

# Using the Pandemic to Unlock Creativity

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It is now undeniable that there will be a 'new normal' in the post-pandemic choral world. For many, the pre-Covid choral tradition was familiar, comfortable and secure, but, as time may show, it may have been limited in its vision and purpose. The pandemic has provided us an interlude with extraordinary possibilities if we are willing to embrace change and find new ways of and reasons for singing together. This article will highlight several innovations and experiments undertaken by Canadian choirs and composers as, together, they have engaged in creative and imaginative projects which never would have been thought up without Covid-19.

## The Convolution Project

Canada, with its population of 38 million and the world's second largest country land mass (9.98 million square kilometres), has a national arts service organisation dedicated to the choral arts sector – Choral Canada/Canada Choral. Working in partnership with Choral Canada/Canada Choral are nine provincial choral federations in the country's ten provinces and three territories. Choir Alberta is the choral federation in the province of Alberta (western Canada), which is a hot-spot for choral activity in our country. During the pandemic when choirs were unable to meet or perform in person, Choir Alberta wanted to organise a project that would

strengthen the provincial choral community as well as push the boundaries of the conventional virtual choir project.



The Convolution Project grew out of the new pandemic reality, in particular the grief and almost panic among the choral community as to how it would survive. The approach was to explore how the pandemic could become an opportunity rather than a calamity. In creating a new digital choral medium, *Reunion* not only brings Alberta choral singers together virtually but also virtually returns their sound to the choral spaces where they ordinarily sing by simulating the resonances of churches and concert halls throughout the province.



*Choral singers have been grieving the loss of their cherished art, with all the social, cultural, emotional, and even health benefits that it brings, due to social distancing imposed by the pandemic. We hope to use Reunion to virtually recreate some of the choral magic that singers have been missing. (Jason Noble, composer)*

The project involved 89 singers from 54 choirs around the province of Alberta and included both auditioned and non-auditioned singers. All the sounds on the recording came from

the human voice. The composer describes the compositional process:

*I have tried to compose a piece that singers will love to sing, with lyrical melodies, lush harmonies, a variety of textures from delicate to rich and sonorous, and a dramatic formal crescendo. Once the singers recorded their parts, I used some of the vocal materials to create virtual soundscapes that are possible only with electronic enhancement. In this way, we hope to turn the distance imposed on us into an opportunity to explore new sonic spaces.*

Using convolution, an electroacoustic technique, Noble was able to model the resonance of a space for the choristers' voices, returning the singers' voices to their own choral spaces. In some sections of the piece, convolution was used to simulate these acoustic spaces. In other sections, the reverb is diminished or cancelled, creating an amazing intimacy by removing the illusion of distance. This technique provided a powerful means of evoking the text, beginning with the line: *Distance disappears in sonic spaces.*

Additionally, the singers recorded spoken and non-texted vocal sounds that were digitally manipulated to create naturalistic and social soundscapes. These sounds were intended to evoke scenes from which many people were isolated due to restricted travel and activity during the pandemic: a forest, an ocean, and a social gathering. No images of singers appear in the performance, only empty concert spaces and natural environments. The project was truly successful in bringing the singers back together, socially and musically, in their acoustic performance environments, even though it was only a virtual 'reunion'.

## Sonic Timelapse Project

The Sonic Timelapse Project is a collaborative choral art commissioning project that grew out of concerns as to how choirs might fund commissions during the pandemic. Founded by Katerina Gimon, Laura Hawley, and Geung Kroeker-Lee with the support of Prairie Voices Inc, this project brings together shared creativity and financial resources in a time of need to fund the creation of 10 new works as well as support online programming for participating choirs.

Kroeker-Lee explains the genesis of the project:

*Sonic Timelapse, at its core, is about community. The spirit behind the project was to give the Canadian choral community an opportunity to respond to the effects of the global pandemic by expressing themselves through new choral works. We envisioned a creative process that placed the composer, conductor, and singer as equal contributors to these works, because we felt this was a way to create authentic expressions of our community. Humanity has always had a way of creating incredible beauty in its most challenging moments; we hope this project provides an experience that allows our art form and community the opportunity to grieve, reflect, make new discoveries, and celebrate the beautiful complexities of life.*

The idea is to commission new works based on how choristers are feeling over time during the pandemic. The collaborative process involves gathering content from the emotional landscape of choral communities in Canada and using these creative reflections as texts for choral compositions. Gimon describes the collaborative goal:

*As a composer, I've always been passionate about finding ways to involve singers in the process of creating a new work for their choir. The result of involving singers intentionally is the creation of a new work that truly feels theirs –*

