

Choirs and Corona virus . . . The Day After

by Aurelio Porfiri, composer, conductor, writer and educator

I have been working with choirs and choral music for almost forty years, long enough to be able to say that working with choirs has taken up most of my existence. And so now I need to reflect on the situation we are living through, created by corona virus: a situation that has surprised us all, embittered us, frightened us, but also made us ask how we will be able to begin again once this nightmare is over. And we do not even know when will be over, because the “experts” are very good at terrifying us almost every day.

Beginning again will not be easy, since we are now terrified of being close to each other, of being exposed to the famous droplets and perhaps being infected by someone who does not show even the slightest symptom. We now see all of these things as potential dangers, and ourselves as a potential danger to others. Singing together in a choir is not the safest activity in these circumstances, since it requires physical proximity between people who are emitting sounds that also carry with them emissions of the famous tiny droplets. If you are singing in a choir of 40 or 50 people, how can you ever be sure that none of them will be exposed to this virus? Then we should also consider that – thanks be to God, from one point of view – in many of our choirs there are quite a few older people. But how can we protect them from someone who involuntarily, without any symptoms, could be a carrier of the corona virus that is much more dangerous for the elderly, as we now know? This is a problem perceived by many choral conductors nowadays, who have found themselves suddenly without a job. The problem concerns everyone, old or young, because anyone can become infected and spread the virus to family members who may be at risk because of age and health

conditions.

These would have seemed absurd questions even only two months ago. Yet this cataclysmic event has turned our whole lives upside down and threatens to also upset our future. We need to think hard about how to protect ourselves until this virus is finally defeated, as we all hope it will be. Of course we do not want to stop all our choir singing, which is so important for so many of us, as a means of praising God for some, and of socialization for others. As I have said many times, choirs are little communities where friends meet, people meet their future life partners, and we all meet people who may become important fixed points in our lives. Certainly we do not want to renounce all this, so we must find a way to face the psychological block created in these months in which we have been terrified by the idea that physical closeness can be dangerous, not only with strangers but even within our own homes.



I have seen some attempts at creating a virtual choir, using the instruments offered by technology. This is certainly something to reflect on, a type of activity that opens up

interesting possibilities for a future in which technology will be ever more present in our daily lives. But these new possibilities must not replace meeting people and singing as we stand side by side. Even if we do not want to admit it, we truly need each other in all aspects of our lives: we need to encounter others, to laugh with others, to sing with others, to speak with others. We are social animals, and choral activity is part of this. We must think how to continue to do what choirs have always done in all parts of the world: singing together and creating the experience of the beauty of choral music. We must overcome the trauma that has cut us off from one another and not allow our fears to become an obstacle to building community with others. Let us be honest and admit that this is not easy. I am not sure if it is happening where you live too, but here in central Italy where I live, even though the virus has not seriously affected my city, you can see how people are very careful to avoid each other, always thinking that the danger may be everywhere. We have been strongly affected psychologically, and this will stay with us much longer than the virus.

We have to go back to meeting others, we need to find a way to be what we have always been. As is often said, the importance of certain things is understood only when these things are taken away. And now is the time to understand how beautiful it was to meet our friends in the choir, to sing with them, to be able to meet them on Sundays for worship or for a concert or a choral performance of some sort. All this has now been denied us, and we cannot hide the fact that we feel its loss and we want it back. We cannot give corona virus the upper hand; we cannot permit that in 2020 a virus can dictate the way in which the entire human race has to live. We consider this to be a temporary interruption, a phase which took us by surprise and during which society did not respond adequately; and so we must try to begin normal life again, including the area of choral music, which – let us not forget – involves millions of people. Therefore, taking all necessary precautions, we need

to put this terrible time behind us. Fear is a bad teacher. But if we are forced to wear face masks for safety reasons, this will be another obstacle to taking up our choral activity again, because singing with masks on is obviously not the same thing. We must think seriously about how we can maintain our choirs without placing ourselves and others in danger. The situation is extremely complex since at every minute we are prey to a steady stream of alarming news that is fed to us by the media.

We must not allow fear to chain us; we are greater than fear, and the noble purpose of preserving choral activity will help us to find creative and effective solutions which can be implemented safely and in such a way that no one will feel threatened by simply making contact with other people. This will not be easy to begin with, because we are coming out of a very difficult time of trial, during which our collective psyche has been subjected to almost intolerable pressure. But we will do it; I am sure that we will do it; for the sake of the respect that we owe ourselves and those around us, we must do it.



Members of the Singing City Choir hold a virtual practice using the Zoom video meeting app. (Courtesy of Singing City Choir)



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