

“When Can We Start Choir and Band Rehearsals Again?”
Notes from Nola Knouse, Director, Moravian Music Foundation

We are hearing of states and communities loosening restrictions on gatherings and activities, and we wonder about starting things like choir practice. We’ve missed being together, and we know our music not only as making beautiful sounds, but contributing to the experience of worship, helping to proclaim the word of God; and we also know our music as our way of expressing and deepening our faith. When can we start singing and playing together again, safely?

I write/talk to summarize the conclusions presented in a webinar about the near-term future of singing, using science and data, as we search for fact-based solutions to protect our singers, teachers, conductors, and congregation members. They made mention of those playing wind instruments, and there are very similar concerns; but the sponsoring organizations of this webinar were vocal-related ones. My belief is that we need to consider this science as applying to our wind players as well. So when I mention “singing” I also mean “playing in the band”.

This webinar took place on Tuesday, May 5, and was hosted by several national arts and medical organizations in partnership, with panelists including medical researchers and clinicians. Information about the hosts, panelists, and a link to view the recorded webinar, can be found at the end of this paper/talk.

The primary conclusion, backed by scientific studies, spanning several decades of research about the way viruses and other particles move through the air we exhale, was this:

There is no safe way for singers to rehearse together (or sing together) until there is a vaccine for COVID-19 that is widely available, and a treatment protocol that is 95% effective in producing a cure for the disease – and this may be 18 to 24 months away.

[say that again]

The scientists presented three major challenges we face in thinking about singing in a group:

1. ***There is no spacing solution for singers that would eliminate risk.*** Physical distancing that is sufficient to prevent the spread of the virus isn't possible for a choir – the example used was “you would need a football stadium to provide proper spacing for the Westminster Choir.”
2. ***There are no masks or other barriers that are safe for singing.*** Even the best masks – the touted N-95 masks – have to be fitted personally; but they make it difficult to breathe; they are not comfortable; re-breathing the same air causes a drop in oxygen levels and a rise in carbon dioxide levels; and could be very harmful to those with any condition such as COPD, heart disease or asthma. And a prior study of the effectiveness of masks in preventing the spread of the flu showed that even speaking into a mask – not singing, which uses more air more forcefully, and not coughing – the person was shedding fine particles of flu virus outside the mask. (*Note: the scientists advised that we not try other sorts of barriers – most are either not droplet proof, open at the top or bottom or side, or may be toxic – don't spray a cloth with a bleach or disinfectant. You may end up in the ER.*)
3. ***The current standard testing has a 3 to 5% false-negative rating*** – in other words, 3 to 5 percent of the people who test negative really do have the virus. The rapid diagnostic tests in development are not as sensitive nor as accurate as the standard testing, and they don't catch the people who are carrying the virus who don't yet show symptoms.

Before we can have regular rehearsals and sing together, then, according to the scientists, we need to wait for a vaccine and a highly effective way to treat the disease. Until then, social distancing (better named *physical distancing*, for we do need to remain in social contact) is the

key, along with wearing masks, handwashing, hand sanitizer, and all the things we've been hearing. Over the course of this pandemic, many severe outbreaks started in churches, where we share folders, or pass hymnals, touch the doorknobs or faucets – and sing together.

The webinar also presented ideas for when we are able to come back together, including ways to manage the remaining risk of infection – which, according to the scientists, will never be zero. These are steps that we will need to consider down the road – acceptance of the risk, by our singers and our audiences/congregations; and screening for symptoms, oxygen level, and fever, at the door, and so on. In an ideal circumstance, that screening at the door would include a rapid response COVID-19 test; if one just screens for visible symptoms, fever, and blood oxygen level, there's still the strong possibility that someone is carrying the disease – and tests show that one is most contagious just *before* you begin to show symptoms.

Where, then, do we go from here, in the short term? We are in an in-between time ... in between early March, when we could sing and play together for the first Sunday in Lent; and whenever the time comes when we can sing and play together again; and we don't know how long that is. The true temptation of any in-between (liminal) time is to try to rush through it, and seek for any way we can get through it quicker.

