Repertoire & Resources

Children and Community Youth Choirs

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Lessons from Summer Camp

by Joy Hirokawa

As our world reeled around us and the ground kept shifting over the summer, we struggled to come to grips with how to translate our instruction to the online environment. Music teachers are passionate and resourceful people. For those leading virtual summer camps, Zoom became the standard platform. We learned how to navigate setting up breakout rooms, manage students through the screen, and make learning engaging and meaningful. Teaching in this environment provided a testing ground to try a variety of pedagogical approaches. What worked? What didn't? Following are ideas from three different perspectives that may be useful as you plan for rehearsals this fall.

Virtual Choral Village

The Choral Village format (see the April 2019 *Choral Journal* for more information on this program) provided a surprisingly adaptable structure to a different "deep dive" through a different delivery system. The focus of the week shifted from looking externally to looking inwardly; from performance to creation. Body percussion, improvisation, spoken word, discussion, and drumming provided artistic tools and ideas for students to create an artistic expression of their experiences and feelings living through these last few months. Following are some techniques used in Choral Village that would be easily transferred to any online choral setting.

Exploit Zoom!

Each day of Choral Village began with a physical and vocal warm-up. These were also designed to build community within the group. Some familiar exercises translated well from in-person instruction to the online environment:

• Mirror the teacher's body movement—stretches, breathing, creative movement.

• Partner students and have them mirror/follow each other.

• Select individual students to lead movement that everyone follows.

• Partner students and have one person "pull" or "push" the other toward or away by gesturing with hands as if pulling by a rope, and having the other person move towards or away from them (also works side to side).

• Step and echo clap patterns (students must have audio muted).

• Step and echo consonants rhythmically, then morph into vocal exploration (sirens, glissandi, etc.; again with students muted)

Other warm-ups took advantage of opportunities only available with a camera and computer screen, such as:

• Use your finger to draw in the air, tracing the edge of your image on screen, not the physical edge of the computer screen.

• Play "I Spy" with objects in the background of a student.

• Disappear and have hands appear at the bottom of the screen like puppets, and have a conversation or some interaction (creative examples could be performed for the group).

• Reach outside the screen on one edge and grab an imaginary object that is placed on another edge outside the screen (side to side, corner to corner, top and bottom, think Stephen Colbert); add sound effects.

• Experiment with moving close up and moving away from the screen, varying the speed used to approach the camera and looking for interesting effects; *super* close-ups can be particularly fun.

• Block the camera, and then hold up an everyday object right up next to it so that all that is seen is a very close-up view of the object; other students guess what the object is (I used the bottom of a pen, which looked like an eyeball on the screen!).

• Experiment with appearing on the screen in different ways, from different angles, corners, edges; work the screen.

This last activity, in particular, can generate considerable hilarity and laughter! By having half the group watch with audio unmuted and the other half doing the movement, everyone can enjoy a hearty laugh and the joy of audience/performer interaction.

Any of these activities could be combined or expanded. Students could partner up and go to breakout rooms to work out and then "perform" their creative project.

• Create a humorous acted-out mime performance to accompany a song or tell a story.

• Expand on the puppet idea to have students create an actual story line, using the computer screen as the stage; by using a hand as a puppet, they could even "virtually" hop from screen to screen!.

• Have two or more students work together passing imaginary objects from one screen to another or have them select a common object that "morphs" as it is "passed" from screen to screen; improvise dialogue to explain what is happening (think of the hanging portraits conversing in Harry Potter).

The possibilities are endless! Creative work in breakout rooms provides opportunities for students

to get to know each other, work cooperatively, and perform for the rest of the group. Choristers love interaction with an audience! We can provide that in the Zoom context utilizing the features unique to the platform. Be sure to remind the "audience" to unmute so that their reactions can be heard by the performers!

Body Percussion

Body percussion is a fun and creative way to incorporate rhythm, creativity, and physical interaction, and also build community. It is also a comparatively safe musical activity to do in person with a large group of students while still teaching the sense of working together as an ensemble. This can lay the groundwork for when your ensemble will be able to perform again in person.

