

Thoughts on successful programming

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Every time we have a Madrigal Feaste at OSU. I am surprised by the response from the community. Audience members are very expressive about their positive feelings and about how they would love to attend a "feaste" every year.

Our Holiday Symphony Concert with the choirs has a similar response from audience members. As I reflect on the wide appeal these concerts have, I am convinced that there are elements of successful programming that I could incorporate into the other events on my choral calendar. My goal is to have an audience leave a choral concert of great standard choral repertoire with some of the same feelings with which they leave our holiday concerts.

As choral directors, we have the great challenge of trying to hold the interest of an audience that is accustomed to the "high-tech" wizardry of MTV, Broadway musicals and Hollywood. But my most faithful audience members speak to me about the "magic" of the madrigal feast, and the "connectedness" they feel to the members of the choir. There is a human response that our "high-tech" world is hungry for. What are some of the elements that bring about this reaction from concert goers? Here are some ideas:

1. **Give the audience an opportunity to connect with the performers:** At the feast, the choir helps seat the audience, take their coats, pour water, discuss the event, greet people as they enter the building, join in on some fun joking and sing with them casually. The audience joins the choir on a few carols and has a chance to talk with them as the choir breaks into quartets that serenade at individual tables during dinner. The audience can get to know the performers, and they love this! The singers enjoy a chance to be right next to audience members and really communicate with them up close. This could be incorporated at other concerts by:

- **varying the concert facility.** Try having events at a restaurant or coffee shop with informal serenading and small ensembles and solos. How about Bach's "Coffee Cantata" at a local coffee shop?

- **having choir members mingle with the audience prior to the event.** Do you have small ensembles that could provide "pre-concert" music? Can students help usher more often? Can students plan to be available to thank audience members after the concert?

- **having choir members announce concert selections**, give program notes and translations verbally.

2. **Use the concert hall space creatively:** We all enjoy a creative processional, antiphonal choral music with choirs placed around the hall, choirs surrounding the audience with sound, etc. We tend to use these techniques more during the holiday season, but they can enhance all our concert events.
3. **Create an atmosphere that takes the audience away from the ordinary:** To decorate for all our concerts the way we do for the Madrigal Feaste would be an impossible task. There is a local flower shop in Corvallis that donates arrangements for my concerts on occasion, and a furniture store that lets me put large silk plants on the stage. For spring concerts this gives the hall a "festive" look, and adds a special quality to the event. The use of candles at Christmas is every effective, but try special lighting for other pieces as well. One of my favorite concerts started with the choir singing from the balcony with the lights very low. and then a second choir started the rest of the concert from the stage with full lighting. I am hoping to experiment with slides and lighting designs in the future.
4. **We all need opportunities to connect with the past and look to the future:** It is hard to address the spiritual side of our concerts, but I feel that it is the spiritual quality of our holiday events that makes them so successful. I believe we all need opportunities to relate to the past and be confronted with new trends. Most audience members have memories about familiar pieces of music that give them an opportunity to reflect on other times, places and people. When we include familiar music in our concert programming, we give our audience members a chance to have a spiritual response to the music. I don't think of this as cheapening the concert with lesser quality repertoire. I feel it is an opportunity to find new arrangements of familiar melodies and new editions and better editions of the standard greats. A lot of the arrangements I use at the "feaste" use only small portions of familiar carols, but they give the audience a sense of familiarity.
5. **Combine choral music with other art forms:** It is essential to the growth of choral music in our country to work with the other performing arts in our institutions of higher learning, public schools and churches. At our Symphony Concert this winter, the student Ballroom Dance Class choreographed the Blue Danube Waltz and performed up and down the aisles as the orchestra performed. The audience was delighted. I have often had theater majors in choir write narratives for choral concerts that included repertoire with a story line. Again, these are opportunities to get away from concerts that have the same format, over and over. Hopefully we can have our audience members get more of that "magic" at concerts throughout the year