

Going Forward with Choristers: A Case Study

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As I write this in the summer of 2021, I am constantly amazed by how differently churches are planning their re-opening of services and music programs based on geographic location. This clearly has been one of the most devastating and stressful times for many of us, and we all experienced varying challenges based on the different restrictions that leadership instituted in our various dioceses and parishes. Here at St. George's, Nashville, we are thankful we were already streaming our services pre-COVID, so continuing our presence to the congregation virtually was not as challenging for us during the pandemic as it was for parishes that had to innovate. I know other churches dealt with the pandemic very differently than St. George's, and I realize our story is only one of many demonstrating a wide spectrum of challenges, achievements, and emotional rollercoasters. As I reflect on the past fifteen months here and look forward to what is to come, I hope our story can provide some sense of encouragement.

Our biggest challenge of the pandemic surrounded the major renovation of our Chancel right after Easter Sunday, 2020, that also included an acoustical enhancement of the Nave, and removal of the organ in preparation for the arrival of our new organ (Buzard, Op. 48). We moved the altar farther back so our choir could move forward from behind the altar into the traditional *Decani & Cantoris* set up in front, and we addressed all the acoustical issues that we have dealt with for the past several decades. After extensive research, we found out it was much more cost-effective to build a new organ for the new space than to try to re-work the then-current Casavant organ installed in the 1980s. Despite the local lockdown, we somehow managed to receive our interim organ, a newly-built Hauptwerk system from Canada, and safely removed the Casavant organ with the assistance of Milnar Organ Co.

During all these changes, we had to adjust for streamed services that would include a limited number of singers in our big, empty church. Fortunately, at the beginning of March before the restrictions took place, our choristers had the opportunity to sing a joint choral evensong with the University Choir of Sewanee in their beautiful All Saints Chapel at the invitation of Geoffrey Ward, an encouraging and memorable experience for us. During the lockdown, my associate Gerry Senechal and I found ourselves in a situation we had never imagined; everything was closed and there could be no choir activity until further notice. The tragedy of the choir from Washington State increased our cautiousness and anxiety to another level. As a Director of Music Ministries in a parish, I always focused on musical growth, as well as a love and passion for sacred choral music. I never thought a deadly virus would be something I would have to consider.

THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC

I came to St. George's Episcopal Church in 2016 following my wonderful time at St. Philip's in the Hills Episcopal Church in Tucson, having just returned with their choristers and lay clerks from a residency at Worcester Cathedral, UK. The program at St. George's had a strong legacy dating back to the time of Wilma Jensen, with a chorister program that was passionately led by my now-associate Gerry Senechal. They had completed a successful residency in Scotland in 2014, and I was happy to enter a position where the priority of training and developing young choristers was commonly shared. Right away, Gerry and I began our work together. We figured out that the most effective way for our choristers to grow was to provide a weekly, private lesson in addition to our weekly Wednesday rehearsals. For the first four years, all lessons were thirty- minutes long, divided between us. We wanted to increase these lessons to an hour, but it would be impossible to do so with just two of us. Therefore, we hired some of our professional staff singers who had experience with choristers to also serve as teachers. These weekly, one-hour private lessons included all the important standards from RSCM, allowing our choristers to incorporate them more effectively in rehearsals and services.

When we began planning these private lessons, we could not possibly imagine what a blessing they would be during the time of COVID. During lockdown, we continued our lessons with choristers through Zoom and other online platforms. I asked our teachers to use their experience with their students to find out what would work best virtually. For example, depending on age, their level of concentration in this virtual format varied greatly. In my own lessons, I focused on music theory and ear training because I found that the choristers I was teaching could use those skills most during this time—clapping rhythms, singing notes within a harmony, and sight-singing worked very well. Playing along with choristers while they sang was impossible due to the delay on Zoom, so we encouraged choristers to be more independent by singing their lines without accompaniment. Although challenging, we did find that strategy to be successful in developing independence.

In addition, while we focused on musical training in these lessons, we used our online rehearsals to personally and individually check-in with everyone. We played games and shared stories and lockdown experiences which allowed us to get to know each other in a new way. It is amazing what kind of games kids can come up with using Zoom, and how entertained kids can be by simply changing the background of the video chat (e.g. a photo of the director of music with a photoshopped mustache). Also, what better way to learn the names of our choristers' pets than when they lovingly interrupt our lessons?

