

RE-STARTING YOUR CHOIR – some F.A.Qs

The past couple of years have been very hard on many choirs, and we're still not back to the old "normal" - we are questioning whether that normal will ever return, and what it will mean for us.

Some choirs have begun again, with much attention to COVID protocols; others have still to venture back into rehearsals.

Here are some of the questions that are being asked.

WHEN WILL IT BE SAFE TO SING AGAIN?

Bearing in mind that different peoples' comfort levels vary, it is possible to sing again now, with adequate attention to mitigations. However, that may vary from region to region, depending on the local case-count, and the presence of variants that may be more transmissible.

WHY IS IT MORE DANGEROUS FOR CHOIRS THAN FOR OTHER GROUPS?

What the research has shown is that the COVID virus is primarily transmitted via droplets and aerosols that are carried on the breath. Any activity that produces a lot of exhalation, may also send out a lot of virus. The danger is not only to singers, but also to any activity that brings people together in a limited space without adequate ventilation. However, we know that amateur singers do exhale a lot of moisture (probably more than professional singers, who have better breath control). And we have the example of the Skagit Valley Chorale in March 2020, and a high infection rate from a rehearsal, as well as those of various other choirs in the subsequent months.

IF WE'RE ALL FULLY VACCINATED, ARE WE SAFE TO SING AGAIN?

Vaccination is only one of many factors that will help make singing safer. Vaccination alone will not protect us – the vaccine does not prevent us from catching a "breakthrough" infection, it merely means that the body will react to the virus in such a way that it is unlikely to be life-threatening, though it may be unpleasant and uncomfortable. Having everyone vaccinated is good – but it's not the only way to be safe.

OUR CHOIR STOPPED IN THE SPRING OF 2020; HOW CAN WE SAFELY GET GOING AGAIN?

The first thing is to talk to your choir. You need to know how people are feeling about coming back – what's their level of concern, what will make them feel more comfortable... A survey of some sort is wise – and it may be a survey done by electronic means, by paper-copy or by phone-call.

Kamloops Happy Choristers, a seniors choir in the BC Interior, has been working on a plan under the guidance of Dr Tim Dundas, who can offer help in the form of a survey done using

Google Forms. In that format, the survey produces nice colourful pie-chart graphics tfor a presentation, but the results of a survey using similar questions can be tabulated by hand. Once you know how your choir is thinking, you need to address their concerns and make a safety plan, helping them to feel good about returning. (Tim has offered both survey and safety plan (though we don't show the results) as models for other choirs to adapt to their uses, and is willing to be contacted.)

HOW DO WE CREATE A SAFETY PLAN?

Bring together a safety committee, so that the responsibility is shared.

There are a list of mitigations that need to be addressed.

- A) Vaccination
- B) Sanitizing
- C) Masking
- D) Distancing
- E) Ventilation
- F) Duration

You may not put equal weight on all these, but they should all be discussed, and codified in some way.

A) VACCINATION

The recommendation from the Provincial Health Department is that groups of 50 or more fall under the vaccination mandate; BCCF would recommend that best practices suggest that this apply to smaller choirs as well.

B) SANITIZING

We now know that the COVID virus is transmitted more via breath than by touch – however, being careful about sanitizing protocols can only be good. Colds and influenza were WAY down last winter because people were being more careful; let's keep ourselves safe.

Practically, this means not sharing pencils or music, having sanitizer or wipes available, and generally being careful about contact.

C) MASKING

Wearing a mask is one of the easiest ways to protect yourself. Unfortunately, it does make singing a bit harder – but singing with a mask is better than not singing at all!

A recent **BCCF webinar** gives more detailed information. A good cloth mask should fit well, and be comprised of three layers, at least one of which should be polypropylene. A Singers Mask (with big space in front of the face) or an origami mask is recommended, but a regular medical mask is worn by many. Because the Omicron variant is so transmissible, it is now recommended that

- you wear a KN95 or N95 if you can find one that is big enough to allow you to sing.
- you double-mask, with a medical mask close to the face and a well-fitting cloth mask on top
- you wear a singers mask with two or three layers of NonWoven Polypropylene

Singers may need to change masks partway through rehearsal, if moisture builds up, and find ways of dealing with fogged-up glasses!

D) DISTANCING

Currently the recommendation is for 6feet/2meters between singers. This is one of the issues that is affected by others – if you are rehearsing in a space that has good air-flow and good exchange rate, a smaller distance may be possible. We are awaiting the results of a study from the University of Alberta about aerosol flow and distancing, but the transmissibility of Omicron is also going to be a factor to take into consideration.

With a large choir, it may be necessary to split into two or more groups if the rehearsal venue does not allow distancing

E) VENTILATION

Depending on the space you sing in, this factor may impact others. In a modern venue, there will probably be a measurable air-exchange rate as part of the HVAC system – note that air-exchange is not just having fans keeping the air moving, but actually replacing air in the room with air from outside. In an older building – perhaps a church – this may not be measurable, and replaced with open doors and windows. You may need to negotiate with the venue and with your singers about what this means in terms of working temperature!

