THE LESSONS OF VIRTUAL CHOIR
IN ACCOMPLISHING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

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Introduction

Due to a lack of meaningful diversity, equity and inclusive practices in arts organizations and the arts sector, improvement in these areas is increasingly important to the future success of these organizations. During the COVID-19 crisis, arts organizations have switched to the virtual model of teaching and performing, and many have been able to attract more diverse audiences than they would otherwise have had in person. Virtual choirs have been very successful in accomplishing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Virtual choirs have made this distinct impact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many participants have found that participating in a virtual choir has greatly enhanced their productivity and mood (Hendler). This paper will examine how arts organizations can learn from the successes of virtual choir projects to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion among community-based performers and their patrons.

Research has shown that music has positive effects on the lives of those who play an instrument, sing, or listen to music daily. Regarding choral singing in particular, Chorus America's "research suggests that choral singing plays an important role in the singers' lives, contributing to positive personal qualities like optimism, resilience, and mindfulness, and to their

feelings and connections with others." (*Singing for a Lifetime*). This can be seen in virtual and in-person communities.

In a recent study by McGill University in Canada, researchers used a combination of PET (positron emission topography) and fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imagining) scans to test participants' reactions to listening to music:

> The PET scan showed the researchers that dopamine was released in the striatum during peak moments of emotional arousal when listening to music. The fMRI scan helped show a distinct difference in the timing and structures involved—the caudate was active when anticipating the peak emotional arousal, and the nucleus accumbens was more involved when actually experiencing the peak emotion. (Moore)

Participants released dopamine when listening to music, at a level equal to that of someone eating or sleeping. The researchers were surprised by the levels of dopamine for abstract rewards, expecting those levels for tangible rewards. Tangible rewards, meaning food, sleep, while abstract rewards are more on the cognitive level of the human psyche (Salimpoor et.al.). This research is not specific to any race, nationality or ethnic group. Everyone can benefit from the positive effects. Thus, there is incentive to participate by everyone, opening the way for greater diversity, equity and inclusion in such a virtual choir community.

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to proceed with consistent definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion. Diversity is recognizing and including "individual differences, such as personality, learning styles, life experiences and group or social differences, including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, and cultural, political, religious or other affiliations" ("How"). Equity is defined as "the creation of opportunities for historically underrepresented populations to have equal access to educational programs and professional opportunities; closing the achievement gaps in student success and completion, as well as professional advancement for employees" ("How"). Inclusion is defined as:

> The active, intentional and ongoing engagement with diversity to increase one's awareness, knowledge and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions; building community; providing a voice to all members of the community. ("How")

A basis for what a virtual choir is must be established before proceeding.

What Is A Virtual Choir?

A virtual choir is a project made up of any number of singers who rehearse a piece of music through pre-recorded tracks, record themselves singing, and submit the recording through an electronic platform to be mixed into a recording that has all voices singing together. To create the final

presentation, the producers then take the individual recordings, strip all background sound, and mix the recordings together. There is then a production release where either video or a sound recording is released for public consumption.

There are thousands of virtual choir projects around the world (Daffern et al.). Many of the virtual choir projects are founded on the idea of rehearsing and recording one song every few months or once every few years, but some produce songs more frequently, especially during the time of COVID-19. There are virtual choirs that meet as an in-person choir does, one to three times a week depending on the director and the workload of the choir. Dependent on the organization producing the music, singers may have access to virtual conductor tracks to stay in tempo and piano tracks that play their notes and rhythms for them (Cayari).

Creating and running a virtual choir can be difficult, but with proper tools and technology, it is possible. "Creating virtual vocal ensembles requires not only musical skills, but also technological and production abilities that can be applied to music education practices and expand conceptions of ensemble, performance, and medium" (Cayari). The technology for producing a virtual choir exists, but it needs to be used effectively to create the best product possible. There is a new system being produced that will change the virtual choir world. VIIVA, Vocal Interaction in an Immersive Virtual Acoustic system, allows the user to participate in

rehearsal in 360-degree virtual reality (Daffern et al.). The members can hear themselves sing along with other members of the choir's recorded voices. VIIVA aims to make choir more accessible and produce an easier platform for members to use. The logical way to achieve this would be to make sure every member of the choirs has access to VIIVA electronic devices in which to record and rehearse.