IN THE THICK OF THE PANDEMIC

Our Sunday services during the pandemic included only one director/organist (we were afraid that if Gerry and I caught COVID at the same time, both of us would have to be quarantined simultaneously) and four singers, masked and spread apart. Unfortunately, this meant no choristers and

no volunteer adult choir members. Our professional singers would rotate each week for Sunday services, and they had a full page of instructions that helped minimize our contact with each other. We had multiple bottles of hand sanitizer—due to the shortage at the time they had been produced at distilleries (we are near the Kentucky Bourbon trail after all). Unfortunately, none of them had a great scent, and they all left an unfortunate lingering smell that permeated our masks.

We did manage a few virtual choir performances to share in livestreamed services during Holy Week of 2020, even as we were all learning the concept of virtual choir at the time. As our season ended in May, we hoped and prayed that the circumstances of the pandemic would quickly improve. We wanted to maintain the connection with our music community, so we held outdoor activities like socially-distanced hikes and picnics with both our choristers and adult choir members. In addition, our adult choir met online every Wednesday for a virtual happy hour. (What a way to learn choir members' favorite drinks!). Our choirs, including the volunteers, were able to sing masked at outdoor services a couple of times during the summer, where we linked our electronic organ directly to outside speakers. Despite the southern heat and humidity, our singers were able to find relief in these occasional musical outlets. During that summer, we also began an extensive partnership with the musicians of the Nashville Symphony for monthly, virtual concerts. When we found out these musicians were being furloughed, we provided them a platform for performance and a means of financial support. Now, when I look back to the Summer of 2020, it all feels like a bit of a blur with all of the activity.

When the time for our annual chorister camp came around in August, we knew we could not hold our usual overnight camp, so we contacted our camp facility and worked with them to determine what could be done safely. We managed to hold a day camp over two days in a large meeting space where we could open garage-like doors to maximize airflow. Choristers sat socially distanced outside with masks, and Gerry and I used a digital keyboard and a microphone so they could hear accompaniment and instructions through our own masks. All activities were non-contact, and all meals were individually wrapped. Despite having to drive out to the camp multiple times over the course of two days, the parents were very supportive. It was a joyful time for our choristers who were discouraged by most of their summer activities being canceled, and having limited options to see their friends. At the time, we were still hopeful for a positive development

during the pandemic that would allow us to be back later in the year, with many choristers lamenting how sad they would be if they had to miss Lessons and Carols.

TIME OF VIRTUAL MUSIC MAKING

We began our season that September (2020) with online private lessons for choristers and weekly, Wednesday online rehearsals via Zoom. At that time, rehearsals with both choristers and the adult choir were online teachings centered around topics of the Liturgy, the history of the Anglican Church, deep dives on specific anthems, composers, hymns, and anything else I could think of from my Church Music minor when I was at the Jacobs School of Music working on my Doctorate degree. (Thank you, Dr. Keiser!). Gerry presented wonderful classes, bringing fresh perspectives to composers such as Edward Bairstow. These were well-received, and attendance was strong despite the fact we were missing the ultimate experience of actually making music together.

We decided to focus our efforts into an All Saints concert. This performance, held annually at St. George's, is usually centered around a major *Requiem* sung by our adult choir with senior choristers. Obviously not being possible at the time, we instead decided to bring diversity to the program virtually. We recorded three anthems in the Nave with our professional singers, all masked and distanced, executed in short time segments for safety. This was right in the middle of the renovation, so there were building materials, construction equipment, and scaffolding all around, exposed and unfinished. We had no working lights, so we had to bring our own in the form of work lamps and candles. Both the recording process and the final product felt symbolic of the painful times we were all going through being in that space: incomplete, ugly, messy, and unsettled. However, in making music we felt strangely hopeful as we looked forward to the time when all this rebuilding, both in the Nave and in society, would be completed.

Our adult choir and choristers also participated in our All Saints concert through the means of virtual choirs. I am sure many of you have very mixed feelings about this new method of singing together—for some, it was a life-saving experience, and to others, it was an experience that brought a fair amount of anxiety and stress. The choristers performed *In Paradisum* from Faure's *Requiem* with the lay clerks, accompanied by organ and harp, and the adult choir sang the anthem *Give us the wings of faith* by Ernest Bullock. Both groups sang the magnificent hymn *Round the Lord in glory seated* to the tune RUSTINGTON. We sent everyone videos of me conducting each work along with the base track recorded by the instrumentalists and lay clerks. Choristers and their teachers used the videos to practice in their private lessons and to record their individual tracks. The tracks were then sent back for editing, together with scripture passages and other readings. We called it a Virtual Offering for All Saints and it was streamed through YouTube to our congregation on All Saints.

Despite its challenges, I found that these virtual choirs provided unique opportunities for some choristers who were shy in a group setting to really blossom in the comfortable environment of their homes. Of course, there were also

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choristers who desperately tried anything to make sure their parents could not hear them singing. You could tell that they missed being in the choir room alongside their fellow choristers. I think those of us who tried virtual choir editing know how painstakingly difficult and time-consuming the process can be. It takes numerous hours of filming and editing, and I could not help feeling awkward conducting tracks in front of the camera. However, because of my knowledge of how awkward the process was, I was so impressed with our choristers finding the courage to sing their parts. I could not help being encouraged by our choristers, who were brave to go through this process with the understanding that this was their role, their responsibility, and their gift to the whole church. Watching their individual clips was a process filled with joy and hope, despite the loud page turns and rolling of eyes towards their parents which we saw occasionally. When the final product came together, I could not help feeling that sense of connection to our choristers that we had been missing for so many months. I found myself smiling while listening to each chorister doing their best, overcoming shyness, and facing the challenges of dry acoustics in their house with pets running around and who knows what else. Even still, I just could not wait to have them back to sing together again.

By November, we still did not anticipate that the worst of COVID was yet on its way—the pandemic reached its massive peak in December. Now I can look back and see my hopefulness was in vain, but at that time, we planned to record our Lessons and Carols with choristers and full adult choir in our Nave, naturally with many precautions in place such as social distancing, masks, short recording segments with frequent breaks to allow aerosols to disperse. However, after careful consideration and frequent consultations with doctors, parents, and clergy, we ultimately decided it was not safe to do so. We ended up only having a limited number of our professional choir members complete the recording. Even as they all expressed their understanding, the choristers were severely disappointed. I know that by December, many of us who work in churches were experiencing similar levels of disappointment, frustration, and fatigue in dealing with the pandemic.

Moving into January of 2021, our choristers continued to progress in virtual rehearsals. We used recordings and prior streamed services from pre-COVID times, especially those from our residency at Ely Cathedral in 2019, which helped to keep their interest and focus high through reminiscing about this recent, successful trip. We also attended the annual Chorister Festival at Christ Church Cathedral, Nashville, this time in a virtual format led by Michael Velting and other directors of music. Our choristers participate in the Chorister Festival each year, and being able to see other choristers from different churches brought them much joy and comfort. We played musical games involving our hymnal, showed off our pets (which was a great hit), and held a talent show with a wide range of talents from amazing art works, to a performance of musical spoons, to a wild act of hula hooping while simultaneously playing the fiddle.

By the end of April, the COVID vaccine finally became widely available. Though many of our adult members were vaccinated, we were still following the then-current guidelines from the CDC. By this point, our services were back in the

renovated Nave with the beautifully improved and warm acoustic, which allowed our adult choir to lead worship effectively even though they were still masked and in smaller numbers. When the full mask recommendation was finally lifted by the CDC in May, we utilized one of our outdoor courtyard spaces to finally rehearse with our choristers in person, though still masked and socially distanced. Through these outdoor rehearsals, we had a chance to renew our joy of singing together despite all the challenges. We fought noise from a beautiful fountain in our courtyard, church bells, and occasional fire engines, though we did enjoy the random appearance of frogs by the fountain. These rehearsals also allowed us to properly say goodbye to our two graduating seniors, and we were able to bring them in to sing one last service with us and to publicly recognize them on St. George's Youth Sunday.

THE SUMMER OF 2021

Despite the CDC advisement that fully vaccinated individuals did not need to wear masks anymore, the situation really did not change for our choristers since younger students still did not have the option to be vaccinated. (As I am reading through this in late July, we now find that the CDC has changed its guidelines due to the Delta variant in our area, so things are still in development.) There are many circumstances to consider as we plan for the fall—the Delta variant, the varied vaccination rates in different counties and states, and the yet-pending approval by the FDA for children under twelve to be vaccinated. It is my hope that we will have FDA approval on vaccines for those students by the time this article is published.

