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Music Theatre 2.0: Re-Imagining Musicking in the Zoom Space

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Abstract

COVID-19 has invariably changed the way that musicking occurs in our communities, and yet it has also signalled an increased need for activities that foster connectivity, health, and creativity. The pandemic highlights challenges of the digital divide, including engaging with and supporting older adults in online forums (see, for example, Adams et al. 2005; Selwyn et al. 2004; and Siriaraya et al. 2012). In this paper, we report on the creation of an online music theatre program for older adults in a mid-sized Canadian city from February to June, 2020. Using Zoom, we introduced singing, dancing, improvisation, and community in weekly gatherings with this group of non-professionals. Along with the usual challenges concerning access and participants' technological facility, liveness, and audio and video latency, we nevertheless made several discoveries about the unique possibilities of community musicking with older adults over Zoom. As we discovered, translating the acts of singing and dancing from live to digital meant re-defining them. Sound, silence, movement, synchronicity, immediacy, and space all took on new meaning. Following the work of Nina Eidsheim on sensing sound (2015), we ask, what does it mean to 'see' singing? What does silence mean in musical interactions in this medium? What contributes to a sense of 'realness' in this medium? How does the fluidity of space and place contribute to the experience of performing as part of a group in this environment? How can one sing and dance responsively in this medium? Through an exploration of some of the unexpected gains of creative music theatre making with older adults on Zoom, we suggest that creative initiatives that engage our aging population over Zoom may offer the opportunity to re-define the very way we conceive of these creative acts.

1. Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, many performing arts venues have closed their doors and artists have been forced to redefine their practice. Words like 'silence,' 'darkness,' and even 'grief' and 'mourning' feature prominently in news reports of season cancellations and performers' struggles (see Berinato 2020; Rubin and Lang 2020; Yoshida-Butryn 2020). While balcony concerts and amateur videos from isolation offer solace for some, many commentators bemoan the lack of most musical and theatrical initiatives during this time (see, particularly, Berger 2020; Collins-Hughes 2020; among many others). In this chapter, we report on the creation of a weekly online music theatre program involving singing, dancing, improvisation, and socializing for a group of approximately 20 amateur older adults (majority age >50) in a mid-sized Canadian city that ran from February to June 2020.[i] As we will describe, what was understood by many participants, and indeed the facilitators, as a stop-gap measure to endure the spring of 2020 resulted not only in a project that affirmed the possibilities for digital performance for amateur community singers, but also revealed the potential for digital technologies to transform the parameters of musicking.[ii] Through an exploration of some of the unexpected gains of creative music theatre making with older adults on Zoom, we suggest that the 'Zoom space' offers many unforeseen opportunities for exploration and creativity.[iii] The Zoom space, we argue, ultimately allows for a more accessible and a less exclusive form of music theatre, re-casting the genre of music theatre by re-defining, for example, what might be understood as 'singing,' 'hearing,' 'dancing,' and 'acting.' Our research mobilizes what Bauman and Murray refer to as an 'ethical advance' in our acknowledgment of the great value of human diversity, and our categorical rejection of notions of normalcy and ability so ingrained in music performance. In fact, while the implicit goal of 'excellence in performance' typical of Western performance and pedagogy has been criticized for its exclusionary politics from the perspectives of race and gender (see, most recently, Kajikawa 2019), this frame also excludes on the basis of age and ability. By focusing on the potential for our Zoom space sessions to promote a form of musicking that embraces non-normativity, we explore a disability aesthetics that 'embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result' (Siebers 2010, p. 3). Drawing on the work of communications scholar Josh Kun, we go a step further to conceptualize Zoom space as an 'audiotopia': a liminal zone of encounter and co-existence with difference, that enables participants to re-imagine their relationships with their social and musical worlds.

2. Rise, Shine, Sing!

For this chapter, we draw on our experience with Rise, Shine, Sing!, a single project within a larger multi-year research creation study that examined the performance and creation of accessible music theatre in a medium-sized Canadian city. It was a weekly program available to the general public, but mostly attended by older adults, some with Parkinson's Disease or other chronic conditions. We held a total of three weekly sessions in face-to-face format from the end of February, 2020, until mid-March and then moved the program online (via Zoom) for twelve sessions from April until June, 2020. Rise, Shine, Sing! aimed to create opportunities for local citizens typically excluded from the creation of music theatre due to age, ability, and access. Participants engaged in performances that combined (in a variety of forms and configurations) the elements of storytelling, acting, singing, moving, and dancing. Initially designed to run face-to-face with weekly 90-minute sessions held in a performing arts centre, the group engaged in physical and vocal warm ups, learned choreographies to music theatre and popular songs, and socialized over coffee before and after sessions. We distributed physical copies of the music to participants at the session and projected lyrics onto a large screen. The sessions were led by two different facilitators: one who led the choreography while the other guided the vocal aspect. Both were supported by a pianist.

Only days after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, the Province of Ontario gradually brought its services to a halt: publicly funded schools shut down as of March 12, 2020, all non-essential services ordered to be closed on March 14th, 2020, and a state of emergency declared on March 17, 2020. Most residents (aside from front-line workers) of our city spent the months of March and April in various versions of strict isolation, with very little face-to-face interaction outside of the home. On May 1, 2020, the provincial government announced the first phase of a multi-phase re-opening plan. While restrictions slowly eased, many businesses and organizations remained closed, and many individuals and families chose to continue to self-isolate due to school closures and gathering size restrictions (see Ontario Federation of Labour COVID-19 Policy Timeline).

