Project summary

Korusol, the Southwark Interfaith Community Choir, was launched in September 2008 as a Council-led community cohesion project, following a suggestion by the Imam at New Peckham Mosque that the borough should have a choir that represented the Abrahamic faiths – Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Twelve months later, Korusol had transformed itself from a small interfaith choral group to an 80-strong community choir with a wide-ranging repertoire.

As well as performing music that bridges cultures and unites faith traditions, the project has also seen strong friendships form and is contributing much to community cohesion across south London. Indeed the very act of harmonising has been acknowledged as one of its most symbolic aspects and the choir has demonstrated how people of all beliefs, and none, can be drawn together peacefully through song.

Alongside the choir’s programme of music-making there is also the other core activity of intercultural dialogue as well as ordinary conversation, with members exploring and celebrating their differences as equals. Much of this has been spontaneous and has happened in the context of socialising before, during and outside of weekly meetings. In addition there has been the more structured organization of facilitated storytelling workshops where members have shared from their particular cultures as well as their life experiences.

Individual members also introduce their favourite pieces of music at public performances, sharing the story of its significance in their lives. Invariably this forms a further human connection between words and music, as well as hearts and minds. It also brings the essence of what the project is about - bridging cultures and commonalities - to a wider audience.

The choir is a rich mix of cultures and beliefs. Its membership reflects the ethnic make-up of its home borough, with almost equal representation between its White and BME groupings. In terms of religious or ideological affiliations, it is made up of people who variously describe themselves as Christian, Atheist, Jewish, Agnostic, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Pantheist, Pagan, and Universalist.

To date Korusol has performed in public spaces across Southwark, including The Unicorn Theatre, Southwark Park, Kings College Hospital, The Council Chamber in Southwark Town Hall, and The Southbank Centre. It has also been engaged for a ministerial launch at Covent Garden and an international conference hosted by The British Council. The choir has two CD recordings behind it and it has also performed live on the BBC.

Artistically the choir is led by a Musical Director, Andrea Brown, and a Principal Accompanist, Michalis Angelakis, who share the vision behind the project and work closely with management and repertoire committees in deciding what to sing and where to perform. Individual members feed suggestions from their particular cultures and traditions into this process, with music from Africa, Greece, Jamaica, Macedonia, America, and the UK all reflected in the current programme.
The nature of interaction and the resulting impact on interculturality

The Koruso! project has harnessed the power of music to create and sustain meaningful interaction between people. In the process it has proved to be a perfect catalyst for community cohesion and intercultural dialogue. The very act of harmonising is one of its most symbolic features and has demonstrated how culture and arts can be a unifying force for good between people from diverse backgrounds. Meanwhile, the rich variety of cultures and traditions reflected in the choir’s musical repertoire has further served to help participants explore differences as equals.

It was initially envisaged that the project would run for a 9-month period (October 2008 - July 2009), with members working towards a first full concert at a major London venue. This happened on June 11, 2009, at The Unicorn Theatre, London Bridge, when the choir performed before a capacity audience. Along the way the project developed much faster than anticipated and a clear need emerged to discuss its development beyond the June 2009 target. There was an early consensus among participants that the project was too successful to be discontinued at the end of its 9-month run and a decision was made by the membership to sustain and consolidate Koruso! beyond the summer of 2009, on a path to complete independence.

Apart from utilising the power of music to bridge cultures, the project has also maximised opportunities for meaningful interaction in the form of ordinary activities where commonalities naturally emerge and friendships are formed. Success has been measured regularly by evaluation sessions where participants complete written feedback on progress to date and take part in facilitated conversations about the direction of the project. Other evidence has been gathered as to the impact of Koruso! through personal testimonies about choir members from different backgrounds and cultures socialising outside the context of weekly meetings. Shared activities have included theatre trips, exchange visits to places of worship, and cross cultural food sharing.

The growth of Koruso! has been actively supported by Southwark’s umbrella organization for the voluntary sector, Community Action Southwark; by the Southwark Multi Faith Forum (SMFF); and by the Partnership Team in Southwark Police. It has also benefited from the professional input of Southwark Arts Forum as well as officers in Southwark Council’s Community Engagement and Culture departments. All have testified to the success of the project and its unique power to build bridges.

Its inception and growth has attracted much positive media coverage, including features in key local publications, Southwark Life and Southwark News. The choir has also performed live on BBC London and was selected by The British Council for showcasing during an international conference on interculturality.

