

Notes From The Couch

Novel Spaces for Creation in Coronavirus-era Choral Music Education

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Article abstract

As Michel Serres states, “The one who has power is the one who has the source and emission of sound” (1982). The sudden soundlessness of our COVID-19 existence is one of the largest pandemic challenges facing musicians. While some argue that there should be a hiatus on creation, others are embracing music’s adaptations to less traditional forums and formats. As a public high school teacher and conductor-educator with a youth-focused private organization, I am experiencing first-hand the improvisations, challenges, triumphs—and attendant burn-out—of rapidly adapting new spaces in which to keep my musical communities intact. Fellow conductor-educators near and far, working with populations at all ages and stages, are also bravely forging onward, rejecting sound-less and ensemble-less realities by adapting online. This all begs the questions: What does the near future hold for choral singing? And what will singing ensembles look like on the other side of current restrictions? Drawing together personal experience, informal interviews, explorations of the transformations of public and private space, sound and media studies, drift methodology, and the proliferation of recent articles in news and arts media, this essay investigates the novel spaces being created by and for choral arts educators amidst the uncertainties of what new reality awaits us on the other side of the screen-scape.

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Laura Menard



The author's couch, as referenced. Photo courtesy of the author.

When we get back to singing in a group, how joyful that will be! You don't ever want to take that for granted again. It will be quite a moving experience, to sing in real time together. It's making me teary right now, just thinking about it.

—Elle

My couch has become my classroom, office, refuge, rehearsal space, recording studio, editing suite, breakfast/lunch/dinner table, conference centre, writing retreat, napping nook and more. Has ever one small area of my home meant as much as it does now?

Like many spaces in our pandemic lives, my couch has become interspatial. Interspatiality acknowledges the complexity and vulnerability of our spatial selves: they consist of multiple overlapping elements and operate in layered and simultaneous ways across time, allocation, association and usage. During the pandemic, these layers have collapsed upon themselves, contributing to inertia, time slippage, and the dreaded “Zoom fatigue.” Musically, the damper pedal has been applied to life: everything is muted, drained of depth and colour. I am everywhere and nowhere at once.

From the sofa, I experience mediations of selfhood in the online world. I am:

1. the wanderer, connected and removed: the virtual browser of, say, grocery aisles or clothing stores.
2. the viewer for whom the web is a stage: the audience member, watching from afar, facelessly, via streamed content, Instagram live events.
3. the observer/ed, aware of simultaneously intentionally seeing and being seen—as per video call and teaching platforms.

I am all three interchangeably, seamlessly, without physical movement. The navigations and improvisations of interspatial identity require different energies, and are indicative of ways that I am now required to be consumer and consumed in order to stay connected to my communities and art.

From the couch, I recognize my privilege. As a public high school teacher, PhD student, and private youth choir conductor-educator, I continue to teach and lead weekly rehearsals. Everything is unchanged. Everything is changed. I move forward—virtually, of course—hopefully, searchingly, without knowing the true impact of these times on my art, and how—wittingly or not—my actions contribute to its viability.

Michel Serres states, “The one who has power is the one who has the source and emission of sound” (141). The sudden soundlessness of COVID-19 existence has wrought upon musicians an existential challenge, and continues to present a crisis for the musical community. Despite the opening up of many industries and the relaxing of some restrictions, “normal” is not yet in sight, for singers in particular. In what has become an infamous webinar for the National Association for Teachers of Singing (NATS), on May 5, 2020, Dr. Lucinda Halstead stated: “there is no safe way for singers to rehearse together,” acknowledging, “For a singer, if they can't use their voice . . . it affects their self-worth, it affects everything.”¹ “This is only temporary,” she added—but what are the long-term impacts on choral music, and music education?

Interlude on Online Rehearsals with an Adult Choir: Three Soletti²

Elle: *Continuing rehearsals has been a surprise. Initially, when we met up online that first Sunday [after the March 2020 lockdown began], we thought it would be just a once-a-month thing, but we ended up rehearsing weekly. It became apparent that we all needed that time to come together. Some days I was feeling down, and having a scheduled thing to look forward to was important. It's definitely a juxtaposition: this [time] is a loss, but you appreciate more those in-person rehearsals. You really do.*

Teel: *I feel a huge sense of loss. What's been gained is camaraderie with other choir members: we created a setting where everyone shared what they're going through. The music took a back seat, but everyone got a chance to share. In that way, I felt closer even though we weren't actually together.*

Joaquin: *I've lost some technique, not just as a singer but as a teacher. I miss the daily use of my voice. Choirs are really unique and special because they do require a group. This situation has put a pause on true choral singing, but it's causing us to think about other ways to engage in music. COVID is forcing us to be creative and think differently. But I worry: where are our voices at? What is happening to them?*

Notes from the couch: in this Interlude, themes of voicelessness, loss, adaptation, and connection reverberate throughout.

