

FEELING SAFER IN THE CONCERT HALL

What's Bringing Audiences Back to Choral Performances

To assess their audiences' readiness to return to concert halls and theaters at this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, choruses and other performing arts organizations are tracking nationwide audience trends and paying close attention to what they're hearing directly from their patrons. They're asking, what can we do to make the in-person experience as safe as reasonably possible? If we respond to common concerns, can we sell enough tickets to meet our budget?

BY DON LEE

In August, the COVID-19 Delta variant surge caused a “dramatic deterioration” in audience willingness to attend performing arts events, according to Alan Brown, principal of the consulting firm Wolf/Brown. Between July and August, the percentages of vaccinated orchestra patrons who said they’re ready to go out fell from 60 percent to 39 percent. But more recent findings from Wolf/Brown’s Audience Outlook Monitor (AOM) showed a turnaround. In October, 53 percent said they were ready to attend in-person performances. Still, demand for tickets remains low, according to what Brown is hearing. In webinars with arts groups, which he joins

regularly, “we go around and everyone’s like, ‘Yeah, we’re down 30 percent. Yeah, we’re down 25 percent. Yeah, we’re down 40 percent,’ which is almost exactly what our data is saying.”

Choruses are sharing that experience. Although they hear from many supporters who are eager to return, a significant number remain cautious. Brown’s survey findings tell him we should expect diminished demand through all of 2022. On the hopeful side, the surveys and concertgoing experiences so far this season are showing choruses and other performing arts organizations an immediate way forward. By responding to what patrons are saying about what it will take to bring them back to the concert hall, these choral leaders are discovering ways to both inspire their audiences and ensure their safety.

Early Signs of Ticket Demand in the Choral Field

For choruses, conclusive evidence of ticket demand was hard to come by in early October as interviews were conducted for this story. The season is still relatively young, and the pandemic has accelerated an already-established trend toward last-minute ticket-buying. Nonetheless, despite the Delta variant, there are anecdotal signs of cautious optimism about audiences’ readiness to return. “There’s no question that we’re down in ticket sales,” says



Leela Breithaupt, executive director of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem (Pennsylvania). “But we feel hopeful that we will reach our goals.” In a survey of regular Bach Choir patrons conducted in late August, even as the Delta wave was peaking, 70 percent of the respondents said they were either very likely or somewhat likely to purchase tickets this season, according to marketing director Renée James.

Although she estimates attendance was down 15 percent for the Santa Fe Desert Chorale’s summer season, executive director Emma Marzen says “demand has stayed relatively strong.” She reports that sales for the upcoming winter season are ahead of 2019 levels. Membership in the St. Louis Children’s Choirs (SLCC) is down from 450 to 310 this year, says artistic director Barbara Berner, which amplified her concern over attendance at three mid-October Family and Friends concerts. But response turned out to be “very robust,” she

says. “For this number of singers to sell over 1,000 tickets, I think that’s great.” In late August, when the Guelph (Ontario) Chamber Choir announced a free outdoor concert, tickets were gone within a day, says artistic director Charlene Pauls. “So, you know, I think the appetite is there.” At concerts in Tucson on October 16 and 17, the community chorus and orchestra Pro Musica Arizona “had maybe half of our normal audience,” says executive director Yvonne Dolby. “But we expected that, so we felt it was a success.”

Three Protocols that Make a Difference

Brown finds reasons for optimism in “a dramatic shift” in audience attitudes toward safety protocols. AOM surveys show a growing number of orchestra patrons would attend concerts at ►

The audience at the Bach Choir of Bethlehem’s Bach at Noon concert in September



ProMusica Arizona performing in October

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indoor venues requiring proof of vaccination, masks, and distancing. With those measures in place, 73 percent of October survey respondents said they would be willing to go. Another 18 percent would attend even if no protocols were in place. The September–October shift in survey responses suggests to him “we’re slowly accepting that COVID is going to be part of the risk profile of going out to cultural events, maybe in perpetuity.” The lesson for performing arts organizations, he says, is to implement all three of the primary audience health safety protocols: proof of vaccination, masking, and distancing.