“*My motives were simply to do a bit of singing with a group of people and the feeling that I could be part of something big and now I am*” (Andy Matheson)

“*Music is such a powerful tool for bringing people together. Koruso! has helped me to gain a better understanding of other cultures and values*” (Rubina Malik)
The benefit to participants engaged in the scheme

The Korusol project has directly benefited the 80 members actively engaged in it as singers. It has done so chiefly in terms of its cross cultural programme of music-making as well as its accompanying dimension of socialising at individual and group level. It has also impacted on the lives of those who have come into contact with Korusol at public performances, where mere passive enjoyment is surpassed by the active involvement and engagement of audiences in the choir’s ethos of altruistic music-making and storytelling. The sheer enjoyment of music is therefore but one aspect of the project’s success and is greatly enhanced by the extent to which Korusol helps to remove barriers and divisions between people - both real and imaginary.

In its public celebrations the choir is a collective mirror image of the diverse community from which it has emerged and is still an integral part of - interculturally, aesthetically, and ideologically. In its initial 9 months of weekly meetings it entertained and inspired audiences totalling almost 1,000 people - even though it was originally envisaged that it would only perform publicly at the end of this gestation period. It has also reached many thousands more in its radio broadcasts on BBC London and Resonance FM (a community radio station and arts radio project based in Southwark).

Using music as the great unifying force that it is, the project has effectively touched thousands of lives in a very short space of time with its core messages of belonging and acceptance, as enshrined in its name and the significance of the language from which it comes (Korusol means chorus in Esperanto - the international language designed to foster peace and understanding, while Esperanto means one who hopes).

The majority of those taking part in the project had never previously sung in a choir before on any sustained basis, and most had never engaged in a public performance of any kind - with the exception, in the case of some, of participation in school productions. Many new joiners didn't believe they could sing but quickly found their voice with the support of others, not least of all the choir’s inspirational musical director, Andrea Brown, who along with the Principal Accompanist and Relief Conductor, Michalis Angelakis, has been pivotal in the success of the project. In this way new skills of musical ability and self-confidence have been developed, as well as members being introduced to an intercultural experience that is outside their comfort zone.

"The performance was a very moving experience for me. I felt more than just a spectator. It made me proud to be part of such a mixed community" (Dave Cannon)

"I met my next door neighbour through Korusol. We've lived beside each other for the past 7 years but only found out when we met at the choir and got chatting about where we'd come from" (Simone Ros)

"It's just great fun and I'm loving it!" (Adeyanju Shodipe)
The benefits to different communities, including the wider community

Much of this evidence has been presented in the previous sections. Of special relevance are the different ethnic, cultural, and religious groupings within the choir, as well as its outreach to the wider London community. Mention must also be made of the contribution the project has made to dissipating tensions in an area where the challenge to create and sustain cohesive and resilient communities is constant. The fact that Korusol is based at the heart of Peckham - a place with a long history of home grown pride counteracting extraneous prejudice, as well as its united stance against the more recent social problems of gun and knife crime - is another sign of its commitment to improving human relationships at all levels.

Korusol is a collective voice that sings, and speaks, of peace. It has also proved to be a project that inspires pride of place in those who actively take part in it, as well as those who join its performances - which are, in truth, more of a shared experience than a mere spectator event. A recent example is the choir’s participation at the launch of Pavee Widden - a project designed to strengthen the relationships between Southwark’s Traveller and Gypsy communities and other residents. People who took part in this event testified afterwards to being "profoundly moved" by the experience and the palpable sense of belonging that the choir generated.

"I love Korusol. It makes me feel part of Southwark's diverse community" (Jeanie Taylor)

Costs of the scheme and value for money

During its initial 9-month run, from October 2008 to July 2009, Korusol cost £16,100 to sustain. The main costs associated with it have been to cover the professional services of a Musical Director and Accompanist - both seen as crucial to the success of the project. Other costs have included venue hire, refreshments, copyright, publicity, photocopying, transport, and instrumentation. It was also decided to invest in a broadcast-quality short film on the early development of the choir, as a way of documenting its growth and as a useful tool for leveraging further funding in the future. This resulted in two short films that were premiered at the choir’s June 2009 concert at The Unicorn Theatre.