*something representative of their voice, feelings, time, ideas, and struggles. During this pandemic, I think this has become even more important. Times of social distancing have made us realize how much we value connection and yearn to be part of something greater than ourselves through choir and singing together. Our hope with Sonic Timelapse is that, even at times when we aren't able to sing together in one room, participants can still feel exactly this connection and relationship to others.*

This collaborative project is designed with a lot of flexibility and options based on nine funding tiers, each with varying degrees of access to digital license authorisation for commissioned scores, creativity workshops, creative reflections, and the New Works Video Library. Using an innovative crowdfunding model, the project will generate a number of new compositions, many for multiple voices in flexible voicings. Hawley explains the funding model:

*Approaching Sonic Timelapse from my dual perspectives as a composer and conductor, I was especially focused on creating a way for choirs to access new music in a year when many are struggling desperately, without compromising our goals around what we want to pay all of the commissioned composers. We therefore designed a funding model that aims to make it financially easier for choirs to buy new music and engage online. For example, the \$350 CAD funding level includes access to choir sets of four new works, learning tracks, videos in which each composer discusses their new piece, and three workshop sessions that are customizable by length and level. All this is valued at \$800-\$1000 CAD.*

*With so many choirs looking for help and with so many individuals wanting to support the community and the arts, we believe we can work together to pool our financial and creative resources. Every individual or choir that donates or signs up helps build a strong community, connects choirs with*

*each other and with composers, gives voices to our lived experience of the pandemic, puts music into the hands of singers, and generates tremendous creative energy that is a positive light in our world!*

Sonic Timelapse has engaged ten outstanding Canadian composers to create the commissioned works. For this article, each composer was invited to share their thoughts on the project.



Carmen Braden

*It is a great idea having so many commissions generated in a short time under one umbrella topic. Making them available to multiple choirs at once is brilliant as it frees up some of the boundaries of exclusivity in the traditional*

*commissioning process. Post-pandemic, I imagine multi-layered engagement with these pieces from across the network of choirs and composers who took part in the initial generation of Sonic Timelapse. As a set of works defined by their circumstances of creation, they will be a fascinating marker to look back on in coming years.*

### **Deanna Edwards (Gestrin)**

*Sonic Timelapse entered my life five months into the pandemic when it was clear that the choral arts were in a vulnerable position and equally unclear what was still possible in terms of music creation, community, and connection. Deriving inspiration from artistic reflections submitted to the project provided me with a sense of much-needed hope and purpose at that time. I felt inspired to write a piece that not only addressed my pandemic experience but could also tackle some of the challenges faced by online choral teaching and singing. It's moving that, at a time of such uncertainty, choral composers from across Canada can stand together on the same 'stage' to offer hope and beauty in a practical and meaningful way.*

### **Jeff Enns**

*I love the idea of Sonic Timelapse as a collaboration of ideas, creators, benefactors, and beneficiaries. As a composer, it is good to have some parameters, and the submission of texts from multiple sources and individuals provided a great variety to choose from. I think that it is a great idea to share the pieces among all of the choirs involved. This gives more opportunity for choirs to perform each piece and for composers to have their pieces performed.*

## Katerina Gimon

*One of the things that excites me most about Sonic Timelapse is its 'timelapse' aspect with two pieces of new music being released each month, each based on reflections by choral music community members collected on an ongoing basis. The music created will serve as a 'time capsule' of this unique moment in our history – the difficulties we faced, how we found hope, how it changed us, and how it changed our world. Through the uncertainty of 2020, this project has been a shining light for me – inspiring me and bringing me hope in difficult times.*

## Laura Hawley

*Working with the Creative Reflections submitted meant connecting creatively with all of the choral artists who had submitted those reflections. As I read their submissions and pondered how to set those emotions and ideas to music, I felt a bridge was created between us. Now as I sing through my completed piece, each phrase, word, or emotional idea connects me to the person who inspired that moment. This was a side of the project that I hadn't necessarily predicted – the power of this collaborative creative process to shorten the distance between us, and how this would remind me that I'm part of a community who can find the creative potential in even the darkest moments and work together to turn it into an expression of art.*

## Ryan Henwood

*At a time when artists have had to pause their creative*



*endeavours, this project has provided an opportunity for me to create and reflect on my experience with the global pandemic. I was drawn to Sonic Timelapse by the Creative Reflections shared by conductors from across the Canadian choral community. As my composition process begins, I hope to weave together their unique perspectives with my own to represent the complex emotions that were brought forth during this time.*

