

## From Your President

### *Together We Sing*

TO QUOTE A FAMOUS SHOW, “Come on, somethin’ come on in, don’t be shy, meet a choir director, pull up a chair. The air is hummin’ and somethin’ great is comin’!” Okay, maybe Sondheim would not be happy with my lack of rhyme and lyric change, but it sure does fit as we get even closer to our 2022 Summer Conference, June 20–22, 2022 ... IN PERSON!!!

The Ohio Choral Directors Association Summer Conference has always been my favorite! No trudging through the snow, no missed rehearsals back at school, no overlapping concerts with interest sessions or reading sessions, and no trudging through the snow (I meant to say it twice, especially after this past OMEA Conference). What we say “yes” to is an intimate setting where we can have expanded reading sessions, learn from clinicians who are the top in their field, meet new colleagues from across Ohio, experience top-notch professional development, gain graduate credit, hear great choirs, AND WEAR SHORTS!!

The OCDA Summer Conference, titled “Together We Sing,” will focus on musical greatness and supporting the communities we represent. While we may have known it before this pandemic, our roles in keeping our communities together and supported has only been heightened in the last few years.

Our first clinician, **Jason Max Ferdinand**, is the founding artistic director of *The Jason Max Ferdinand Singers: an ensemble of exceptional talents*, and the director of choral activities at Oakwood University where he conducts the Aeolians of Oakwood University. Dr. Ferdinand will present sessions on fostering racial harmony through music, conducting gestures, and programming, and he’ll offer a focused conference chorus reading session.

**Elaine Hagenberg’s** music “soars with eloquence and ingenuity” (*ACDA Choral Journal*). Her award-winning compositions are performed worldwide and are frequently featured at American Choral Directors Association conferences and All-State festivals. Her music has been performed at Carnegie Hall and in other distinguished international concert halls from Australia to South America and throughout Europe. In addition to leading a reading session of her music, Ms. Hagenberg will present sessions on



OCDA President  
Doug O'Neal

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discovering our creative voices and demystifying the composition process.

Rounding out our headliners is **Lisa Wong**, Director of Choruses for The Cleveland Orchestra and Associate Professor of Music at The College of Wooster. Dr. Wong will present a session which will examine leadership in choral music. Her insights into current trends (and what should be trends) in choral music are outstanding and thought provoking.

In addition to our incredible headliners, we will be joined by the directors of the Harmony Project, a Columbus organization that boasts a 500-member choir involved in making the community better through song and service. Performances from one of their ensembles as well as seven other choirs will grace our stages. Opening our conference will be the Bexley Vocal Arts Ensemble, directed by Amy Blosser and the Ohio University Bella Voce Treble Ensemble under the direction of Dominique Petite. We are excited that the Monday evening concert will take place in

Cowan Hall this year and feature our OCDA High School Honors Choir conducted by Lisa Wong; Friends in Harmony (Harmony Project), conducted by Peg Meckling-Baker; and Capriccio Columbus, conducted by Larry Griffin and Karrie Horton. Tuesday afternoon will finally feature the two-year-delayed performance of Stivers School for the Arts Chorale, conducted by Paula Powell, followed on Wednesday by the award winning Columbus International Children's Choir conducted by Tatiana Katz. Our conference will end with our singing out the event as a community with some Choral Gems and CPDL selections led by Ron Blackley!

The OCDA reading sessions are always popular events and are expanded for the Summer Conference. Join us for the five sessions of music chosen by our R&R Chairs in the areas of Collegiate, High School, Middle School/Jr High, Elementary, Community Children, Treble, Bass, Church, World Music and Cultures, Community, Jazz, Show Choir and Pop A Cappella.

Thanks to JW Pepper for their sponsorship of the music and sessions!

Opportunities for networking and socializing about through our Monday evening Gemütlichkeit; two events on Tuesday: the incredibly popular All-Conference Party (sponsored by Bob Rogers Travel), and our Annual Meeting Luncheon; and the R&R area Lunch Roundtables on Wednesday lead by our outstanding R&R Chairs.

Unfortunately, it seems the Children's Honor Choir is still feeling the impact of Covid. Registrations were not high enough to be able to hold the event at the conference for 2022, but we anticipate a big return in 2023!

The 2022 conference promises to be an exciting one as we once again join in community! Registration is open and we can't wait for your return or to meet you for the first time. ([Click here to register now!](#)) Best wishes for the conclusion of your 2021–2022 season and I hope to see you this summer at Otterbein University! ♦

## Advice for Mentoring a Student Teacher

*Laura Kitchel, Collegiate Choirs: Student Activities R&R Chair*

IT'S A CLASSIC SCENARIO—an area college reaches out to you in the hopes that you will be willing to host a student teacher. It can be a big ask; pre-service teachers take time and energy, and not all of them are as ready as we wish they

were. The field experience process is an essential part of education training however, and great mentoring from an experienced professional can set up a beginning teacher for long-term success. Well-mentored students enter the

profession excited and ready, but when a student-teaching experience is strained, a young teacher can become disheartened and discouraged, sometimes choosing to leave



the profession before they ever apply for a job. So, what can cooperating teachers do to ensure that they are supporting the learning of pre-service teachers and engaging in quality mentorship?

