NCCO Webinars

Part 1

Series 1, Webinar 1 - 24 Mar 2020: Running Choir Online

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In the world that we've come from the social aspects of choral participation happened automatically – chatting between rehearsals and classes, that nervous moment before going on stage – elements that were taken for granted. Now, in this new world, we've been working to bring our course objectives online, but many of us haven't been able to give any attention to how we bring the rest of the choral experience online. As many universities are finding, the mental health of our students is on the line. Can choirs once again be a means of creating a social framework for our students?

Michael McGaghie: This is not a one-size-fits all operation. We all have very different groups that serve different functions in our institutions. Some groups are elective, some are mandated, and every group has its own "vibe," and that's okay. We don't want to get too prescriptive or make value judgements.

Also, our students opt into our ensembles at very different levels, and we give those students space to figure out their own level of attachment. Personally, I think it's very important that we keep doing so now.

I teach in a liberal arts college and my students are almost entirely non-majors. Community building is an explicitly stated learning goal in my syllabus. My paradigm has three pillars: gathering, studying, and serving. We have intentional activities like retreats and meals that are an investment in trust, and we work hard in rehearsals to produce a gift as an act of service for ourselves and each other, but then ultimately for our friends, families, and neighbors.

It all comes back to the idea of gathering: learning how to be in right relationship with the people in the room sonically, emotionally, and personally. These are the things I am deeply afraid of losing now.

Elise, tell us about the intentional building that might be ahead for us.

Elise Hepworth: Since we've been thrown into this new situation with little time to prepare or consider, we need to take a breath and step back to evaluate. Don't be so quick to immediately jump in to create a new platform, but take stock of your students and their needs.

I teach at a small regional school, and we have a significant digital divide. Many students do not own a laptop or a computer, or may not have reliable internet access. I think about the things that are lost by not meeting face-to-face with my students three times per week, but I have to also think about what kind of gains and opportunities are presented. Ways of providing continuance of the community building that I have done with my ensembles: in an asynchronous way they can do on their own time with their available technologies, and then in a way that may be synchronous.

Katherine, talk about how this beginning to affect our mental health as individuals, as choirs, and what the role of the professor might become.

Katherine Fitzgibbon: A lot of us think of our role as a music facilitator, but also as the one responsible for personal check-ins with students, and group therapy that occurs within a rehearsal context, and relationships that are formed. I am not a trained therapist but there are lots of ways in which my students look to me to provide a framework to make sense of what is happening in the world.

We love choral music and its marriage of text and music, and the way it allows us to think deeply about complex social and personal issues. Something is lost for our students now, not having that opportunity—there is something lost for us (as conductors) in not being able to make music with the people we love. I want to own that vulnerability here.

Katherine, can you talk about some ways in which this new framework might open some new doors of opportunity for our choir communities?

KFG: Yes, this allows us to be unbound from geographical constraints, and that is exciting. For instance, having the opportunity to work with some amazing composers and conductors from around the country. If we move to a model dominated by cerebral analysis, that would be a loss of connection that is such a valued part of the choral experience.