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## A choir still: Sustaining a choir through the COVID-19 pandemic

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### Abstract

This paper draws together three of the areas of interest suggested in the recent call for papers on the role of music during COVID-19: technologies and communication; narratives and reflections, and the impact of music upon wellbeing. At the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown measures in the UK, choirs all over the country were forced to abandon their normal pattern of rehearsals and concerts. The London Welsh community choir that I lead, and another that I sing with, did so before the lockdown officially began and immediately moved their rehearsals online. Since then, rehearsals have continued weekly, and the choirs have come together to produce a virtual performance of a new piece setting words written by a choir member in direct response to experiencing a virtual rehearsal for the first time. The work is now available for other choirs to perform virtually, alongside all of the supporting materials that allow virtual performances to be produced. Based upon these experiences, this paper reflects on the experience of guiding an amateur choir through the pandemic, the technological affordances and challenges presented by this, its effect on the choir as a community, and the importance of this to individuals within the choir. It will discuss, in particular: the composition, rehearsal, and performance of the aforementioned choral work, ‘yn un rhith’, the attempt to recreate a sense of liveness for both performers and audience, and the responses to the performance from both singers and audience; the experience of leading rehearsals virtually, the qualitative change in the connection between participants, and the changed rehearsal soundscape; and the impact of regular virtual rehearsals and a virtual performance upon participants and their sense of wellbeing and structure, drawing on direct, anonymised, quotations.

### 1. Preliminaries

This article, in different measures, concerns two Welsh community choirs and my observation of and direct participation in their activities: Côr ABC, a mixed choir based in Aberystwyth led by Gwennan Williams, and Côr Dinas, the women’s choir of the London Welsh. I have been a member of Côr ABC since early 2012 and have written a good number of pieces and arrangements for the choir; I became the director of Côr Dinas in late 2018. For the purposes of clarity, the parts of this article that discuss guiding a choir through recent events are written from my perspective as the director of Côr Dinas; commentary on the newly composed work, its performance, and the impact of these and virtual rehearsals relates more fully to both choirs and will draw on comments received from their members. This article does not take a scientific approach; instead, it narrates and considers from a personal perspective. In doing so, it touches upon technological choices and their effects on the choral experience, creativity, and the wellbeing of

choir members. Perhaps more profoundly, the article will also give consideration to what it has meant to be a choir in a time when the familiar use of the term has come to seem almost nostalgic.

Before going further, it is important to acknowledge that the work the article is based on owes a great deal to the efforts of the director of Côr ABC, Gwennan Williams, to the accompanist of Côr Dinas, Robert Russell, and to the members of the choirs. Gwennan, as well as leading Côr ABC through the pandemic, played a critical role in preparing the rehearsal, recording, and instructional materials for the newly composed work; Robert, as well as accompanying the choir from week to week and leading them when my workload has been problematic, has played a vital role in the technological aspects of rehearsals and the production of the rehearsal materials and virtual performance of the new work. The members of the choirs have been, for the most part, willing and patient colleagues as we have experimented and refined our approaches through trial and error. Though Gwennan and Robert are both referred to directly in this paper, no other member of the choirs is referred to by name and quotations of comments that they have provided have been anonymised. ‘yn un rhith’, the piece discussed later in the article, the videos referred to in relation to its production and performance, and other relevant materials can be found on the project’s website, <https://ynunrhith.wales>. All of the performance materials for the project have been made freely available through this website for other any choir that wishes to produce a virtual performance during the lockdown.

## 2. A tale of two choirs

In many respects, Côr ABC and Côr Dinas are similar choirs. Each is a community choir to the core, with strong roots in their respective environs and Welsh identity; neither choir auditions members, and each welcomes people from many backgrounds; each choir values musical growth and achievement; each choir consists of a diverse membership of people who have joined for a variety of reasons, whether musical or otherwise; in each choir, friendships and social interactions are just as critical a part of the choir’s fabric as music. However, though each choir serves a more or less urban area, Côr ABC is based in Aberystwyth, Wales, whereas Côr Dinas is based at the Borough Chapel in the heart of London, England. There is a saying in Wales, ‘*Gorau Cymro Cymro oddi cartref*’ (‘the best Welshman is the Welshman away from home’). Côr Dinas’ distinctively Welsh identity is a signifier of its role as a gathering place for members of the Welsh diaspora of London; its members’ Welsh identity, with its distinctive language, cultures, traditions, and musical heritage, is often, whether explicitly or implicitly, tangible. That is not to say that the choir is exclusively made up of *Cymry* - it is not; however, the choir acknowledges and celebrates its roots and serves a special function in its members’ lives. Through its membership and activities, it has become a group in which a sense of ‘home’ is recreated and accessed, partly through a certain thematic consistency in repertoire. Côr ABC’s identity as a Welsh choir is also a strong one, earmarked by its regular participation in the canonical events of Welsh musical culture - eisteddfodau and competitions are as regular an occurrence as concerts; but it is a Welsh choir in Wales working through the medium of Welsh and enjoying the confidence of that normality. As such, it focuses on its outward-looking and ambitious aims in its music-making, as well as being a vivid space of friendships and social activity. Despite their different situations, in recent months, the two choirs have faced an identical challenge: a period of time during which it has been impossible to meet to sing together. In broad terms, the choirs have responded in similar ways to the COVID-19 pandemic and the still-current impossibility of meeting, having maintained a regular pattern of rehearsals as a substitute for in-person rehearsals, organised online social events, and united to produce a virtual choir performance of a new work.

