



A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

Sarah MacDonald

In mid-August, the results of two major studies into aerosol and droplet emission during singing and wind playing informed a significant change in UK government guidance.¹ As I write, both papers are in the peer-review stage; by the time you read this, they should have been published. The prepublication results demonstrated (entirely unsurprisingly) that singing is no more dangerous than speaking or breathing. England has therefore been planning for the resumption of choral activities with the new academic year. Social distancing continues to be important, though the distance needed between singers is no greater than that required between people in shops and restaurants.² It is crucial that rehearsal and performance spaces have adequate ventilation—fortunately for the Anglican choral tradition, ancient drafty churches are fine on that front. The stories about a handful of choirs that experienced outbreaks of COVID-19 in March were tragic, but given how little we knew of the disease at that point, to lay blame at the door of singing itself, rather than considering poor ventilation, hugging, close proximity, meal sharing, and all of the other non-socially distanced things that choir members are wont to do, was unfortunate. The entirety of a worldwide activity well known to be beneficial to people's health³ was devastated by one webinar in early May,⁴ and many people are still suffering the repercussions.

It was a relief for all of us when scientific evidence began to supersede anecdote and anxiety, and consequently, in the UK, tentative steps toward recovery are taking place. In-person planning meetings have occurred (Zoom has been useful, but we need human contact), though with a few differences: Hands are washed and sanitized on entry and exit, everyone wears face masks, we sit farther apart than usual, and the windows are wide open despite the early autumn chill. In addition, every meeting features a prop unusual for anything other

than the annual gathering of the International Society of Haberdashers: a measuring tape.

The most important change here is that individual venues are now permitted to make their own risk assessments. Until recently, the same restrictions were in place for vast cathedrals that seat 2,000 people as for tiny chapels that accommodate only 40. Sensibly, we are now able to put in place our own procedures to allow for a safe resumption of in-person choral worship. Such risk mitigations include ensuring that singers are spaced an appropriate distance apart (hence the need for a measuring tape) and that they are not facing each other, or are singing behind Perspex screens. Face coverings are required by law in all places of worship in the UK, though those leading worship may remove them when praying, preaching, reading, or singing.

Many cathedrals with a professional back row (i.e., adult altos, tenors, and basses) have begun services with lay clerks in the first instance. This usually comprises only six or eight singers (easily socially distanced), and there is a significant body of music (Byrd, Victoria, Tallis, et al.) for lower voices. Along with more traditional repertoire, the director of music at York Minster commissioned three contemporary composers (Philip Moore, Becky McGlade, and me) to write new pieces for the lay clerks' first services of Choral Evensong, as a forward-looking contribution to a renewed and living tradition. Most cathedrals' boy and girl choristers will return to singing services over the first few weeks of September. Particularly helpful guidance for choir schools allows for choristers to be "bubbled up"—since they are a small, consistent group of children in a regular before- and after-school activity, they count as a single household and do not need to be socially distanced.

University term begins in early October, and since most chapels are much smaller than cathedrals, other options must be considered. Some Cambridge colleges are intending choral services to be covered by half the choir at a time;

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the smallest of the chapels are looking at groups of just four or six singers for each service. At Selwyn, where we are blessed with a large chapel, we will be able to field the entire choir for each service, but we will sit on socially distanced chairs in front of the altar, rather than in the choir stalls, since that allows for a bigger (and also socially distanced) congregation. Many chapels are installing webcasting equipment with a view to livestreaming services, allowing elderly, vulnerable, or self-isolating members of our congregations to participate from home, as well as keeping geographically distanced congregations engaged.

Of course, by the time you read this, circumstances might have changed, and we might be back in lockdown, local or national. Until there is a viable vaccine, this possibility continues to be real. But if lockdown recurs, at least we know that it will be temporary, and we can be confident that an existential threat to our *raison d'être* will not overshadow the hope of recovery.

NOTES

1. Research conducted by Dr. Declan Costello, ENT surgeon and professional tenor (PERFORM), and a study involving lay clerks from Salisbury Cathedral as well as amateur singers and wind players (SOBADRA), sponsored by Public Health England and Her Majesty's Government Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, are summarized in the following PDF: bit.ly/aerosol-droplet-study.
2. Two meters without mitigations, less if other mitigations are in place (e.g., a screen or a mask, or that singers are standing side by side rather than facing each other).
3. bit.ly/choir-singingforhealth.
4. Webinar given by the ACDA and NATS on May 5, 2020, which erroneously implicated singers as super-spreaders of the coronavirus.

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