Throughout these months, many choral and singing communities actively debated whether singing in public was, in fact, safe. But the opposite was slowly revealed: that singing indoors in close proximity posed significant and greater-than-usual health risks to singers. The 'super-spreading event' of the choral rehearsal at the Skagit Valley Chorale is one prominent example: three quarters of the group were infected after a single rehearsal, three singers were hospitalized, and two died from the virus (see Read 2020). It was following this incident that research began to emerge about the dangers of respiratory aerosols in addition to respiratory droplets where the spread of COVID-19 was concerned. Singing, it is still thought – though debated (at the publication time of the article) – spreads aerosols in large quantity due to the expression of air from the body. Articles such as Sara Austin's 'Why Singers Might be COVID-19 Super-Spreaders' and Anastasia Tsioulcas's 'Is Singing Together Safe in the Era of Coronavirus?' circulated widely in the choral singing community on social media in Canada, with provocative statements such as 'it's unclear when and how we'll ever sing together again' (Austin 2020) and that group singing 'remains extremely dangerous and irresponsible' (Tsioulcas 2020) (see also Asadi, Bouvier, Wexler, and Ristenpart 2020). Provincial gathering regulations, along with the growing body of research on what was emerging as the relatively unsafe act of group singing, informed our decision to move Rise, Shine, Sing! onto Zoom so that we could continue our activities but not put our participants at risk of contracting COVID-19. We believed strongly in the importance of gathering socially as a group, and the benefits of singing together – though, as we will explore, the shape of this togetherness proved to be much different than we initially imagined.

We were conscious that many of the older adults in our group would not be comfortable in the online environment, which was indeed a very real barrier for many (see, for example, Adams et al. 2005; Selwyn et al. 2004; and Siriaraya et al. 2012). We also assumed that people's capacity to engage was shorter than what was possible in a face-to-face session, so we aimed to have a 30-minute session comprising a vocal and physical warm-up, as well as song performances with a few vocal and choreographic directions given by the session leaders at various points. We opened the call early so that individuals could connect for some conversation over coffee and check their connection, and we also held a variety of activities after some of the sessions (e.g., team building games, social time, and singing/ dance enrichment sessions). We chose a Zoom Meeting format (rather than a Zoom Webinar format) so that multiple people could be heard and seen, while also allowing for moments of interactivity aimed at developing a sense of community.

To deliver the session, the vocal facilitator accompanied themselves for the vocal warm-up segment on the piano using a microphone that was set to a stereo setting. For the choreography and song rehearsal segments, we used pre-recorded tracks (recorded by the vocal facilitator) that played while the vocal facilitator mimed playing the piano: participants saw one leader perform, but the sound, in fact, came from another source. Creating the illusion of performing together was intended to help participants experience the liveness of the interaction. We also used the application Loopback Audio, which allowed us to layer sounds from multiple sources, enabling the choreographer to play the music from their computer while also giving instructions and cues during the song to circumvent the challenges associated with latency on Zoom—specifically, that sound from multiple computers cannot be coordinated rhythmically, and is often misaligned by at least one or two seconds. In other words, melody, accompaniment and verbal cues were conveyed to the participants as one unit. As Zoom only allows a single microphone to be live at a time, there was no way for us to hear our participants as a unit. As a result, all the participants (except the facilitator leading a particular portion) were muted during the session.

We collected a variety of observational data, including documenting a chronology of the activities, participants' attendance, and changes in their engagement with the material over time. Even as we observed them, the participants observed us and others in a variety of ways: they were free to view the session either on 'Speaker View' (the leader is featured on the viewer's screen) or on 'Grid View' (participants see other members' during the session). Many participants noted that they set the session to Grid View, so they could be part of the group, changing to Speaker View when they wanted to focus on a particular idea that was being presented. As facilitators, we had the capacity to promote particular focal points by 'spotlighting' an individual screen, though participants could override our inventions as they desired.

3. Musicking 2.0

A primary focus of our research was exploring opportunities to increase the accessibility of music theatre, primarily for older adults, in our community. Although we were initially concerned that the move to an online creative space for our sessions would limit the accessibility of our work together, in many ways Zoom facilitated acts of musicking that allowed us to reimagine the traditional aesthetic priorities of music theatre in less exclusive ways. As scholars of disability studies in music have shown, traditional, normative notions of singing and listening have limited not only the inclusion of neurodiverse and differently-abled bodies from participating in formal music-making, but the discipline itself has been starved of the ability to know more fully how these acts might be conceived, supported, and celebrated, guided by different priorities and parameters (see Holmes 2017; Howe, Jensen-Moulton, & Straus 2016; Howe 2016; and Straus 2011 & 2018, among others). While conformational practices tend to dominate measures of success in western music performance (think of the goal of choirs to sound "together" and "harmonious") – even in so-called amateur settings – this means that voices that do not produce sound or bodies that articulate movement uniquely are excluded from the agreed parameters of singing and dancing. It is often perceived that non-normative voices sound out of tune, shrill, raw, and differently-abled bodies appear to be limping and off-kilter (see, for example, Lee 2016). By drawing attention to the various facets of musicking that we observed in the process of combining music, movement, and story in the Zoom space, we outline the broadening of our understanding of these acts, and some of the ways that the Zoom space offers a more accessible approach to music theatre.

Whether coming together in a performance hall or coming together via videoconference, the decision to enter a performative space arguably places the participant in a liminal state in which multiple perspectives, systems of knowledge, and forms of creative expression coalesce. Participants encounter themselves while encountering others in their efforts to musick together, with creative potential emerging not just in the ways they vocalize and move, but in the ways that they imagine their world(s). This capacity for encounter is arguably augmented in music theatre, where participants enter alternative storylines or narrative worlds, take on characters, and allow music to shift temporal experience.

The potential for this imaginative dimension of musicking is amplified in the Zoom space: while participants are together in time (more or less) and have the potential to hear, see, and sound together, their experiences are necessarily unique. Each participant enters the Zoom space from a different geographic location with disparate acoustic properties and layouts that constrain or enable movement in varied ways, perhaps amplifying the individual experiences, strengths, and struggles that each participant brings to a shared physical space. Each participant views and interacts with the Zoom interface in a variety of ways: they can focus on the 'spotlighted' screen that features session facilitators, or they can opt to view a grid interface that includes the entire group. But while each participant has the ability to see the rest of the group, other members are located in unique configurations on each screen. Sonic experience, as well, varies by participant. Each participant can raise or lower volume levels, make decisions about how they blend with the facilitators' and vocal group's voice(s), or opt to wear headphones as a way of selectively engaging with a narrower slice of their sonic environment. While participants could not hear other participants singing for most of the process, they could hear the facilitators on the track we played to accompany the singing and movement.

We liken the Zoom space to a concept proposed by communications scholar and music critic Josh Kun. 'Audiotopias' are spaces in which sound, space, and identity converge that 'offer the listener and/or the musicians new maps for re-imagining the present social world' (2005, p. 23). Through music, Kun argues, 'space is constructed and de-constructed, shaped and shattered, filled up and hollowed out. Music creates spaces in which cultures get both contested and consolidated and both sounded and silenced' (Kun 2005, p. 22). By likening the Zoom space to audiotopic space, we are understanding musicking as having a productive capacity: music creates spaces in which difference may be introduced, negotiated, and accepted without insisting on resolution by consensus. Indeed, because most musicking on Zoom involves not hearing simultaneous sound from other screens, the Zoom space is necessarily creative, reliant on the ways that individuals imagine sound, movement, touch, and community. As an analytic tool, what 'audiotopia' does is force attention to the positionality of participants, facilitators, and observers, as well as the overlaps between these roles in the Zoom space. It highlights the imaginative work that is required of participants to create the reality that they experience. What is conceptualized as a singular encounter—that is, a weekly Zoom session, has the potential to generate multiple meanings. The aesthetic qualities of the Zoom space and experiences that we attempt to detail in this chapter are by no means uniform, and, in some cases, may even appear contradictory. This multiplicity speaks to the contingencies of musicking in an emergent medium.

3.1 The Mediated Zoom Space and Liveness

One of the most pervasive frames of musicking in the Zoom space is the mediated nature of the activities therein. As our sessions began in person, participants and facilitators were accustomed to the idea of live face-to-face interaction. All subsequent interactions on Zoom were thus shrouded by expectations of the live. The desire to maintain a feeling of co-presence was motivated partly by the desire to mimic in-person music-making activities and hope for togetherness as an antidote to feelings of loneliness and isolation, which were acute for many participants living alone during the pandemic.

The aesthetics of radio vis-à-vis liveness shed some light on the nature of the liveness experienced in the Zoom space. Listening to radio and musicking through Zoom are experiences with fundamental differences, and yet the aestheticization of mediated liveness—as a marker of proximity, shared experience, and community—points to important affective overlaps. Communications scholar Hugh Chignell explains, 'Radio is often described as an intimate media and one that fosters a simulated co-presence with its listeners. A friend that is also somehow in the same place as the listener. Liveness is a critically important part of this effect' (Chignell 2009, p. 90). His use of co-presence is exclusively temporal—listeners and broadcasters imagine themselves to exist in the same moment, enabling imagination of a listening community and connecting content to the real-life flows of time and activity of listeners. While historically programming did tend to go live to air, since the 1950s and to an even greater extent in more recent years, content is pre-recorded and presented 'as live' in order to maintain this sense of liveness, co-presence, and community.

While the affective experience of proximity and connection are not unproblematic outcomes of shared musicking experience via Zoom, the desire for the experience of liveness remained unmistakable—for both session leaders and participants (see Lehman 2020). Indeed, as organizers we relied on the arsenal of techniques and tricks pioneered in the context of 'as live' broadcasting to create an illusion of liveness and synchronicity for program participants and to mitigate some of the technological barriers to performing together across time and space. These techniques included pre-recording music tracks, lip syncing and 'air' piano playing, and providing participants with cues to help them believe the illusion. For example, while all participants were muted throughout the session, anyone who ostensibly sang on the lead track or played the piano was unmuted (most often our vocal facilitator, but sometimes a research assistant who modelled the female vocal part). The source of the music was actually a recording that the choreographer activated and spoke over. When inevitable slip ups with the playback happened—the 'wrong' song was selected for playback—the dance and vocal facilitator covered the mistake through humourous banter that, in most cases, suggested that the unfortunate piano player just wasn't sticking to the plan. Such efforts to save face were more about saving the illusion for participants, or at least offering an opportunity to suspend disbelief (cf Goffman 1981).

