

Grants for the Arts Case Study

Surrey Arts:

The Freedom Game Community Opera



Image courtesy of Surrey Arts. Photograph by Karl Newman.

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The Freedom Game was an artist-led community opera exploring themes of democracy, liberty, citizenship and identity. It was aimed at participants to whom these values hold particular resonance.

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Case Study Introduction

What will I learn and is it relevant to me?

Themes...

- Community engagement
- Large-scale events

Learning...

- Recruiting participants for large-scale community projects
- Embedding the arts in major local events
- Engaging with local authority priorities
- Planning and running a large-scale event

Relevance...

This case study is relevant to:

- Arts marketers, education and engagement teams looking to recruit participants for large-scale community events
- Artistic Directors and Chief Executives wanting to build relationships with local authorities and embed the arts in their community
- Project managers planning large-scale events
- Grants for the Arts applicants who want to find out more about funded projects

Surrey Arts' long-term ambitions are centred around education, inclusion and wellbeing. It aims to give people in Surrey the opportunity to participate in and achieve excellence in the arts.

Background

Painting the backdrop to the project

Introducing Surrey Arts

Surrey Arts is Surrey County Council's music and arts service.

It works across different artforms including music, theatre, dance and visual arts and is the lead partner in Surrey Music Hub.

Surrey Arts provides music education opportunities to 15,000 young people every week and employs 300 professional tutors. It offers music lessons on all orchestral instruments in 220 schools and runs 50 performing arts ensembles.

Our audiences

Surrey Arts works primarily with young people but also with families and older people in the wider community.

Our long-term ambitions...

Our long-term ambitions are centred around education, inclusion and wellbeing.

We aim to give every young person in Surrey the opportunity to participate in and achieve excellence in the arts.

Ensuring every child and young person has the opportunity to sing and progress to the next level of excellence is one of Surrey Music Hub's priorities in line with the 'National Plan for Music Education' 2011.

The vision was to involve over 1,300 residents of all ages, abilities and backgrounds from across Surrey in a community opera.

Planning

Exploring plans and motivations

What we planned to do

We planned to create a community opera, commissioned to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the sealing of the Magna Carta in Runnymede (Surrey).

We wanted to explore the values that are central to the Magna Carta - democracy, liberty, citizenship and identity - with people to whom these values hold particular resonance.

The vision was to involve over 1,300 residents of all ages, abilities and backgrounds from across Surrey. The opera would be performed for the first time at the Royal Albert Hall. Extracts would then be performed at the 'Great Charter Festival' and the 'Magna Carta Foundation of Liberty Runnymede 800' event, as well as local community celebrations.

We were particularly interested in involving people with disabilities in an integrated performance.

How we planned to do it

We planned to commission an artistic team to lead the project and create an opera with the community.

They would run a series of pre-devising workshops to involve the community in the writing process.

There would also be a series of audition workshops for the stage and dance company, mass chorus and principal singers, dancers and soloists.

We planned to reach participants through existing networks and partners as well as an open recruitment campaign.

Why we planned to do it

- To progress our ambition to ensure every child and young person has the opportunity to sing and progress to the next level of excellence
- To engage communities who don't normally participate in arts activities, especially those who feel marginalised in society
- To build on previous singing and vocal development projects
- To tie in with Surrey County Council's plans to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the sealing of the Magna Carta in Runnymede
- To impart a greater understanding of Magna Carta and its global contemporary significance and connection with Surrey
- To break down perceptions that opera is only for a cultural elite by involving communities from the outset

Action

Delving into the process

How we began the project

We appointed a core artistic team of composer Hannah Conway, director Karen Gillingham, librettist Sir Richard Stilgoe and producer Richard Mallett. These artists were selected because of their background working collaboratively to create high quality large-scale community operas. The opera was given the title 'The Freedom Game'.

As planned, we ran a series of pre-devising workshops. People got involved in the opera through a combination of attending audition workshops, responding to advertisements, recommendations and invitations.

How we recruited participants

From the outset we knew partnership working would be key to the recruitment process. We spoke to all of our partners and personal contacts and participants came on board from Epsom Youth Theatre, the Yvonne Arnaud Youth Theatre, Zambesi Dance Company, StopGap Guildford Youth Group, The Orpheus Centre and The Freewheelers Theatre Company. Partners either brought their groups along or encouraged them to participate.

At the heart of the recruitment campaign was ensuring performers were drawn from across the County with no barriers to participation. We specifically contacted partners that work with people with disabilities to achieve our ambition to deliver an integrated project, in which everyone was included and encouraged to work together. We also paid the transport costs for selected groups to ensure that cost wasn't a barrier to attendance.

We conducted an open recruitment campaign with posters and flyers distributed across Surrey, supported by a big social media push.

We also invited Surrey Primary schools to participate in the mass chorus via a letter to headteachers and an article published in the Surrey Schools Bulletin. Thirty schools applied and seventeen were offered a place in the chorus.

Community engagement

Activity began in Summer 2014 with a series of pre-devising workshops to involve the community in the writing of the opera.

Following these workshops, Sir Richard Stilgoe began writing the words which were passed to Hannah Conway in August 2014 to set to music.

Before Hannah began composing the music, she visited some of the Surrey Arts ensembles to introduce the project and listen to the young musicians who might be performing in the opera.

Recruitment and audition workshops were held in the autumn for adult and youth stage and dance companies, as well as the five principal parts.

Rehearsals and Performance

Rehearsals for the opera started in January 2015 and took place across Surrey for different groups. There were also several mass rehearsals, which gave the groups the opportunity to work together. This was vital both for artistic quality and the integrated and intergenerational vision for the project.

