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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Scattered and silenced by the pandemic, choral groups are trying to find their voice

By **Michael Andor Brodeur**

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In March, Eugene Rogers was in Ann Arbor, Mich., celebrating his appointment as the new artistic director of the Washington Chorus by completely scrapping and reimagining his inaugural season for a virtual future.

Meanwhile, in Washington, Steven Fox, music director of the Cathedral Chorus Society, was reeling from the forced cancellation of a program two years in the making — a celebration of the ratification of the 19th Amendment featuring the premiere of a CCS commission from composer Lisa Bielawa.

And in New York, Bielawa was trying to figure out what to do with herself after losing access to her primary instrument — other people.

Every corner of the classical music world has been hit hard by the pandemic, but perhaps no subset seems as uniquely centered in the coronavirus's crosshairs as choral music, which relies upon — and, indeed, exists as — a combination of public safety no-no's: large groups, proximity and voices raised to the heavens (i.e., major distribution of droplets).

Look closely at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report covering one of the first termed "superspreader" events — an outbreak in early March among the 122 members of a choir in Skagit County, Wash., that sickened 53 and killed two — and you'll see singers recast in an ugly new pandemic-era nomenclature: superemitters.

For choruses and choristers — a great many of whom volunteer for their positions on the risers — the music may be the meeting place, but the act of singing is what generates the sense of community and connection that keeps them returning to rehearsals — as a small percentage of the Choral Arts Society of Frederick recently did.

More studies than any of us have time for here demonstrate the function of music as a social binding agent (and in the case of one study, "a special form of social cognition") as well as a source of physical well-being (aiding everything from posture to breathing) and chemical pleasure (helloooo, dopamine). This goes for those listening, too.

Put another way, that sense of belonging you get while standing before a chorus of hundreds singing at the holidays isn't just you feeling festive — it's your body behaving like a body. If talking to a loved one over Zoom doesn't feel quite the same as sharing a sofa or a coffee in person, it's partly because — get ready for some science — you're not feeling the same *vibrations*. It may be why I'm genuinely impressed but ultimately unmoved by the Zoom choruses that exploded in popularity this summer. (For the rest of you, the Self-Isolation Choir, one of the largest choral clouds featuring several thousand singers from around the globe, is preparing to perform Mahler's Resurrection Symphony on Nov. 14.)

And it may be why people from every end of the choral community are trying new ways to raise their voices again. Talk to anyone who sang regularly with others in the before-times, and the loss they describe sounds less like the suspension of a hobby and more like an ailment.

"The isolation was staggering," Bielawa says by phone from New York. "I actually Googled 'touch starvation' because I was trying to find out what was wrong with me. I went to get a covid test, and I walked in there and she touched my arm with a glove on and I started projectile sobbing. Because somebody touched my arm. It was really bad."

Bielawa's approach to composing might seem diametrically opposed to the isolation imposed by the pandemic: She loves to gather hundreds of people at a time in public places to sing and perform as part of collaborative compositions she terms "broadcasts."

But, oddly enough, the mechanics and principles of her process and practice — loosely scored, highly spatialized orchestrations that create a kind of sonic commons by smudging the line between audience and participant — are uncannily compatible with the new artistic strictures of life online during the pandemic.

In April, Bielawa created "Broadcast From Home," a digitally assembled chorus of crowdsourced voices singing short testimonial texts submitted by people adjusting to isolation. Bielawa then layered and arranged the voices into 15 weekly compositions, or "chapters" — a term that makes more sense as you experience the arc of the music's narrative. The project drew thousands of listeners. Entire choirs started contacting her to join in. It was working! Sort of.

"It made me feel so just sad," she says. "There was so much suffering, but there was this unique new problem, which was this incredibly wholesome thing that people did — people of all ages who just love music and want their bodies to be part of making music. Suddenly they were radioactive and they couldn't do it anymore. And it broke my heart."

This made Bielawa only hungrier to hear more voices. In late September, she premiered "Voters' Broadcast" — a participatory choral work "for online and/or socially distanced ensembles" commissioned by the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in partnership with New York's Kaufman Music Center, where Bielawa is a 2020 artist in residence. Its text excerpts lines from artist Sheryl Oring's ongoing project "I Wish to Say," which is now using Zoom to solicit messages to be sent to the next president — some 4,000 of which it has delivered to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. since 2004. And its recording assembles about 200 voices — groups from the University of Michigan, Kaufman Music Center and Wayne State University — unbound by tempo but joined in a kind of mass expression of public consciousness.

The composer's latest project, "Brickyard Broadcast," digs even deeper into this digital turf. Commissioned by North Carolina State University and premiering Nov. 12, it's an immersive sound environment staged in a virtual-reality version of the campus commons.