At the beginning of March 2020, both Côr Dinas and Côr ABC were meeting on a regular basis (Mondays and Thursdays, respectively), had given recent performances, and were looking forward to imminent forthcoming events. By the end of the month, both choirs had settled themselves into a pattern of online rehearsals, complete with what would become a stable *modus operandi* based partly on their ordinary approach to rehearsals, partly on the possibilities offered by their chosen platform (Zoom), and partly on the needs of the moment. For both choirs, the collaborative decision-making that led to their

becoming, in effect, distant choirs, was at least one step ahead of government recommendations. Writing in retrospect and after long months of news-cycle fatigue, it is challenging to conjure the shifting mood of that short month during which the far-flung spectacle of COVID-19 became an immediate threat. It is hard, also, to fully reconstruct the central uncertainty that confronted the groups' leaders in the face of conflicting interests and inconsistent reports about the severity of the situation: was it an overreaction to cancel events and meetings or was it the responsible course of action?

A sense of the rate of change for the choirs and the uncertainty that came with it can be gleaned from a straightforward timeline of events, given here for Côt Dinas. It reflects, all too honestly, a period of uncertainty as to how to manage the situation, marked by paradoxical events and conversations; it reflects the heaviness with which all events and rehearsals were cancelled for the foreseeable future; it reflects the sense of disruption felt in this precursor to a national lockdown; it reflects, also, a dual optimism - naive in one aspect - that it would not be long before we were able to meet and sing again and that singing would, in the meantime, help to raise people's spirits.

- 1 March, Côt Dinas sang for the St David's day service at Borough Chapel, the choir's home, enjoying a meal in the Chapel's function room afterwards
- 2 & 9 March, the choir met to rehearse for forthcoming performances, including a concert on 14 March, and the Pan Celtic Festival in Ireland in mid-April
- 9 March, during rehearsal, one or two members light-heartedly commented that they had briefly thought they had caught COVID-19 but had realised the pollen count was high
- 10 March, emails were exchanged regarding the duty of the choir to its singers, the risk of the virus spreading within the choir, and whether or not we should be asking people to travel from across London and beyond for rehearsals
- on the same day, the choir tweeted an advertisement for the concert later in the week
- 11 March, the choir withdrew from the Pan Celtic Festival
- 12 March, the Pan Celtic Festival was cancelled
- on the same day, confirmation was received from the concert organisers that it would go ahead in two days' time unless performers withdrew
- 13 March, the concert organisers agreed that the concert should be postponed until September
- 15 March, in a not unanimously agreed decision, I informed the choir that we would be 'putting our rehearsals on hold until after Easter and keeping an eye on the situation'
- 17 March, Borough Chapel suspended use of the building for meetings for thirty days 'in line with government guidelines'
- on the same day, the choir's chairperson asked if I would be willing to livestream a rehearsal via the choir's Facebook members' group to keep up the term's momentum
- 18 March, I agreed to this, in principle
- 20 March, partly as a salve to the abrupt end to the term's rehearsals and cancellation of various plans, and partly in order to combat an already gathering sense of social isolation, we set a date for a virtual rehearsal-cum-sing-along using Zoom
- 23 March, incidentally the date on which a strict national lockdown was first announced, we held our first virtual rehearsal, attended by around sixteen members
- 24 March, having received feedback that the virtual rehearsal had made people feel better, it was decided that with the uncertainty of the time, it was important to keep singing and that we would continue to meet virtually.

