

With Access and Accommodation

FOR ALL

When choruses accommodate singers with disabilities, everybody wins

BY KELSEY MENEHAN

In 2007, Ella Merritt was feeling the itch to sing again—so she began calling choruses. Her first question was not about the audition process or the concert season, but rather “Do you have accommodation for a wheelchair?”

The first couple of choruses seemed to be caught off-guard by the question. Then she reached Carol Dunlap, managing

director of the Metropolitan Chorus in Arlington, Virginia, who replied, “Not only do we have accommodation for a wheelchair, but we do not sing at any place that is not wheelchair accessible.”

“That really got my attention,” Merritt said. She usually had to advocate for accommodation, recalling the flurry of calls it took to get the county to put in curb cuts and handicapped parking spaces in her neighborhood.

Merritt joined the chorus and happily navigated its completely accessible rehearsal space—right down to the handicapped-accessible bathroom and drinking fountain. And true to its commitment, the Chorus performed the season’s concerts in churches that could accommodate wheelchairs.

It was not until Merritt volunteered to sing in a special concert with another choral organization that things went awry. The concert was at a large, century-old church. At the dress rehearsal, Merritt and her husband found their way to an elevator that transported them to the



Ella Merritt of the Metropolitan Chorus

sanctuary level. So far so good. But then they discovered that the chorus bleachers had been placed in such a way that she could not reach the alto section.

“I parked myself on the opposite side, next to the timpani,” she recalled. “I thought that I could live with this for the rehearsal,” but after the rehearsal she was told that the bleachers would not be moved for the performance. She attended the concert—as an audience member.

“I was devastated, especially after all the hours spent rehearsing,” she said. “That doesn’t happen to me too often. Most of the time people are a lot more accommodating.”

“We Are Choristers First”

Many choral organizations have embraced accessibility as an important value, even making it part of their policies and practices as the Metropolitan Chorus has done. But disappointments like what Merritt experienced persist. In talking to singers and chorus managers about accessibility we heard

troubling stories: a chorister barred from singing a concert because she needed crutches to get on stage, a singer dropped from a chorus because a vision problem required him to wear dark glasses, and others.

Fortunately, there are many more stories about choruses that have worked closely with their members with disabilities to overcome barriers to their full participation. The Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia is a prime example. Dave Simpson joined the Mendelssohn Club 25 years ago, followed by John Luttenberger, and Dan Simpson, Dave’s twin brother. The three are blind, and stellar musicians—all attended the Overbrook School for the Blind, well known for its excellent music programs, and the Simpsons are graduates of Westminster Choir College. Together, they have perfected methods for learning the music—including Braille music scores, software and writers, and digital recorders.

Luttenberger also creates a complete program booklet in Braille for each of the Mendelssohn ►

GUIDELINES FOR RELATING TO DISABLED CHORISTERS

Ask, Don’t Presume

If a fellow chorister looks like they need help, simply ask. “Do not come up and start pushing a person in a wheelchair without permission,” Ella Merritt cautioned. “That happened to me at work and I got my hands caught in the spokes. If you ask, ‘Would you like me to help you,’ they will tell you.”

Don’t Patronize

The blind singers of the Mendelssohn Club have been grateful for the natural way in which the chorus accommodates them, from auditions to even the most intricate performances. “Alan Harler [conductor] is a master at finding out what he needs to know by a possible alternate route, but not making us feel uncomfortable or patronized,” John Luttenberger said. “He knows how each of us works and works with that. And it’s not just tolerating us, but encouraging us to be our best selves.”

No Coddling Needed

First encounters with a person with a disability can be a bit awkward, Kyra Humphrey said. “At first people are taken a little aback,” she said, “and then they adopt me. It’s like, ‘We have to make sure everything is okay for her.’ I believe we [disabled people] have a responsibility to let people know that we are all in this together, by engaging people, and not pulling back. It’s part of our job to make being disabled not be such an issue.”

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Club's concerts. It's time-consuming, but a labor of love that has helped the chorus grow a loyal following of people with sight impairments.