Bielawa has been surprised to find a semblance of the bodily closeness in the unadorned vocal recordings that keep arriving. The granular differences between the thousands of disconnected voices in her Google Drive have become the raw materials of her music. She hasn't touched her Steinway in weeks.

"I'm not saying I don't love a beautiful choral blend," she says, "but I also would love to be with my mother on her 80th birthday. And it's just not what's happening right now. What's really important to me is not a polished product that sounds like it was recorded in a recording studio. The thing that's important to me is to keep the fire alive."

Nurturing a community

Eugene Rogers experienced a similar paradigm shift of priorities once the pandemic took hold — less than a month after he was hired as artistic director of the Washington Chorus.

"For a minute I couldn't see my way forward, just to be frank," he says over Zoom from Ann Arbor, where he was among the singers virtually gathered in Bielawa's "Voters' Broadcast."(He commutes to D.C. every few weeks.) Along with executive director Stephen Beaudoin, Rogers rebuilt the season, assembling a task force from its ranks to determine best practices. They migrated the chorus's 60th birthday bash online, announced virtual "open sings," launched a YouTube show and hustled to replace a centerpiece commission of its canceled season with a piece that could speak/sing to the moment and be rehearsed, performed and premiered virtually.

The result, premiering Nov. 14, is "Cantata for a More Hopeful Tomorrow," a work for virtual chorus composed by Damien Geter and set to a 25-minute short film directed by filmmaker Bob Berg. The film tells a covid-era love story centered on an elderly Black couple separated by the virus, and the music is modeled after Bach's redemptive "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" cantata (BWV 12). Nearly 40 Washington Chorus members appear through green-screen and software wizardry, and more than 100 lent their voices to the recording.

With "Cantata," Rogers wanted not only to preserve the launch of his Mahogany Series — his initiative to center voices and composers of color — but also to protect the essential social bonds the chorus had formed merely through singing together.

"That sense of community that they have is so important," he says. "We're trying to nurture that community, whatever that means, musically and spiritually."

Steven Fox, music director of the Cathedral Choral Society, was a week shy of premiering "Voters Litany" — the piece Bielawa would "uncompose and recompose" to make "Voters Broadcast" — as well as two other commissions to celebrate the centenary of the 19th Amendment when the pandemic struck. It was a project Fox had pitched when he first interviewed for the job in 2017.

To salvage the season, and keep the Choral Society's 130 singers singing, Fox and executive director Christopher Eanes opted for a free, entirely online fall season of concerts filmed in their home court of Washington National Cathedral (with precautions taken) — and filtered through its familiar acoustics.

"We wanted to come back strong but do so in a way that would be safe," Fox says in a conference call with Eanes.

One concert was released last week, a celebration of Beethoven's 250th birthday (and a replacement program for an intended performance of his "Missa Solemnis") that features lesser-known corners of the composer's music — among them, a selection of lieder including his "6 Sacred Songs" and an account of Elegischer Gesang, Op. 118 for 16 singers and string quartet.

The next, a "Joy of Christmas" program to replace the group's usual Christmas concerts (which drew more than 5,000 people over three performances last year), will feature lesser known corners of Washington National Cathedral — taking viewers through its smaller chapels and chambers. And a video due in the spring will find the CCS collaborating with Stanley J. Thurston and his Heritage Signature Chorale, with a program centered on compositions from Black composers.

As vital as the community formed by the chorus is, Eanes put practical protections first.

"We went under the notion that this is not essential work," he says. "So it does not hurt us to take every single precaution we can. In other words, Beethoven is important, but it's more important that everybody stays healthy."

And to eliminate any uncertainty about the soundness of the measures they planned to enact to safely record the performances — testing, quarantining,

masking, and eight to 12 feet of distance inside the cathedral — they went to the guy in charge. (By which I mean infectious-disease expert Anthony S. Fauci.)

“I heard the man likes to answer emails at all hours of the night, and he called me,” Eanes says. “We had a conversation about it. He made some recommendations. And I thought if this guy isn’t saying you’re nuts, and if he’s looking at our recommendations and saying, ‘Yeah, you can do this,’ then we’re going to do it.”

Part of this resolve to bring choruses back together extends quite naturally from a long, proud, inbuilt American tradition of obsessive show-must-go-on-ism. But why is it that the show must go on? It became cruelly crystal clear only once all the shows were called off, but in singing together, we also learn something about living together, and, at the moment, our country could use some rehearsal.

“People really need music in their lives,” Bielawa says. “They need it *right now*. I need it now. It’s completely selfish. I need to open up my Google Drive and see 35 singers singing some kooky phrase. I need to hear people shouting.”