

Where have all the singers gone, and when will they return? Prospects for Choral Singing after the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic

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Conclusions

The weight of scientific evidence warrants no conclusion other than that at the present time choral singing in enclosed spaces must be considered a high-risk activity. Nevertheless, there are variations in the level of risk across the wide range of circumstances and contexts in which choral singing is undertaken. These variations will become more apparent as a more subtle and nuanced picture emerges. Conditions associated with higher success rates in strategies for managing both the pandemic itself and the risk assessment process for choirs wishing to restart will become better documented and clearer. The course of the pandemic – whether it declines gradually or is subjected to renewed peaks or seasonal resurgences as conditions change will be known with a relatively short timescale.

Given that risk can never be eliminated, decisions will need to be made as to when choirs can resume activity that has been assessed by suitably comprehensive risk management protocols. The evidence that children both present less risk and are themselves at a significantly lower level of risk than other age groups is not yet fully conclusive. Nor are its potential consequences yet tested. Nevertheless, it does point towards the possibility that the first choirs to resume might be either children's choirs, or choirs in which children play a prominent role. All choirs will need guidance as to the nature of the risk assessments they should undertake, and a view needs to emerge on who will provide this guidance. Professional organisations or choral associations are one possible answer and should perhaps already have begun to collaborate on the provision of suitable guidance. In Norway, the process has been clear, but fewer organisations have been involved and the Norwegian government appears to have taken a decisive and proactive role.

It is an unlikely scenario that choirs will remain locked down for ever. The case for proactive, anticipatory research that traces, documents and analyses the consequences of choirs restarting is strong and one of the main recommendations the author wishes to make. The term “new normal” has gained some currency. It remains to be seen whether the “old normal” returns or whether discoveries and innovations made during the lockdown become more permanent features of the life of choirs. On-line part learning or singing lessons may well become part of a “new normal”. The phenomenon of the “virtual choir” will almost certainly receive attention and choral directors, newly upskilled in activities perhaps previously considered “geeky”, may feel motivated to perpetuate aspects of the virtual choir. It seems probable that physical spacing or “social distancing” may be part of everyday life for some time to come. The use of public spaces from supermarkets to trains may reflect this and choirs, when they return, may look anew at work undertaken on such matters as choir spacing by Daugherty (1999), or self to other ratio by Ternström (1999).

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