




Choir Quarantined – Beyond Music Technology and Community building

By Kanniks Kannikeswaran

A horizontal bar composed of several colored segments: orange, purple, teal, orange, purple, teal, and purple.

19 years ago, the 911 attacks on the United States changed the face of the world. A year later, a Super-Conductor friend of mine and I chatted over coffee in Downtown Cincinnati, to dream up a new means to open up new vistas for cross-cultural collaboration - by singing ancient chants for peace in a mixed choral setting. The result was 'Shanti - A Journey of peace', a musical production, the roots of which enabled us to leverage tradition, technology, and community together to forge a means to keep the dialog of interconnectedness alive at the grassroots level across continents.

We are now at crossroads again. The very breath of our singing chants for peace is challenged; by a virus, that has brought the world a grinding halt. We had dreamed of Peace movements going viral; all we have now is a viral pandemic. Air travel that we had taken for granted, is now off-limits. Local choral rehearsals are rendered impossible with singers being pushed to quarantine themselves for the general good of all of humanity.

And sadly, the virus has hit us where it hurts the most.

Singing in a choir is now deemed a health hazard. "Singing is equal to coughing in the number of particles emitted. Unlike coughing, singing ... is sustained," - Choir America¹

For instance, 45 of the 60 choristers who rehearsed together in Washington State with every social-distancing precaution in place developed symptoms and two died.

Here are some sobering observations from the American Choral Director's Association.

- 1) *There is no safe way for choirs to rehearse together until there is a vaccine or 95% effective treatment in place, most likely 1-2 years. Masks and spacing DO NOT protect your singers from contagion, and singers are super-spreaders*
- 2) *Though there may be some mitigation using a combination of UV lights and fan/atmosphere scrubbing inside, it is not 100% effective and the UV, in particular, maybe both expensive and dangerous*
- 3) *No concerts or public performances this fall, and frankly, maybe not for 1-2 years, though we actually don't know.*
- 4) *Once rapid testing becomes available, the possibility to rehearse with immediate testing before every rehearsal with iron-clad agreements from choir members.*
- 5) *AUDIENCE: Temperature checks at the door and required masks.*

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https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/05/10/never-faced-anything-like-this-covid-19-silence-singers/3101846001/?fbclid=IwAR0wkp8uulyJ_GPRcfr3sUpdbwD6qapZa9WQrP1U-TzRaV03-0clh8social

54 Million people in the United States sing in choirs - professional, semi-professional and amateur choirs. Common to each of these singers is the shared joy of ensemble singing. Are we to be deprived of this joy for the foreseeable future? The choral fraternity is in tears. We sang together to express ourselves, our hyphenated identities; we sang together to use our collective sound to express the possibility of peace and interconnectedness. We explored commonality in melody and harmony with people who looked and sounded different from ourselves. Far from being celebrated for singing together, we are now strapped with the burden of having our very breath of collective singing labeled as a health hazard! Is this the end of our choral-world as we know it?

Well, humanity has always come up with creative solutions to all crises and I am sure we will surmount this and emerge even stronger in the years to come.

Many choirs and ensembles have begun to make use of teleconferencing software and are sharing recordings of 'seemingly live-performances' on social media. Technology gives us the ability to get together online, speak, sing, share ideas, look at each other and even share our work with the rest of the world. We, the quarantined Indian-American community learn new music across cities and states and even across national borders with the common objective of keeping the embers alive as we live through this temporary phase of social isolation.

We also stare at the question of what lies ahead for us. We acknowledge that this silencing of our collective voice is a 'first-world problem' in the face of the millions that are displaced in this Covid era. We note with wonder that this shutdown is enabling the world to think out of the box. We observe that tech savvy art-leaders, institutions and community organizations are keeping audiences engaged through online performances, interactions and education. We strengthen our resolve to stay connected and to sing; we reach out and educate our fellow singers on using technology to connect. We constantly remind ourselves that the Covid-Stupor is only a temporary phase and that we will waking up in a matter of months and that we will have an exciting world to rebuild. We acknowledge our bodies, our breath, our voices, our mental capabilities, our ability to learn; we strive to nurture every one of our faculties, to enhance our existing skills and to pick up new skills in preparation for the upcoming cultural and economic global renaissance in a post Covid world. We resolve to take care of our fellow-singers, to provide a listening space for each other and to stand together.

We yearn for the freedom of pre-Corona/Covid era and look forward to our return. The growth in our 'Awareness' and our return to a state where the Arts can actually be experienced **live** will lead to a new found respect for live music and dance and a renewed respect for all lives.

Our fellow singers, our symphonies, our conductors, our choirs will all be our heroes along with the ushers, the box office personnel, the production crews and custodial

staff that we will welcome back in a new spring, after this hibernation. The thrill of singing together, being together will empower us first, even as we continue to interact online and use 'realtime digital rehearsing' and sing of a kinder and gentler planet even as we continue to rebuild.

When the dust settles, all that would be left are memories of the time when we all contributed to this renaissance. May our progeny be inspired by legends of positivity from the post Covid recovery and rebuilding that we will share (with them) one day.