**Be clear with your expectations.**

If you want your student teachers to turn in daily lesson plans, tell them up front and work with them if they aren't up to par. If you expect them to show up or leave at certain times, be precise about what those times are and what they need to do while they are there. If a student teacher isn't dressing or acting as professionally as you would like, let them know. A lack of clarity about work expectations can increase tension and resentment, so have those conversations very early on in the process. It can be easy to forget how unaware beginning teachers can be about workplace policies. Usually, a single conversation about expectations is all it takes to get them on track.

**Communicate with the university supervisors.**

Observations by a university supervisor are a standard support for the student teacher, and it's a good idea for you to engage the supervisor at these visits and be open about what is and what isn't going well. The supervisor may have insight regarding the student or be able to help with difficult conversations. Making the supervisor aware of issues immediately can also help prevent future problems and keep frustrations from escalating. Problems might not be as apparent during observations by the supervisor, be-

cause student teachers are usually the most prepared and professional at those times. Taking time to meet with the supervisor to talk through the strengths and weaknesses of your student teachers can be beneficial if things aren't going well.

**Let them teach.** Turning over your classes or songs can be difficult, especially knowing that the student teachers might not be doing as good a job as you or moving as fast as you'd like. *Let them take over anyway.* Student teachers need to learn how to teach on their own, and a cooperating teacher that doesn't give them autonomy or swoops in to save them won't help them learn the hard lessons they need. Sometimes student teachers need space to fail, and if they do, talk through their mistakes with them and give support without providing all the answers. Self-sufficiency and resiliency after failure are necessary learning areas for pre-service teachers, so mentor them by helping them reflect and plan, not by minimizing their time in front of a classroom.

**Don't try to be perfect.** Hopefully, your student teachers will come to you with questions, concerns, and ideas. They will look to you for answers and guidance based on your years of experience and wisdom. Sometimes, however, that can make cooperating teachers feel like they need to have all the answers. It's important to demonstrate to your student teachers that you don't always have it figured out. You can just be yourself; pre-service teachers need to know that



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experience doesn't equal constant success, and they need someone they can trust with their concerns more than they need an example of perfection. They also need to see how you handle your own work/life balance, so they can think through what that might look like for themselves.

*Show them the good parts of the job.* Teaching can be frustrating and overwhelming sometimes. While it's important to show the harder parts of being in education, a constant barrage of negativity towards the profession can deeply hinder the natural enthusiasm of a beginning teacher. Constant complaining about your principal or the lack of support can eventually lead to student teachers questioning their career paths. Show your student teachers the difficulties of teaching, but also show them how you are dealing, and make sure that your student teachers see the good parts, too. Let them in on the relationships you have with your class, the joy of a great rehearsal, or the fun of an after-school ensemble. Talk to them about what keeps you coming back every day, so that when they have their own difficult days in the future, they will remember your example.

*Remember that they are still learning.* A successful relationship between student and cooperating teacher is one in which the mentor has a realistic expectation regarding a beginning teacher's capability and remembers how much a young teacher still has to learn. Most student teachers will struggle with issues of classroom management, open score piano parts, and time management. Remembering that these skills improve quickly in the first few years of teaching can help you manage your expectations during the student-teaching experience. The student-teaching semester can also be an overwhelming time; giving your student teachers a little grace during their early missteps will go a long way for building a trusting and purposeful relationship in later weeks.

*Enjoy their unique perspectives and gifts.* Every now and then, take a moment to appreciate the enthu-

siasm and youth of your student teachers. See if they have learned any new educational frameworks, composers, or technologies while in college. Enjoy the unique rapport they will have with your choirs and help them develop their emerging philosophies. Allow them to reinvigorate your own teaching methods and share ideas. They will only be with you for a short time, so enjoy it.

*When you are asked to mentor, say yes!* Taking on student teachers can be a difficult job, but with the right kind of mentoring, it can be a rewarding and fulfilling process. The next generation of music teachers needs experienced leaders who can carefully and wisely guide them through this difficult time in education. A little time, candor, and grace from a cooperating teacher can cultivate a meaningful relationship and be a model for years to come. ♦

## Vocal Health and the Rehearsal

*Jordan Saul, Repertoire Specific: Women's/SSAA Choirs R&R Chair*

FOR MANY SINGERS in a choir, the choral conductor may be the sole voice teacher they will have in their lifetimes. As conductors, our instruction has the potential to positively impact a singer's vocal health, and indeed it is our vocation to teach both music and healthy ways of singing it. Private one-to-one voice lessons often highlight vocal health, but it is not

reasonable to expect that choristers receive vocal health education this way exclusively, as many will never have this type of singing lesson.

Instrumentalists are commonly cautious about exposing instruments to potentially harmful elements or circumstances. They understand (and are often taught explicitly in early learning stages) that

care is required to keep instruments in proper working condition: flute pads that don't seal sound sluggish; slipping or stuck pegs create intonation issues; a loose drumhead doesn't ring. In contrast, it is not uncommon for singers to disregard the care of their instrument: yelling at a sporting event or live music





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event, whispering, and consistently speaking over background noise are all regular factors that can greatly impact vocal health. For singers, promotion of vocal health in the rehearsal may help remove risk factors for vocal fatigue (which can lead to vocal damage). Vocal fatigue is a major liability for singers, and can be caused by over-singing, poor vowel modifications, pressed vocal production, and over-rehearsing in passages with high or low tessitura and/or that sit in the passaggio.

Conductors can take concrete steps to support singing health in the planning stages before rehearsal, during the rehearsal itself, and in considerations for performance. It is always a good idea to refresh our knowledge of the vocal system, too, and I recommend the Vocology Tool Box at [voicescienceworks.org](http://voicescienceworks.org) for refreshers, education, and resources.

During the planning stages before rehearsals begin, conductors can consider certain factors that will support the vocal health of the singers. First, consider deeply the singers themselves: age? experience level? prior knowledge? Consider

that mental stress and tension cause physical stress and tension, which can easily lead to vocal tension. In the best circumstances, singing together is fortifying for the body, mind, and spirit. In less favorable settings, choral experiences can inhibit vocal growth and personal confidence. Group dynamics powerfully impact choral singing, and the singers' abilities are often considerably varied. Differences in musicianship skills, in social skills, and in size and timbre of voices can all promote competitive attitudes. When the conductor carefully considers these elements when organizing the choir sections and the resulting repertoire selections, choral singing can promote positive individual, collective, and artistic growth. A singer's instrument responds best in a relaxed and responsive atmosphere, especially in the learning stages, and so choral conductors benefit from recognizing feeling tone and ensemble culture as impactful and influential factors on overall sound and vocal health.

Another important consideration in the planning stages is, of course, programming. Program for

the voices that are in the ensemble, rather than those the conductor may wish were present. Range and tessitura are powerful indicators of potential vocal hazards. The range of a given vocal part may appear suitable (that is, the top note to the bottom note falls in informed expectation for what singers can accomplish); however, the tessitura (the range of pitches in which most of the vocal part lies) may be at extremes of the range. Choral singers asked to vocalize in extreme tessituras for an extended time will likely experience vocal fatigue and perhaps vocal injury.

It is not uncommon for choral conductors to ask singers to deviate from their normal voice parts to join another section for balance, clarity, tone, or any number of sonic reasons. Baritones may be asked to sing in higher registers to strengthen the tenor section. Altos may be asked to join or indeed become the tenor section. An occasional departure from the singer's range is not necessarily harmful, especially for a skilled singer. A longer leave (such as a season) from a singer's regular part and classification can be detrimental to

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the vocal health of the choral singer. It is healthiest to choose repertoire that matches the singers in the ensemble and avoids these potential hazards. When these balance issues are unavoidable through repertoire selection, conductors can help mitigate damages by making choices to support vocal health in the rehearsal itself.

Once the planning stages are complete and the rehearsals have begun, there are still elements to consider in order to support vocal health. The time of day the rehearsal takes place may indicate the overall state of readiness in the singers, and therefore impact how much physical warm-up time may be required. The number of hours in the rehearsal may indicate a lesson plan that flows, alternating vo-

cally taxing repertoire and that which is less so. Consider the rehearsal space itself. Dry environments are less suited to healthy singing, and hydration is essential for singers. Is there a water fountain easily accessible to choristers? There may be other factors in the room that contribute to oversinging, like air conditioners, air filters, or noise from outside. Consistently singing over background noise can lead to bad habits in singers, as these stimuli eventually become unnoticed while the strain to sing over them becomes commonplace.

For building vocal technique and supporting vocal health, it is important to honor vocal warm-ups. Time spent here is not time wasted unless the exercises them-

selves are routine to the extent that they have no meaning for the singers. Warm-ups are a time to teach technique, establish expectations, clarify processes, and build ensemble culture. An excellence-building warm-up sequence would include physical exercises, mental exercises, repertoire-specific exercises (which apply the technique to artistic expression), and ensemble awareness exercises (for tuning, awareness, and listening). These four areas are foundational for vocal health and skill-building in the choral rehearsal.

Once rehearsals have concluded and the time for performance arrives, there are still more decisions that may be made to support vocal health. Body alignment, essential for excellent, healthy singing, may

be negatively impacted by the elevated close quarters of choral risers. Rehearse on risers whenever possible, so that singers acclimate to performance positions. Singing alignment, then, becomes a matter of course rather than another adjustment to be made when performance deviates significantly from rehearsal.

Other items that may impact alignment in performance include choral folders (which may hold pounds of music) and sight lines (which may cause singers to extend neck positions uncomfortably if they are unable to see the conductor). Conductors can mitigate these factors by considering them in advance and adjusting elements that may be adjusted. When such elements persist outside of the conductor's control, it will be conducive to vocal health to arm

singers with strategies for success. For example: "After the applause following the third selection, switch your folders to your opposite hand. Switch back at intermission." "If you are having trouble seeing, make sure your knees are slightly bent, extend your spine from the hips up, shift as best you can to see between other singers, and listen large to the ensemble around you. Straining your neck won't help."

Finally, the conducting gesture plays a role in vocal health. Gestures supply information, explicitly or implicitly. If a conductor's gesture is shallow and consistently cuts off the breath, the singing is impacted. If the conductor holds tension in the throat, shoulders, or hands, the singing will likely be impacted (especially if the singers are actually watching...). Consider

making a recording of your own conducting and singing. You may observe less clarity than expected or see ways that your gesture beautifully supports healthy singing. Voices require longer preparation time: singers must audiate or hear the pitch, prepare the vowel shape, establish the breath, and then produce the sound. This coordination is either supported by the conductor's breath gesture or inhibited by it depending on whether the conductor is cognizant of the vocal health needs of the ensemble.

Singers and conductors benefit from promoting vocal health. Including benefits of vocal health in choral rehearsals and planning for factors influencing rehearsal can both mitigate risk factors for vocal fatigue and amplify techniques that support artistry. ♦

## The Sunshine Ratio

*Katie Silcott, East Central Region Chair*

HAPPY SPRING! As you approach your end-of-year activities and look ahead toward the summer, I'm sure you are also entering a season of reflection, especially after this once-again challenging school year. As I reflect upon my twentieth year of teaching, I'd like to share with you a philosophy that I hold near and dear to my heart. I have tested and solidified this philosophy every year, both in my professional life and also in my personal life. It might surprise you to know that

this philosophy was not directly taught to me during my undergraduate or graduate studies (although I learned *many* beautiful lessons during those years). It was also not taught to me by my parents or other family members. I acquired this philosophy simply by waking up each morning, seeing what the day brings, and reflecting upon those moments. I did this every day, whether I was conscious of it or not. That means I tested this philosophy for 7,300 days!

Sometimes I wrote about the moments in a journal, sometimes I took a photo to capture aspects of them, and other times I just processed them in my mind. Before I tell you the name of this philosophy, I will say that I had doubts in my head many times as I brought it to the forefront and began talking about it with my students and colleagues. "Is this what people refer to as *toxic positivity*?"



“Am I just telling myself what I want to hear?” “How long will this last?” “Will people laugh when I tell them what it’s called?” “Will this really help when things get tough?” “Should I even say this out loud?” But now I can say that after a global pandemic filled with waves of uncertainty and loss, this philosophy is 100% tried and true.

My philosophy is called “The Sunshine Ratio.”

**sun·shine** /'sʌn,SHɪn/ *noun*  
direct sunlight unbroken by clouds, especially over a comparatively large area; cheerfulness; happiness.

**ra·tio** /'rāSHĕ,ō/ *noun*  
the quantitative relation between two amounts showing the number of times one value contains or is contained within the other.

For every one challenge we face in our life that might make us feel upset or frustrated, I have learned that we can find two or more (usually more!) positive thoughts or moments to help balance and even counter that challenge. Following the Sunshine Ratio shifts our mindset so instead of feeling hopeless or stuck, we look for the good. Now let me be clear—this can be very hard to do and it takes a lot of

practice. In addition, the positivity does not always eliminate the challenge. Challenges can be powerful and heavy but shifting our outlook and focusing on the bright side can usually make them less heavy.

When a student walks into my room feeling dejected after a challenging algebra test, I try to help them find some positive parts of the day. In middle school, it can be something as simple as “It was Pizza Day in the cafeteria!” or “My friend helped me open my locker!”

Finding the Sunshine Ratio can help us put things into perspective. Sometimes it’s hard for us to identify the positive thoughts or find silver linings on our own, especially if we are in the midst of a challenge. And it’s perfectly OK to admit when something is stressful or challenging! Sometimes saying it out loud shines some helpful light for us. If our vision gets cloudy, we must not hesitate to seek the help of our friends and colleagues who are our marigolds. A few years ago, I read an article titled “Find Your Marigold—The One Essential Rule for New Teachers” ([cultofpedagogy.com/marigolds](http://cultofpedagogy.com/marigolds)). The author explains how marigolds are companion plants. Gardeners plant marigolds next to vegetables because they protect delicate plants from harmful pests and weeds. “If

you can find at least one marigold in your school and stay close to them, you will grow. Find more than one and you will positively thrive.”

I hope you try the Sunshine Ratio and look for marigolds in your own personal and/or professional life. If you find that these practices work for you, please reach out and let me know. Please encourage others to try this too!

*Look for the good in everything  
Look for the people who will set your soul free  
It always seems impossible until it's done  
Look for the good in everyone  
Everyone needs sunshine, everyone needs rain  
Everyone is carrying around some kind of pain  
I see who you are, you're just like me  
I see you're searching for a purpose, guided by a dream  
I see who you are, I'm just like you  
I get lost sometimes and I forget what I came here to do  
I keep on trying  
When it gets frightening  
Look for the good in everything  
Look for the people who will set your soul free  
It always seems impossible until it's done  
Look for the good in everyone*

—JASON MRAZ ♦

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## A Good Time to Spice Things Up?



*Tyler Skidmore, Repertoire Specific: Show Choir R&R Chair*

As a high school choir teacher stumbling my way through these last few years, I've learned how short the four years of high school can seem and how traditions can quickly become temporary. Next school year, very few of my students will have any idea what our choirs were like before 2020.

Reflecting on this made me wonder: what traditions, whether administrative or musical, should be changed? Are there things I can do better or more efficiently? Or, if not better, in a way that provides more opportunity for creativity and engagement? All of us must work through these questions with and for our choir. Recently, I've been taking some time to look at how we engage with audiences of our concert groups. While the music may be pleasant to the ear, how can our performances engage with the other senses?

Music is essentially an auditory art form, but our choristers and audience members are constantly perceiving the other four senses, whether consciously or unconsciously. What is the look and feel we are trying to achieve with our concerts?

The following ideas came out of time spent reflecting on various nonmusical ways of enhancing our choir performances; I hope some of these ideas help to get you thinking outside of the box. Below are several ways to add some visual "spice" to your choral performance.

**Projections** Projections can serve a variety of purposes. Images and videos of landscapes could help to transport our audience to another place; for instance, you could project images of tundra while performing Ola Gjeilo's "Tundra." Patriotic or religious symbols may be impactful in some contexts. The use of projections takes time to prepare and rehearse. As with all of these suggestions, they should be used with care. Distasteful or unrehearsed projections can detract from the choral performance.

**New formations or props** This is perhaps the easiest way to enhance the performance visually. If planned well, it should also have a beneficial effect on the sound of the ensemble. Commonly used formations for choirs include sectional by block, sectional by rows, mixed, and polychoral (choir 1, choir 2). Is there an opportunity to bring the choir off of the risers? Could a prop be tastefully utilized? Can the audience see what needs to be seen (soloists, featured sections)? A great example of an impactful and nontraditional performance posture is the seated performance of Ēriks Ešņvalds "Only in Sleep" by the Trinity College Choir. ([click to view this performance](#)) All formations should be rehearsed and quickly executed during a live performance.

**Costuming** Allowing for variety in costuming can be a new way to en-

gage your choristers in the creative process. A pops concert is a wonderful time to venture away from a traditional choral uniform or black dress. With a simple costume guide, singers, for example, could be charged with the responsibility of finding their own jeans and flannel shirts for a concert of American folk music. If this seems too dramatic, a costume change could be as simple as introducing a new color into a traditional uniform. If your budget allows, there are many great formal and show choir costume companies. You may also look at theater costume rental companies for a themed concert or event.

**Choreography** Music and dance have a very deep human and historical connection. Is there a way to include both in your choral performances? If your budget allows for a professional choreographer, that's great. If not, could you or a member of your choir come up with some appropriate movement for your concert selections? Whether dance, simple riser choreography, or sign language, movement can enrich the experience of both the performer and the audience.

**Scenery or backdrops** Whether in an auditorium, gym, church, park, or a large open room, simple



# TOGETHER WE SING

## 2022 SUMMER CONFERENCE

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scenery or backdrop ideas can be integrated with minimal cost and effort. Ordinary items such as wood pallets, screen material, and PVC pipes have been used to create the scenery for our choral performances. If your performance space has a fly rail, you may want to look at rental backdrops, hanging crystals, or even hanging paper airplanes, as we used for a part of our spring show one year.

**Lighting Effects** Theatrical lighting helps to draw the eye of the audience. Once even lighting of a performance space is achieved, the addition of color washes with inexpensive LED stage lighting can provide a nice added effect. Gobos and spotlights can also enhance the

visual aspects of a musical performance. With our audience, inexpensive battery-powered candles and a dark stage always seem to be a favorite at the holiday concert. The use of dimming and intensifying stage lighting during Alexander Kopylov’s “Heavenly Light” may deepen the impact of the piece.

**Change of Venue** Finding a place off-site to perform can also be a great way to connect with new community members. Are there churches open to hosting your choir? Could there be parks, community buildings, or even larger businesses in your community with space and a desire to host? Although there may be sound-related hurdles to work through, present-

ing your nature-themed concert at a local park might create a new level of engagement with your audience.

Moving beyond the visual, my final thoughts centered on interactivity and the concept of immersive theater. Interactive elements added to a choral performance could include anything from a sing-along to volunteer participation on stage. The ensemble, repertoire, and audience will determine the appropriate nature of interactivity for that moment. Choral music has such potential to move audiences and choir members alike. I wish you all the best in your pursuit of deeper engagement—each year is a new year and each day a new opportunity. ♦

## It’s On the Air We Breathe: *Dear Vaccine*

*Scott MacPherson, Northeast Region Chair*

THINK ABOUT IT, for maybe two seconds. We can all place ourselves back around late February 2020. Although we read with curiosity-laced worry about the news of this novel coronavirus rapidly spreading in other parts of the world, we continued working our choirs in the usual way: rehearsals in person in preparation for live concerts in front of an audience.

For me, it was a very busy time. My Cleveland Chamber Choir (CCC), a professional ensemble of 32 singers, was in the final stages of preparation for our March 7–8 concerts, “We March On: Music of

Social Justice” in Kent and Cleveland. We did, in fact, have several sick singers attending out of dedication, but our policy at that time was to come if you are up to it, and sit in the back of the room to listen. As it turned out, those two concerts were among the very last live performances in Northeast Ohio before the pandemic hit. Both programs were well attended with 350+ audience members sitting shoulder to shoulder in church venues. We also involved two high school choirs on stage with our CCC singers—Theodore Roosevelt High School *Choral Works* (Corey