### **Shane Raman**

*During the time of the pandemic and social uprising I was re-evaluating my relationship with choral music as a person of South Asian descent. Working in a specific art form of the culture that colonized my people is a hurdle I am hopping over multiple times. Sonic Timelapse allowed me to channel some of my thoughts and feelings about these issues into a piece that could have more exposure. The ideas of inclusivity and diversity and supporting the choral community during this pandemic seem so relevant that I jumped at the chance to be part of this group of Canadian composers.*

### **Marie-Claire Saindon**

*What a project! When everyone was still reeling from the cancellations of thousands of concerts and rehearsals in the spring, Sonic Timelapse offered a new way to create music by bringing choristers, conductors, and composers together despite the physical distancing. Of course I was going to jump in! It is also a wonderful challenge to compose something 'simpler' in order to keep it accessible over Zoom-filled rehearsals, yet to have it still be artistically compelling. I hope this model that makes commissioning*

*accessible at a lower cost to community ensembles and flourishes around the international choral community!*

## **Ben Sellick**

*It's cold, dark, and we can't see our friends. Death and grief are experienced in alien, distanced setups. The Canadian spirit trudges on. The thaw holds more promise than ever this time around. Sonic Timelapse is about this spirit of Canadian resilience and creativity in response to hardship. One of music's jobs is to capture moments like this: a living snapshot of one time and place. My hope is that the picture is one of transcendence, amidst the darkness, grief, and snow.*

## **Tracy Wong**

*Sonic Timelapse is such an innovative way to bring hope to the choral community – singers, directors/conductors, audience, and composers. It addresses community engagement, creation of new music, financial collaboration, and emotional resilience at a time when we are forced into silence. As a conductor, choral singer, music educator, and composer, I feel this project fills multiple gaps in collaborative music creation right now and will continue to be needed post-pandemic. Sonic Timelapse reminds us to lean into music and each other for resilience and hope.*



## **Veritas: Seeking Truth, Sharing Wisdom**

Exploring the concept of truth during a global pandemic saturated with 'fake news', deception, and misinformation, the Aeolian Singers (Halifax, Nova Scotia) commissioned works by Canadian women composers under the title of *Veritas: Seeking Truth, Sharing Wisdom*. The three composers are Frances Farrell (Nova Scotia), Marie-Claire Saindon (Quebec), and Carmen Braden (Northwest Territory) – each from a different region of Canada. Artistic Director Heather Fraser describes the inspiration for this project:

*We are all searching for truth in our lives, and it seems it is increasingly hard to find. This project embodies just how widely the truth is open to interpretation and how our certainties can be so different from one to the other. We continuously grapple with the complex world of shadow and light, the seen and the unseen, and the manipulation of reality.*



Through their commissions, the composers have explored the theme of truth and permitted it to lead them down wildly different creative paths. Farrell draws inspiration from the rose as a symbol of truth, something that can be stripped away petal by petal and then flourish in the most unexpected places. Saindon examines truth in the era of fake news, anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theories, and deepfake technology. Braden challenges listeners to experience truth through the eyes of a child with ever-evolving memories and impressions.

Rather than premiere the commissions in one concert, the project showcases the composers individually in three separate concerts designed to allow the audience to interact with these outstanding Canadian women composers. Each concert features the world premiere of one commission and incorporates a presentation by the composer on a topic related to her own compositional and creative process. The composer engages in a collaborative demonstration with the choir about the

commissioned work, giving audience members the rare opportunity to hear directly from the creators about their craft, witness the collaborative creative process, and experience an in-depth look into the world of composition.



Frances  
Farrell,  
composer

One of the composers, Frances Farrell, shares her thoughts about her creative process and, in particular, the interaction in the Veritas project between the composer, the choir, and the audience.

*The first challenge in accomplishing this commission, A Rose by Any Other Name, was tackling such a broad topic. I decided to create a suite of three pieces to reflect truth from several viewpoints. A preliminary exploration of poetry led me to Anne Brontë's quote: "But he who dares not grasp the thorn should never crave the rose." I played with the rose as a symbol of truth that could unify the three movements of A Rose by Any Other Name. When reading the last stanza of Hilda Doolittle's (H.D.) poem Night, I was intrigued by the image of petals dropping, leaving only the stark core of the rose behind. As I read through the text, the idea of a Handel aria came to me. The truth these days, it seems, is a rather archaic construct, and it occurred to me to pair this notion with an archaic, but much beloved musical style, Baroque, resulting a slow and stately farewell to the truth as the title of this first movement, Elegy, suggests. The second*

