

# The Elevator to Inclusion!

**A long time ago, in the legendary Kingdom of K r lland, a conductor had trouble recruiting enough singers gifted with a “normal” vocal range going from E2 to C6 (yes, this was the norm for choral singers in this wonderful country). He decided to recruit singers with a very serious “handicap”: they could only sing over an ambitus of about two octaves, if ever. In his “inclusive choir”, he grouped the singers according to their handicap, and he named the groups with positive sounding terms: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Baritone and Bass. Although his peers were a bit suspicious, they soon discovered that they could highly benefit from this inclusion strategy, both musically and in terms of participation, and in just a few years what had been an exception became the norm. SATB collective singing spread across the country, and, as it appears, across the whole continent.**

This visionary conductor not only offered an access to disabled singers (“Only two octaves!”), he helped change the definition of normality. Fast forward a few centuries: who would today even discuss the need to foresee an elevator and an access ramp in a new music school building?

Maybe it is now time to install elevators in our heads too.

On the basic level, inclusion aims at ensuring an equal right of access to existing activities regardless of physical, mental and sometimes social or cultural disadvantage: a choir should not refuse singers only because they are in a wheelchair or are blind. This may involve some specific efforts: Inclusion means here adapting the process, the environment and work methods to ensure equal right of access, but not essentially adapting or changing the musical contents or identity of the group.

But organisations and groups can also take a step further and actively foster inclusion as an aim of their activities. This approach takes the differences between participants into account and leads to fundamentally adapt the contents, methods and outcome of the activity in order to reach a positive results both for the inclusion “targets” and for the other participants (like the conductor did in our introduction). For example, working with mental handicap or with people suffering from dementia leads to redefining the repertoires, methods and rehearsals modalities in specific ways. Ensembles or conductors can decide to foster social or cultural inclusion by reaching out to population which are not usually found in the choral demographics, or which are already going through a more global integration process, like for example political refugees, migrants or prisoners. This can lead to new musical forms, new ways to interact with singers and audiences.

But inclusion is not a one-way gesture generously offered to disadvantaged population. It can help groups and organisations question, redefine and enrich their activities and methods, reach out to new audiences, reconsider their repertoire, etc. By opening up to new members, the ensembles can redefine and enrich their identity.



But what is the situation on the field, do the choirs want to be inclusive? Surprisingly yes, according to our pilot study Singing Europe, about 30% of the choirs claim that they want to contribute to the integration of handicapped persons and 10% that they have fully reached this goal. Social integration is an aim for about 70% of the choirs, and over 40% consider to have fully reached this goal. These figures show that the question is of interest for a lot of choirs, but that they may be in need for tools and support to achieve these goals.

The European Choral Association – Europa Cantat has decided to include the theme of Inclusion in its strategy. One of the tools that will be developed in the coming years through the Hearts in Harmony initiative is the “inclusion label”.

This “inclusion label” will be a set of concrete guidelines and tools designed to help ensembles reach these goals, based on practical examples from the field. The “Inclusion Label” itself will be attributed to choirs or events respecting a set of recommendations, guaranteeing their inclusiveness. They will be part of an inclusion network that allow them to exchange and learn from their peers. The label will also be a promotion tool, both for the choirs and for the concept of inclusive choirs, raising awareness through concrete action and public performances.

The Europa Cantat festival proved it over 50 years: collective singing can be used as a tool for mutual understanding between nations, as a way to foster peace. But it can also help bring people together inside nations and inside communities themselves. It can be a tool to foster civilisation, exchange and mutual learning.

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