Defining the Virtual Choir

by Cole Bendall

While the world is changing how it consumes, experiences, and performs music in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of so-called "virtual choirs" has grown exponentially. For a mode of music making that did not exist in a widely known manner until the early 2010s, its proliferation across choral music and choral education circles is profound. Our industries have yet to define the parameters in which a virtual choir works, alongside its meaning and its purpose. By understanding this, participants can enter the process of virtual choir creation with confidence as to what is expected of the process, directors can review the best practice in which to coach and develop virtual choirs, and administrators or committees can learn how to best promote and extol the merits of this platform to prospective audiences or sponsors.

A common retort to virtual choirs is illustrated by this statement recalled to the author: "It [virtual choir] is not 'choir' to me or my singers."[1] While emotive and reflective of personal viewpoint, this is a loaded statement. If a virtual choir isn't "choir," what is choir? What are its component features and principles? What is the purpose of a choir or a virtual choir? Christopher Small writes, "It is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfils in human life."[2]

Choral music functions as an act of music making, and in order to understand its purposes and how virtual choirs may succeed in, or fail to fulfil, those purposes, we must understand each potential element of its process. In short, to know what a virtual choir *isn't*, we must know what a choir *is*.

Defining the "Synchronous Choir"

In order to distinguish the two modes of music making for now, traditional in-person "choir" will be labelled here as a *synchronous*[3] *choir,* or group singing. What follows is a non-exhaustive list of common features of a synchronous choir. This is not a comprehensive history of synchronous choirs, nor an aesthetic depiction of choral singing or the general merits of music making.[4]

Rather, this serves as an introduction to some of the areas of commonality and to anticipate where we might see issues or areas that require further understanding.

Synchronous choirs are unified in purpose by principles of education and social development. Such has been the case since the rise of the middle-class in the nineteenth century, where choral music was seen as a way of "weaning 'the horny handed sons of toil' away from 'vicious indulgences' towards the more rational, moral, and peaceable forms of recreation and leisure."[5] Indeed, William Weber notes that the growth of the large choral society, in particular, brings together mixtures of social classes who identify as a community of music makers, supporting the "lusting for identification with the mass of population."[6] For whatever reasons a participant may be involved in a synchronous choir, they would typically perform in a venue to an audience, or record together, although some synchronous choirs exist for the sole purpose of casual rehearsal or sing-along. Participants in a synchronous choir may self-define as a member of that choir or a

subset of that choir—be it a section (a voice part, for example), a particular age group, part of a particular geographical area, or other factors. Indeed, certain synchronous choirs may fully define themselves as running for the purpose of advocating a community subset, such as in dementia choirs, youth choirs, or choirs framed by sexual and gender identity—for example, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses.

Synchronous choirs may sing accompanied or unaccompanied music and may use a leader, conductor, or vocal coach (or may be fully autonomous). Synchronous choirs may be defined by their choice of repertoire, the space or institution in which they rehearse (and may be affiliated with), or other extra-musical factors. People may participate in synchronous choirs by paying a fee or attending for free or may be paid

for their participation. Participation in synchronous choirs may be open, or may be subject to audition, ability, or the whims of whomever manages the power dynamics of this group.

In response to international social-distancing regulations, several synchronous choirs have attempted to simulate the proximity experienced in their ensembles through group meetings on video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Skype. These platforms, while useful in maintaining social contact, were not designed for musical use and have been widely criticised for significantly increased lag and latency in response between participants, which impacts teaching methods often used in synchronous choral practice.

New works written for vocal ensembles to be recorded and performed on Zoom exploit and

embrace the indeterminacy of connection and occasionally distorted sounds produced on these platforms.[7] In this way, such tools do provide a scope for new modes of sonic and musical potential. Nevertheless, in this regard, while the practice of music making through video conferencing platforms may technically take place at the same time, it is problematic to consider this as part of the conceptual understanding of synchronous choral practice at present.

Participation in synchronous choirs, therefore, typically also involves participants working in the same physical space: a building, a church, outdoors, a stadium, and so forth. The distance between singers is often close but may be modified to alter acoustic effect, balance between individual singers, or for non-musical reasons (physical limitations of a performance space such as the cantoris and decani sides of a cathedral choir, for example).