Radio historian Susan Douglas (2004) points out that ways of listening are conditioned by the era in which individuals learn to listen. For adults who came of age in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (the majority of Rise, Shine, Sing! participants) this involved learning to ignore momentary cuts in sound, changes in background noise, narrative slips, and other aural/oral cues that the liveness of broadcast sound was manufactured. Liveness in radio listening supports an experience of intimacy between participants, but involves suspending disbelief, refusing awareness of the technological impediments to actual co-presence between sounds, sources, and receivers, and investment in creating 'as live' content.

Participation in Rise, Shine, Sing! (or other participatory musicking mediated by videoconferencing) turns expectations of liveness on their head—or at the very least, makes refusing awareness of the mediated nature of the encounter an impossibility. Participants had to learn to navigate drops in audio and video signal, latency, and unsynchronized movement and sound, sometimes sparking a sense of communal solidarity in the face of technological failures, but also provoking feelings of alienation, isolation, and frustration with technological mediations that simultaneously facilitated interaction and raised awareness of a lack of proximity. We transformed these moments by practicing patience, and by finding humour in moments of shared learning with this new technology.

We offered participants the opportunity to engage on demand with our program through streaming content available via our website (http://www.riseshinesing.ca). We also facilitated access through weekly email newsletters with embedded videos and links. Videos, audio recordings, and song sheets offered participants opportunities to sing and dance along to 'the same' content with 'the same' singer, dancer, and choreographer, but without the same potential for latency, interruptions to audio and video flow, or unsynchronized movement and music. Uptake for streamed content, however, was quite limited. Similarly, invitations to participate in forms of asynchronous communication, such as social media, appeared of little interest to participants. Instead, participation remained focused on our weekly 30-minute sessions that afforded participants opportunities to see and be seen, to assume the simultaneous roles of student, audience, chorus member, and soloist, and to act and react.

While the decision to engage primarily in live sessions, rather than accessing streamed content, can be accounted for in a variety of ways (e.g., time commitments, comfort with sharing platforms, or failings in communications about asynchronous engagement possibilities), at least part of the answer seems to lie in the value assigned to the immediacy and realness of live interactions – in the desire for proximity as an antidote to the loneliness and isolation imposed (or exacerbated) by the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the twelve weeks that we were online with participants, many changed their engagements – changed their performances – in observable ways that seemed designed to elicit a response and reflected growing awareness of both the possibilities and limitations of the videoconferencing platforms. Some performers, for example, explored dramatic possibilities. Some participants opted to incorporate props (umbrellas in the case of performances of Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown's 'Singing in the Rain') and 'hammed' up their performances with the expectation of being seen, something that we facilitated through use of the spotlighting feature in Zoom. Such behaviours highlighted the extemporaneous, improvised, interactive, and communal nature of liveness.

The experience of liveness – or more accurately the imagination of liveness, community, and proximity – is a defining element of the Zoom space. The mediated nature of this space affected not only how participants experienced time and space, but how they made meaning of sound and silence, enacted and (imagined) ensounding their performances, and embodied contact and community. In these conditions, aesthetic priorities, modes of musical relationality, and exclusions are necessarily decentred and redefined. In the remaining sections of this chapter, we explore particular aesthetics and modes of performativity that emerged as defining aspects of musicking in Zoom space.

3.2 Silence

Silence offers both possibilities and insecurities for participants and organizers alike in video-conferenced musicking. As noted above, momentary cuts in sounds or unexpected silence were part of the liveness of the experience, but there were other ways that silences and sounds were experienced. The Zoom platform (in its April-July 2020 versions) imposes certain realities on the exchange of sounds and silences. Most notably, only one microphone can be active at any given moment, meaning that attempts to speak or sing together impose silence on at least one voice. In the conversational coffee time and tech support that prefaced formal Rise, Shine, Sing! sessions, this reality sometimes resulted in interruptions to conversations, unfinished stories, or jokes with missing punchlines. It also meant somewhat stilted exchanges as participants and facilitators negotiated the new interactional norms of videoconferencing. Silences were pregnant, but not necessarily negative. They could signal uncertainty or a technological problem, but they also indicated thoughtful engagement with an idea or story and considerate sonic space-making for each participant to take a turn in the conversation. While initially nerve-wracking, by the end of our twelve weeks in the Zoom space, silences became a more acceptable part of conversational norms for at least some participants. These participants consistently logged on early and negotiated silences to tell their stories from the past week. Other participants found the silences of group Zoom conversation more difficult to overcome; they opted to log on just as singing and dancing were scheduled to begin.