This season’s initial concerts by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem tend to support

Brown’s recommendation. In the choir’s own survey, James says 65 percent of respondents said they would feel comfortable attending concerts with the three protocols in place. Responding to that finding, along with a regional spike in COVID infection rates and lower-than-anticipated attendance, the organization’s COVID committee decided to add a vaccine requirement ahead of its October Bach at Noon concert. “Now that we have made that a very clear policy, there has been a bump since we last looked at the ticket sales,” says Breithaupt.

The Santa Fe Desert Chorale is making a similar shift. Through its summer season, “we had already been requiring full vaccination of all of our personnel internally,” says Marzen, but in September, the organization, guided by its safety committee,

decided to extend the requirement to audiences at its winter concerts. A few weeks later, after announcing it would accept proof of a negative PCR test as an alternative, “we noticed a slight uptick in sales,” Marzen says. Consistent with a September mandate from the province of Ontario, the Guelph Chamber Choir has implemented a vaccine requirement, and the move is also consistent with prevailing attitudes toward vaccination in Guelph, which Pauls characterizes as “a very progressive community.” By contrast, in Arizona, “we’re probably a little less strict than some states,” says Dolby. Pro Musica Arizona’s board has decided not to check concertgoers’ vaccination status unless the state requires it, she explains. “We’d like to have as much of a normal experience as possible.”



"The masks couldn't stop [the joy in hearing the live sound].

I just felt a sense of triumph."

—Barbara Berner

Children and youth choruses couldn't require that singers under 12 be vaccinated this fall as ages 5-11 weren't eligible until early November. What did that mean for audiences? SLCC made their October concerts "totally open to families," says Berner. No proof of vaccination was required. "We have lots of brothers and sisters in the program," she explains, "and if the program is going to grow, you want other children to hear children." In light of the singers' unvaccinated status, Berner says the choirs instituted extra distancing precautions for their seating and their placement on the risers.

The process of confirming concertgoers' vaccination status was "a bit volunteer-intensive" for the Guelph Chamber Choir

at its October 2 concerts, says Pauls, and the same was true for the Bach Choir when it instituted the practice on October 12 at its second Bach at Noon presentation of the season. When lines form outside, "we check people's IDs and vaccination cards, either digitally or the actual cards, and then give them a wrist band," says Breithaupt. "Then the line could move very quickly inside once we open the doors." There have been no signs of pushback in either locale. "People felt safe," says Pauls.

In North American concert venues, **masking** has become a common protocol for audiences. All of the choruses represented in this story applied the practice in some form. Just in advance of its two mid-October performances, Pro Musica Arizona "had a few calls from ticket-buyers that were concerned" about audience safety, says Dolby, so the organization asked patrons to wear masks until seated. "I didn't get any pushback at all, from anyone," she says. "We had masks available if someone didn't have one, and everybody was very cooperative." At the Desert Chorale's summer performances, masking was the most prominent protocol. Signage

in the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis bore an image of a person wearing a mask, prompting patrons to stay masked, with nose and mouth covered, while in the sanctuary, says Marzen. The chorale's health manager and operations director were on hand in case anyone needed further reminding, but "we really didn't have many issues with that," she notes. "I think by and large, our audience understood the reasoning and were happy to comply."

Some choruses are including singers in their masking protocols. In their two early October concerts, Pauls had members of the Guelph Chamber Choir (but not soloists) wear masks. "They hate it. Let's be honest," she confesses. But the audience was surprised that the concert space, which she describes as a "nice, medium-sized sanctuary," blended the voices well, "and by and large the diction came through." For SLCC, masks for singers provided another way to protect unvaccinated children. Some parents would not let their kids participate without that protection, says Berner, while others said, "We're going to wait a year because our children just don't want to sing in masks." But in the October performances, she ►



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sensed “the joy in hearing the live sound” come through. “The masks couldn’t stop it. I just felt a sense of triumph.”

Several choruses adopting the third main protocol, **distancing**, started by capping audience size—as low as 35 percent of capacity in the case of the Guelph Chamber Choir. The group kept it there even after Ontario raised its mandated limit to 50 percent. The Bach Choir chose to cap its September Bach at Noon concert at 50 percent. James devised a staggered seating pattern, directing people to alternating sides in each row of pews. “You just zigzagged your way down the church,” James says. “By doing that, there will be no one directly in front of you or directly behind you.”