In Choral Village, we explored the wide variety of sounds used in body percussion and ways of combining them to create interesting rhythmic patterns. A number of excellent tutorial videos are available on YouTube that vary from simple repetitive patterns to complex forms that coordinate with classical music. Pass the Sound (http://www.passthesound.com) has an informative collection of instructional videos for both creative movement and body percussion. Santi Serratosa López is an innovative body percussionist with numerous YouTube tutorials and performances to accompany both popular and classical music.[1] (Check out his video of a large school group performing

to "Try" by Colbie Caillat.) Once students became familiar with the amazing range of possibilities of body percussion, they can work with partners in a Zoom breakout room to create their own body percussion patterns that can later be shared with the rest of the group.

Sing

While singing creates challenges in Zoom due to the latency issue, it can still be satisfying to sing knowing that others are singing the same music with you. Students must be muted and the teacher is not, but everyone is able to see each other's engagement with the song. *The Justice Choir Songbook* (https://www.justicechoir.org) is a free and useful source of music that is easy to sing, easy to learn, and available to all the participants. It also demonstrates how music does not have to be complex to be satisfying and meaningful to sing, and introduces the idea of using song for purposes of social justice.

Improvise

Non-rhythmic vocal improvisation is another avenue to explore. The sustained and ringing sound of a Tibeten prayer bowl translated surprisingly well over the internet. I played a long, sustained, ringing sound while they listened with their eyes closed, and then vocally improvised over the tone. After I modeled some ideas for them, singing with the bowl and using varied sustained notes, melodies, and vowels, students tried vocal improvisation

on their own while listening to the prayer bowl through Zoom. Many students found this to be a uniquely satisfying experience due to the meditative nature of the sounds. Most had not experienced this kind of singing previously, and since they were alone in their own space and were muted, there was no fear of peer judgement.

Guest Artists

While we did not have guest culture bearers for this virtual Choral Village, YouTube videos provided unique "guest" artists that exposed the students to new forms of musical and artistic expression. I focused on examples that were created by students of the same age and on issues that might be of importance to them or reflected their recent lived experiences. These included:

• The Detroit Youth Choir performance of the John Legend song "Glory" from the movie *Selma* with words rewritten to reflect the current situation in our country and dedicated to Representative John Lewis. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nWvOvTq94o&list=PLHGEvaVluXPAYqBWTmlPEI7zDn2_nvhr8&index=3&t=0s).

• Performance by Amina Iro and Hannah Halpern (from DC's Youth Slam Poetry Team) at the 2014 Common Ground Awards with their slam poetry about stereotyping. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCUz2b050lE&list=PLHGEvaVluXPAYqBWTmlPEI7zDn2_nvhr8&index=3).

• Video created by fourteen-year-old high school student Liv McNeil called *Numb*, expressing her experience of the last months of the school year suddenly going online due to the quarantine. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSkbd6hRkXo&list=PLHGEvaVluXPAYqBWTmlPEI7zDn2_nvhr8&index=4).

These artistic expressions demonstrate the vast untapped creativity in our students, using their art to examine, distill, and convey their lived experience. I encourage you to explore some of these possibilities with your own students.

Practical Ideas

Jamie Perez Sutta, Founder & Artistic Director of The Children's Voice (www.thechildrensvoice.org) ran a virtual summer camp in July. She offered the following ideas for success while teaching in the virtual environment:

1) Provide a box with materials. Give the students something tangible to work with—dry-erase staff boards, markers, and some sheet music. Provide funding to help kids with some technology needs like headphones and tablets.

2) Make most activities interactive with lots of back and forth with the students.

3) In order to do #2, you have to make groups small (10 or fewer). Use breakout rooms in Zoom to create smaller groups.

4) Use lots of body movement. Start the class with stretching, breathing, and dance.

5) Build community. Spotlight individuals and give fun facts about them and let other students ask questions. Play team-building activities that get kids learning about each other. Have a spirit week with students sending in pictures and showing off their outfits daily.

6) Set expectations early on. Let parents and students know what they'll need, including a space that is quiet and where they have room to move. This isn't always possible for some of our students, but ask them to do their best.

7) We ask campers to always turn on videos, sit up (no one in beds or laying down), good lighting, use bathroom before or after session (as long as it's short enough) and chat box rules. Speaking of chat, we change the chat settings from public to host only depending on the activity. We do not allow for private messages between students since we can't monitor that.