Perhaps most importantly to a conceptual understanding of a synchronous choir, these groups are often defined simultaneously as a singular unit (i.e., "I've joined a choir.") and a collective body of participants (i.e., "I sing with/as part of this chorus.")[8] Synchronous choir singers often describe a sense of what the conductor Paul Hiller defines as the "singing condition"—a state that, he argues, is only possible in group singing rather than individual singing, which "leads us towards an expressive state that lies beyond our normal condition."[9] While I would argue that this phenomenological stance of simultaneous group and

individual expression is not unique to choral and vocal ensembles (the same could be said of almost all instrumental ensembles), there are many ways in which vocal music is elevated in this environment.

Singing is an individual practice, not constrained by the economic limitations of the purchase of an instrument. There are numerous entry points to choral and vocal activity, which make this an accessible activity for large numbers of prospective singers. Finally, singers often sing words that convey alternate modes of meaning or belonging in whichever language they are sung. In a range of settings from a church choir singing a seasonal motet to joining in with a rock band singing lyrics together, or impassioned songs of protest movements, synchronous choirs may possess, modify, or amplify a wide variety of meanings, purposes, and belongings. Many of these principles arguably still successfully transfer to the world of the "virtual choir."

Defining the "Virtual Choir"

The term "virtual" is a borrowing from the post-classical Latin *virtualis,* which relates to the power to produce an effect. In Middle French and fifteenth-century English, the term became a synonym for a something that was "in essence, potentiality, or effect, *although not in form or actuality.*"[10] Modern usage of "virtual" conveys something that could be labelled as such for practical purposes, and may be very near to what the something may be but is not what it assumes to

be according to strict definition.[11] The affiliation of the word *virtual* with computers and technology is a comparatively recent phenomenon, with the idea of illusory characters and objects first conveyed in 1930s French avant-garde theatre.[12] This *réalité virtuelle* (virtual reality) did not reach use until the 1970s, with its science fiction connotations first applied in Damien Broderick's 1982 novel, *The Judas Mandala.*[13] In both definitions of "virtual"—as an approximation of the intended practice and as a simulated, computerized presentation of the practice—the term "virtual choir" seems an appropriate designation.

In virtual choirs, individuals typically record their own elements to be edited together following recording. Unlike the majority of broadcast choral performances on radio and television, which often take the form of a group performance at the same place and time as "live," the group does not work "together" in the same sense. Depending on the parameters placed on them by whomever is editing the track, each member of the group can perform at a completely different time and place. Participants may record completely independently or can follow guidance from whomever is editing the project, potentially following guidance of a rendered click track, backing track, or other guide, which may include breathing, diction, articulation, dynamic or other sonic elements. The most successful virtual choir projects at present seem to be those where parameters for difference are as determined as possible prior to individuals recording.

A virtual choir is different from running a live session on a video conferencing software where latency and lag make traditional synchronous rehearsal, reliant on immediacy of response, impossible. Participants in virtual choirs are typically encouraged to use video, but several will allow participation using audio alone, mixed with other singers in the process.

The term "virtual choir" appears to have been first used in 2009 in a recording of Eric Whitacre's *Sleep* directed and edited by Scott Haines in response to the submission of a young soprano submitting her unaccompanied vocal part online.[14] Whitacre's virtual choir projects (managed in collaboration with Decca Records and external partners) have since blossomed. Its last incarnation *Sing Gently,* a work written during the initial peak of COVID-19 lockdowns, claiming to attract 17,572 singers from 129 countries.[15] Whitacre's choirs have been by far the most popularized of the virtual choir movement, but a plethora of creators have rendered their own attempts, including professional ensembles, youth groups, and large amateur symphonic choruses.

Several of these videos embrace different senses of setting and space even within the simulated environment. Disparity in style and form is prevalent in this mode from static shots of the full group of singers to "Brady Bunch" style grids with gentle panning to fully rendered, computer-generated real and non-real performance environments.[16] The simplest presentations available at present are straightforward audio

mixes set to slideshows, more a PowerPoint presentation than a typical choral performance.