### 3. Becoming a distant choir

Though for Côt Dinas, and as the timeline above shows, the initial thought for an online rehearsal came informally from its chairperson, the impetus for persevering with the idea came from two main

sources. The first was a sense of malaise at the all-too-abrupt breaking of plans and the sharp curtailment of the choir's activities. After a term spent learning repertoire and preparing for a performance that was only days away as well as being mid-preparation for a competition, this sense of upset was particularly keen. The second was a general feeling amongst the choir's members that to keep singing would provide relief in the context of the pandemic, driven not least by the fact that many of them were already being instructed to work from home. Over the coming months, the importance of assuaging the sense of loss engendered by the change of plans would cede to the value of the virtual rehearsals as a focal point for community, activity, and otherwise unregulated time.

Over the days that followed the initial decision to move our rehearsals online, we considered a number of possible platforms for the experiment. At the very beginning of the pandemic and lockdown, there was a flurry of reports from different groups trying different platforms and approaches with varying degrees of success. Although we first considered simply streaming a Facebook or YouTube feed for people to sing along with, we concluded that the unilateral nature of these media would fail to capture the social aspects of the choir. With an indeterminate number of attendees and Zoom offering extensions to meetings that over-ran its usual 40-minute limit for free users, we decided to try it. The platform combined some of the controls and features needed to lead a rehearsal (host-controlled muting of microphones, screen sharing, and audio-sharing from different sources) with an easy learning curve for users. Importantly in the final decision to work with Zoom, musicians in other countries had already produced tips for leading these rapidly ascendant 'Zoom Rehearsals', offering advice on what to expect, what settings were most helpful, and how to manage groups online.<sup>1</sup>

Even armed with this information, preparations for the first few Zoom rehearsals were strangely reminiscent of an earlier part of my life in which I would frequently make a preparatory visit to a church or cathedral with a colleague to test out an organ, understand the acoustics and delay, and try to decide what might work. The main issues of the platform, as a medium for a choir rehearsal, were its latency and its orientation as a platform for conference calls, with the software highlighting one speaker at a time. These factors meant that it was necessary to switch off the participants' microphones when they were singing, and to lead them with a guiding accompaniment; in turn, this created one of the strangest and most paradoxical hallmarks of a Zoom rehearsal - the choir itself was, to all intents and purposes, silent.

Experiments with Robert, the choir's accompanist, revealed possible work-arounds: between us, we tested a small number of low-latency solutions for remote rehearsals, we also considered routing a separate audio feed for each singer so that I would be able to hear the whole group, theoretically in time with itself; however, at the time, we concluded that the technical burden this would place on members would be outside the reasonable limits of what might be expected. In the meantime, whilst we certainly had fun with not switching off microphones whilst we sang - birthdays, for instance, occasioned great hilarity - predominantly, we did not hear one another's voices. Sharing a little in the surreality of the silent disco, the focus of the virtual rehearsal shifted to the provision of an accompaniment alongside which people could sing coincidentally with others and yet alone; it leaned towards creating the illusion of singing together by leading people in singing at the same time.

There is a sequence in the last moments of the 2001 film, *Donnie Darko*, in which the camera cuts from room to room, from character to broken character, all facing themselves, their lives, through the long hours of night in the quiet isolation of their homes. The film is a disconcerting cult classic in which the title character follows what is, or what he perceives to be, a predestined path, along which he is guided by a distorted prophetic rabbit-man. At the very beginning of the film, guided by this harbinger, Donnie narrowly escapes death; led further still, he goes on to unwind the fabrics of other characters' lives and lies before the world self-corrects, time reverses, and he is killed at the very beginning of the film's timeline. In these closing scenes, Donnie, the single thread that has linked all of these other characters, has been erased wholly from the narrative, cutting our understanding of them loose; however, the memory of those tangled lives, of what might or should have been, lingers with us disquietingly and the characters are still inextricably bound together by our perceptions of things that should be and are not, of the

characters' loneliness, fragility and futility, overwhelmingly, a hollow sense of loss. More pragmatically, they are tied by the musical thread that underpins the sequence, a piano-led rendition of Orzalbo's 'Mad World' performed by Gary Jules and Michael Andrews. (Donnie Dark, 2001)

As might be imagined, it is a sequence that has haunted me in recent months. We have peered into the homes and lives of others through various video-conferencing 'solutions'; we have gazed into the isolation, or the hectic unexpectedness of people's homes; we have distantly viewed the spaces and moments of people doing their best to continue under trying circumstances, as they try to live through this period rather than the timeline that was expected, still half-grieving for its loss. As I have looked at a screen filled with small windows into the lives of people singing, at once isolated and together, all conveyed a disjunctive beat or so later than the piano accompaniment that is carrying them forward, this experience has, for me, and in parallel to the film, had its own all-too emotive soundtrack. As with the silence of the characters beneath the music of the film, the musical sound of the rehearsal is played by one to many so that they are able to sing together in time, if not in space: in their world, in their homes, they are heard; in my world and each other's homes, they are not.

As well as forming a strange mirror to the lockdown and its half-isolated, half-invaded quality, this isolation of the choir-members' voices from one another has created a radical change in the soundscape of the rehearsal environment. Ordinarily, beyond basic note-learning, the focus of a physically-present rehearsal would be on honing the singing of musical lines, on breath, on vocal technique and on establishing routes to improving all of these things through aural and visual observation; in particular, a choir rehearsal aims to knit a collection of singers and musicians into a single musical unit. This paradox is most apparent to me as the person who, under normal circumstances, conducts the group. While standing amongst the singers, I listen, I give feedback, and I guide the sound; I address problems, tune chords, and adjust sounds, as I hear them. Online, I facilitate, and I scroll through virtual pages of scores; I wait, and I listen only to what the singers themselves are hearing, relying on them to ask for help, to sing as best they can, and to build their own meaning into the activity.

#### **4. Remaining a choir**

With all of this in mind, the actual meaning and process of 'rehearsal' has had to be reconsidered, not only to adapt to a circumstance that has erased the need to prepare for performances, but to a situation that has also removed the normal day-to-day choral objectives of sharing and improving singing as a group. The first rehearsal online was less than entirely smooth, as we wrestled with the give and take of the technology and how we might cope with it, but despite the oddities and frailties of rehearsing virtually, it soon became clear that it was valued by the choir's members. Over subsequent weeks, we ironed out some of the more obvious wrinkles and established a regular shape for the rehearsals. Despite the need to rethink the aims and affordances of Zoom rehearsals, there have been marked similarities between these virtual gatherings and our offline rehearsals. In part, this resemblance is deliberate, but it is also driven by an half-unconscious shared perception of what a choir rehearsal is, of what is expected of it, whether it is held in 'real life' or virtually and whether its normal objectives can be achieved or not.

Since I took on the directorship of Côr Dinas in 2018, each rehearsal has begun with a period of 'catching up' as members arrive, often early. The rehearsal proper begins with a series of corporeal warm-ups, normally taking between ten and fifteen minutes. Humorously known as 'choir yoga', this segment of the rehearsal combines unwinding some of the tensions of the first day of the working week, preparing for singing, and easing the choir into shared activity through a mixture of focused movements; the emphasis on physical movement, on finding space and filling it in a shared environment, also helps to create a relaxed and focused atmosphere and to break down some of the mild barriers of embarrassment that sometimes dog performative activities. Gentle aerobics flow into vocal warm-ups, beginning with breathing exercises followed by working on extending and improving tone and range. The repertoire-learning phase of the rehearsal generally begins thirty to forty minutes into the rehearsal: a recapitulation

of work from the previous week leads to detailed learning of parts and the assembling and refining of music for whatever the current project is. The rehearsal tends to end with a pseudo performance of the pieces being worked on followed by something of particular relevance to the choir's Welsh roots, such as a national song, folk song, or hymn.

The pattern of our virtual rehearsals has been strongly moulded by these routines established in 'normal' rehearsals: both the frequency of meetings and the internal schedule of the rehearsals have been approximately maintained. The logic of this replication was and is bifold: firstly, the rehearsals are modelled on standard practices reflective of the needs of the choir as a social and musical unit, paying due attention to the vocal wellbeing of the singers and to creating a convivial atmosphere through shared effort; secondly, it was hoped that offering something so close to the routine and familiar during a period in which routines were substantially broken would help to create a sense of comfort, structure, and normality, however fleeting.

Inevitably, some adjustments were necessary to accommodate the rather different nature of a virtual rehearsal; some of these changes were expected, but others were less so. The most prominent were made as a direct result of the circumstances of lockdown or social isolation, and have affected the approaches taken to warming-up, repertoire choice, and singing itself. As might be anticipated, and with members joining the rehearsals from kitchens, bedrooms, and living rooms, the physical warm-ups were modified to suit areas that were not necessarily spacious or conducive to such activities. Although a deliberate effort and intent remained to sustain learning and musical value in the rehearsals with new pieces being worked on and learned, repertoire choices have leant towards familiar, nostalgic, or uplifting pieces, and the schedule of rehearsals has included a monthly sing-along at which members make requests for songs we would not normally consider to be part of our repertoire.

