigger than themselves Mixing between age groups is something everyone wants

Allows a richer variety of vocal colours within your group

Youth choirs need to bring in a range of styles of music so that everyone gets a range of choices for later.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



8

Bridging the gap

WHY does it matter? 2 minutes!

Brings tolerance
between generations



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

I think it matters because:

- We want a rich and vibrant future for classical choral music.
- We (might) assume a musical desirability in having younger voices in the choir.
- Those younger members will bring different skills, energy and perspective.
- Our choirs have a lot to offer them!



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Who is going to join the choir? Possibly they...

- Sang a lot at primary school (so had good basic pitch-matching and aural skills).
- Perhaps sang in a high-school, youth, MT or church choir / chorus.
- Did some singing in HE.
- Stopped as work / life / family / relationships developed.
- Came back to choir with more time, with at least some of that past experience.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Who is going to join the choir? Possibly they...

- ~~Sang a lot at primary school (so had good basic pitch matching and aural skills).~~
- ~~Perhaps sang in a high school, youth, MT or church choir / chorus.~~
- ~~Did some singing in HE.~~
- Stopped as work / life / family / relationships developed.
- Came back to choir with more time, ~~with at least some of that past experience.~~



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

What are singers of the future exposed to...

- Patchy singing provision in primary schools.
- Reduction in meaningful instrumental opportunities.
- In West Yorkshire for instance, a lack of after-school choirs in out of school settings.
- High schools with single-teacher music departments.
- >10% reduction in GCSE and A-level music since 2017.
- Challenging for many schools to recruit music teachers.
- Some outstanding provision (in schools and out of school).



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

How do we recruit new singers? Visibility through building relationships.

- Youth choirs of all genres.
- Music hub organisations - lead organisations / partners.
- Schools.
- University / HE / FE choirs (department or student union run).
- Singing teachers.
- Community groups (particularly those offering support for the vulnerable).
- Other musical groups (different cultures, genres, instrumental).



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

What can we offer?

- Free tickets!
- Collaborative concerts.
- Workshops.
- School visits.
- Or set up an umbrella organisation! Peterborough Sings for example...



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Making it work...

- Personalise contact
- Phone rather than email schools (particularly primary schools).
- Make the process as easy as possible.
- Make sure you make your group look credible.
- Clarity on safeguarding / risk assessment etc
- Rejection is the norm - don't give up!
- Finally, the project has to be well-run and enjoyable!



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Any reflections on recruiting / partnership? 2 minutes!

Personal contacts - opportunities to see others perform

Welcoming is important. Getting students and under30s we have done. It's the 30-45 people with young families, how can you bring them in?

Local music hubs very variable in their response to offers of support from independent schools.

Very important to signpost the next options for the teen leavers.

Collaboration is so important! With local charities, organisations etc



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Direct recruiting...

- Offers for students (and personalise to institution).
- Scholarships (choral / conducting).
- Music hub staff.
- Primary school music leads / High school music teachers.
- Under 18s - already invested in music.
- What's the quality of your recruitment material?
- How's your social media?
- Is your musical offer enticing?



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

How do we recruit younger singers? 2 minutes!

Age-appropriate-raise communication methods

Engage with local HE or training institutions

Rebrand everything

Expanding our communication methods ie using social media

Invite people to sing for local project based events.

Collaborations between existing choirs - different genres and styles

Go to them via social media?... (not sure how!)

invest in "scholar" programmes for choral societies



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

How do we recruit younger singers? 2 minutes!

Offer experiences that appeal

Teach them early and keep them Free scholarships to join choirs of any type . Musical literacy and the joy of singing paramount! 'Small project' choir - no strings attached - good strategy!

Work place choirs - bring choir to them

Framing it not as " we need younger people", instead about encouraging inter-generational relationships

Work in schools Connect community choir with local schools Grow office choirs! Connect schools in singing projects

Demonstrate the functionality of choir - what can you use it to do - build connections, raise money, relax

Go to where younger people are....?



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Another perspective...

As leaders of youth choirs what's our responsibility to 'older' choirs?

Do we stereotype too easily?

Or do we advocate for continued singing?

We should take a moment to consider how we're addressing that and encouraging, reassuring our young singers about their future choral opportunities.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Retaining those new members...

- Be nice!
- Is information clear?
- Is there a culture of welcome?
- Value them - don't assume younger members won't want to get involved.
- More on what you need musically soon...



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

And how do the 'older' singers feel about all of this?

- Are we accidentally de-valuing them by focusing on 'youth'?
- Learn about the ageing voice and hormonal / menopause vocal changes.
- Respect and be interested in their experiences.
- Remember how important the choir can be to people.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Case study - BFCS

- LOTS of social media (mainly facebook / insta)
- LOTS of collaboration
 - Free tickets to Bradford Music and Arts Service
 - Free tickets to community groups (ie Anchor Project for the isolated and vulnerable)
 - Musical collaboration (ie with DoL)
 - Youth choirs at Christmas concert
- Family-friendly approach to concerts
- Reduced subs for under 30s
- Low-key 16-18 memberships
- Collaborating with diverse professional musicians
- Diversity of repertoire
- Founding and supporting Bradford Friendship Choir for refugees and asylum seekers



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME





Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Case study - Diocese of Leeds

- Collaboration mainly focussed on professional level singing.
- Gabrieli ROAR - amazing introduction to oratorio and large choirs.
- The Sixteen Talent Development Programme.
- Signposting to university / further choral opportunities.
- Focus on musicianship skills, not just repertoire (ie producing independent musicians).
- Providing singing lessons when funding allows.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME





Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

What do the singers think? The old(er) people were asked:

- Do you think it's necessary to recruit younger people?
- Did you sing at school?
- How old were you when you first joined an adult choir?
- What are the problems (if any) for choirs focussing on recruiting younger members?
- Are there periods you weren't in a choir, and any specific reasons for this?
- How do you think choirs could attract younger members?.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

What do the singers think? The young people were asked:

- Describe your idea of an adult amateur choir.
- Why would you join an adult choir?
- What might you not like or would stop you joining?
- How could adult choirs attract younger members?



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

1. 2. 3.

1. very confusing giberish random stuff
2. never ending and tiring
3. scary people like Mr. Leech



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

What else do we need to think about?

- Our audiences - an amazing resource for recruitment!
- Our repertoire.
- Quality of direction / teaching in rehearsals.
- Safeguarding - **priority** if you have members under 18.



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

tl/dr:

- Be clear about why (if?) you need to recruit younger singers.
- Decide to allocate resources to recruiting younger singers.
- Safeguarding **priority** if you have under 18s.
- Do your best for older or changing voices - coaching, resources etc.
- Make sure your older singers are (and feel they are) valued.
- Build musical relationships with younger choirs.
- Build your audience with ticket offers to younger groups, particularly those with an interest in music.
- Audit your outward facing material - website, socials.
- Are you welcoming?
- Programme diverse repertoire.
- Run excellent rehearsals!



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME



Bridging the gap

Many amateur classical choirs might worry about ageing membership, but how do we address this?

Hear some of these singers on YouTube (and please **like** / **subscribe!**):

Diocese of Leeds - www.youtube.com/@dioceseofleedsmusic

BFCS - www.youtube.com/@BradfordFestivalChoralSociety



Diocese of Leeds Music



NATIONAL SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAMME