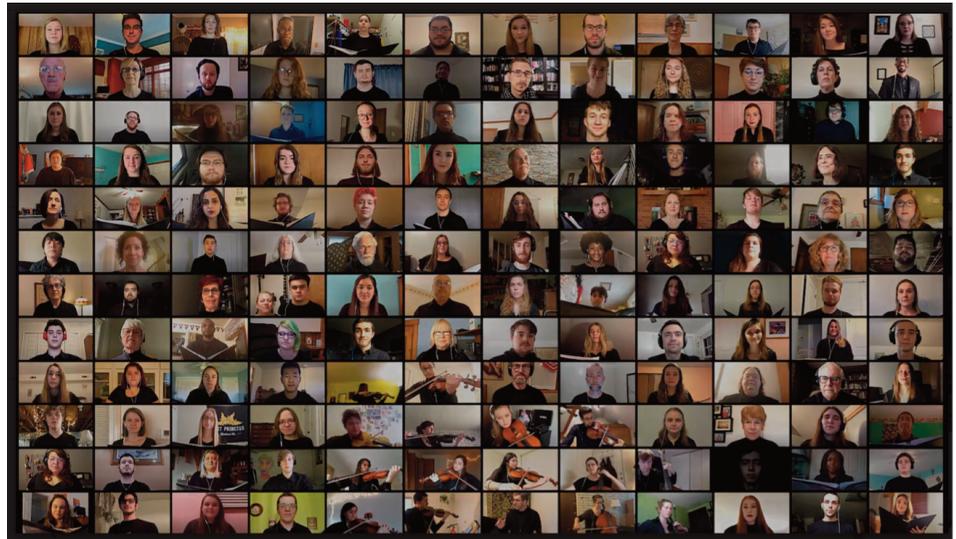
Fowler, director) and the Oberlin Choristers *una voce musica* (Tim Unger, director). In other words, a lot of people interspersed on stage singing their hearts out for social justice! Our program closed with Jocelyn Hagen’s textless piece *Hands*, an incredibly lovely and moving piece for unaccompanied voices that prescribes movement off risers towards the front of the stage as singers hold hands. I remember introducing the piece to the audiences and saying, “due to the current spread of coronavirus,



we will not be holding hands.” There were many giggles among singers and audience members, and our combined choirs proceeded to sing with full emotion, dispersing aspirants potentially containing the virus. To my surprise, we never heard that any singers or audience members fell ill. We dodged a bullet.

The next day was another “normal” day at Kent State University, where I am Director of Choral Studies. However, Tuesday, March 10, 2020, near the end of my Chorale’s afternoon rehearsal, as we sang through Hagen’s *Hands* (yes, love it so much I programmed it twice!) in preparation for our upcoming tour to Chicago, we received the urgent message that the university was ending classes at 4:30pm and would not resume until April 12th. Of course, that date kept sliding later and later, and teachers had to transition to remote instruction. How in the world do I engage my choirs from their homes?

Like most choral directors, visions of heads floating in space along with composer and conductor Eric Whitacre suspended in the stars immediately came to mind. I decided to give it a go, so I contacted our wonderful new recording engineer, Sam Robert, who, like me, had never done a virtual video. Our first virtual project was Stephen Stills’ protest song *Find the Cost of Freedom*, which was written in response to the May 4, 1970, National Guard shootings on the Kent State campus that resulted in four students dead and nine injured. This amazing a cap-



ella arrangement was written for us by one of my former grad students, B.K. Riha. My hope was to somehow get a performance of this piece on the University’s 50th Anniversary Commemoration Event, which, like everything else, would be virtual. Not only did our KSU President, Todd Diacon, request to open the commemoration with our successful video, Neil Young responded, “I wish the Chorale would make a video of my song *Ohio!*” Even though the semester was over, my students and I jumped at the opportunity. At the same time, CCC made their first virtual video on Abbie Betinis’ social justice song, *Resilience*. I also embarked on a combined KSU choirs and string orchestra virtual video performance of Mozart’s *Ave verum corpus* which included 125 singers and 15 string players. You all know the hours and hours of reviewing video takes and retakes! But, if Eric Whitacre could do it, so could we...or so we thought. Unfortunately, our financial resources only allowed for changing walls of about 30 performers at a time—no

floating in space or singing in a mountain meadow. Luckily, my grad assistant at the time, Gréta Pásztor, figured out how we could end with all performers on the screen. Thankfully, our students come through in terms of technology for those of us less savvy! She suggested using a still shot of the 140+ performers, which faded in during the final bars of the string conclusion.

While it was a novel idea for the novel virus times, I must say that in the end it seems hardly worth all the time and effort. I’m not sure how you choral conductors out there felt about it, but to me it just isn’t what we trained for in our choral conducting careers. Sure, we can be proud of the final product, knowing all the work that went into it, but it is manipulated audio that never quite perfectly matches with the homemade videos recorded on cellphones in basements, bedrooms, kitchens, in the car, standing in a river, or sitting in a tree. However, we made the best of the resources at our disposal. I now look back on all of them with

genuine pride, knowing those projects were what got me and my singers through the initial mandate of remote choral singing.

The shocking news of the wildly spreading coronavirus in the Pacific Northwest during March 2020 confirmed what many of us were worried about: choral singing together during the pandemic (before a vaccine) could and did result in severe illnesses and deaths. We all read with horror about the Skagit Valley Chorale in Washington State, where the director chose to continue rehearsing while the virus was spreading in Seattle. Not long after, over forty of the singers were diagnosed with COVID-19, several were hospitalized, and two passed away. I also read of a 130-voice choir performing J.S. Bach's *St. John Passion* in the Netherlands on March 8, 2020, where dozens became ill and a few people lost their lives. Sadly and tragically, singing—the very thing that gives many of us life and purpose—became a super spreader, a carrier of death.

We all went through various levels of hoarding hand sanitizer, toilet paper, and Clorox wipes, and trying to find protective masks. As the spring 2020 semester came to a close, I was hopeful that it would all blow away over the summer. I remember even joking among colleagues, “next thing you know, choirs will be singing with masks on, hahaha! Ridiculously impossible!” Well, we all know the rest of that story. It was no joking matter come fall semester 2020, when we were allowed to hold classes in person, though masked and distanced. For an entire academic year, the 28

members (yes, enrollment declined) of my Chorale were spread out in the 280-seat recital hall from side to side and front to back. This for an entire academic year. With no desire to return to virtual videos, our concertizing, likely similar everywhere, became video-recorded events with no audience, singers again spread out among the seats of the concert hall. And again, we were all extremely proud of these “concerts,” which were later streamed online. We did the best we could! I look back and see that we truly were all in this together—the students were amazing, hanging in there under difficult circumstances!