Perhaps most poignantly, there have been significant changes to the vocal warm-ups and to the singing itself. From the outset, it was hoped that singing and vocal exercise would help the choir's members to keep their voices active while social interaction was at its least; but it was also clear that many members felt uncomfortable singing fully or stretching their range as they normally would, and that the effects of no longer being in regular conversation were all but immediate. From the first rehearsal, members raised their hands onscreen to indicate that they were unable to sing any higher, at least a tone, sometimes as much as a fourth, before reaching what I know to have been the upper limit of their range. If these hand-signs are to be believed, the general compass of the choir has dropped by around a major third as the weeks and months have progressed. Watching breathing exercises, and visually observing when breaths are taken during a musical phrase, it seems also that the choir is becoming breathier and less sustained. The poignancy of these changes comes not so much from a sense of ground ceded as long-term work on vocal confidence and tone slows or is lost; more, it derives from an acute awareness of how unable so many of us feel to vocalise freely in the places we call home, of the tensions that mean singing is over-breathed, and from the ability to interpret these as small indications of how significantly the constrictions of the lockdown and subsequent months of restrictions have affected people's lives.

## **5. Virtually together**

From the outset, it has been clear that some members of each of the choirs have connected more easily with virtual rehearsals than have others. Some of the choirs' most dedicated members have been sporadic in their attendance or have seemed to disengage altogether. Though levels of technological familiarity differ across the choirs, alongside quality of internet access, living circumstances, and whether or not a member wishes to spend an evening on a conference call, the reasons for not engaging with the new mode of meeting have not always been clear, and, during the pandemic, tacit acceptance has sometimes felt more respectful and appropriate than questioning them. Conversely, and particularly in the case of Côr Dinas, members (including past members scattered to different parts of the globe) who have often been unable to attend normal rehearsals owing to logistical difficulties, have attended virtual rehearsals with much-increased regularity.

Beyond the simple continuity of choir membership, the singers have engaged with the online meetings for all sorts of reasons, from a simple desire to do something social, to finding the choir a rare beacon of structure in an otherwise disordered period of lockdown and, in a touching parallel to the physical experience of shared singing, a need to ‘sing it out’. Emotional responses to rehearsing, particularly as the lockdown progressed, varied likewise, ranging from breezy banter to open tears at singing again. One of the more pronounced overtones at the beginning of the lockdown was a distinct sense of defiance of circumstance through singing together in spite, because of the isolation. This was particularly marked in the case of Côr ABC, whose first virtual rehearsal took place on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March and began immediately after the first ‘clap for our carers’, the two combining to invoke a particular sense of community spirit. Directly after that first rehearsal, Dafydd John Pritchard, a *prif-fardd Cymru* (Chief Poet of Wales) and singer in Côr ABC, wrote an *englyn* (verse) capturing the experience of being a virtual choir for the first time; he posted it to Twitter the next morning. So early in the lockdown, against a background of eerily quiet streets and a tensely subdued national mood of unity in separation, it captured very concisely what felt like an act of musical solidarity.

*Er o bell, roedd herio byd heno'n gân  
yn y gwaed, yn fywyd,  
pob tôn yn fonllef hefyd,  
yn un rhith, yn gôr o hyd.* (Pritchard, 2020)

In English, Dafydd renders it as follows,

Yes, from a distance, but we fought back tonight,  
our song being lifeblood,  
every note we sang, a cry,  
virtually one, a choir still.

## 6. A virtual performance

The sentiment expressed by Dafydd’s *englyn* and the urge to keep both choirs active at a moment when they had lost their immediate goals suggested a project: a new piece setting the words to be learned and sung during the lockdown as a ‘virtual choir’. Having asked Dafydd’s permission, I spent some time with the poem, gradually shaping a melodic and harmonic structure for the first few lines. In the face of events, I wanted to write something that was uplifting; in light of people learning and recording at home, I wanted to write something tuneful, and easy but rewarding to sing; and, for my own part, I wanted to write something that was still recognisably of my oeuvre.

The piece, ‘yn un rhith’, emerged gradually over the course of around three weeks, during which I, along with a large proportion of the population, wrestled with adjusting to working from home. Fleshing out the skeleton of a melody, countermelody and piano part, I created two compatible versions of the piece, one for Côr ABC (a mixed choir) and the other for Côr Dinas (a women’s choir). The decision to create these two versions stemmed from feeling it important that, as well as suiting a joint performance, the piece should be suitable for the choirs to sing independently. As I wrote, I began to look towards how the piece might be ‘performed’, discussing it with Robert and Gwennan. Research into the amount of work involved in creating a virtual choir video revealed that it would be a substantial commitment; luckily, it was one that Robert, as an amateur video editor, was willing to make. Once the piece was completed, Robert and Gwennan helped to produce a comprehensive package of materials for the choir members to work with in producing their recordings. Gwennan and I sang and recorded each vocal part to an accompaniment recorded in advance by Robert; Robert then synchronised these recordings with an on-screen score so that the singers would not need to turn pages or worry about any extraneous equipment. The process took a number of days, with numerous takes and retakes, and exchanges of emails and phone-calls to organise refinements. To make it as easy as possible for the singers, the finished materials were

consolidated on a public, fully bilingual website, with warm-up exercises and guidance on the process of recording. A generous deadline was given for the choirs' members to send in their completed recordings ready for Robert to weave them together.

Whilst the singers made their recordings and submissions, it became apparent that the recording process itself was a stressful one for them: anxieties about the quality of recording equipment, quality of singing, and whether or not the recordings submitted were 'good enough' were common, alongside apologies for the recordings and their quality. At the same time, there was a very present feeling of commitment to the project from members of the choirs, some of whom were going to considerable lengths in order to take part: some recorded their part several times; some recorded multiple parts; some, isolated in more rural areas, drove good distances to find more stable internet connections to upload their videos or made several overnight attempts to do so; deadlines were stretched as some of the singers struggled with background noise and illness.

During this period, we debated the matter of presenting the finished performance: How should the videos be cut together? Should there be emphasis on members or parts to create additional visual interest? How should we release the video? Should the singers see it first? Could it be made to feel like a real choral performance? If so, how? The answers to all of these questions came down to three factors. One, inevitably, was the resources available in terms of time and experience, the need to keep things reasonably straightforward. Another, more important consideration again, was remaining true to the parameters of the project agreed with the participants, of maintaining our awareness of the qualitative difference between a singer seen and heard amongst many and a singer alone, even for an instant, for example. Most important, however, was the desire to reflect the notion of a choral performance, of the shared experience in time of a collaborative unit of co-equal partners. These considerations led us towards a series of decisions. There would be three 'virtual performances', in the form of a video of each individual choir singing the piece, and a third, central video of the singers from both choirs. To keep our parameters well set, everyone would be on the screen and there would be no moments of visual emphasis that were not intimated by the music. In order to reflect the true characters of the choirs and their performances, there would be no significant editing or tidying up of people's singing other than when individual voices were exposed by holding a note for too long. In order to create the sense of a shared musical experience, we would make the release of the video an 'event', setting a specific time and gathering as much of an audience as possible. Finally, we decided that we would share no previews with the singers, so that they would share in that anticipation.

A date was set, allowing us time for troubleshooting. We would release the video on 22 May, the eve of two months from the beginning of lockdown restrictions in the UK and coinciding with the end of Mental Health Awareness Week. In order to make the 'première' of the new piece feel as much as possible like a live performance, we decided to present it using YouTube's première feature, which allows video creators to upload a video and set a release time for it in advance, and users to bookmark the video ready to watch it at the release time.

By the time that the singers' individual videos had been received and Robert had gone through the laborious process of aligning, framing, and rendering the first draft of the video, it had been two months since we had heard our singers as choirs. Though we had heard individual voices as we worked on the video, there was no certainty about the outcome of amassing them with all their individual qualities. As community choirs, variances of vocal quality, of accuracy, and of confidence, are entirely normal, even desirable things. What one hears in any given performance is the averaging out of these inconsistencies. On a good day, this works in a choir's favour, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts; on a bad day, individual voices stand out and that effect is diminished or altogether lost. I listened to the first draft of the videos for the first time alone. With no editing beyond an equalisation of levels and the addition of a little reverb to create space, the groupings of the choirs blended together, benefitting naturally from the averaging process. They sounded life-like. After those long months spent in social isolation, in watching the choirs sing silently, I am unashamed to admit that my entirely unexpected

response to seeing and hearing this was to cry. This experience was echoed some days later when the choirs themselves were able to watch the videos for the first time.