Improvisation = Survival

Martin Irvine describes improvisation as a “generative combinatorial structure [that] provides the space for *quotations from the future*, the about-to-be” (28, emphasis original), casting improvisations into time and space beyond our own. This future-focused perspective on improvisation has been vital to my updated praxial “improvisation” over the last several months. My pandemic-impacted self now defines it thusly:

The future-focused creation of something new relying on, and excavating from, my foundation; problem-solving; building on rehearsed, revisited, revised building blocks as a teacher, singer, musician, scholar; a second-nature response.

Technology has been a significant aspect of this improvisation, creating new kinds of engagement. Kevin Roose argues, “if there is a silver lining in this crisis, it may be that the virus is forcing us to use the internet as it was always meant to be used: to connect with one another, share information and resources, and come up with collective solutions to urgent problems” (“The Coronavirus Crisis”). Many singers, for example, have turned sharply towards virtual choirs as a viable—albeit heavily mediated—way to collaborate, employing improvisation for survival. This flexibility of improvisation has enabled so much in our teaching and music-making communities: who had run so many online rehearsals and lessons, or created so many instructional videos, before March?

However, such improvisation has been nearly impossible for other individuals and communities. Without the physical spaces we are accustomed to sharing with one another, we literally lose common ground and interspatial vulnerabilities are exposed. Public schools in particular are vital equalizers, the importance of which many of us realized fully only when they were shuttered. In physically-based educational settings, there are fewer impediments to learning during the school day, as students contend less with things like housing and food precarity,

challenging family situations, and lack of access to suitable working environments and required materials. Improvising in online space requires tremendous privileges of access and resources, which are in short supply for many learners—a fact laid bare by the pandemic.

Further, in teaching—as in music-making—feedback is everything: interpreting body language and gestures, eye contact and utterances is an ongoing and integral pillar of education, and essential for successful improvisation. In our soundless, feedbackless, seemingly endless COVID-19 improvisation, our fibres of connection are strained. I yearn to hear the unmediated voices, chatter and laughter of my students, to see their reactions unfiltered by poor lighting, spotty connections, camera shyness, or lagtime. I worry about the faces—too many of them—that I haven't seen “in class” online at all.

A Trio On Education

Elle: The connections [with my students] have been altered. I question: Have I been providing a quality education to my students? I worry a lot about that. I judge myself. I worry about my students. I worry about the cost of those connections that I was working on with my students, and just missing them.

Teel: I can see that there are kids who are not engaged; online, it's really hard—if not impossible—to be a cheerleader for struggling kids. You end up watching helplessly and hope they get back into the programming in front of them. It's really hard to watch.

Joaquin: We get instant and constant feedback in teaching. We are always adjusting. There is none of that feedback available—or a heavily, heavily reduced amount—in online learning. Being a performing arts teacher exponentially augments the challenge. [This situation has] cost me a lot of joy. I say this from a place of privilege.

Notes from the couch: concerns about connection and engagement, educator responsibility, education quality.

On Making, and Making it Work

Unquestionably, there have been fundamental changes for those of us in in-person performance art traditions.³ Up for debate: What's next? The possibilities seem vast, yet I wonder about the responsibility we practitioners have to our art, to our fellow artists, to our students, to our audiences. What does art—and arts education—mean now? And who, as a result of current shifts, is left behind, vulnerable, interspatially exposed?

Historically, Christopher Macklin indicates that despite the strain upon society's fabric, “Music was not a luxury in times of epidemic uncertainty, it was a necessity” (“A Historically Informed Approach”). Heather O'Neill identifies a feedback loop of sorts, in that “periods of hardship indelibly mark art . . . [changing] the very structure and possibilities of art. And all art that follows contains the echoes and scars of all we have been through” (“Art During the Time of Coronavirus”). These ideas reinforce for me how crucial it is to continue engaging—however limited such engagements may be—with our practices and communities, despite the ongoing uncertainty of their (and our own) futures.

In my interspatial wandering, viewing, and observing, I continue improvising in my art, projecting into a time and space (how far?) ahead. Pivoting—making such rapid turns to face a new reality—however necessary, is costly: in swiveling towards one thing, we turn away from

something else. I wonder with what eyes we will look back on this time, with what perspective. I wonder how much longer the couch will be my all.

Notes

¹ Dr. Halstead is the president-elect of the Performing Arts Medical Association and the Medical Director for Voice and Swallowing at the Medical University of South Carolina. For the ACDA & NATS presentation, visit <https://youtu.be/DFI3GsVzj6Q>.

² These excerpts were informal interviews conducted with three friends who are singers and music educators in the private and public education systems. Pseudonyms have been used.

³ It is important to acknowledge that there are performance artists who have been working in innovative, boundary-challenging and game-changing ways in the virtual sphere for decades. Although less of an adjustment may be required of these performers to adapt to new formats, undoubtedly many aspects of their art-making and livelihoods have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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