At the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Kyra Humphrey has enjoyed a long tenure as a paid chorister, despite her inability to stand because of spinal muscular atrophy. She is helped on and off stage by helpful crew at Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Chorale's primary concert venue, and uses a stool and a music stand during performances.

When she first auditioned for the Chorale some 20 years ago, it was a "brave new world" for arts organizations dealing with accessibility. "The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) had not passed, so it was a new challenge for everyone," Humphrey said. "But John Curry (the Chorale's music director at the time) told me, 'Come hell or high water I am having you in the Chorale.' I got to sing everything, including some really physically awkward jobs."

Humphrey has helped paved the way for true openness within the Chorale to people with all manner of disability. "We had one woman in the

alto section who, during her time in the Chorale, contracted cancer," said Humphrey. "In the last month of her life, she was on stage with her chemo and TPN, sitting next to me, and we sang together. The staff made sure she had whatever she needed. When she could not hold music, we got a stand. In any situation, your choristers are choristers first and they want to be there. We need to be open to whatever it is they need."

Waking Up to Accessibility

If your chorus has not yet welcomed members with disabilities, it probably will in the future. Fully one in five Americans has some level of disability, according to the 2000 Census, and this number does not include those who have a temporary disability as a result of an injury or disease. With the aging of the population, the number of people needing accommodation, either for a period of time or permanently, will certainly climb.

Barry Hemphill, music director of the Metropolitan Chorus, noted that, in addition to Merritt, several other members of the Chorus have physical problems that limit their movement or their ability to stand throughout an entire concert. "Prior to the concert we figure out a way to get those people in place on stage and have the Chorus come in around them," Hemphill said. "We scout the place ahead of time to see what the possibilities are."

The U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in 1990, has helped pave the way for greater opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate in civic life. Some of the Act's provisions apply to choral organizations. Choruses who pay their singers, for example, cannot discriminate against a singer with a disability who is otherwise qualified. Choruses may also be subject to the ADA rules about public accommodation, according to Alison Combes, executive director of The Cathedral Choral Society in Washington.

"If you are a 501c3 and get public funding, you are a public chorus," she said. "You have to make accommodations for people with disabilities. If the disability is deafness, you can't make accommodations for that, and the ADA recognizes that. But if somebody is blind or physically handicapped, walks with a cane or is in wheelchair, you have to make accommodations."

The requirement to make accommodation applies even if your chorus performs in a church that is exempt from the accessibility requirements of the ADA. "Non-religious entities may be subject to Title III of the ADA when operating in places of public accommo-

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*—Kyra Humphrey, singer,
Los Angeles Master Chorale*

THE GIFT OF NEW POSSIBILITIES

The prevailing language of disability is all about accommodation—you folks who are "normal" have to make room for those who are not—or else. While such language may have been important in winning legal battles, it doesn't say much about the many gifts that people who are "different" bring to a choral community.

Last September, the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia collaborated with the Leah Stein Dance Company in a performance of a new commission by composer Pauline Oliveras. *Urban Echo: Circle Told* features the singers moving in space with the dancers and the dancers "sounding" with the singers. All three of their blind singers participated in the work, which involved not just moving, but running through a large domed space.

"Dave and I chose to run," Dan Simpson said. "We ran with somebody else, but the cool thing was Leah [the choreographer] had exactly the right attitude. As we rehearsed and experimented, she let us find our way. Toward the end, she said, 'Okay, let's go through all the transitions,'

and if there was a place where we had to get from here to there, there were escort people who could make the transition with us.

"She attended to those kinds of details," Simpson continued, "but it never felt like, 'Oh my god, I have to make an accommodation. This is really a pain in the butt on top of having to learn the work.'"

In fact, having blind people in the group really influenced the shape of the piece. There is a point at the end of the work, where the singers and dancers coalesce in the group and sway and rotate as they sing. To keep the blind singers in step, the choreographer had the whole group rest their hands on the shoulders of first one and then another singer as they turned.

"It worked beautifully," Simpson said, "but it also created a whole different feel in the choir. You almost never touch the same people twice in performance. Having physical contact with different people all the time created a bond in the choir that we had never quite had like that before."