All this reminiscence serves as the backdrop for an incredibly creative and moving choral piece the Cleveland Chamber Choir and I commissioned and premiered in late February 2022 by critically acclaimed and award-winning British composer, Cecilia McDowall. In this instance, the pandemic's long reach had a silver lining for me and the Choir. Having fallen in love with McDowall's choral music over the previous five or six years, I designed a concert weekend in celebration of her music for February 2021 that had to be postponed a year. We decided to make it a weekend residency for McDowall. (If you are not familiar with Cecilia McDowall's vast catalog of choral music, visit her website at <https://ceciliamcdowall.co.uk/>. If you are a fan of the annual King's College *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* service on Christmas Eve, you will have heard the premiere of McDowall's stunningly

beautiful setting of *There is no rose* now published by Oxford University Press.)

I called the concerts *Cecilia and her World*, a program of her music and several pieces by composers she considers strong influences in her evolution as a composer (Tallis, Stravinsky, and of course Britten's *Hymn to St. Cecilia!*). In order for our audiences to hear even more of her music, I invited four collegiate choirs from the region to participate, two on each concert: the KSU Chorale, the Cleveland State University Chorale (Dr. Brian Bailey, conductor), Case Western Reserve University Concert Choir (Dr. Christopher Clark, conductor), and the Youngstown State University Dana Chorale (Dr. Hae-Jong Lee, conductor). Each choir sang two pieces of their choosing and we all combined on a wonderful “closer” called *The Presence* for unaccompanied double choir. As part of her residency, McDowall traveled from Cleveland to Youngstown and Kent to listen and work with each choir on her music.

For the commission, I asked Cecilia if she preferred choosing a text herself or if she wanted suggestions. As she said in her pre-concert conversations with Oberlin College Conservatory of Music Professor of Musicology Charles McGuire, she is flexible on the issue of choosing a text for commissions. Some people have strong ideas and others are wide open. In our case, I originally asked her to choose something about redemption and healing. Enter the vaccine! The world-wide arrival of the vaccine promised a sense of hope

for an end to the pandemic. In the late spring of 2021, the Kent State University Wick Poetry Center Director David Hassler and the University of Arizona Poetry Center Director Tyler Meier launched their collaborative *Global Vaccine Poem* project. After reading a sample poem by Naomi Shihab-Nye, participants choose one of four prompts to write a poetic entry, essentially addressing it to the Vaccine. The *Dear Vaccine* project has received over 2,500 poetic re-

sponses from 118 countries and every state in the U.S. In her notes about the piece, McDowall states, “I always enjoy exploring possible texts to set and the process, this time, was most unusual and interesting. I was guided to the newly created website, the *Global Vaccine Poem* project. All were encouraged to express their hopes and expectations on this website, in poetic language, for a future after vaccination as we emerge from the pandemic.”

McDowall’s *On the Air (Dear Vaccine)* is a poetic letter through music addressing our desires about the COVID-19 vaccine, including the universal hope for things to return to the way they were before the pandemic. For the text, McDowall worked with British poet, writer, and broadcaster Seàn Street. Together, they chose several excerpts from the project, which he in turn carefully shaped into poetic form.

**On the Air (Dear Vaccine)**

*text freely adapted by Seàn Street, from the Global Vaccine Poem*

*Dear Vaccine, please invite the singers back to the stage,  
And welcome audiences to sit closely together once more,  
And let all be as it was and always new.*

*Enough of searching strangers’ eyes, for what smiles reveal,  
To let a child explore a face with their tiny fingers,  
To taste the sun on lips, to walk in a garden,  
To stand close, and best of all, kiss.*

*It’s birdsong in the morning after rain,  
The fragile shoot that promises a flower,  
The new bud on the basswood tree after winter,  
In the spring, it’s opportunity.*

*Bring me my dancing shoes,  
Let me wear a lipstick kiss  
Bring me the sharing of breath  
Bring me my mother, my grandchild to hold.*

*To broadcast is to sow a seed,  
It’s on the air we breathe,  
And in the air we sing,  
Exhaling seeds of sound to plant a garden.*

*We are the choir unmasked, unveiled, unmuted.  
Breathe air and sing!*

The composition begins quietly with sustained textures providing the backdrop for a lone speaker who implores the Vaccine to make possible the return of singers to the stage:

Commissioned by Sabrina and Peter Vanden Broeck  
in honor of Ellen Vanden Broeck for the Cleveland Chamber Choir, Scott MacPherson, Artistic Director

### On the Air (Dear Vaccine)

Seàn Street  
(freely adapted from poetic entries from  
the Dear Vaccine website)

CECILIA McDOWALL

With expectation ♩ = c. 80

Dear Vaccine (spoken naturally)      please invite the singers

SPOKEN

SOPRANO 1

SOPRANO 2

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

6

please invite the singers back,      back to the stage,      and

Following the spoken prologue, the piece proper begins with beautifully lilting lines sung by the tenors and basses alternating with the sopranos and altos. McDowall is a master at setting language to music, the rhythm of each word and each phrase perfectly expressing meaning. Her subtle use of harmonies, both consonant and dissonant, defines the ultimate direction of each line of text, bringing the architecture of each section of the piece into clear relief. The first part of the piece ends poignantly with a change of rich harmonies depicting our thanks “to stand close, and best of all, to kiss.”