By nature of adaptation to multimedia, the relationship between performer and audience is impacted by the inclusion of a new author. This kind of discussion is not new; the discussion of performer as interpreter of a composer's independent work has existed since the Romantic period, where notions of self-determinacy reached the forefront of artistic discourse. Nicholas Cook notes that these ideas must be dispensed with when dealing with music multimedia.[17] Creation of a virtual choir requires a synthesis of approaches and equally valid artistic processes coming from the author of the musical work (the composer); the performer (singers, players, conductors); the audience, who may also interpret the performance in a completely independent manner to performers; and our new author: video, sound, audio engineers, or, indeed, the conductor fulfilling these duties by themselves.

The role of this new author also presents new modes of understanding for a musical work. The staging of a virtual choir in a simulated real/non-real environment can support a plurality of interpretations. This is quite helpful for our understanding of the virtual choir, as these plurality of forms have almost always existed in this mode of music making. For example, a performance of Mozart's *Ave verum corpus* is different when performed by a church choir in a rural English village, or a professional-level symphonic chorus, as was the case in the combined virtual choir video of the Orfeó Català, City of Bir-
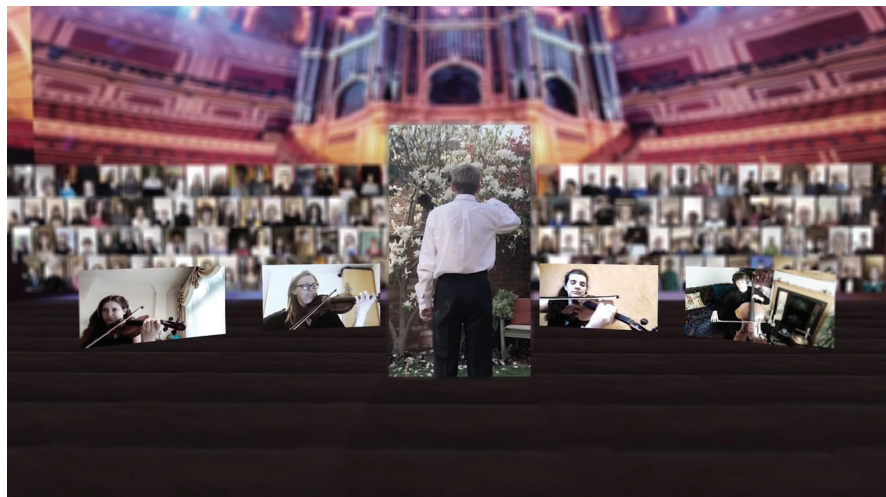

Figure 1

Figure 2

mingham Symphony Chorus and London Symphony Chorus, staged in a simulated version of the Royal Albert Hall, London (Figure 1).[18] At its most extreme, presentation in this manner enables modes and settings of performance completely impossible in real life. The unnamed metropolis setting depicted in Eric Whitacre's *Fly to Paradise* Virtual Choir performance, for example, features singers positioned in colorful windows and billboards watching a young (computer-generated) angel

taking to flight (Figure 2).[19] This illustrative and vivid environment demonstrates the potential range of fantastical possibilities open to a virtual ensemble performance when working with new authors.

These values can be further manipulated by the presentation of individual singers who may or may not choose to present themselves in choir uniform, in a unified background or format. These values may be, to a degree, left more to the decisions of the video engineer or individual

performers than they would be in a synchronous choir.

Such presentation, combined with the ability to cut between shots and offer close-ups of individual singers, creates a new sense of mutual engagement between audience and performer that is not necessarily possible in synchronous choir contexts. Performer and audience are separated by the use of recorded media (rather than a live recording), but audiences are entitled to a closer proximity of experience owing to a wider range of shots, angles, and narrative of editing.[20] These issues of proximity are further encountered by the fact that performers can (theoretically, at least) pre-record their contribution from anywhere at any time. Performers can collaborate from further distances than ever before in choral performance: spatial proximity may or may not equal a more effective performance in this instance.