8) Kids have been very excited about open mic. We ask students to submit pre-recorded videos through a Google form and then we have a watch party on Fridays. We allow the kids to submit any talent they wish to share. We had kids singing, playing instruments, and even showing off their karate wood-breaking skills.

9) Bring in clinicians! Mix things up and keep it fresh. This is especially important for us because our camp is four weeks.

10) Zoom Tips
    a) Assign several people to do different tasks on Zoom or whatever platform you're using. One could be allowing students in from waiting room, spotlighting videos when different people are talking, and another setting up break-out rooms. The technology can get overwhelming.

    b) Screen sharing with annotating is great! Especially when teaching theory and sight-reading. We like to do a double screen; one screen is highlighting the director, while the other is on an iPad where you can actually use an Apple pencil or something similar to write on the staff. Students can also use the annotate feature to write something on the screen for all to see. On this note, disable annotating if you do not want anyone else to type on screen.

Craig Hurley, Conductor of the Spivey Hall Young Artists offered the following suggestions from their summer camp that could easily be adapted to school and community choral settings for the regular season:

1) **Focus on relationships.** Just like you would in a face-to-face camp, include intentional relationship building into your daily

activities. We had dress-up days (i.e., red-carpet wear, crazy hat/hair day), played games (i.e., digital scavenger hunt, charades, etc.), and kept numbers manageable through a 10:1 student-teacher ratio.

2) **Recruit parents to be facilitators.** Digital camp requires parent buy-in even more than face-to-face camps. We held a parent Zoom meeting prior to camp starting to make sure parents were comfortable and aware of the technology requirements (we used Zoom, ClassDojo, and Flipgrid) and felt comfortable assisting their children. Our campers were in grades 4-7. We also provided parents with three questions to ask their campers at the end of each day. This allowed them to better understand what was happening at camp and helped engage the whole family.

3) **Have a balance of synchronous and asynchronous events.** Too much screen time is never a good thing. Provide a variety of activities. We also held individual coaching sessions in the afternoon to help students prepare for the final concert.

4) **Have a final product.** Whether it's a virtual choir, digital talent show, or online musical, having a performance goal helped focus our time together and build a sense of pride in the students. It showed the parents some of what we had worked on and provided a positive culminating event for camp.

5) **Use the technology to your advantage.** How often have you dreamed of being able to mute a student during rehearsal? It's possible in Zoom. During Zoom calls someone always acted as the "Zoom Wizard." The "Zoom Wizard" made sure student's names were labelled correctly (we discouraged last names for privacy reasons), disabled distracting chat features and ensured that everyone was where they needed to be, which freed the instructors up to focus on teaching. Passwords were a must.

Craig also offered the following things to *avoid*:

1) Large Zoom calls – students tend to get lost and become disengaged when they don't feel seen or heard.

2) Trying to recreate an in-person camp. Digital camp is a new way of doing camp. Be inspired by previous face-to-face camps, but let this new digital format inspire something new.

Boldly go...!

Meaningful learning in the virtual choral rehearsal *can* happen! But rather than trying to replicate or recreate the traditional rehearsal, I encourage you to think outside the box and take advantage of the unique opportunity to reinvent your pedagogy.

• Consider what you might be able to do in a virtual world that you are not able to do in an in-person rehearsal.

• Consider how being in a room by themselves frees your singers to be unencumbered by peer pressure, and able to explore their creativity without judgement.

• Reconsider expectations and outcomes. If a pristine and polished performance is not possible due to restrictions on in-person rehearsing, in what ways might you expand your singers' musicianship and musical knowledge?

• This is a perfect time to explore improvisation and composition, two National Standards that are frequently shortchanged in the traditional choral setting.

Your singers will come through as stronger and more creative musicians in the end, which will only lead to more informed and inspired performances. Good luck! CJ

NOTES

[1] While his website is unfortunately not in English, this page is a collection of the numerous instructional and performance videos he has created. https://santiserratosa.com/ca/videos/ You may need to copy and paste the titles of the videos into YouTube to locate the actual recordings.