

# Choral singing and technology: How has Covid-19 changed the way choirs make music?

*Darius Lim, Conductor, Singapore*



**SINCE the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic two years AGO, we HAVE FOUND ourselves moving deeper into the realm of digital music-making. THE PANDEMIC has deprived us of the ability to experience live choral music-making – a defining medium of the choral idiom – IN MANY WAYS.**

The online rehearsal experience has transitioned to a process that many would deem colder, ineffective, and a one-way experience at odds with the definition of the choral art. Many of us (including myself) look back and remember the times when we could sing together in large groups. We now appreciate much more the ability to experience the sounds of the collective human voice – a spontaneous artistic endeavour that is made even more special with the knowledge that the music made is specific to that moment in time.

Even now, many still debate the efficacy and purpose of virtual choirs. Despite all the challenges, if we really look deeply into the changes in our choral music-making, we realise that the virtual platform has given us a chance to strip apart the different aspects of the choral art: we are able to

separate and delve into the technical, social and artistic aspects of the artform more effectively.

We may have experienced some fatigue with virtual concerts of late, probably because of the many similar virtual choirs that have come through the screen, all produced in the same 'window frames' format. It is interesting to note that choirs are now starting to put greater focus on advocacy and story-telling through acting and speaking in music videos. This has helped provide a greater visual impact for their viewers. In short, what choirs previously spent so little time focusing on must now assume greater importance on virtual platforms.

Our causes for music-making have also changed drastically. Singing to bond, unite, heal and change has now taken centre stage. In some ways, the pandemic has refreshed and reminded us of its advocative purpose: being the world's most accessible artform, uniting the human race through the unity of voices, the sharing of stories, and providing hope of a brighter future. The competitiveness of choral festivals and competitions has somewhat taken a back seat for the time being, as many festivals pivot to host digital programmes that engage choirs and conductors, and continue to provide a platform for professional artistic development and global awareness of music-making amidst this chaos.



Darius Lim

## **What is the place of technology today and what will it look like in the years to come?**

In many ways, Covid-19 has forced an entire generation of musicians, artists and singers to pivot and transition to a new digital platform. It has made us think out of the box and take a new look at the choral idiom: We cannot sing together now, but what would it take for us to do so? For the time being, we look to technology and all its advances to remake the choral experience – rehearsing on Zoom and organising virtual concerts. But... is it really “for the time being”? A great debate is still on-going.

The virtual platform has created whole new markets and media

to connect the world together. Virtual rehearsals and concerts that seemed impossible just two years ago are now possible with the click of a mouse. Our need for this platform has also created a new market for software designers, sound engineers, music producers and media companies.

Rehearsals on Zoom have to be conducted with singers unable to hear each other because of the application's limitations. However, the different elements of a choral rehearsal (vocal technique, musicianship skills, social interaction and learning of songs) would be more successful and efficacious for singers if the elements were conducted online separately and not all at once. You cannot respond to someone next to you, listen to the conductor, harmonise and look at your score simultaneously while in an online rehearsal.

Until recently, spontaneous two-way communication was deemed to be virtually impossible, but the launch and discovery of Jamulus and JackTrip has made virtual music-making much closer to live experience, allowing singers and musicians to hear each other and react to a conductor's gestures in real time. This, in my opinion, is one of the greatest improvements to the virtual choral experience.

I don't think anything can replace the experience of live choral singing. The choral experience is most profound when we are physically present: Human interactions and the sounds of the human voice create an unexplainable connection and motivate us to build a choral sound together.

However, looking into the near future, the lines of virtual and physical spaces will continue to blur with improvements in technology. Synchronous choral rehearsals and concerts will see improvements in latency, transmission and sound quality. I foresee a new breed of hybrid concerts in the next few years, where musicians and singers will be able to collaborate virtually in one physical space, but perform from the comfort of their homes. In the slightly more distant future – the next few decades – we will probably see breakthroughs and technological advances in 3D holograms. When successful, we

will be able to sing side by side with the next person being thousands of miles away. That would certainly be a sight to behold!

## **What threats do these developments pose for the choir world?**

Whatever the developments in technology, I hope we will not lose that spark for live choral singing and choral excellence. It is through the live singing choral idiom that we are able to experience the true soul of choral music-making. The resonance of the human voice, the spontaneity of a conductor's gestures and the imperfections of unplanned moments in a live performance are but some of the elements of choral singing that simply cannot be replicated on the digital platform. They are what makes these moments magical and memorable.

Another danger probably lies in the ability to create an artificially perfect sound world. The digital realm does sometimes give the illusion of perfection, which may develop into complacency or fracture our ability to give great live concerts of equal calibre. Some have claimed that virtual choirs have saved the choral world from total obliteration during the height of the pandemic. Others are of the opinion that virtual choirs should not be categorised under 'choir' singing and deem it artificial. Perhaps if we could take a different attitude towards this platform and view it through the lens of ensemble-building via the different elements of the choral art, it would help us see the bigger picture: Virtual choirs are, in fact, a form of choral advocacy – just as a retail shop with a physical space can also continue selling its merchandise on a digital platform.

The choral world will take a few more years to heal from the after-effects of the pandemic. During this time, we should not forget that digital platforms, though effective, should not be a long-term replacement for live choral singing. We also should not lose our aim for artistic excellence – to constantly challenge ourselves musically to be the best version of ourselves. It is through this endeavour that we

find ourselves and build the necessary skillsets of discipline, drive, and self-motivation.

Having said that, virtual choirs have given hope to the choral world at a time when we needed it most. I believe even post-pandemic, it will continue to serve as a platform for advocacy and cause, and remind us all of the importance of coming together to sing for a common purpose, wherever we are in the world.

*Edited by Anita Shaperd, USA*



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