

Open-air singing: a blessing or a curse?

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How many times in the last two years have choirs across the world made use of open-air spaces for their concerts in order to reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19? And how many times have the venues available turned out to be anything but adequate for the normal acoustic requirements of a choir?

If singing outdoors was a reasonably widespread practice before the pandemic, from 2020 it saw a significant increase. It became a real necessity which meant that, inevitably, in the name of the need to return to singing, consideration of the characteristics of concert venues became less important, often requiring choirs to “make do” in order to be able to hold a concert.

Even in normal conditions with careful consideration of all the environmental factors, singing in open spaces has never been ideal for a choir, due to the disadvantageous architectural conditions. Firstly, the very nature of an open space – without walls to contain the sound waves (indeed there is often not even a wall behind the singers to reflect the sound waves back) – causes the sound to disperse considerably.

In addition, to worsen this already challenging situation, there is often also excessive distance between the choir and the audience, the possibility that the wind blows dispersing the sound even more, and the presence of insects that can bother the singers considerably when breathing.

This concert set-up, in addition to causing distraction, annoyance and listening difficulties, instinctively leads the singers to try to compensate for the environmental shortcomings by employing techniques which are technically poor, are potentially harmful to their vocal cords, and which are anything but helpful to the quality of the sound.

The most common of these techniques is to increase the intensity of the voice, in some cases going as far as to "shout", in a vain attempt to fill the large open space around, resulting in overexertion and vocal fatigue after only a few minutes of singing.

Paradoxically and in some ways unexpectedly, however, the opposite problem can also occur. The difficulty hearing the other singers' voices can lead to singing excessively quietly in order to try to hear the surrounding sounds better, with the consequence that the choir produces an insufficient level of sound.

Impacts on the rhythm and intonation often follow, due to the difficulty in hearing one another. These are most prominent when different tempi are gained between one section and another (or even between one singer and another), or when the original key of the music is lost, either by the whole choir – where it usually goes up or down by a semitone – or, in the worst cases, where different parts of the choir shift to different keys.

All of these issues are due to a single cause: the inadequate conditions of open-air singing spaces.

But what, then, are the remedies to this situation?

Are there any suggestions for how singers can better manage this difficult singing environment while avoiding compromising their vocal organs?

Even though there is no silver bullet that can solve all the

problems listed above, there are some useful tricks that can make the outdoor singing experience healthier and more comfortable for the singers and more enjoyable for the audience.

Of these, the most important is to use vocal resonance rather than intensity, to allow the sound to amplify and spread without straining the voice. In this way, with the same amount of power, you will get a sound presence equal to or even greater than what can be obtained by singing louder. Of course, this is a technical skill that must be carefully taught during rehearsals, as part of the vocal training that the conductor should promote and encourage.

Another aspect to consider is how the choir and the audience are positioned within the space, in order to enable both the singers and the audience to be able to hear one another as much as possible. The first and most obvious suggestion is to ask the organisers to position the audience very close to the choir and in an appropriate location when considering how the sound of the choir will circulate, avoiding for example a very large audience where those who sit at the back and edges end up in a sound shadow cone.

As far as the positioning of the choir is concerned, a very narrow semicircle arrangement is preferable, with the conductor positioned in the centre (so as to close the circle) when there is no reflective wall behind the choir. In this way the sound will become concentrated and merge into a single focal point very close to the singers themselves, who will then be able to hear each other more easily. Where this positioning is adopted, it can be a nice and original idea to have the audience sit in concentric circles around the choir itself.

Finally, when it is extremely difficult to hear one another, for choirs used to performing from memory it can be helpful to sing holding their hands open in front of their ears with

their palms facing backwards. In this way, all the sound coming from the other singers is collected and amplified and, at the same time, your own sound is softened, considerably increasing awareness of the sounds of the rest of the choir.

In conclusion, one should not be afraid to try out unusual and unorthodox solutions, even perhaps explaining their meaning to the audience, in the name of acoustic effectiveness and the resulting success of the concert; because we must never forget that, although the visual element of the concert has its importance, a choral concert is still above all an event to listen to, preferably in the best possible way.



Choir director, Vocal Pop arranger, teacher and pianist, **Raffaele Cifani** graduated with honours from the Conservatorio G. Verdi in Milan, and from the “Accademia Righela”, where he studied with international teachers like Carlo Pavese, Lorenzo Donati, Matteo Valbusa, Werner Pfaff, Marco Ozbic, Lucio Golino, and many others. He founded several youth choirs, and he continues directing them, handling more than 40 vocal pop style choral arrangements. In the choral scene, among other activities, he has participated in the International Festival “La Fabbrica del Canto” and “MITO Settembre Musica” and has received many awards in national and international choral competitions. Furthermore, he is often involved as a speaker at many conferences and training courses about choral conduction and vocal pop arrangement. Since 2018 he has been part of the Lombardy choral association board.
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