piece in this set was inspired by an image I ran across in a Tupac Shakur poem about a rose growing from concrete. The impossibility of this image intrigued me and, as I thought more about it, the notion of standing in one's truth, of believing in yourself when perhaps no one else does, eventually informed the musical material in this movement. The musical ideas in last movement of this suite, *Women Are Not Roses*, were inspired by a poem of the same name. In her poem, celebrated author Ana Castillo challenges the ways in which women have stereotypically been described and categorized, ostensibly overlooking the truth of who we really are. Musically, I wanted to reflect the notion of withholding definition by playing with the music so that it did not stay in one place, as it were, resulting in changing time signatures, unorthodox melodies, and playing with temporary keys creating abrupt shifts in musical ideas. This movement is really a moving target of sorts.

It seems like during these times the choral art, too, is a moving target. All of us have been challenged to explore and extend the parameters of what the choral art can offer. The *Veritas* project points to innovation in these times of uncertainty. That this project was performed at all, given Covid restrictions, speaks to the determination of Artistic Director Heather Fraser and the Aeolian Singers. But, beyond Covid, the *Veritas* project underscores the role a living composer can play in advancing choral music.

Behind-the-scenes segments have seemingly become a staple in many other arts forms as evidenced in interviews with actors and directors for movies, authors and their books, and songwriters' circles. These events give voice to creators in addition to the creations themselves. In the choral world, and I realize I am speaking in general terms, the composer's voice tends to be relegated to programme notes or brief remarks from the conductor. This is inevitable with composers who are no longer alive. Moreover, one could argue that the

performance of a composer's work is, in and of itself, giving voice to the composer. But, how might the performers' and audience's experience be enhanced when they are given more opportunities to hear from the composer himself, herself, themselves? When composers are invited to work with the singers and the conductor to share their vision of the piece? When composers are invited to talk about the genesis of their pieces and salient compositional features to the audience? The Veritas project may serve as a model of a choral concert that sees a reimagining and strengthening of the allyship among performers, audience members, and the composer and, in so doing, may provide new answers to age-old concerns of sustaining and growing an audience base. Moreover, inviting the composer's voice shifts the balance between the process and the product, affirms and elevates the composer's voice, and, at the same time, offers further opportunities to empower and elevate choristers' and conductors' voices in their shared role as agents of artistry. The truth of the matter is that projects such as Veritas may be pointing the way through these troubled times and beyond in the choral world.