Distancing presents a particular challenge to performing arts organizations, says Brown, because of its effect on ticket revenue. Larger ones “need to sell 80 percent of their hall to make money. They can’t offer distancing.” But not doing it may also come at a cost. Respondents to AOM surveys “are telling us is that actually, a big chunk of them won’t go out without distancing,” Brown says.



A Santa Fe Desert Chorale performance from the Summer 2021 season

Awareness of that attitude guided the Desert Chorale as it planned for its summer concerts. At the time, New Mexico required “six feet of distance, all the way around every party,” says Marzen. Because of that,

the Santa Fe Basilica became a natural choice: “That was the only venue that we utilized, as it was large enough to allow for that distancing,” says Marzen. SLCC gave their fall concerts in the Purser Center at

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Logan University, which has room for 1,200, but the largest of the three audiences was 460, says Berner. Because assigned seating “was going to be too complicated,” she says, “we just asked the audience to please leave two seats between family groups.”

Once they are inside the venue, audiences are sending mixed messages about distancing protocols. Effective July 1, New Mexico lifted its distancing requirement for public gatherings, but the Desert Chorale stuck with its plans for the late July/early August concerts. Nonetheless, Marzen discovered “most of our patrons wanted to move up, get closer to the performers. She says “that felt comfortable to probably 90 percent of our audience members. But for those who didn’t feel comfortable, we maintained that six feet of distance.” At the September Bach at Noon concert, Breithaupt says people spaced themselves, but “it worked out beautifully. Everyone said they felt safe.” Respondents to the October AOM survey also found distancing less important than proof of vaccination or masking; only 22 percent said they consider it a requirement.




“People are having great experiences and we really need

to reflect that back to those who are who are not yet comfortable going out.” —Alan Brown

Communicating protocols to audiences is as important as establishing them, Brown feels. “Somewhere along the line,” he says, “singing got identified as the most dangerous thing besides playing the trumpet,” which makes messaging about audience safety crucial. A Wolf/Brown survey on the reopening experience shows 66 percent of respondents sought out advance information about health safety policies and procedures to be implemented at performance venues. As Brown puts it, “Audience members are going to want to know, is there a vaccine requirement? What is the testing protocol? Is it safe to sit in the first row?”

Chorus websites most often serve as the definitive source for that key information, and email blasts call attention to shifts in policy. The Guelph Chamber Choir listed protocols ►



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A small ensemble from the St. Louis Children's Choirs performs at an October donor event

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in its pre-concert promotional mailings, which normally focus on program content. The blurb included a paragraph detailing the main protocols, the projected length of the concert, the absence of an intermission, and more. Because of that messaging, says Pauls, “if there were any people who were not on board with what we had in mind, they didn’t show up. We didn’t have to deal with it.”

Along with all of that, Brown encourages performing arts organizations to promote the AOM survey findings that people returning to in-person, indoor performances are having positive experiences. When asked how comfortable they felt, September respondents rated their experience between 4 and 4.5 on a scale of 1 to 5, Brown says. “People are having great experiences and we really need to reflect that back to those who are who are not yet comfortable going out.” Eventually, he predicts, people will realize that going to a concert hall or a theater is “among the safest places you could ever go because 95 to 99 percent of the people are vaccinated. I mean, that’s about as safe as it gets.”

Lessons Learned from Returning Audiences

By and large, the choruses represented in this article expressed satisfaction with the protocols they have instituted and with the way their audiences have responded. Just a few months into the season, they have already made some adjustments, and no doubt others are yet to come. Here’s a short list of what they have learned so far.

Of the three main protocols, vaccine requirements appear to stand out as a difference-maker.

Since giving their initial performances of the season, both the Santa Fe Desert Chorale and the Bach Choir of Bethlehem instituted protocols requiring audience members to be vaccinated and/or tested. As noted earlier, both experienced bumps in ticket sales immediately after announcing the changes. James says demand “has been getting more and more robust, even out into spring.” The choir instituted the change in advance of its October Bach at Noon concert, making it clear in its messaging “that we were requiring vaccinations, and

everyone has to wear masks so that we can have full capacity,” says Breithaupt—meaning the 50 percent cap was removed. James says October attendance was up from September, not nearly returning to pre-COVID levels, she acknowledges, but “the good news is we’re growing our live audience again.”