VIIVA strives for that core interaction choir members get when singing in person and hopes to bring that to the virtual platform. The creators of VIIVA were able to measure the success of their project by having members use wearable technology in the form of sensors that tracked heart rate and level of engagement. This is just one example of a virtual choir technology that makes it easier for members to learn their music, follow the conductor, and submit their vocal track. Technology can be used to promote greater accessibility and remove a potential barrier to achieving diversity, equity and inclusion.

Many choirs that moved to the virtual model after the COVID-19 pandemic started were closely connected with churches and other organizations that were based on an affinity, such as performing strictly religious works, music composed by women, or polyphonic music. Many have detoured from their restricted affiliation to create more diverse and inclusive choirs because it is no longer about the religion or the specific music they are trying to sing; it is about including others who need an outlet

and creating an artistic space during times of crisis. One notes that virtual choirs predate the COVID--19 pandemic with Eric Whitacre's previous virtual choir projects, but large number have popped up during the COVID--19 pandemic. Diversity, equity, and inclusion have been largely successful in virtual choirs and arts organizations can learn from virtual choir successes to learn more through recruitment, accessibility, and community building practices.

Successes of Virtual Choirs

Virtual choir projects can create online community spaces that are inhabited by a vast array of people. Most notably, Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choirs have drawn more than 35,000 participants from 145 countries. Whitacre started the path of achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion through global participation by creating an easily obtainable and highly accessible project. He achieved this, in part, by reaching out all over the globe for singers, allowing sign language interpreters, and encouraging the hard of hearing to use sign language in their videos. He also ensured that his vocal tracks and rehearsals were recorded with closed captioning for the hard of hearing. He created an online space where members could converse, rehearse and socialize. Through *Facebook*, *YouTube, Twitter* and the *Virtual Choir 6* webpage, Whitacre has made language barriers less challenging and music making equally accessible. Whitacre and his team also sent many

emails out to members making sure participants had the materials needed to be successful in recording and watching the conductor tracks (Hendler).

Following Whitacre's example, the Kulshan Choir, led by Dustin Willetts, is a prime example of success in diversity, equity, and inclusion through virtual choir. The choir, located in Bellingham, WA, is an auditioned, youth choir that consists of multicultural and multigenerational participants. They have taken their one-hundred-member ensemble and expanded it to include youth in the area and community members who otherwise are unable to sing with the group due to the nature of the choir. Singing John Lennon's *Imagine,* all public, private, and home-schooled students were encouraged to record and submit themselves singing their voice part. This was an opportunity for students to continue to take part in singing and performing with their teachers and classmates and community members (Bikman). "These students are not just our future, they are our present and their music experience now has an impact on their artistic lives as adults," says Willetts. "I want to do whatever I can to help our amazing music educators provide substance to these students without adding to the workload." (qtd. in Bikman).

The October Project, a pop-rock band started in the early 1990s, but joining the virtual choir world in 2018, later created the Virtual Choir of Joy in 2020 (Juma). This successful project consisted of 167 singers, dancers, and drummers from fifteen different countries singing and performing solos

from the first song in *The Book of Rounds: 21 Songs of Grace* written by Julie Flanders and Emil Adler. The success of this project hinged on Julia Flanders words: "The piece conveys an uplifting and longed-for message of hope and harmony during this worldwide pandemic" (Juma). The purpose of the project was to uplift others and bring joy and hope during COVID-19 when people were feeling hopeless and a little lost. The piece reached millions and was hailed as an anthem for the spirit of joy during COVID-19. This project modeled inclusivity by creating a space where multinational, multilingual and multicultural persons could listen to the music created and participate in the music making process thus creating equity and inclusion (Juma).

Virtual choirs have been highly successful during the COVID-19 pandemic and many hope to maintain the momentum and recognition they have received as they continue using a more hybridized version as organizations start to return to in-person rehearsals and performances.

Recruitment

Recruiting for an in-person choir can be a difficult process, but virtual choirs can be much easier to recruit. Many directors and organizations who are unaffiliated with a religious group or specific genre of music can recruit many new members into their ranks just by placing an ad, boosting a recruitment video, or sending out mass emails. Recruiting strategies can

achieve DEI by reaching out to multigenerational, multilingual, and multinational participants. Creating a project in and outside of America that has old and young participants, participants of different races and ethnicities, and of separate backgrounds makes for a more well-rounded and diverse project.