*ritenuto poco a poco* . . . . .

61 *f* - den, in a gar - den, to stand close, stand close, and best of

- den, in a gar - den, to stand close, stand close, and best of

- den, in a gar - den, to stand close, stand close, and best of

- den, in a gar - den, to stand close, stand close, and best of

- den, in a gar - den, to stand close, stand close, and best of

*ritenuto poco a poco* . . . . .

68 *mf dim. poco a poco* (✓) *pp* Simply, folk-like ♩ = c. 88 *p*

*mf dim. poco a poco* (✓) *pp* Simply, folk-like ♩ = c. 88 *p*

all, kiss. ah It's

*mf dim. poco a poco* (✓) *pp* *p*

all, kiss. ah It's

*mf dim. poco a poco* (✓) *p*

all, kiss. ah

*mf dim. poco a poco* (✓) *pp* *p*

Simply, folk-like ♩ = c. 88

After a section she labels “Simply, folk-like” containing music that is pastoral in quality, the mood abruptly brightens with vigorous compound dance rhythms for the words, “Bring me my dancing shoes,” and “Let me wear a lipstick kiss.” Again, pairs of voices are contrasting:

**Bright**  $\text{♩} = c. 108$   
*mf with vigour*

94

Bring me my danc-ing shoes, my shoes, bring me my shoes, bring  
 my shoes, bring my shoes,  
 Bring me my danc-ing shoes, my shoes, bring me my shoes, bring  
 my shoes, bring my shoes,

**Bright**  $\text{♩} = c. 108$   
*mf with vigour*

111

*f leggiero* *mf* *mp*  
 Let me wear a lip-stick kiss, a kiss, a kiss, a  
 danc-ing, my danc-ing shoes, shoes, a kiss, a kiss,  
*f leggiero* *mf* *mp*  
 Let me wear a lip-stick kiss, a kiss, a kiss, a  
 danc-ing, my danc-ing shoes, shoes, a kiss, a kiss,

*f* *mf* *mp*

The dance-like section ends with perhaps the most touching words: “Bring me my mother, my grandchild to hold,” where McDowall again colors our emotions with warm harmonic progressions.

129 *f* **ritenuto poco a poco** . . . . .

me my mo - ther, my grand - child to hold, hold.

me my mo - ther, my grand - child to hold, hold.

bring me my mo - ther, my grand - child to hold, hold.

bring me my mo - ther, my grand - child to hold, hold.

*f* **ritenuto poco a poco** . . . . .

McDowall then returns to the pastoral, folk-like music once again, this time with increasingly uplifting fervor, culminating in the lines, “We are the choir—unmasked, unveiled, unmuted. Breathe air, and sing!”

150 *cresc. poco a poco* **poco rit. allargando** *f*

to plant a gar - den. ah We are the

*cresc. poco a poco* *f*

to plant a gar - den. ah We are the

*cresc. poco a poco* *f*

in the air we sing, ex - hal - ing seeds of sound to plant a gar - den. ah We are the

*cresc. poco a poco* *f*

in the air we sing, ex - hal - ing seeds of sound to plant a gar - den. ah We are the

*cresc. poco a poco* **poco rit. allargando** *f*

157 *mf cresc. poco a poco* **a tempo** **ritardando** *f* *ff*  
 choir— un-masked, un-veiled, un-mu-ted. Breathe air, and sing!

*mf cresc. poco a poco* *f* *ff*  
 choir— un-masked, un-veiled, un-mu-ted. Breathe air, and sing!

*mf cresc. poco a poco* *f* *ff*  
 choir— un-masked, un-veiled, un-mu-ted. Breathe air, and sing!

*mf cresc. poco a poco* *f* *ff*  
 choir— un-masked, un-veiled, un-mu-ted. Breathe air, and sing!

**a tempo** **ritardando** *f* *ff*  
*mf cresc. poco a poco*

When the Cleveland Chamber Choir premiered *On the Air (Dear Vaccine)* under my direction in late February of this year, the omicron variant of the virus was still too present, so our singers and audiences remained masked. McDowall writes, “Of course, when we conceived the new work [a year earlier], we were hopeful that the pandemic would have faded into the shadows. But alas, here we are, it is still with us and though the singers are masked and veiled, thankfully they are unmuted.”

The score for *On the Air (Dear Vaccine)* is in production to be published by Oxford University

Press and will likely be available in the coming months. While it certainly is not an easy piece, it is accessible for experienced choirs. I highly recommend it for your fall programming as a kind of announcement that we choral musicians are back, ready to make music as we once did, unmasked and in front of live audiences!

Bringing this reflection of the current state of choral performance back full circle, the combined KSU Choirs and the KSU Orchestra performed “Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen” from *Ein deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms on Monday, May 2, 2022 in

a KSU School of Music showcase concert at Severance Hall in Cleveland. We were approved to perform unmasked... The sound washing over me was incredible standing there on the Severance podium, and a huge lump swelled in my throat at the sheer beauty of it. There were many wet eyes. Conductors again not only making eye contact with singers, but full facial recognition of their wonderful singing beings! Let’s hope the vaccine has now made it possible for us to live in manageable ways with the presence of the virus and back to “normal” choral singing! ♦

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