

Report from a Musical Gig Worker: Choirs in the Time of COVID-19

Nina Gilbert

In February, I was music-directing two community theater productions (performing *Matilda* at Coronado Playhouse on weekends, and rehearsing *Big Fish* at Center Stage Productions in Escondido on Tuesdays and Thursdays); guest-conducting a community chorus on Mondays; playing accompaniments with a studio of flute students preparing for a recital; playing the piano on weekend afternoons for ballet students preparing for a visiting examiner; accompanying and coaching voice students at San Diego State (that is, helping them learn their music with appropriate phrasing and accurate diction in several languages, preparing for lessons, competitions, auditions, and recitals, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays); teaching piano and voice lessons; and music-directing at the Congregational Church of La Jolla (playing organ for Sunday worship, and directing choir rehearsals on Wednesdays or Thursdays as the choir graciously accommodated my weeknight schedule). I typed each commitment into two electronic calendars in my phone and set frequent alarms and reminders.

Matilda finished its run on February 23. Backstage between scenes we traded news and rumors about a mysterious disease beginning to spread.

The ballet students danced successfully for their visiting examiner on March 9. The examiner told us about other examiners whose trips to places like Singapore were being cancelled.

That week we heard announcements about groups of various sizes (250, eventually 50) being told not to gather. Thursday, March 12, we met *Big Fish*

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cast members at the door to our rehearsal studio and sent them home. Friday, March 13, everything else shut down or found a way to move online.

The following week, we learned the term “superspreader event” as applied to a choir rehearsal in Skagit County, Washington, where 53 of 61 participants developed COVID-19 and two of them

died. Through spring and summer, we added layers of information about how the disease spreads—surfaces, droplets, aerosols—and tried to find safe ways for choirs to sing. We’d see a photo of singers carefully spaced six feet apart, possibly with Plexiglas shields, and think, They may be lucky so far—and they haven’t read the latest epidemiological research about aerosols, ventilation, and even “toilet plume” (namely, even if your rehearsal space has MERV-13 filters and big open windows, the air and surfaces in the restroom can still be hazardous). Some people designed special “singers’ masks” that made them look like giant ducks. Some researchers figured out that these masks didn’t eliminate risk, though they certainly made people feel as if they were taking precautions.

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Some choirs are finding ways to meet outdoors—though my friends in Alaska acknowledge that this is not a long-term solution—as researchers offer data about

what direction people should face and how often the area needs to be vacated. Recently we have learned that louder singing and deeper breathing affect coronavirus transmission. And in September, the world again learned of a choir rehearsal, this time near Barcelona, where one singer infected 30 of 41 fellow members.

Artists are creative. How are choral organizations creatively meeting the challenge of coronavirus? The answer depends on the choir and its purpose.

Some community choirs are simply meeting socially via Zoom. That is, getting together for virtual coffee hours, without singing.

If you've tried to sing "Happy Birthday" (or anything else) together on a Zoom call, you know it doesn't work. It's not you, it's *latency*—the delay in transmitting sound makes it impossible to sing precisely together. If you have an exceptionally hi-tech situation, there is something called SoundJack that enables real-time collaboration in specialized contexts—for rehearsals, not audiences.

If you've seen what looks like a choir singing together via Zoom, what you're seeing is a *virtual choir*. Each singer recorded himself or herself, carefully matching a guide track to stay in tune and in tempo, and a video engineer/editor spent many, many hours compiling the result.

So how does a choir rehearse via Zoom?

Singers learn their notes independently. During rehearsal, everyone mutes except the director and perhaps a section leader. The director tells

people what to sing. Everyone sings, self-evaluates, and lets the director know if they have questions. The director might listen to one singer. For online sectional

rehearsals, I would invite participants to take turns "leading." That added variety, gave us a chance to repeat, and—my real reason—gave me a chance to listen to individuals without having them think they were being judged.

While this is generally a pretty hobbling way to run a musical ensemble, I have noticed a few advantages to online rehearsing. In one choir I visited, one singer was a Zumba teacher. She set up her camera in her studio and led an exhilarating physical warmup session at the beginning of the rehearsal. Choir members who have moved out of town can return virtually if the group meets online. And a colleague enjoyed guest-conducting choirs in Sweden, Canada, and New Zealand, all within one week.

Some choral organizations have enough technical expertise to rehearse in their cars. That is, everyone in the choir

drives to a big parking lot, everyone gets a microphone, and an engineer among the choir members does something magical that enables everyone to hear each other through their car radios.

Many of these choirs are church- or synagogue-connected. Some churches are livestreaming worship services either from their church building or from leaders' homes—clergy, musician, and possibly a vocal soloist. Some post services on YouTube, where people can watch them at any time, not just during an official livestream hour.

The church where I music-direct emails a worship-at-home packet ahead of

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every Sunday during the pandemic: a PDF document with words and images, plus audio files with a sermon from the pastor, a song by a soloist (sometimes a hymn where we put music and lyrics in our PDF and encourage people to sing along), and my piano prelude and postlude. Sometimes I pre-record an accompaniment for our soloist. If the song is more complicated, so is our process— she might send me a rough unaccompanied recording to listen to in my headset while recording a piano accompaniment precisely matched to her breaths and pauses, and then I send that back for her to record herself singing along.

What is my life like as a gigging musician in the time of COVID? I'm a pianist as well as conductor. I have recorded accompaniments for voice

students' Zoom lessons and a cantor's chants for virtual Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. I send weekly uplifting emails to the church choir (we are not meeting, except for occasional church Zoom happy hours), with cheery photos of my culinary/homesteading adventures, including homegrown bean and vegetable sprouts and homemade spanakopita.

As a wonderful, nostalgic surprise, I have reconnected with students I taught as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya forty years ago. They're creating a virtual choir spanning three generations and four continents, and I'm recording some accompaniments and helping them find sheet music. Most charming was when they asked me to help re-find some Swahili lyrics that I had given them.

As of March 16, however, I no longer need my electronic calendars. The little boxes on my page-a-month paper calendar have more than enough room for any reminders I need.

The author. Nina Gilbert's background ranges from Kenya, where she translated Schubert's Mass in G into Swahili while serving as a Peace Corps volunteer, to Carnegie Hall (Associate Conductor, New York Choral Society), to Boston (Education Manager, Boston Lyric Opera). Her degrees are in music and conducting, from Princeton, Indiana, and Stanford. Nina has offered NPR commentaries on choral music, appeared on liberal and conservative talk radio as an expert on *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and lectured on the history and science of chocolate. She serves as music director for the Congregational Church of La Jolla, and freelances as a conductor, accompanist/coach and musical theater director. Nina is the daughter of SDIS member Arlene Gilbert.

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