Facebook, YouTube, and other social media platforms thrive on advertisements. There is no limit to where the Internet can reach, and on *Facebook* there are ads as part of users' feeds, *Instagram* as well. *YouTube* utilizes ads in between and at the beginning and end of videos.

The International Virtual Choir Project has an online forum where members can access music, recordings, conductor tracks, and communicate. While this choir is affiliated with a religious organization, anyone is welcome to join. Whether you are of that faith or not, open arms welcome you and encourage global participation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this has worked very well due to people of religious faith being unable to attend church or sing in church choir. This gives them a religious outlet or an outlet for singing even if they do not practice the religion (*I.V.C Project).*

When marketing a virtual choir, it is important to develop a persona, understanding what is drawing the participants in and what is keeping them active. Straying from the persona may cause members to leave or cause a disjointed community. Expressing what a choir member will gain from the

experience and the level of difficulty of music you intend to attempt is imperative. Choirs are much more likely to get newer recruits if they are transparent about everything expected of the member. ("Helping Choirs"). Just as an in-person choir would give information up-front about the choir's expectations, virtual choirs too need to be up-front about any and all necessary information.

Accessibility

In order to make virtual choirs more accessible to global and United States participants it is important to recognize the financial barriers some members may face. Stay At Home Choir is an example of an organization that recognized such barriers. In the Stay At Home Choir, based out of the United Kingdom, members are required to give a donation to reserve their spot in the recording ("About"). While some potential participants cannot do this, there are sponsorships where people pay the way of a member to participate when they cannot afford to pay a fee. Interested participants can be put on a waiting list for when an unpaid spot becomes available, which is when a sponsorship fee would be used. This is an effective equitable practice by the organization. It is equitable the way the choir sets this up to garner more interest and draw people into the choir who may otherwise have passed on the opportunity because of cost. The Stay At Home Choir has global participation and has done very well at implementing diversity, equity

and inclusion. From thirteen-year-old middle school students to a ninety-one-year-old retiree, anyone is welcome and embraced.

Six Degrees Singers, an ensemble made up of auditioned singers has, since March of 2020, expanded its repertoire and opened its ensemble to community members and choral students. In order to take away the barriers that negatively impact equity, music has been distributed online and through the postal service. This helps members who are unable to access the music online or do not have access to a printer have their preference of receiving hard copies of music or electronic copies. (Carlson).

Virtual choirs allow access to certain persons with disabilities who would otherwise be unable to participate in the choir. From wheelchair accessibility to people who are hard of hearing, virtual settings offer safety, security, and a sense of inclusivity. In-person settings do not often offer easily accessible avenues for members with disabilities and organizations could learn from virtual choirs on improving accessibility.

Tori Cook, former Sales and Marketing Director for Chorus Connection, discusses how to take away some of the financial burden on participants with low socioeconomic status. "When working towards equity in our choruses, the financial impact on our members is an important consideration" (Cook). Scholarships funded by outside sources and internal members, childcare onsite during rehearsals, or tiered membership dues to

combat the financial responsibility are a few ways choirs can effectively make their programs and projects more accessible. Incentives and alternate choir schedules are more ways to combat losing members due to busy schedules and financial woes. Virtual choirs can take away a lot of financial burden and schedule problems by recording rehearsals and making them readily available, sending recorded conductor tracks and allowing at-home practice time rather than being in person on a night where the member must work. The obstacles encountered by schools in hybrid learning, online learning and lack of social interaction may not be as problematic for virtual choirs.

"Full access to online learning is far from universal and students who are poor are less likely to have access to the key tools and experiences they need to attend school online." ("Access"). Students and their families are not given the tools needed to successfully participate in an online learning environment. Many schools and communities have adapted to these issues by reaching out to lower income families, providing resources to those without the means to provide an online learning space, and offering hybrid learning options where some children can attend school in person while others attend from home. ("Access"). From an education standpoint, educators have found that students without access to internet or electronic devices to attend classes online have suffered greatly from being unable to see their friends and keep up in class. This can also translate to virtual choir

situations if a choir member is expected to submit materials but has accessibility issues.