Looking toward the future, there are several steps we are planning to ensure that our choristers can safely return. Though returning in full force could come gradually (in light of safety protocols), the most important thing is to help our choristers find and reignite their love and passion for the great music we share in worship, and to build confidence and understanding of choral repertoire as they grow older. From *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace* by S.S. Wesley, to *Let all mortal flesh keep silence* by E. Bairstow, to the magnificent *Gloria* from *Collegium Regale* by H. Howells, we want to make sure they do not focus on the lost fifteen months of real-time experience, but instead on joyfully coming back home. Consistent exposure to Anglican hymnody and liturgical music, such as the singing of psalms, remains a high priority. Overall, there are multiple points we will focus on this fall:

- **Clear communication and “buy-in” from choristers and parents:**

There are many different viewpoints and a hesitancy toward vaccinations in some parts of the country, especially for younger age groups. It is imperative to have strong and clear communication on the topic of safety, and have parents fully support our plan to move forward together before the season begins.

- **Training of liturgical practices:**

One of the beauties of the chorister program is the discipline and knowledge of our wonderful liturgy that

comes with singing: reverencing the altar, the spoken portions of the service, processing with a hymnal in a dignified manner, and more. Much of this is taught by more experienced choristers who lead by example, and we will focus on these fundamentals more than before.

• **The sense of comradery and leadership:**

Choristers receive a practical education in leadership skills by leading in real life. We will emphasize the importance of leadership by seating them in our newly-renovated Chancel where they are in front of the congregation instead of behind the altar. (We used to watch the sermon on a TV screen from behind the altar, which was one of the major reasons for our Chancel renovation).

• **New choristers:**

We have a program called St. Dunstan's Choir, made up of first and second graders who are in preparation to join the choristers when they move to third grade. In St. Dunstan's, they participate in services and other special services to build their experience, something they did not have the opportunity to do this year due to COVID. Incoming choristers will have a special one-hour rehearsal with me each week, focusing on liturgical practice (instead of private lessons) for a few months to initiate the experience of leading worship in real-life.

• **Building back the repertoire:**

As much as I like introducing new anthems, there are certain standard pieces we make sure our choristers know well by singing them at least once a year. From *O taste and see* by R. Vaughan Williams to *Blessed city* by E. Bairstow, I will be looking back several years to make sure we have included what we believe to be staple repertoire for our choristers. Older choristers, who know these works very well, help younger choristers when learning them for the first time.

• **Having a fresh new goal:**

Having a common goal is a great way to bring people together. It can be as simple as a fundraising or social event, or something like a special service. In 2019, we sang a full Choral Evensong with all choirs to honor Gerry Senechal's fifteenth year at St. George's, and the sense of common celebration and joy brought our whole music ministry together. We want to bring that same sense of joy to every goal we have, big or small. It does not hurt to have a long-term goal, too; we plan to be the residency choir at Canterbury Cathedral, UK, in 2023. Following our Ely Cathedral residency in 2019, we anticipate that this upcoming trip will bring a renewed excitement and commitment. We are also looking forward to our new Buzard Organ op. 48 to be installed in 2022. Preparations for these goals will bring energy to our choristers, along with a sense of responsibility and ownership.

I know full well that everyone who is reading this has likely experienced the pandemic differently, and things are changing even as I write. Although we have had varied challenges, I am

sure we all share excitement, hope, and quite possibly caution as we begin again the process of making beautiful sacred music. As I pray and hope for good news concerning the vaccination for choristers aged twelve and younger, I also hope everyone will find continued and renewed passion for the great calling of training the next generation of church musicians.

Woosug Kang enjoys a strong reputation as a concert organist and a choral conductor. He has performed in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and the UK as an organist, and currently he is the director of music ministries at St. George's Episcopal Church in Nashville. He oversees the whole nationally-recognized music program, and keeps it to a high standard while maintaining his solo career, as well as serving as the artistic director and board member of various non-profit arts organizations. He enjoys singing in a chamber ensemble immensely, singing in various groups throughout his career as a chamber singer and a soloist.



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