The Art of Strategic Alliances

When do partnerships add value and when do they distract from a chorus’s mission? Philadelphia’s venerable Mendelssohn Club explores the spectrum of collaboration, from artistic to administrative.

BY MATTHEW SIGMAN
Collaboration is essential to the choral enterprise: singers engage musicians, musicians engage choruses, and together they engage soloists, opera companies, dance troupes, schools, and, ultimately, audiences. If on the artistic side the whole is generally far greater than the sum of its parts, might the potential for positive synergies exist on the administrative side as well? Philadelphia’s Mendelssohn Club, now approaching its 140th season, recently explored such opportunities through an intensive consulting engagement funded by the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage through the Philadelphia Cultural Management Initiative.

The investigation of potential alliances grew from the chorus’s strategic plan, completed in 2010 with the assistance of Allison Trimarco, an independent consultant who works through The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University’s School of Business. Her familiarity with Mendelssohn Club and the Philadelphia cultural community made her the logical choice for the follow-up study. Unlike the strategic planning process, which involved significant time and resources from the board, Trimarco conducted much of the alliance research independently. “Allison has a lot of respect in the Philadelphia arts world,” says Mendelssohn Club board chair Eleanor Elkinton. “Organizations shared with her more than they might have with us directly.”

The initial challenge was simply to define the meaning of “alliance” and “collaboration,” expressions that have entered the vocabulary of funders, agencies, artistic directors, board members, and managers, often without clear definitions. The study carefully differentiated between artistic collaborations on concerts or series of performances and administrative alliances that involved ongoing, behind-the-scenes integration of resources. The fundamental question, says Mendelssohn Club executive director Janelle McCoy, was “Could we share resources with other organizations to create growth?” Trimarco says a full-on merger with another organization was never really on the table, but that Mendelssohn Club “thought there might be some spots of value along the continuum.”

On the artistic side, the study affirmed the success of Mendelssohn Club’s “serial collaborations” with a variety of other organizations. Mendelssohn Club is no stranger to working with others, having performed with groups including the Philadelphia Boys Choir, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra, and Symphony in C, a professional training orchestra based in Camden, New Jersey. Under the leadership of artistic director Alan Harler, the chorus has commissioned nearly 50 works, many involving other artistic partners. Mendelssohn Club recently commissioned a new work from composer Julia Wolfe that will include a chamber ensemble of New York’s Bang on a Can All-Stars featuring a banjo, mountain dulcimer, and accordion.

Harler, artistic director since 1988, has firsthand experience with the complexities involved in collaborating. “It’s very important to do one’s research and make clear what the collaborative organization brings to the table and what we have to offer,” he says. “There is, of necessity, a lot of parsing of who is paying for what.”

The study revealed that as multi-disciplinary collaborations increasingly involve entities with profoundly different business and operational models, artistic-logistic convergence becomes even more unwieldy. For example, Harler offers, choral singers, most of whom are volunteers, are accustomed to following a score as written, whereas dancers are accustomed to choreographers who may rehearse a routine for half an hour, toss it out, and start over again. A chorus may be able to cut some slack during rehearsals for choreographic improvisation, but once highly paid soloists or orchestral musicians become involved, experimentation is no longer financially feasible. Even for chorus managers accustomed to juggling, such collaborations are the stuff from which nightmares are made.

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You might also want to consider these best practices drawn from the major findings of Mendelssohn Club’s Strategic Alliances study.

- If a partnership creates too many complications for your audience, it probably is not worth it no matter what the other benefits might be. Inconvenient venues or show times, products that lack appeal, or partners of unequal artistic caliber may diminish your audience’s enthusiasm.

- Focus on expanding capacities rather than reducing costs. Even if a partnership does not directly reduce spending, it may allow you to get more accomplished efficiently and effectively.

- Keep in mind that administrative alliances often require upfront investments of time and money, but take years to yield savings. Make sure the risk of discouraging board, staff, and volunteer commitment is worth the reward.