Accessibility is important in virtual environments and in person. Creating a community that embraces all genders, colors, and ages helps society be less cold and hostile. Choirs can always work harder to be more accessible; virtual choirs help to close some of the gaps. Choir is one of the only places where people of different religions, ability levels and ages can come together and create a lasting community.

Virtual Community

Building a virtual community is one of the greatest takeaways from virtual choir projects. Virtual communities create a space where members of a group can come together over a shared appreciation for music.

As discussed earlier, Eric Whitacre has been a pioneer in creating a virtual community space for choir members to interact and socialize. Most recently, this has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and mandated social distancing. In 2019, during research following Whitacre's fifth virtual choir, "the virtual choir participants' feelings of social presence were not only comparable to those in a live choir, but were even slightly greater" (Hendler). Later in an interview, Whitacre hypothesized that this was due to "the perception of being involved in something larger than yourself" (qtd. in Hendler). Whitacre knew that a way to get a large number of performers to

sing with him was through a virtual project, overcoming geographical limitations. The members were "hyper-supportive of each other. You rarely see any of the divisiveness that typically comes into Facebook groups" (qtd. in Hendler). All members came together under a common love of choir to create an online community. The thing that made this work was Whitacre being as famous as he is, creating a persona for his choir, composing an easy piece of music to learn, and creating a community for his singers.

Scientists have looked at how social media platforms can create places of supportive community. "Use of these platforms can range from community-building to proactive mentoring, and advocacy, as well as more customary uses for supporting scholarly success of diverse individuals, including dissemination and accessible discussions of research findings" (Montgomery). Using social media platforms and online forums helps participants delve deeper into their experiences with an organization. Although this study was focused on dissemination of scientific findings, it is useful for arts organizations pursuing social media and online forums as a more direct approach towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. Organizations can bring groups of people together who have the potential to advocate for each other and the organization. Having members advocate for the organization is free marketing. Members can also choose to mentor their peers. Many members may not be tech savvy and other members can help

guide them to solutions that produce results. This creates inclusion because anyone can participate with the help of others.

Along with the public and private forums members use to build community, there are many virtual team building activities that can be used to build community. Many choirs use team building exercises for members to get to know each other. For example, happy hours, icebreakers, quizzes, and trivia games, are many things people use to create and build community through virtual forums. Creating a space where everyone feels comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions could possibly yield a couple of negative outcomes.

One, they could receive backlash from fellow members, which is why it is important for moderators to present rules and regulations. Two, everyone could feel so free to express their opinion that the forum becomes clogged and heavy with multiple people talking about the same thing. Again, moderators need to be aware of this and be sure not to silence the people, but rather amplify posts and concerns so others are not repeating the same things. This has been proven to work through Whitacre, the Stay At Home Choir, and others. Applying these inclusive practices to a virtual or in-person choir involves taking the ideals listed above and using them as part of an implementation plan, making sure diversity, equity, and inclusion practices are melded into the structure of the plan.

Conclusion

Virtual choirs create spaces of meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion. Arts organizations can learn from their success by implementing better practices toward achieving a higher standard of diversity, equity and inclusion in their everyday practices. Based on the research presented in this paper, it is easy to apply these lessons toward other forms of art. Theatres, symphony orchestras, and dance companies are some of the arts organizations that have also had success in diversity, equity and inclusion through the virtual platform, and arts administrators can only hope to watch arts programming and participation grow through the virtual platform. Many arts organizations have information on their website or printed collateral that talks about how they champion diversity, equity, and inclusion, but that does not mean that every organization does it well. Organizations need to follow virtual choir projects and learn recruiting strategies, accessibility practices, and virtual community-creating to become more successful. Following a hybrid model when things return to normal will help many arts organizations reach a broader audience, along with maintaining a diverse, equitable, and inclusive ensemble. The belief in this stems from watching and learning how it happens and how happy participants who cannot physically be in the space are to be involved:

> Choral singers credit singing in a chorus with making them more
> optimistic, mindful, and resilient. Eighty percent of singers

expect more good things than bad things to happen to them,

while only 55% of the general public has the same positive

outlook. Singers are also more likely to feel a sense of purpose

in their lives and to find their lives meaningful. (Chorus America)

Choir has a significant impact on the lives of its participants. Striving

for a more consciously diverse, equitable, and inclusive community, arts

organizations can learn better and more successful implementation practices

from virtual choir projects.

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