In the sung portion of sessions, awareness of being silent to other participants was freeing. Concerns about being too loud, being out of tune, hitting a high note, or having a 'bad' voice receded. Participants were free to sing out as they felt comfortable. Some participants reported positively on losing themselves to the experience of singing and dancing with abandon. As one of our participants explained to us, 'I sing my heart out because, well, […] who cares if I'm singing it correctly? The only other person that could hear me is my husband, and he said, "You're really singing!"' (Rise, Shine, Sing! Interview, June, 2020). While there were those who did not perceive their experience as a legitimate form of, group singing, most agreed that it was better than nothing. And over time, many grew to appreciate the unique affordances of the Zoom space and were committed to improving their abilities within these new parameters.

The perceived silence of other participants also came with challenges. The Rise, Shine, Sing! content actively combined song with dance, and, especially in the later weeks of the session, encouraged participants to engage in acts of expressive improvisation. Many participants found combining so many expressive modalities in singular performances challenging to the point that they had to give up an aspect of the performance as part of a process of integrating skills. Awareness of their silence to other participants combined with a lack of aural feedback from the group meant that the sung portion of the performance was the most likely element to be sacrificed.

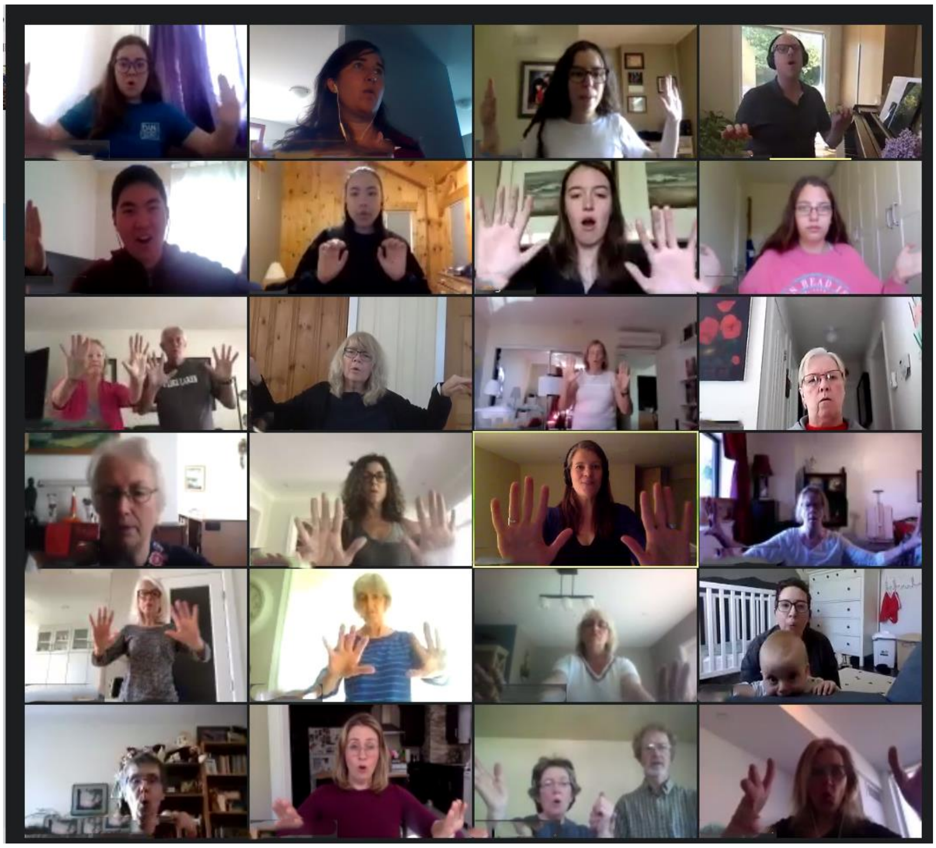
Silence potentially resounded most loudly in relation to participants who were unseen in sessions. Differences in infrastructure and available technologies—not to mention comfort at being seen—meant that some participants turned off their video feed. For them, communication was one-way only: they could hear the session facilitator and see other members of the group, but technical troubles had an ongoing potential for imposing silence—a loss of audible connection—on these members. The inability of the group to see the sounds of their video-less performance, as well, imposed another type of silence on the rest of the group. The implications of such audible and visual silences for the experience of community and connection through musicking are, as yet, unclear. While arguably offering an emancipatory freedom to lurk, observe, and creatively engage without fear of social censure, for those who made this choice because of broadband limitations, this type of silence potentially exacerbate loneliness and isolation, as well as pointing to the ongoing relevance of the digital divide in highly mediated social interactions.

Rise, Shine, Sing! was meant to be a space for learning and the silent nature of participation affected the instructors' approach. This was a particularly challenging reality for the vocal facilitator, who more typically relied on qualities of sung sound to assess, intervene, and develop group performance (both technically and expressively). While the choreographer retained the ability to witness performances by group members, they, too, commented on the silence of participants—the lack of immediate feedback about challenges and pleasures found in the combination of choreography and sound. In the initial weeks of the online Rise, Shine, Sing! sessions, facilitators drew on repertoire that participants had encountered in the early in-person sessions as they negotiated feelings of speaking, singing, and moving into a silent void. During these early sessions, leadership mainly took the form of review and run-through. As facilitators and participants grew more accustomed to the format and possibilities of the platform, alternative approaches were adopted and silences became less threatening. Warmups became sites for introducing new dance steps and experimenting with vocalizing through self-assessments of tensions, body position, and the shape of the mouth. Feedback became proactive instead of reactive. That is, participants were given cues before they started a performance about how to address particular vocal challenges present in a song, often referencing a concept or technique that was introduced in the warmup or a previous session. And, setting the mood or intention of a performance became the focus of introductory commentary, providing participants with a shared vision of the performance that supported both individual expression, but also the audible silence from other participants.