Aeolian Singers

## The Light of Hope Returning



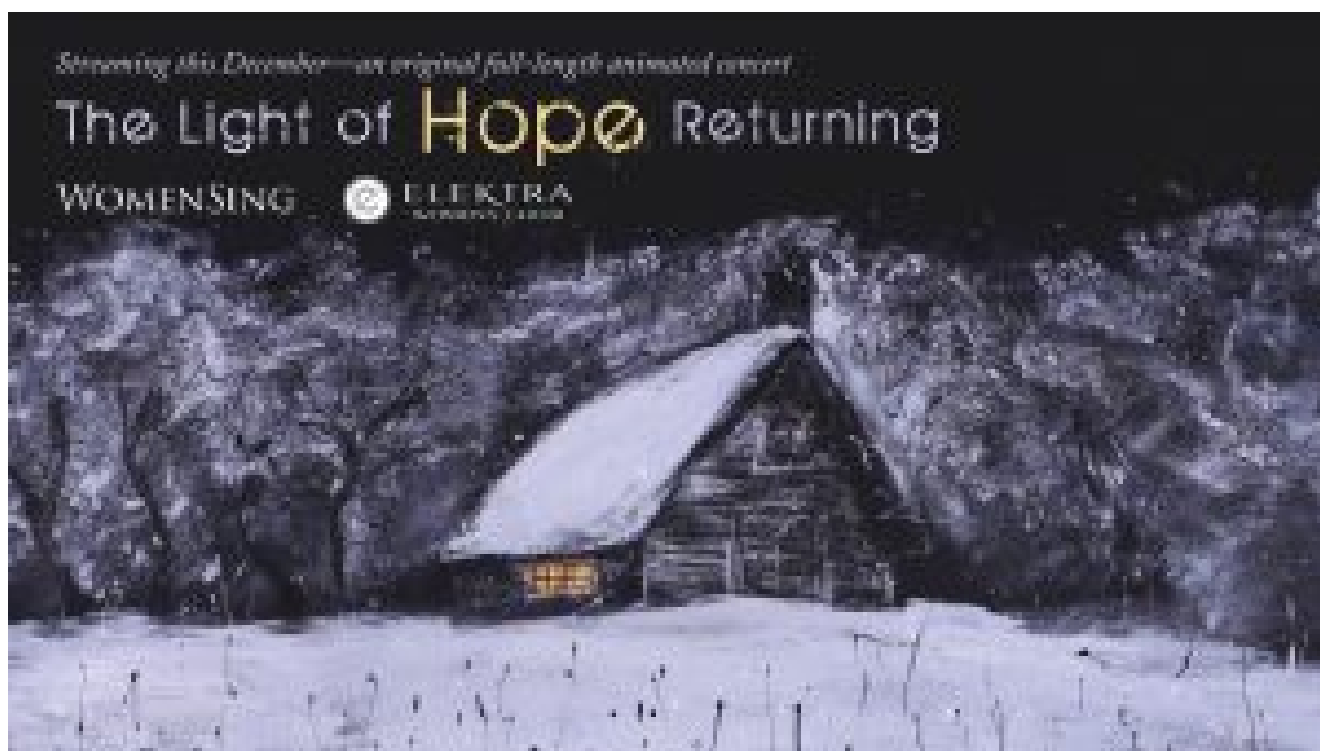
Shawn Kirchner

In June 2020, as the realities of an entire choral season being lost to the pandemic were setting in, Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director of Elektra Women's Choir (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada), was approached by Ofer dal Lal, Artistic Director of WomenSing (Orinda, California, USA), about the possibility of an international collaboration between the two



choirs on a performance of Shawn Kirchner's *The Light of Hope Returning*. Edmundson states:

*Because Elektra's mandate includes building awareness of good repertoire for treble choirs and because extended works are so rare in the repertoire for our voicing, I jumped at the chance to get to know *The Light of Hope Returning* and to promote it. Due to the travel ban between Canada and the USA, we knew from the outset that the performance would have to be recorded separately. Early in our planning, we decided that this virtual choir project should have animation and learned from Kirchner about Syrian-American visual artist Kevork Mourad's work with classical musicians including the LA Master Chorale and Yo-Yo Ma. It has been fascinating bringing our two art forms together.*



*The Light of Hope Returning* is a concert-length 'ceremony' of folk carols in which a number of Kirchner's best-loved Christmas settings are combined with newly penned carols on Christmas, Winter Solstice, and New Year's themes. Together

these carols form a dramatic arc that takes the listener on a journey from distant hope through darkness into the rebirth of light and true hope for the future. Canadian soloist Allison Girvan and instrumentalists from the San Francisco Opera Orchestra are also featured, as well as texts by author Susan Cooper.



Kevork Mourad

The thematic aspects of this work, while timeless, feel very appropriate to the current restricted conditions we are all experiencing during the pandemic. Threatening the lives of many and separating us from each other's warmth, Covid-19 has put the world in a 'winter-like' state. Intended as an antidote to hopelessness in troubled times, this international multimedia collaboration poignantly reflects the current state of global uncertainty, at the same time trusting in the cycle of the seasons and the hope embodied by the eventual return of light. We will sing together again!



Elektra Women's Choir

### To the future...

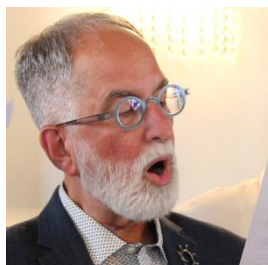
Too often organisations are trying to find ways to differentiate themselves from other organisations... whether they are choirs, festivals, or national arts service organisations. We see ourselves as competitors rather than collaborators. The pandemic has demonstrated that we really need each other for help and support so that we come out on the other end with the choral art thriving and surviving.

Community is not just about singers who are not able to meet to sing together. It is just as important for all levels of the choral art form to connect and collaborate.

We could never have imagined that the catalyst for unlocking the creativity exemplified by these four projects would be a pandemic that fundamentally rearranged our ways of living. We are never going back to what we were before. Together, we are reinventing how the choral community communicates and how it collaborates. There is no doubt that we are all off on a new journey together.

*I will not follow where the path may lead, but I will go where there is no path, and I will leave a trail. (Muriel Strode, 1903)*

The challenge for us all is to look for ways to leave a trail rather than follow a path.



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**Currently a board member of the International Federation for Choral Music and President of the World Youth Choir Foundation, Ki is Founding Co-Director of The Singing Network, a collective for generating and producing a series of vocal and choral experiences ranging from workshops, seminars, masterclasses and dialogues to the biennial International Symposium on Singing and Song. Email: [kiadams@mun.ca](mailto:kiadams@mun.ca)**

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