Conclusions

As indicated at the outset, a virtual choir does not fulfil the social, spatial, and aesthetic functions of what I have termed a synchronous choir. In many ways, however, the virtual choir presents new modes for musical performance and collaboration using the model of choral music making as its key frame of reference. Technological limitations provide the ability to simulate much of the recorded sound of choral singers and can, in fact, produce alternate presentations of these performances typically impossible in a real setting and space, although these sensory experiences cannot yet be passed on those recording virtual choir video and audio tracks. Further, we are left with the problem that, at present, there is no standardized format of a virtual choir, and so a

standardized definition is unnecessarily limiting. Understanding these elements has led to the following suggestion for a working definition of the term "virtual choir":

A multimodal creative product combining aspects of the methodology and form of choral music performance with the materialities of media creation.

The meaning of and connection to virtual choir will likely require review as we continue to make music in the post-COVID-19 era, and as new recordings and performances using this format appear. Some might ask if that kind of definition could ever define the nuanced factors of what a choir is. At least virtually, I'd say it does. CJ

NOTES
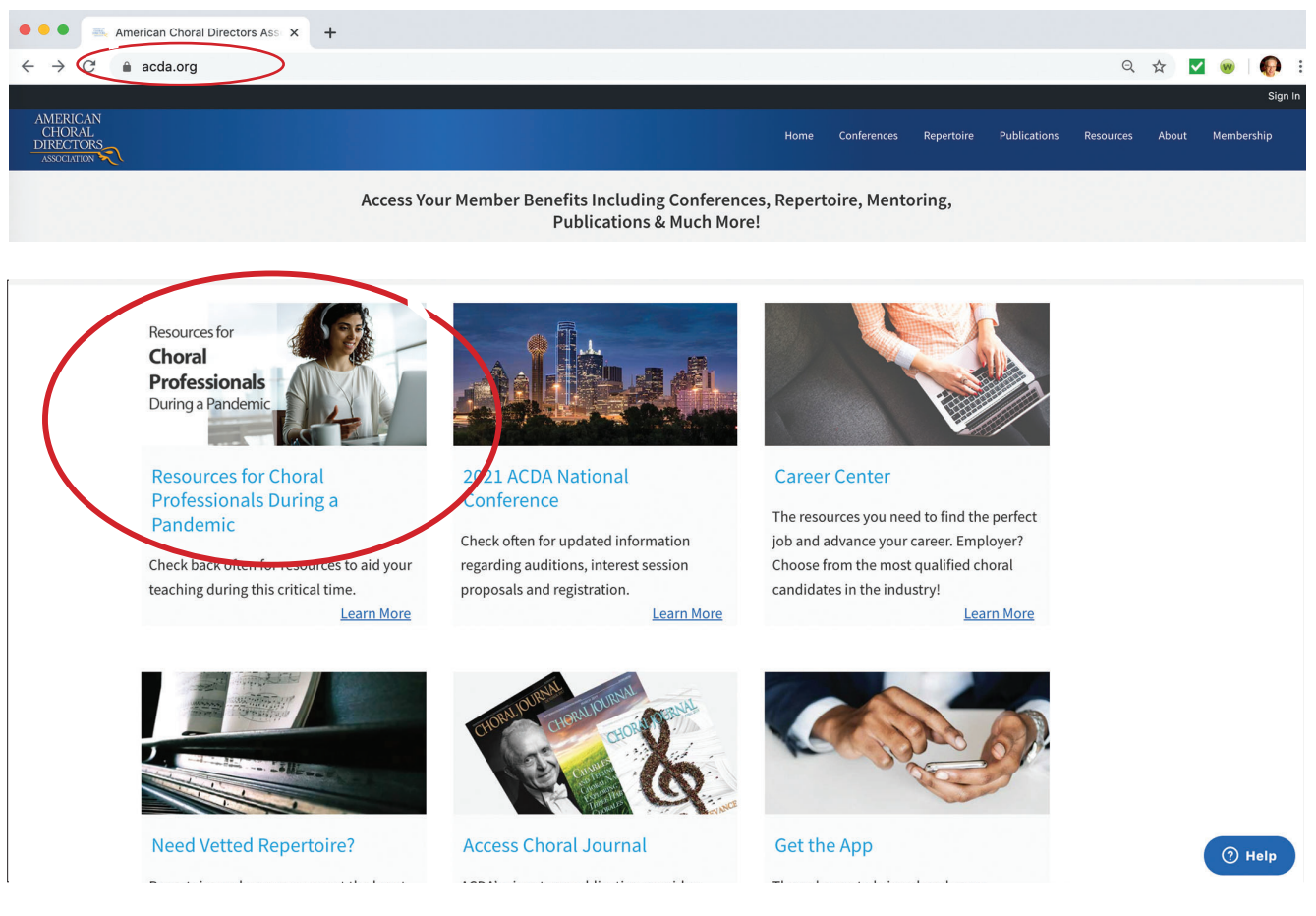
[1] Interview with chorister. Cole Bendall, "Corona-tion Anthems: Virtual Choirs and Choral Music Making in a post-COVID era." Paper presented at Music in the Home: A Virtual Symposium, Northumbria University, UK, June 5, 2020.