Kyra Humphrey with the Los Angeles Master Chorale, conducted by Grant Gershon (photo by Steve Cohn)

ation in inaccessible facilities that are rented from a religious organization,” noted Alan M. Goldstein on the website of the Illinois ADA Project. “Only the non-religious entity has ADA liability in this situation; the religious organization does not.”

From a chorus management perspective, having members who are disabled may require some flexibility in the organization’s operations. Singers with disabilities may require a modified audition process, for example. Those with mobility problems will need to audition while seated. Blind singers obviously can’t “sightread,” so music directors will have to create other ways to evaluate their ability to learn a piece of music.

Alan Harler, music director of the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, modified his audition process to accommodate his blind singers: “Instead of sightsinging, they were given a more extensive tonal/rhythmic memory examination, repeating pitch and rhythmic phrases after one hearing,” he said.

Harler does not compromise musical standards to accommodate a disability, though. “I gather a lot of information about all applicants before they audition,” he said. “So in the case of our three blind singers, I knew that they had done high-level choral work before they auditioned.”

Having a level playing field is important for the singers and for the choral organization. Recalling her audition some 20 years ago, Humphrey said, “I was not hired as a token. I was hired for my voice.”

Music directors may also want to extend the audition time to explore with a singer the kinds of accommodation he or she will need and to gauge her or his ability to be a productive member of the community. “You can’t expect everything to be done for you,” Luttenberger said. “On the other hand, if you need something you have to ask for it. I think the singer needs to do everything he or she can to make it work. If someone is more high maintenance, then it can be tough.”

Different Pathways, Same Goal

Chorus rehearsals present different kinds of challenges for singers with disabilities. Those with limited mobility may have to pace themselves to maintain stamina for a long rehearsal, but otherwise their rehearsal methods will be similar to their chorus mates. Singers who are blind, though, may need to take a different road to get to the finish line.

Olga Espinola, a blind member of the Michael O’Neal Singers in Roswell, Georgia, brings her computer to early rehearsals and reads the text in Braille straight from the keyboard pad. Sandra Streeter, a member since 1988 of the Mystic River Chorale in Connecticut, has a reading assistant record the words of a piece along with any important page and measure numbers or relevant markings. She then transcribes the words and letter markings to her ►

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—John Luttenberger, singer, Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia

score using a mechanical “Braille” machine; she adds other markings, using her own symbols, with a pencil stylus.

Luttenberger and the Simpsons at the Mendelssohn Club order Braille scores of the choral works, if they are available, and use these to study the music at home. Using a Braille score in rehearsal is impractical, they say, because it takes too much time to “read” both the text and the musical line simultaneously. They also use rehearsal recordings that include instructions about dynamics and tempo (often available from the Berkshire Choral Festival), or make their own recordings within their section at rehearsal. By sitting next to strong readers with larger voices, they are able to hear—and record—accurate pitches and rhythms from the first rehearsal.

“In early going, I would come to rehearsal and hardly sing a note,” said Dave Simpson. “I don’t want to interfere and risk throwing people off. Then I go home and work with the tape between rehearsals. I may not start singing until two to three weeks before the performance.”

With complicated or difficult pieces, the Mendelssohn Club steps in to help. When the group programmed Penderecki’s *St. Luke Passion* in 2002, Harler and Don St. Pierre, the rehearsal accompanist, made a tape of the score section by section. St. Pierre played the leading orchestra parts on the piano to help them find pitches and Harler sang the parts. The tape also included a verbal description of the written instructions on the score.

The goal is to arrive at the performance with the music fully memorized. “I joke with people in my section, that it is sort of like the Tortoise and the Hare,” said Dave Simpson. “But we are at an advantage, in a funny way. I don’t come out of rehearsal thinking, ‘I am such a good sightreader that I can wing it.’”

All the effort pays off, says Harler. “The level of listening from the blind singers is most often so much greater than the sighted singers that they learn the music more quickly,” he said. “I have never had a problem with even difficult ensemble passages and we perform lots of new music. The blind singers take their cues from the collective movement around them, especially the motion involved in breathing.”