The world premiere performance took place at the Royal Albert Hall on Tuesday 12 May 2015 in the presence of HRH The Earl and Countess of Wessex. The concert was opened by Sir Richard Stilgoe and Hannah Conway and began with a performance of 'Free to be Me', a new piece of music written and performed by participants from the Orchestra of Unlimited Potential (UP).

The cost

The project cost £320,000: £45,000 from Arts Council England and significant contributions from Surrey Music Hub, Surrey County Council and Arts Partnership Surrey. The performance achieved £40,000 of income from the Royal Albert Hall box office.

‘Words can’t describe what a wonderful time the children and I had and how it has changed some of them forever into more confident children with an experience of a lifetime.’ Willa Baird, Tillingbourne Junior School

The end results

Changing the world one piece at a time

The results

- A 120 minute-long two act opera called ‘The Freedom Game’ that tells the story of a Surrey family and their quest to win back freedoms taken away from them by an evil Dictator
- 350 education, training and participation sessions including skills development for mass chorus teachers and choir leaders
- 81 artists involved
- 1,052 participants performed in the opera at the Royal Albert Hall
- 2,361 people attended the performance at the Royal Albert Hall
- 120 people performed an extract of ‘The Freedom Game’ at the Great Charter Festival to an audience of 5,000 people
- 75% of survey respondents (including audience and participants) rated ‘The Freedom Game’ as excellent
- 65% of survey respondents said that they had learnt something new about opera

How people have benefited

The 81 artists involved all had different levels of experience and specialisms. This project allowed them to learn from each other and to develop their skills in working on large-scale events and with integrated groups, which was new to many of them.

The 1,052 participants came from across Surrey and included people of all ages and abilities from a wide variety of backgrounds. Participants included Surrey schools, people with disabilities, workplace choirs, community choirs, choral societies and community groups.

The participants all benefited from working as part of an integrated and intergenerational group with people they might not otherwise have worked with.

Several participants considered the project to be ‘life changing’, referring to increased confidence and benefits to mental health and happiness.

A further 2,361 people benefited from seeing their friends and family take part in a performance that 75% of survey respondents rated as excellent.

The legacy of the project

An unexpected outcome of the project was a feeling of sadness among participants that ‘The Freedom Game’ had come to an end. This has led to an incredible legacy of networks and friendships that will continue beyond the end of the project. Surrey Arts is aware of the following activities taking place as a result of ‘The Freedom Game’:

- A proposal to establish a Surrey Youth Opera Company for members of the Youth Stage Company to continue working with Karen Gillingham and Suzi Zumpe
- Members of Epsom Youth Theatre attended Garsington Opera’s Summer School in August 2015
- Members of Epsom Youth Theatre watched Keel Watson perform in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland at Opera Holland Park
- Members of the Adult Stage Company and Earthly Voices have joined together to form ‘The Freedom Game Stage Company’

Partnership working was fundamental to the recruitment process.

Top tips

Learning from the experience of others

Successes

Partnership working was fundamental to the recruitment process. We only had a limited amount of time to recruit participants so tapping into existing networks enabled us to get the project started and drive it forwards.

Challenges

Surrey Arts had to book the Royal Albert Hall years in advance before school examination dates are set. This caused some challenges with the recruitment of participants due to clashes with year 6 SATS and year 11 GCSE examinations. This resulted in a lower number of participants than originally planned.

The logistics of recruiting a team of suitably experienced Vocal Animateurs and Repetiteurs and matching their availability to the choirs in the mass chorus also proved challenging.

Other practical challenges included the size of space required for mass rehearsals. It became apparent early on that the space that had been booked wasn't big enough, which led to last-minute location changes.

The team found that there weren't always sufficient project management and administrative staff to support all of the artists involved. This was particularly apparent in the Dance Company, which would have benefited from a designated company manager.

Finally, there were some challenges around balancing artistic excellence and the desire to deliver an inclusive project. The majority of the opera was integrated with people from a wide range of backgrounds including disabled and non-disabled people performing together. The orchestral score however was aimed at grade 8+ standard musicians, which limited involvement.

Recommendations

- Develop partnerships early to help build networks and excitement for your project
- Publicise support of Arts Council England and other major supporters to demonstrate the quality and profile of your project
- Carefully weigh up the importance of the venue with the lead times and challenges that choice might impose
- Make sure you have the right balance of artistic and administrative staff
- Write concise briefs for composers/artists that give clear expectations
- Ensure you have sufficient time to plan, deliver all the community engagement you want to do and achieve a strong artistic result
- Carefully review the number of projects your organisation will be working on during the same time period because an event of this scale requires a full team effort

Several participants referred to the project as ‘life-changing’ and the 4* review by Music OMH is testament to the artistic quality of the opera.

The final word

Concluding your project

The feedback for the project has been overwhelmingly positive from funders, participants and audiences alike.

Several participants referred to the project as ‘life-changing’ and the 4* review by Music OMH is testament to the artistic quality of the opera.

We were pleased with the results of the project and feel we achieved a huge amount in the time and budget available. However, there was still much more we would have liked to have done.

A longer lead-in time would have allowed us to run more pre-devising workshops with a wider cross-section of the community and to increase the number of participants.

Additional budget would have enabled us to increase the accessibility of the performance itself with surtitles and interpreters.

We intend to build on the experience gained from ‘The Freedom Game’ and work towards a performance that is fully integrated for future large-scale events.

Find out more

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