3.3 Seeing Singing

Because of the challenges posed by latency in both video and audio transmission on Zoom, we ran sessions with participants muted. This resulted in participants singing without their vocal sound being heard by facilitators or other participants. For the vocal facilitator and researchers trained and experienced in choral conducting and voice training, this was at first incredibly frustrating. The desire to 'fix', 'blend,' or at the very least, 'coordinate' voices as one does in a traditional choral setting proved impossible and undesirable in this new Zoom space. Rather, we were confronted with the opportunity to understand the act of singing more broadly and holistically; that is, in one way, to *see* singing – to see bodies move toward and away from the camera, seemingly in rhythm to, or in response to, the music. Mouths opened and closed to shape vowels and enunciate text, necks raised as the pitch ascended, and chests expanded in breath. In sections of songs when participants felt particularly comfortable or connected, one could occasionally see eyes close, mouths open wider, and necks strained upward through the Zoom space (see Figure 1). In this act of soundless singing – at least on one end--we embraced a certain musical aesthetic which, like the understanding of singing in Deaf culture, centres on the idea that deafness needn't preclude musical engagement and expression (see, for example, Holmes 2017; Strauss 2011). That is, that traditional conceptions of sound itself must necessarily be a part of music-making.

Figure 1. Screenshot from the 8 June 2020 session of Rise, Shine, Sing! The image features the group members singing, some quite vocally engaged.



In Jessica Holmes's work on disability aesthetics and singing (Holmes 2017) and Nina Eidsheim's work on the sensory materiality of voice and singing (Eidsheim 2015), traditional vocal technique is questioned and its parameters dismantled in order to explore different dimensions of what constitutes the act of singing. Eidsheim (2015) explores the work of Juliana Snapper, an operatically-trained singer who pushes the limits of singing by experimenting with singing underwater, thereby displacing the traditional focus of opera from operatic sound to the act of expressing. It is a move from the sonic to the sensory, in many ways. Similar to our work with musicking in Zoom space, Snapper performs within the western tradition, but with a completely different set of aesthetic parameters. Similarly, in Jessica Holmes's (2016) 'Singing Beyond Hearing', she writes about Christine Sum Kim's *Face Opera ii*, a performance art piece written for nine prelingually deaf performers where each sings using their face rather than their voice. In each of these examples, the primacy of traditional notions of not only sound but singing are upended, and reclaimed. By removing the autonomy of vocal beauty from the act of singing, new possibilities for participation and, indeed, success are drawn. As in ASL (American Sign Language), the voice registers through a range of senses and is expressed through gesture. While the act of singing voiceless may for some have felt unusual, we made regular mention of the opportunity we each had to 'sing out with abandon' – that is, without aesthetic judgment from a director, as is typically the case in choral settings.

3.4 Listening Anew

Similarly, the act of listening was necessarily re-cast in the Zoom space. Sounds did not occur when expected (due to latency), they occurred as discrete events and never simultaneously (due to Zoom's audio settings), and, in many cases, they did not occur at all (due to participants being muted for the duration of the setting). Again, in many ways, the Disability Studies in Music literature is useful to help unpack what we identify as the unique potential of these moments. Joseph Straus's *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (2011) examines the social construction of disability—the understanding that society and its institutions determine social expectations of health—and its impacts on composers, musicians, listeners, musical discourse, and musical works. In this book, Straus deconstructs two widely-accepted types of listening that have dominated traditional understandings of musical listening: theoretical listening, which requires prodigious abilities, and music cognition's designation of 'normal' hearing. Straus introduces the idea of disablist hearing, which might account for 'the ways that people whose bodily, psychological, or cognitive abilities are different from the prevailing norm might make sense of music' (Straus 2011, p. 150). Taking Straus's 'disablist hearing' a step further, we propose the Zoom space as one that requires a form of disablist hearing in its requirement that participants imagine and re-construct sound (cf. Douglas 2002). Listening is re-conditioned for the emerging and sometimes unstable parameters of the Zoom space. Phonocentrism is perhaps the defining –yet unspoken– characteristic of normative musical performance, the one parameter that most brutally excludes those who do not hear by normative standards from participating. In our interactions with participants in the Zoom space, for the songs, each heard the pre-recorded music of the track along with their own singing voice in their physical space – an aural creation that was, by necessity, entirely different from the sonic experience of another group member's session.

Another dimension of the experience of listening and hearing in the Zoom space was the often-disembodied nature of sounds heard, emanating from bodies, but often (momentarily) unidentifiable ones. We discussed the air playing of piano and singing on the part of the session leaders above, but other sites of Zoom listening include the required acceptance of asynchronicity of movement to sound as a reality in the Zoom space.

