

Kinnara Ensemble: A Project-Based Choir

While choral singing represents one of the most popular art forms, professional choirs account for a small segment of these organizations. Kinnara Ensemble, directed by J.D. Burnett, is a medium-size choir that began in 2009 with graduates of Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey. The group blossomed from a volunteer arrangement into a professional one and now draws singers from around the country for its programs. This case study outlines the project-based choral model and introduces issues with hiring local and national talent. The financials of Kinnara Ensemble are reviewed, with attention to fluctuations in the organization's revenue streams. With a new managing director, there is hope to stabilize revenue for the long-term health of Kinnara.

Sample Materials

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This case study was prepared by Kyle Nielsen (Southern Virginia University) and Michael Alan Anderson (Eastman School of Music). *The Eastman Case Studies* are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

Establishing Professional Choral Art

Choral singing remains the most popular form of participation in the performing arts for both adults and children. In 2009, a study showed that some 270,000 choruses operated in the United States and that 42.6 million Americans (or nearly 1 in 7) regularly sing in choruses. Professional choruses represent a very small and selective subset of choruses (less than a tenth of a percent), but they offer some of the highest quality singing and programming one can find around the country. Kinnara Ensemble, directed by J.D. Burnett, is one such professional chorus, comprising some of the country's finest ensemble and solo singers. Launched in 2009 in Princeton, New Jersey, the *a cappella* choir performs a wide range of choral repertoire unconstrained from any historical period. In 2017, Kinnara Ensemble released its first commercial recording, *Provenance*, on the Affetto label, which includes an international distribution agreement with Naxos. The recording features works by Johannes Brahms, Francis Poulenc, and Alberto Ginastera.

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Kinnara Ensemble is a mid-size group most often made up of around 32 voices, larger than most professional chamber choirs, but smaller than typical symphonic choruses and oratorio societies. The organizational mission of Kinnara Ensemble is "to engage the public in exemplary choral experiences that speak to the modern soul." The generalized nature of this statement is intentional. "We wanted to keep as many limits off us as we could,"

said J.D. Burnett, co-founder and artistic director of Kinnara Ensemble. He relates the organizational mission to the demands of the competitive choral arts environment in the Princeton area. The Princeton

Pro Musica is a 100-voice choral organization, which auditions singers and performs larger canonic works. It has the air of a semi-professional chorus. On the other hand, the Princeton Singers is a 16-voice choral ensemble in which all performers are paid. Directed by composer Steven Sametz, that group's programming more or less reflects his specialization in contemporary choral music. Kinnara needed to be different.

The group had humble beginnings in Princeton and in fact was "founded twice." In the fall of 2008, current assistant conductor Reid Masters pulled together eight or nine fellow graduates of Westminster Choir College for a Christmas program in December, performing it a few times and recording a CD inexpensively for local distribution. Meanwhile, J.D. Burnett, another recent graduate of the choir college, had just returned to New Jersey from a year teaching in San Jose, CA. Masters asked him to conduct the ensemble, and Burnett was interested but only if the group were larger. He assumed the reins of Kinnara Ensemble immediately in January 2009 with an expanded roster of 18 singers. The operation grew from there.

A Friendly and Mission-Centered Board

After a year of concerts under its belt, Kinnara Ensemble felt the wind at its back. It would not be long before the volunteers who started with the group could transform into professional status. Given his experience working with nonprofit choral organizations in Texas and New Jersey, J.D. Burnett knew a board of directors needed to be formed. A board would force Kinnara Ensemble not only to govern itself independently but also to incorporate and obtain nonprofit status, allowing it to access the advantages and protections of a formal business structure. Not atypical of small startup arts organizations, Burnett started with close contacts who had keen interest in the business's prospects.

A friend of Burnett's, John Ruffley, was a retired marketing executive for candy maker Mars Incorporated in New Jersey. Ruffley and Burnett's relationship dated