



Patron: Samuel West
Music Director: Darius Battiwalla
Registered Charity No. 518073

Singclude Improving access to choral singing for mobility impaired people

Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus aims to be as inclusive as possible. As part of this commitment we have, with generous assistance from the Big Lottery Awards for All, purchased a stair climber for use by wheelchair users and others with severe mobility impairments. The equipment will enable singers to participate in performances in concert venues where the choir seating is inaccessible. The Singclude project was prompted by one existing member whose mobility decreased to the point of becoming a full time wheel chair user. Once the project had been devised it became obvious that we had a number of other Chorus members who had great difficulty using stairs and might also appreciate the benefits the mobility equipment would offer.

The Problem

Choral singers who use wheelchairs or have other significant mobility impairments may be able to access a concert venue, or even the stage of an auditorium, but are rarely able to participate in performances in these venues because of their need to sing with their voice section and to be able to see the conductor whilst seated, rather than whilst standing like their fully mobile colleagues.

Choral rehearsals and concerts often take place in venues where making the choir seating accessible to a wheelchair user is not deemed 'reasonable' under the Equality Act 2010; for example, the raked seating sometimes built for a specific performance on scaffolding as in Sheffield's City Hall. Major refurbishment has made most parts of the City Hall building, including the stage, wheelchair accessible: for choral concerts, however, a raked platform is erected on scaffolding, which is beyond the scope of normal wheelchair access for the reasons explained above. The same problem applies to fixed choir seating in such venues as the Leeds Town Hall, which, though also recently refurbished, nevertheless still has a choir seating area which does not permit a wheelchair user to sit with their voice section.

The barriers facing mobility impaired choral singers were highlighted recently on national radio by Gwenllian Williams' Musicability campaign. For details see http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/youandyours/items/06/2010_04_wed.shtml (RealPlayer required) and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/north_west/8481389.stm

A Solution

With the help of Big Lottery Awards for All funding, we purchased a portable and easy-to-operate stair climber which facilitates access to the raked platform in Sheffield's City Hall. This



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enables our wheelchair-using member to participate in our concerts, from which she was previously excluded. It makes access easier for other mobility impaired members, and has successfully aided access in other concert venues with built/raked seating.

Singclude Benefits and Opportunities

The inclusion statement of Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus states "We have a passion for singing and aim to be inclusive" which means we should be open to all singers able to pass the audition. Singclude means that anyone who is passionate about singing and can pass the audition will be able to participate fully in all the Chorus's performances, irrespective of the seating arrangements or the severity of their mobility impairment. We are pleased to share with colleagues our aspiration to be inclusive by making the stair climber available to mobility impaired members of other local choirs by arrangement with Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus. Please contact us for details.

Choral singing offers proven health and wellbeing benefits. Some examples can be seen via The Independent article 'The Choral Cure' at <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/thechoral-cure-1864774.html>; confirming the long held belief that singing is emotionally and mentally uplifting. Singing provides aerobic exercise which is beneficial to the heart, circulation and respiratory system. The application and concentration required in learning and performing music to the necessary standard is mentally challenging and therefore beneficial. Choral singing offers the further benefits of teamwork and a strong sense of diversity yet cohesion, bringing together for a common purpose people from every sector of the community.

Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus's membership reflects this diversity yet cohesion whilst placing great importance on the quality of what is produced. For example, the Chorus offers its members free one-to-one voice coaching with a professional voice coach, something that may be financially out of reach for many people; and additional to the City Hall performances takes the full chorus to other nationally significant venues giving untold musical opportunities and experiences to our singers.

Singclude offers safe, dignified access to all these benefits. Singclude now opens up to everyone, including people with mobility impairments, the ability to participate in the larger kind of performances which symphony choruses like Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus undertake. As Musicability indicates, there are currently relatively few choral singers with severe mobility impairments, largely for the reasons outlined above. Promoting the opportunity for more mobility impaired people to engage in choral singing is a pioneering first step - which Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus is extremely proud to be taking.



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