Because of the act of re-assembling or making meaning from discrete sounds, Kun's (2005) audiotopia serves again as a way to understand the assemblage, imaginative work, and liveness at play in the act of listening in the Zoom space. This was emphasized most specifically in a moment during one of our first sessions together in the Zoom space: we chose to end the session by playing a major chord and having participants sing one of the three pitches of the chord in 'harmony' together. Participants were directed to un-mute themselves for that moment. Motivated (again) by a desire for co-presence articulated sonically, this resulted, predictably, in a jagged, uncoordinated series of discrete voices and sounds singing a single pitch of the imagined (and desired) major chord. In the archival recording that we later analyzed, the sound was indeed that of a series of discrete, sequential pitches, several out of tune, and in various octaves. Though the moment may have shattered the illusion of harmony and synchronicity in the Zoom space, for many, it was also an opportunity to imagine harmony and attempt to blend with the sounds they were hearing to create a sense of wholeness. As Kun's (2005) theory of audiotopia suggests, this moment was, in many ways, a moment of possibility in which harmony and consensus are shown as unnecessary for the togetherness and community that ensemble singing offers. As Kun writes, 'the music has always been there and it has always been all mixed up. Its clashes and exchanges and convergences and contests, its never-ending play of differences and particularities, have always been there. The problem is that not enough people have been listening' (Kun 2005, p. 17). The possibility for a re-imagined version of beauty in the 'harmony' of voices sounding together was performed in the beautiful, out-of-tune, and entirely disjunct series of sounds that were intended to be sung simultaneously – a sonic rendering of the multiplicitous and unique voices traditionally unheard, covered up, or erased in traditional performance settings.

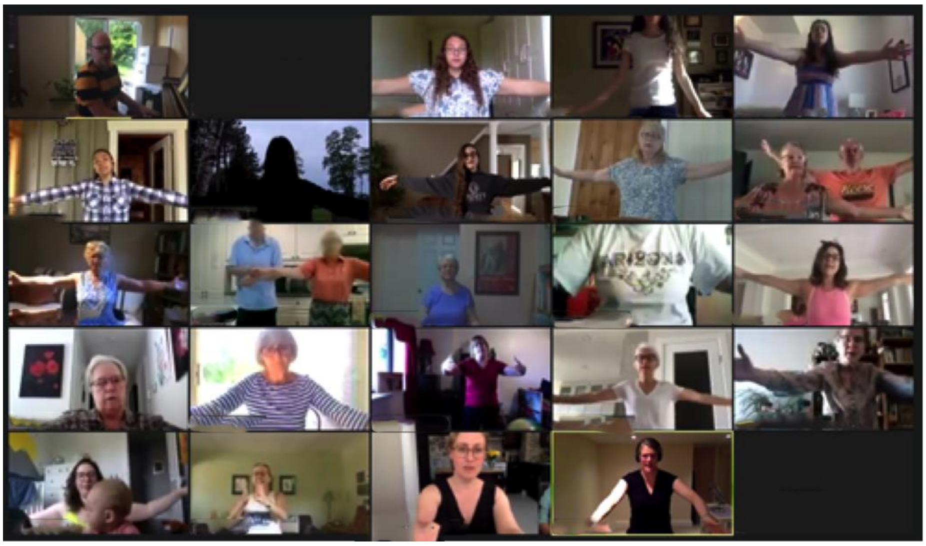
3.5 Choreographing the Zoom Space

In music theatre, choreographies are often synchronized among the performers and to the music. Here, too, precision is part of the beauty that most instructors aim to achieve through the rehearsal process. The choreographies in the Rise, Shine, Sing! program were meant to allow participants to move in sync with the music, but also enable variety as participants chose between standing and seated versions of the dances. The facilitator alternated between seated and standing positions throughout the session: some participants regularly stood for the entire session (e.g. warm-up, songs), some stood for part of the session (e.g., the warm-up) and sat for the remainder of the session, and others sat for the entire session either on a chair or on the floor.

Many of the group's activities had one choreography that was meant to be performed by all the participants. We also, however, designed moments of individual choice or improvisation, as well as moments where interactions between participants were possible. Though the unknown nature of the moments of improvisation meant that participants were unsure about how their improvised movements would line up with the expectations of the choreographer or other participants, the unsynchronized nature of the Zoom space meant that everyone's movements appeared to be out-of-sync, thus normalizing all choices. Participants grew more comfortable with the possibilities of the Zoom space over time, and more able to push their own boundaries personally without the fear of moving (or singing) in the 'wrong' ways. One participant mentioned tripping backward over his sofa—he was unharmed—as what he saw as humorous evidence of his engagement. This, he gauged, was a level of participation that would have been impossible without the isolation of singing in silence from home.

Another point of interest in the aesthetics of the Zoom space for music theatre is the dimensionality and experience of the strangely configured box stage in which each participant is poised. The small box in which one appears, speaks, dances, and sings is much smaller and more focused than a performance on a live stage. We explored the dimensionality of the Zoom space by playing with the tensions between the proximity of the boxes, and thus, the proximity of one's face to one's neighbours' face, while also acknowledging the distance (geographical, but also often in terms of our positionalities and complex subjectivities!) between us (in songs like 'On the Street Where You Live'). We explored a particularly interesting exercise that involved us each reaching out to the person in the next screen – an exercise transformed in the moment one's arm disappeared into nothingness (as the parameters of the box dictated). In that moment of disappearance, when one's arm reached into the screen of the person beside oneself, it was possible to experience a sense of tactile hallucination, a sensory experience that was particularly meaningful given the social isolation that many participants experienced due to the pandemic. Again, the mixed modality and shifting parameters of seeing, feeling, and listening in the Zoom space allowed for this playful work with dimension and with the borders of the sensory. This was further explored in moments in our songs that expressed longing, reaching, holding, etc., that asked participants to mime those actions, and thus play with the dissolving of the boxes in the Zoom space (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot from the 22 June 2020 session of Rise, Shine, Sing! The image features a moment of learning when a participant-written and - choreographed song was first introduced. 'The Space Between' emphasized acts of coming together, intimacy, and touch as longed for antidotes to the isolation of the pandemic. As the screenshot demonstrates, the choreography played with the idea of reaching out to adjacent screens to take the hand of a neighbour.