Initial seed-funding came from Southwark’s Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programme - on the basis that the original idea came from within the Muslim communities, and as a means of promoting opportunities for Muslims and non-Muslims to share an intercultural enterprise. Midway through its development PVE seed-funding was replaced by an allocation of £20,000 from Southwark Council’s core Social Inclusion spend - on the basis that the project was proving to be particularly successful as a community cohesion initiative. It was envisaged that this money would sustain the project to the end of its 9-month run and well beyond. The money in question was placed in the stewardship of Community Action Southwark (CAS - the umbrella organization for the voluntary sector) and CAS was tasked with supporting the project in its transition to complete independence and self-sufficiency.
Sustainability of the scheme

After its initial 9-month run the project was judged to be a resounding success. On the strength of this, the membership has taken the lead in deciding that the growth of Koruso! must be sustained. A visioning meeting was held on July 23, 2009, where it was agreed to retain the Repertoire Committee that had already been formed and to also establish a Steering Group as a caretaker body that would oversee its transition to becoming fully formalised and independent. Two further visioning meetings took place on September 3, 2009, and September 10, 2009.

At the latter, in the context of a discussion about the choir’s identity and purpose, members voted by a large majority to change the choir’s name from Koruso! The Southwark Interfaith Community Choir to Koruso! The Southwark Community Choir. This decision was largely reached on the basis that the concept of “community” is all-embracing. A consensus was also reached that the choir should include religious and classical material in its repertoire. In tandem with these deliberations a recruitment drive to help Koruso! reach its full target of 100 active members was sustained and as a result 35 new members presented themselves. Meanwhile, the choir’s steering group - made up entirely of members - began to take responsibility for all tasks associated with running the project.

By January 2010 the steering group had drawn up and agreed a constitution and set of rules. On this basis it opened its own bank account and began looking at ways in which it might become self-financing and independent of Southwark Council. As a first step it was agreed that members would contribute a subscription each term, based on individual means. The steering group also announced a date for the choir’s first AGM – Thursday, February 25, 2010. At this meeting members were elected to a range of positions including Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. Others assumed responsibility for specific tasks including publicity, performance requests, website development, rehearsal and performance venues, equipment, photocopying, and copyright compliance.

Impact of the project in achieving its goals

From its inception Koruso! set out to be as reflective as possible of Southwark’s super diverse population. It now has an active membership of 80 Southwark residents, representing the rich diversity of age, culture, religion and ethnicity in the borough. Its youngest members are in their 20s; its oldest in their 80s. The choir is equally distributed in terms of its White and BME members - at 50% each - while the mix of faiths, and their proportions, almost replicates the latest census figures for Southwark, as does the number of people who declare “no religion” or for whom religion is not stated.

In its first 18 months of existence Koruso! reached a combined audience of up to 3,000 residents, and many thousands more within and beyond Southwark through its extensive media coverage and CD recordings. Members - many of whom had never sung in a choir before - have mastered complex 4-part harmonies utilising latent skills of musicianship and self-confidence in the process. More importantly, the project has seen new friendships form across cultural and religious divides and has introduced members to each others different ways of being human.
All of these are measures of its success. But perhaps chief among its evidence base is the fact that ordinary residents have tasted and seen the value of the project and have taken it upon themselves to safeguard its future and to widen its impact and reach even further.

The potential of the scheme as a role model for other organisations

Lessons have been learned about the issue of identity, & the challenge of gathering such an apparently disparate group of people around a common vision. Initially the project was an interfaith enterprise and this, to a certain extent, simplified things. It meant that faith, although held and expressed differently, could nonetheless be a common denominator and a shared force for good.

The addition of those who presented themselves for membership as atheist or agnostic, or with other ideological affiliations, added a whole new dimension. This does not mean that the project was destined to be vague or ambiguous, but it did present new opportunities for negotiation and compromise. Koruso! has been very successful in meeting these challenges & has demonstrated that it is possible to create a space where people of all faiths and none, and from myriad cultures, can unite around a common purpose and goal. In the process they have found that a real sense of a shared humanity will greatly diminish the adverse impact of any factional differences.

They have discovered too that it is possible to hold individual identities, beliefs, and value systems intact while opening to new vistas in a tangible spirit of oneness. This is the single lesson we would most like to share with others. Doing so will help us to also demonstrate the unique power of an arts and culture project to build bridges between people.

"Koruso! has exceeded all my hopes and expectations. It has achieved more than I ever dreamed of!" Imam Ahmet Muharrem Atlig, New Peckham Mosque.

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