F) DURATION

You will probably not return to full-length rehearsals unless you can meet the distancing/ventilation factors. What a reduced-length rehearsal may mean will probably vary, according to those factors. 45 minutes of continuous singing in a small and/or poorly-ventilated space is not recommended – can you do a short rehearsal, break into sectionals in a different space, and then return to rehearsing together? Do you do two shorter rehearsals with a long break in between (in which people go outside for fresh air)? Can you use part of your rehearsal for non-vocalizing activity? A church choir may be in place for more than an hour's service, but not singing the whole time.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD BE IN A SAFETY PLAN?

Other things to think about might include

- **ACCESS** – where are the traffic bottle-necks? Can you enter through one door and leave by another?
- **ADMIN STUFF** – can you do as much as possible online? - like, registration forms, paying membership dues, buying raffle tickets...
- **VACCINATION RECORDS** – one person only should have responsibility for this. If records are scanned electronically, they don't need to be scanned each week and they're not being stored in any form that is accessible to choir members. If anything is written down, then there are privacy issues to consider
- **MUSIC** – probably a good idea to collate and bag it for singers a few days before it's needed. The virus does not last long on paper surfaces.
- **SOCIAL** – choir is a social event for many singers, as well as a musical one; you may need to keep reminding people to keep a distance at break-time, or to go outside.

- **SEATING** – keep a record of who is at rehearsal, and also of who is sitting where. If there is ever a COVID outbreak, it may be important to be able to warn singing-neighbours to self-monitor.

WHAT ABOUT ONLINE REHEARSALS?

Many of us have had experience with rehearsing online, and finding how hard it is. There are the technical limitations – working with wifi, the signal is not always steady, especially out of the metropolitan areas. There has been a steep learning curve with Zoom, but many people are still not comfortable with it. We can't sing together and hear each other because of the time-lag. The choirs that have been successful with it have mostly used it as a teaching aid for theory and vocal technique.

But Zoom does have a part to play in a live rehearsal with a choir who has members who are not ready to return to in-person. If you can make a Zoom session accessible to those people, they will hear their choir-mates and be able to sing along – and they may eventually feel safe enough to return. Alternatively, it is possible to record a rehearsal and post it on a private YouTube account for at-home singers to follow at their convenience. You will need to balance recording, which may give you a better product, with Zooming, which will make the participants feel more part of the choir.

WHAT ABOUT THE CONDUCTOR AND ACCOMPANIST? DO THEY NEED TO MASK?

That will depend on the venue, and what the rules are. If you're in a facility that says everyone must be masked at all times, then everyone must be masked. If you're in a sufficiently large facility that the conductor and pianist are at a good distance from the choir, then being mask-free may be possible. You can only ask.

BUT I CAN'T HEAR WHAT THE CONDUCTOR IS SAYING!

Definitely a problem – in a larger space, with the choir spread out, yes, hearing instructions may be difficult. Sound technology to the rescue – talk to your local supplier about renting or buying a wireless head-set mic and speaker.

DO WE NEED WAIVERS? WHAT ABOUT INSURANCE?

These factors may be affected by the venue you rehearse in. It's a good idea to have your safety plans in a format that participants should read and sign. It's unlikely that any waiver will have legal weight if someone decides to sue the choir because a singer got COVID – if you have clear, signed safety plans, and are following them, you've done due diligence. You can't insure the choir against someone getting sick – but you do need to make sure that your venue's requirements for insurance are met.

WE'RE FINANCIALLY STRAPPED; IS THERE HELP?

The choirs that were most financially impacted by the hiatus were the ones who depended on concert income to carry the financial load. Even returning to rehearsals, we are not sure what

this season will hold in terms of concert audiences – people have become used to watching online performances, and though live is best, safety may keep some people online. The choirs who have held through this period tended to be the ones for whom membership fees covered most of the vital expenses: professional fees, venue costs (which became technical costs), administration, etc. And most of the members of these choirs decided that COMMUNITY was as important as CHOIR, and that they would hold together somehow. These are the choirs who have fees that look high at first sight, but who have members who recognize that a term of choir is equivalent to a term of evening classes, or a trip to a movie each week, or at least a couple of lattes. They do not undervalue the choir experience, and if necessary, they recognize financial hardship cases with bursaries and other support. So the main recommendation is to take a hard look at the budget and see how realistic it is. It may be a shock to members to move membership from (say) \$50 a term to \$100 – but a term costing \$100 is \$10 a week, which is manageable to most people. Then, with a realistic budget, perhaps approach a local business or arts council or municipality and ask for sponsorship or a grant. BCCF doesn't have grants in this situation, but they can offer advice with your budgeting and admin, they can offer workshops and events that will help your choir, and BCCF member choirs can borrow music from the Virtual Library at no cost other than shipping. When you think that a set of 30 at \$2.50 will add up to \$75, that's paid for your BCCF membership right there!

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