By 19:00 on 22 May, some 140 YouTube users were waiting for the virtual performance to begin. Some of this audience was made up of the choirs' members; others were friends or family; others still were unknown. In the count-down to the video, a number of members exchanged messages on WhatsApp, showing themselves settled with a drink, or popcorn, to listen for the first time. By 19:10, what felt like two months of intensive effort had flourished. After the première of the video finished, we held a 'party' on Zoom, at which the two choirs met each other for the first time. In our separate spaces, but this time able to communicate and observe one another, we watched the videos of the individual choirs. It was at this point, suspended between the grinding end of strict lockdown and the anticipated re-initiation of social activities, that the full emotional impact of hearing themselves sing together with their fellow singers for the first time in more than two months settled home for the singers.

## 7. Impacts and effects

A virtual performance is, by nature, a performance deprived of the normal channels of communication with audience; however, the use of YouTube's première feature had the desired effect of creating a sense of liveness by allowing the building of anticipation and a perception of shared experience in time: seeing audience members as numbers of 'waiting' and 'watching' users; engaging with them directly in the live chat presented alongside the video; receiving text messages, and WhatsApp messages and tweets to wish luck or express excitement; the compressed nervousness about having got everything 'right' in a technical sense while using a new technology; all of these things combined to create a very real sense of 'performance' shared with others. From verbal feedback and personal correspondence, it seems that this sense of occasion and the emotional impact of the performance was felt beyond the participants in the recording, by non-participating members of the choirs, friends and family of choir members, and by the audience more generally, people who had either been personally invited or seen the social media advertising for the virtual event.<sup>ii</sup>

Earlier in this article, I alluded to the parallels between the viewers' experience of looking into the final moments of the fictional world of Donnie Darko and the strangely disconnected, silent nature of a virtual choir rehearsal seen through the intermittent portals of audio-visual connections. However, for those of us engaged in music-making at a distance during a time of pandemic, there is, of course, aside from category error, a very significant difference between the two: we create these virtual connections not in order to revel in the fragmentary isolation of existence, but in order to provide some relief from that isolation through music and community. It was a wonderful and affirming thing to receive such a positive audience response to the piece and its virtual première; however, both were the result of a longer process. In many senses, the most important audience for the performance was the combined membership of Côt ABC and Côt Dinas: their responses to the performance, to being part of a 'virtual' choir, and to the months of virtual rehearsals that had led them up to that point would be the real means of evaluating the project and the online activities of the choirs.

While the choirs' singers were preparing their individual recordings, and in an act that starkly illuminated the importance of the choirs' activities in maintaining wellbeing, one of the singers asked if it might be possible to release the piece during Mental Health Awareness Week, tying the two together with a small campaign. As part of this effort, the leaders of the choirs asked the singers for feedback on their experience of the project and, more generally, what the choirs had meant to them during the lockdown. Before continuing, and as I stated at the outset of this article, I wish to emphasise there was no scientific method involved in the gathering of this evidence. It was gathered, initially, for entirely non-academic reasons. Further, there is insufficient distance between me as the author of this paper and the singers themselves for me to do anything but acknowledge how deeply moving their responses were, and,

more than that, how deeply unsettling and shaking it was to discover the extent of the subjective value of the choirs to their members and to absorb the sense of responsibility that accompanied that knowledge.

Once collected, and with their permission, the singers' comments were anonymised and shared publicly, alongside other materials about the project and its importance to the choirs. At the time, Gwennan, the director of Côr ABC, created and shared word-clouds, distilling longer sentiments into their most striking components, sufficient for a public contribution to the Mental Health Awareness Week campaign. Alongside some of the more anticipated responses such as 'fun', were some more directly potent ones, such as 'uplifting', 'emotional', 'therapeutic', and 'warmth'. Some of the comments gave a sense of the value of the choirs during a period of intense isolation: 'a focal point in the week', 'keeping in touch', 'community', and 'friendship'. Taken alone, these words and concepts are potent enough; taken in full context, they are much more so, and give a far richer impression of how music and the rhythm of participating in musical communities had impacted upon the choirs' members in the course of the lockdown restrictions.

The bald statement from one singer that 'the singing helps support my wellbeing' was both an affirmation of the value of continuing to meet virtually and a reminder of the significant responsibility that choral communities and their leaders bear. In a vindication of the decision to pattern online rehearsals in the mould of our usual meetings, this comment was reinforced by the references to 'being able to keep a part of our normal routine in an abnormal time' and '*rhywbeth i edrych ymlaen ato i dorri'r wythnosau, tra'n cadw rhywfaint o'r hen routine i fynd*' ('something to look forward to, to break up the weeks while keeping something of the old routine alive'). More surprising, perhaps, given the peculiarities of virtual rehearsals, were comments that emphasised the communal experience of singing and indicated that, despite distance and the silence of that experience, the choirs have maintained some of their social aura of community: 'I appreciate seeing and singing with everyone', '*ffordd wych o gadw mewn cysylltiad efo ffrindiau yn ystod y cyfnod anodd hwn*' ('a great way of keeping in touch with friends in this difficult period'), 'music brings people together even when they're apart', '*mae canu'n eich atgoffa chi lle mae eich cyfeillion, a lle mae'ch calon*' ('singing reminds you where your friends are, and where your heart is'), and, perhaps most affectingly, 'we may be isolated, but these rehearsals remind us we are never alone'.