[2] Christopher Small, Musicking: *The*

CHORAL RESOURCES FOR THESE TIMES

ACDA is hosting a webpage that is updated daily containing resources that are particularly useful for choral professionals:

Resources for Choral Professionals During the Pandemic.

Meanings of Performing and Listening (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998). Kindle edition.

[3] The term "synchronous" has also developed altered meanings in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak in education and business sectors; the meanings I assign to this term are based on choral practice and philosophy.

[4] Paddy Scannell, "On Music and its Dissemination" in *Music, Culture, and Society: A Reader.* ed. Derek B. Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 193. An element of this—in my opinion, antiquated—viewpoint continues to exist in many British amateur choir constitutions when registering with national charity regulators.

[5] William Weber, "Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770-1870" in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 8/1 (1977): 15.

[6] James G. Smith and Percy M. Young, Chorus (i). *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed May 31, 2020. https://www.oxfordmusiconline. com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/ gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/ omo-9781561592630-e-0000005684.

[7] A selection of representative examples include Dale Trumbore's *I hope You're Doing Well,* Ellie Slorach's *Until the Dust Settles,* Sarah MacDonald's *In te domine speravi,* which are all available directly from their respective composers.

[8] There are well-documented distinctions between the definition of "choir" and "chorus." In this instance, the terms are used interchangeably.

[9] Paul Hillier, "The nature of chorus" in *The Cambridge Companion to Choral Music* ed. André de Quadros (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 64.

[10] "virtual, adj. and n.". *OED Online.* June 2020. Oxford University Press.

[11] In this instance, one may consider "virtual" a synonym for "in all but name" or "in effect."

[12] Artaud uses the expression "réalité virtuelle." See Antonin Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 160.

[13] Peter Nicholls and David Langford, "Virtual Reality." *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction.* http://www. sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/ virtual_reality (October 2011, rev. May 2020; accessed June 5, 2020).

[14] Eric Whitacre, "The Virtual Choir: How We Did It," blog post, March 23, 2010, accessed June 3, 2020. https://ericwhitacre.com/blog/ the-virtual-choir-how-we-did-it. See Virtual Musicians Group, "" Sleep" (2009) – The Original Virtual Choir Experiment," *YouTube.* Uploaded February 29, 2012, accessed June 1, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=8gg86GjMNqU

[15] See *Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir 6: Sing Gently,* accessed 2 June 2020, https://virtualchoir6.com. This number only illustrates part of the engagement with Sing Gently. Data is not publicly available as to how viewers prepared tracks for the recording but never submitted or singers who may have submitted a recording for consideration but whose recordings were ultimately not used. See Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir, *YouTube Channel,* date created unknown, accessed August 7, 2020. https://www.youtube. com/user/EricWhitacresVrtlChr

[16] Here, I define "real" as staging singers in a space that is known and indicates additional meaning (Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, a local church, or another physical space) and "unreal" as unknown, simulated and conceptual spaces (this could even include the grids populated by participants in the "Brady Bunch"-esque virtual choirs). Of course, there are implications to this considering whether any setting here is real, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

[17] Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128.

[18] City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, "CBSO Chorus @ Home: Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus,*" *YouTube.* Uploaded May 22, 2020, accessed August 8, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=psUYFIbZzfA

[19] Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir, "Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir 4: Fly to Paradise," *YouTube.* Uploaded July 11, 2013, accessed August 8, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=Y8oDnUga0JU

[20] John Ellis describes this process as "co-present intimacy." See John Ellis, "Broadcast TV as Sound and Image" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 347.