- Don’t forget the hidden costs of staff time. If you pursue too many partnerships simultaneously, the burden of coordination may overwhelm staff and limit artistic opportunities.

- Geographical differences allow organizations to collaborate without poaching each other’s audiences. They can also present disparities in audience and donor demographics that are difficult to resolve.

- Pay attention to the perspective of donors. Weigh the value of long term artistic and/or administrative collaborations against the risk that funders may see the two partners as one entity and decrease their support.

- Organizational compatibility counts. Almost all interviewees said that a partner’s intent, work style, and ethics were an essential basis for successful collaboration. Without communication and respect, small problems will become big ones.
for those folks and I assumed when we started the research that it would not be difficult to locate examples. It turned out to be much harder,” she says. The primary comparative model she used was the Cincinnati May Festival, which has shared resources with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra for decades. The May Festival “buys” time from CSO finance staff as needed, giving it access to better accounting resources than it could afford on the open market. The two organizations share some marketing costs as well, but fundraising is kept separate to avoid conflicts of interest with regard to their individual missions.

The bottom line of the study for Mendelssohn Club was that, while there is much potential for continued artistic collaborations, some of which may yield cost savings, there are currently no distinct opportunities for the chorus to establish a formal administrative alliance with another organization. The fundamental business model of the chorus, with its substantial volunteer component and minimal artistic and administrative staff, is not compatible with a large organization that has a much higher paid-to-volunteer labor ratio, such as an orchestra. Says Trimarco, “While managing volunteer resources is complex, it also gives you a financial model with built-in efficiencies that cannot be matched by other organizations. When you put that highly efficient model up against a more traditional nonprofit with a larger number of paid staff, it’s hard for Mendelssohn Club to come out a winner.”

“We were surprised at the results, and in a way relieved,” says Elkinton. “Relieved that it seemed from everything Allison was learning that we had made good choices along the way. Relieved that there wasn’t a reason for us out there to change courses or rethink our mission or infrastructure.”

Harler was also delighted by the results, which, though independently derived, validated his philosophy. “We have a very specific artistic mission as most organizations do. I want to have an executive director who is totally committed to our mission. I can’t see the logic in administrative personnel committed to several missions. How can they write a grant proposal that is compelling and be writing another grant proposal and be equally compelling? That’s not commitment. That’s just work to be done.”

Thiagarajan agrees with the study’s findings, but remains optimistic, pointing to European entities that succeed in sharing...
resources. He also sees opportunities for collaboration to reduce administrative overhead, even if artistic missions are kept separate. “Getting together to negotiate those costs is paramount,” he says. After rent expenses, health care benefits are the second largest overhead cost for Symphony in C.

A Formalized Approach for the Future

The fact that opportunities for strategic administrative alliances do not presently exist does not mean they may not arise in the future. Indeed, the study suggests that Mendelssohn Club continue to test the potential for joint ventures. “With the evolution of the arts scene in Philadelphia the possibilities remain,” says Elkinton. And just because the concept may be challenging for a large symphonic chorus does not mean it could not work for others arts organizations. “The key factor is if the partnership has grown along with the organizations,” says Trimarco. “It’s much harder when you take two mature organizations and try to reconstruct the business model.”

All parties agree that a formalized approach should be established to investigate the possibilities. “Instead of looking at ‘Should these two organizations work together?’ we might ask ‘How should organizations think about working together?’ which is a much more creatively driven question,” says Trimarco. “You want to know what your own goals are as organizations. Alliances are just a tool. They are not magic. You have to assess whether the alliance will help you meet your goals.”

Online Resources

As part of the study, Allison Trimarco and Mendelssohn Club developed a worksheet that can be used to help determine the relative pros and cons, as well as the overall potential value, of an alliance. The worksheet is available for download on the Chorus America website: www.chorusamerica.org/resourcefiles/StrategicAlliances_worksheet.pdf

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