Audience behavior inside the hall indicates some may find distancing less important.

Although Brown says “a big chunk” of AOM survey respondents will not go to performances if distancing is not required, the behavior of audiences in Santa Fe and Bethlehem suggests the protocol is not



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Bach Choir artistic director Greg Funfgeld at the September performance

crucial to some, possibly many, patrons when other safety measures are in place.

Beware of raising prices to compensate for reduced ticket sales.

The Guelph Chamber Choir hoped to sell 60 tickets for each of its October concerts, says Pauls, but it fell short. “The \$50 ticket price, from what I’m hearing now, was a barrier for people,” she says. In the future, she’s decided she will not “worry too much

about getting the ticket price at a price point that that will break even.” Instead, she intends to trust that the organization will identify other revenue sources to cover concert expenses.

Use the in-person concert experience as a fundraising opportunity.

Pauls already knows what one supplementary revenue source might be. Even though the October concerts did not sell out, the choir managed to meet its costs because it created an opportunity for audience members to donate. “That table with the envelopes” brought in a few extra thousand dollars, she says. Previously, “the group had often offered silent auctions at intermissions,” but she says their effectiveness waned. The October initiative was the first of its kind for the choir, and its success compels a repeat in November. The lesson? “Put together an additional fundraising opportunity for people to donate,” Pauls advises. “People are very generous, and they really are trying to support our troops out there. That saved us that evening.”

Planning for an Uncertain Future

Having experienced the ups and downs of the COVID-19 pandemic for a year and a half, choral leaders assume they’ll need to do more adjusting in the months that lie ahead. “We all have to be very creative and open and able to—I know these are the words that keep coming up—pivot and navigate,” says Pauls.

What that means for the Guelph Chamber Choir is “looking at our situation and making decisions six weeks ahead of time and, based on that, going ahead.” For the group’s traditional *Messiah* at Christmas, she has three contingencies in mind. Plan A would offer a condensed version focused on the Christmas portion, with pared-down orchestra and 60 in the audience. Plan B would be a performance recorded for later streaming, with no audience. Plan C would reduce the size of the choir. Last year, Breithaupt prepared multiple budgets and scenarios for the Bach Choir, one of which included a European tour, which was ultimately cancelled. This year, “our scenario planning has to come more within the ►

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Like a number of choruses, the Bach Choir is presenting a hybrid season, offering live streaming of in-person performances. Several Bach at Noon concerts will be free online; streaming of its holiday concerts and spring festival will be ticketed. The Guelph Chamber Choir is making similar plans, says Pauls. "By offering a live stream and a live performance option, to me, that is respecting how our audiences feel about coming back." For other choruses, however, the hybrid option does not feel realistic. The cost is too much for Berner, and she says the SLCC staff has been cut to five. "I feel like unless you have a hall set up with the cameras in place to capture close-ups and far back and get all that without disrupting the concert atmosphere, it would be difficult to do both at the same time." So Berner is planning on live concerts for the rest of the season, but in the event of a COVID resurgence, she



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—Charlene Pauls

says "we have a wonderful production company that we can call on" to record concerts for online viewing.

The AOM research demonstrates sizeable, but not intense, long-term audience interest in online programming. In October, more than two-thirds of the orchestra patrons surveyed said they see a continuing role for digital offerings in their cultural lives. Seventeen percent expect it to play a "substantial" role, and 55 percent envision only a "small" role. What this suggests, says Brown, is that "we really need as a sector

to sort out our digital content strategies. We have created an audience for digital programming, and where we take them from here really is up to us."

There would be little reason to imagine any digital future were it not for the fact that now, as we enter the 2021–22 concert season, performers and audiences are once again sharing concert halls. "It was a very emotional experience" when the Guelph Chamber Choir returned to the stage in early October, says Charlene Pauls. "It was for me, it was for the choir, and for people who have experienced a lot of loss, in particular, over the last 19 months. And those masks were kind of handy to be hiding behind, because there were tears dropping down into my mask almost the whole program. It was a cathartic experience." ■

Don Lee is the managing editor of the Voice as well as a media producer, editor, writer, and amateur choral singer who lives in St. Paul Minnesota. At NPR in Washington DC, he was the executive producer of Performance Today.