## 8. Reaching conclusions before reaching the end

Considered philosophically, the events of 2020 have posed deep, even existential, questions about many aspects of our lives, societies, and cultures. Not least amongst these are questions about the roots of many of our communal and collaborative sociocultural efforts and what those things are, or become, when we are separated. How do we evaluate our communal activities? How are we different without them? How do we continue them from afar? In the darker moments of the last several months, these questions have affected many people in many fields of human activity, whether professional, amateur, or in the ambiguous space betwixt the two. At a more immediate level, participants in and leaders of different cultural activities have had to face these questions practically, and to respond as best they can.

**Choir | Quire, n. 3.a gen.** A company of singers; *spec.* an organized body of singers who perform at concerts, etc.; a choral society or institution. (OED, 2020)

The Oxford English Dictionary's third definition of the word 'choir' is perhaps the closest to what I suspect to be the most common interpretation of the word. Even so, ordinarily, this understanding carries with it a set of tacit implications. In particular, it bears an implication of singers singing together in space and time, of a group of people who spend time in each other's presence to breathe and voice together, and, as an all but inevitable result, of a group of people who share experience together, both musically and socially. In short, it implies a singing community.

These implied attributes of the concept of ‘choir’ have, of course, been challenged for some years by ‘virtual choirs’, most notably by the various iterations of Eric Whitacre’s Virtual Choir from 2009 to the present;<sup>iii</sup> yet, to a great extent, such challenges have represented a technological *tour de force* of postmodern abstraction and distance, and, more subtly, the exceptions that prove a rule of choral singing - that it is a cohabited and co-created sound-space. In these cases, the word ‘virtual’ has been of central importance: the significant examples have, for the most part, been choirs that have never met, do not rehearse in the normal sense of the word, and do not stem from a pre-existing non-virtual community. With no judgment or diminishment of the musical value of these projects in or their creation of new communities, they have been choirs one step removed from what it is to be a choir, from what it is to be a contextually rooted singing community.

As I write, with six months of virtual rehearsals behind us, I know that both Côt ABC and Côt Dinas are preparing for several months of distant singing ahead. Refinements to virtual rehearsals are being made to make them more fit for the medium term; virtual concerts are being planned for Christmas-time; and more permanent changes to rehearsals are likely. Côt Dinas, for instance, has taken the decision that it will stream future rehearsals online for absent members, even after in-person rehearsals become possible again. The new piece, ‘yn un rhith’, has been taken up by at least one other choir, based in America, that is preparing for a period of meeting and performing only online; it remains available for any choir in a similar situation to do the same.

As a choral director attempting - sometimes successfully, sometimes not - to guide a choir through the oddities of the time, the events of 2020 and their lasting effects have forced me -are continuing to force me - to rethink the concept of a choir, and to consider things that I have never needed to think on, in the past: at what point is a set of individuals singing a choir? how can a choir still be a choir when it cannot sing together? and, more existentially, what is a choir? My responses to these questions have changed as my experiences have reformed them: a choir is a community founded on a shared desire to sing together; a choir singing together from afar is a choir still.

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<sup>i</sup> Amongst the most useful of these materials is a series of videos produced by the director of the RAMA Vocal Centre of the Royal Academy of Music, Denmark, Jim Daus Hjernøe. (Daus Hjernøe, 2020)

<sup>ii</sup> Without wishing to descend further into unsupported anecdote, personal correspondence either sent to or shared with me expressed that the optimism of the event and the piece itself had a profound and positive impact on a number of audience members who had been struggling with the encroaching hopelessness of recent months of isolation.

<sup>iii</sup> Eric Whitacre has overseen six large-scale Virtual Choir projects, the first of which was completed in 2009 and involved around 2,000 singers; the most recent was undertaken in response to the coronavirus pandemic, was released on the 19 July 2020, and involved some 17,000 singers. (Wikipedia contributors, 2020)

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**Video Access**