Logistics, Logistics, Logistics

Singers with disabilities have generally learned to be quite facile at getting from place to place, but the chorus managers can be helpful in anticipating logistical needs. The Mystic River Chorale helps arrange transportation for Streeter to and from rehearsals and performances, for example. “Nobody has failed me,” Streeter said. “I’ve never heard anything like, ‘You can’t do that because of your disability.’”

A number of the singers we spoke with had assigned chorus “buddies” to help them navigate in their rehearsal space and on stage. Olga Espinola’s buddy escorts her on and off stage and signals sitting and standing cues with a touch on the arm or leg. “Olga is remarkably self-sufficient from a chorus management perspective,” said Cammie Stephens, chorus manager of the Michael O’Neal Singers. “The buddy’s help is rarely perceptible. She requires only the lightest touch to know when to start, stop, climb a step, and sit or stand.”

Singers with mobility problems generally scout out performance venues beforehand to find accessible ways in and out. However, there are times when chorus management needs to take the lead, especially if a relatively easy fix would ease accessibility. “I can’t go to a building and tell them to put in a ramp if they don’t want to do it,” Merritt said. “If someone with a disability wants to come and is talented enough to do this, then they [the chorus] need to come up with an accommodation that will work for them.”

Chorus members who use seeing-eye dogs also need a place to leash them during performances—something the chorus management will need to arrange. “Dave and I use guide dogs,” Dan Simpson said. “Generally, if we can we leave the dogs at home during the concert, we do. But if we are traveling, we may need a place to fasten them in the warm-up room or the green room where choristers’ personal stuff is kept.”



John Luttenberger with the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia
(photo by J.L. Shipman)

Making Inclusion the Norm

Some of the singers with disabilities who we spoke with thought choruses could do more to invite people into their communities. “I know that some people with disabilities hesitate to get involved in choruses,” Streeter said. “Outreach cuts both ways. Blind people don’t get reached out to, so they don’t think about being part of something like a chorus. It’s not discrimination, per se, but we are an afterthought. People are not thinking in our direction.”

Sometimes all it takes is picturing people with disabilities as being part of your chorus or your audience and promoting yourself to those groups. “You can go to college voice professors and reiterate that your chorus is available to blind students,” she said. “You can also go to state agencies, vocational rehab programs, veterans programs, senior centers where blind singers may be.” She also noted that audition notices need to be audible, for those who cannot read a poster or a web page. “Word of mouth works well,” she said. “You need to talk it up.”

A couple of choral singers wondered if choruses might be more upfront about their intention to be inclusive, even posting in their advertisements and publicity, ►

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“The beauty of this trend toward [inclusion], is that we are really trying to break down those expectations that all you are going to see is a sea of singers dressed in black holding folders. We as choruses are going to look different in a lot of ways, and that can help the audience have an entrée into what we are doing.”

—Lynn Faust, executive director,
Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia

“We are a chorus that is open to all, regardless of disability.”

“I think artistic people in general really get it that it is the product that is important,” Humphrey said. “There is this pride in saying, ‘We are an organization that prizes the talent, whatever the package.’”

Such a stance may reap unexpected benefits for the choral organization. “Accessibility is more about a market that hasn’t been explored,” Combes said, “rather than charity for people who have a disability. There are so many people with disabilities who have so many friends. You are reaching out to a whole new audience.”

That truth was driven home a few years ago at the Mendelssohn Club. Tamara Matthews, a soprano soloist who has sung with the chorus many times, looked out at the audience gathering before a concert and asked the director Alan Harler, “Why are there so many dogs at your performances?”

Harler happily explained that this was the result of having many blind friends of the group’s blind singers in attendance. “The beauty of this trend toward [inclusion],” said executive director Lynn Faust, “is that we are really trying to break down those expectations that all you are going to see is a sea of singers dressed in black holding folders. We as choruses are going to look different in a lot of ways, and that can help the audience have an entrée into what we are doing.” ■

For an Accessibility Resource List, please access this article on Chorus America’s website: www.chorusamerica.org/publications.cfm

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