As with singing, listening, and moving, the aesthetic dimensions of feeling and touch were also re-drawn in the Zoom space. This was particularly timely given the restrictions of touch and proximity following COVID-19 restrictions. As Lehman writes:

> 'While during the COVID-19 pandemic people wear gloves and sanitize their hands as a matter of personal protection and good citizenship, it is perhaps important to be reminded that not all touch is contagious, and not all touch leads to sickness. Touch is emotive, sensual, metaphorical and connecting' (Lehman 2020, p. 4).

He goes on to elaborate research that demonstrates the efficacy of social isolation as a public health measure, but that has the side effect of creating an 'epidemic of loneliness' (Lehman 2020, p. 6). As our research supports, music making, especially musicking in the Zoom space, is perhaps a partial answer. Indeed, the idea of 'safe touch' was practiced throughout Rise, Shine, Sing! sessions, particularly in the choreographies and warmups, which invited participants to self-stimulate by touching their own arms, legs, hands, but also to reach out to their camera or the edges of their screens and imagine touching the person in an adjacent frame (as in Figure 2, above). Participants themselves aestheticized safe touch in their composition 'The Space Between,' which celebrated the idea of contact lyrically, as well as in their choreography. Touch, in Rise, Shine, Sing!, was central to community building and an antidote to the loneliness experienced by many of the older adult participants in the program.

4. Re-Imagined Musicking

In the act of transposing our musicking to the Zoom space, we discovered opportunities to recast acts of singing, listening, moving, dancing, and sociability. By reconfiguring what 'ideal' participation looks like, by embracing the multiplicity of voices, talents, and abilities, and rejecting traditional notions of excellence in performance, musicking in the Zoom space reconfigured aesthetic parameters and enacted alternative forms of relationality and performance that upend traditional exclusions.

The Rise, Shine, Sing! sessions proved to be a powerful antidote to the overwhelmingly negative effects of isolation in the early days of the pandemic. Participants were initially hesitant to explore the creative possibilities of the Zoom space, but became more comfortable over time. While we did lose some participants to a lack of interest in making music over Zoom, the drop-in nature of the program meant that none felt pressured to come regularly or commit to the full program. Thus, it was surprising that many remained to the end of the program, and many expressed feeling very comfortable in the space after only a few weeks of the program. We intend to pursue this research with another iteration of the program in 2020-21, with more in-depth explorations into the creative possibilities of musicking with this population on Zoom.

Music theatre has often been interpreted through the theory of integration, which posits that all components of a given musical (music, movement, narrative, staging) work together to produce a unified whole (see McMillan 2006; Rogers 2010, etc.). The work of integration is ultimately about providing wholeness or unity where it was lacking, a concept that, in many ways, describes the impulse of those musicking in Zoom space. Since dance, song, and dialogue remain discrete in this medium, often resisting coordination, synchronization, and traditional forms of 'harmony,' the Zoom space offers an opportunity to re-think the aesthetic preference for integration and offering instead an opportunity for a convergence traditionally marginalized voices and bodies. The push against wholeness or completion that is so central to disability aesthetics offers us a way to understand the potential for a more multiplicitous form of musicking in the Zoom space – for Music Theatre 2.0 – an unexpected light in what has otherwise been a dark period.

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ENDNOTES

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[i] We use the term music theatre to refer to any combination of musical and theatrical activities. Adopted originally from the German *Musiktheater*, the term came into use first in the early twentieth century to refer to a genuine middle ground between opera and musical theatre. By distinction from opera and musical theatre, music theatre favours a more economical approach to sung theatre and often focuses on the creation and production of new works (e.g., Bawtree, 1991; Salzman and Dési, 2008).

[ii] We use Christopher Small's concept of 'musicking' to refer to the act of participating in a musical event. Musicking involves all aspects of taking part in musical events, including listening, performing, and production roles. Small's concept of musicking includes musical contexts that are not meant for public performance with the aesthetic standards of high art. Because this paper outlines our efforts to expand traditional conceptions of music-making, Small's concept of musicking is particularly apt in its focus on the aspects of the musical context that go beyond the organized sounds themselves. See Small, 1998.

[iii] We selected Zoom because it was already in use at the institution at which the researchers teach. Additionally, the ability to manually adjust sound settings in this platform enabled us to improve the quality of the musical sound we produced for listeners. Most importantly, Zoom is a user-friendly interface that enables participants to access a recurring invitation with a single click. As many of our participants were, at least initially, hesitant about using internet-based technologies, ease of access was a paramount consideration.