Let's don't do that. Let's first allow ourselves time to mourn. To be sad for what we have lost already and for the experiences we were looking forward to, that won't happen in the near future. We don't know how long this is going to last; and sadness, grief, lament, is the appropriate response. (I recommend Psalm 42.) Speak your sadness to God, and to one another. And listen to the lament of your sisters and brothers. Live in that grief now, and don't try to hurry out of it. God knows your sadness, and God is with you in it.

And let's listen to the scientists who have spent their lives studying the way little tiny particles and droplets and viruses and "bugs" are transmitted through the air, and let's believe good science when we see it.

Finally, one of the panelists, Dr. Halstead, made this observation: Our choirs (and our bands and brass choirs), are "powerhouses of community and tolerance". How can we deploy all that energy, all that experience, for the benefit of our communities?

The world we now live in is, much to our grief, a world in which we cannot safely sing or play music together – whether in a choir or a congregation. It is, still, a world that needs the gifts we as musicians have. What are some of those gifts?

- ***We are collaborative.*** We know that we are stronger together than alone, and what we can do together is far more impressive than any of our individual efforts.
- ***We are hospitable.*** We are experienced in exercising widespread forgiveness and open-armed acceptance to those with whom we make music.
- ***We are resourceful.*** Musicians are, by the very nature of our art, versatile; adaptable; flexible; creative; energetic; collaborative, in our lives as well as in our craft.
- ***We are disciplined.*** We didn't pop out of the womb able to sing or play at the level we do now; we had to learn, and we did so, with baby steps – one or two notes at a time, sustaining our breath for 2 seconds longer than last week, maintaining our routines of daily practice to meet our long-term goals.
- ***We are perceptive.*** We can see and rejoice in tiny moments of beauty all around us.

Friends, these are gifts and experiences that our world can certainly use. And our faith calls us to use the "talents" our Master has placed in our hands, in our lives. Can we, as a choir or a band or a congregation, use these gifts? If Wednesday at 7:00 can't be choir practice, can we

covenant to use that time in some other service, either as individuals or as a group (wearing our masks and observing our proper physical distancing)? One of my favorite hymns is *Come, Let Us*

Sing the Song of Songs:

Come, let us sing the song of songs;
with hearts and voices swell the strain,
the homage which to Christ belongs:
“Worthy the Lamb, for he was slain!”

We can’t *sing* that song now; but our lives can demonstrate that faith, that joy, that worship. May I encourage all of us who sing or play in a group, to find a way for our lives to “sing” the song of songs? And some day, when we are able to raise our voices in song together, the song will be the richer for the service we have rendered to the Lord we so love.

About the Webinar

On Tuesday, May 5, the National Association of Teachers of Singing, the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), Chorus America, Barbershop Harmony Society, and Performing Arts Medical Association (PAMA) presented an important webinar about the near term future of singing, in the search for fact-based solutions to protect singers, teachers, and conductors. The live webinar was entitled “What Do Science and Data Say About the Near-Term Future of Singing?”. The webinar was hosted by NATS was moderated by Tim Sharp, executive director of ACDA, Catherine Dehoney, president and CEO of Chorus America, Marty Monson, CEO of the Barbershop Harmony Society, and Allen Henderson, executive director of NATS.

Guest panelists were:

- Dr. Donald Milton, a leading researcher whose work focuses on the interrelated areas of infectious bioaerosols, exhaled breath analysis, and development and application of innovative methods for respiratory epidemiology. Dr. Milton is Professor of Environmental Health, University of Maryland School of Public Health, with a secondary appointment in the School of Medicine.
- Otolaryngologist Dr. Lucinda Halstead, is founder and medical director of the Evelyn Trammell Institute for Voice and Swallowing at the Medical University of South Carolina. She is also President Elect of the Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA).
- Mollie Quinlan-Hayes is director of ArtsReady, a national initiative of South Arts and most recently served as deputy director at South Arts.
- Tom Claeson is project director of Performing Arts Readiness, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to help performing arts organizations protect their assets, sustain operations, and prepare for emergencies.

To see the webinar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q>

The presenters’ slides are also available at

https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/article.html/Featured_Stories_/NATS_COVID_Resources_Page