

Summary of SongFest/ANCA Webinar 24 June 2020

“Strategies for singing with and without COVID”

Comments by Chair - Tim Fisher

Executive Summary

Feedback from 62 choirs indicates that:

1. We need to change the dialogue with our members from certainty and safety to managed risk and quick response consistent with living with COVID-19 for the long term.
2. Choir managers should be confident that they are acting responsibly when they comply with the current state government health regulations
3. Each choir should consider implementing their own COVID Safety Plan to reflect these strategies and share information
4. Mitigation (not elimination) of risk and effective contact tracing and isolation is the primary aim
5. Measures to meaningfully engage with your vulnerable members are an integral part of your plan but may not involve live rehearsals for some. Shared information and agreed strategies will maximise ongoing engagement, even when community transmission appears.
6. Behaviour change will be required to ensure that all singers conform to the plan, particularly now when most people believe there is no risk. You need to assist all your singers with training and you need to discuss acceptable ways to hold everyone accountable to sticking to that plan.
7. Special, and perhaps optional, measures pertaining to vulnerable choir members could include, greater spacing to vulnerable singers only, personal PPE, use of the COVIDSafe App, shorter attendance at rehearsals or an enhanced online option.
8. Next week’s webinar – How to make and implement your own COVID Safety Plan
9. Issues around performance with COVID-19 will be addressed in the coming months.

Discussion

Based on the survey results received there are a lot of concerns to deal with!

From what I’ve just heard the critical issue for many leaders of choirs, including all members of committees responsible for choirs, is the climate of uncertainty and concern that has developed within the singing community based on media reports and expert discussions relating to a number of infection clusters around the world connected to choir rehearsals and performances together with the conclusion of an American Webinar that “there is no

safe way for singers to rehearse together until there is a COVID-19 vaccine and a 95% effective treatment in place”.

Let's be clear. This statement is true, provided the vaccine is 100% effective. It is equally true to substitute any other activity into that statement. There is no safe way to go to a restaurant, play contact sport, use public transport etc, etc, during a pandemic. The statement is a truth about the reality of living in the world with COVID-19. The risk of doing so is something that every one of us must assess when it comes to each and every activity we undertake short of isolation. Essentially singers have taken on a special status through these reports and conclusions when this situation is not at all unique to them.

More clusters and super spreading events happen with other activities than singing. Singing represents a clear risk. It is not special in being an activity that has a risk of infection.

The easing of restrictions by our state government is not a promise that abiding by the regulations in force at any particular time will keep you, personally, safe. They are a compromise between economic health, community safety (that is the avoidance of widespread infection and the collapse of our health system), and personal risk. As the restrictions ease the personal risk increases, the community risk is managed and the economic health improves, hopefully.

So, while government regulations are not a guarantee of personal safety, they are a guarantee of organizational safety. The government is effectively saying to all organizations that they have a social license to operate provided your activity fits within the regulations. Singing does.

This addresses one of the key concerns that leaps off the survey. Choir managers and committees are afraid that they are responsible for putting people's lives at risk if they commence live rehearsals. The regulatory framework makes this responsibility clear. Choir managers are responsible for satisfying the current regulations and ensuring that all members of their choir conduct themselves accordingly. Individuals must make decisions about the consequences of the risks they take, in singing and every other activity, and act accordingly. Where these individuals are children choir managers will need to engage with their parents/guardians accordingly.

To be clear, choir managers have certainty. Individual singers do not. If we conflate these two issues it paralyzes choir managers.

Choir managers cannot guarantee safety. They are not required to. They should not encourage or persuade individuals to attend live rehearsals or not. They should let singers know what to expect at a choir rehearsal. They should direct singers to information sources that assist them to make informed decisions about the risks they face. They aren't responsible for the consequences of the decision made by any singer provided the choir operates within the regulations.

This is a long-term situation. Our communities must adapt to the risk that COVID-19 presents, particularly to our most vulnerable people. Right now in WA we are in a terrific position. There appears to have been no community spread for quite some time. This has created an environment where most people have moved from the initial panic of lockdown to now building confidence to undertake normal activities. This is a great environment in which to start live singing rehearsals. However this is unlikely to last forever for a whole range of reasons.

I'm concerned that we do not squander the gains we've made and mislead ourselves about the nature of the future. It is very likely that COVID-19 will reappear in WA at some point in the future. This is not a disaster. The current situation in Victoria is probably a better template of our future with a steady emergence of new cases and no exponential spread of the virus....provided that's what they achieve over the next week or so! We need to be having the discussions now, when we feel almost no risk, to enable us to continue to sing together in the future when there is a greater risk. We can sing now, as we will be able to sing then, because the risk is acceptable to many based on the accepted and consistent behavior of all members of the singing group. Getting started is the easy bit. Making a plan and having a strategy to keep singing when there is slightly more risk is the top prize.

Let's be clear, if the health authorities get sufficiently concerned about the rate of community infection in WA at any stage in the future they will re-impose restrictions. If the state government says to stop singing then we will stop. Up and until that point the choir can have a plan to meet and rehearse. The unknown will be how many of your members feel that the risk is acceptable to them and for how long.

How choir managers engage with all singers about how your choir will operate, what new behaviours every choir member will need to adjust to and what training everyone will be given to learn those new behaviours will have a big bearing on how confident your highly vulnerable members feel about coming to your live choir rehearsal. If you aren't diligent about ensuring that all singers comply with the current regulations, let alone any additional measures you add, then vulnerable singers will be inclined to stop attending earlier.

The Informed Choice

So, how can singers make an informed choice?

There is incomplete research and data and considerable speculation. Reports tend to focus on zero risk scenarios which are not appropriate to the real world task of living with COVID-19. Beyond it being not absolutely safe, no-one can quantify the risk or define how much safer this measure is than that one.

It is tempting to ask authorities and experts for guidance. However, as we have seen from recent webinars, in the absence of data they will revert to a conservative approach and probably tell you that you shouldn't do anything because it isn't safe. This is the worst

possible scenario where the absence of information paralyses us from making our own decisions and we should resist the urge to put experts and authorities in that position.

As a consequence it is very difficult. The media reports highlight the extreme events and are silent about what happened at all the other choirs which experienced the virus before lockdowns came into effect. All of the clusters reported have occurred prior to formal mitigation measures being adopted by choirs. This has encouraged a lot of theories, but not fact.

The risk of catching the virus while singing is real. What we do know is that isolation is our only guaranteed approach to eliminate the risk of catching the virus. But, isolation comes with its own risks, particularly if we are living with this for years to come.

Hopefully at this point we've succeeded in changing your mindset so that, as a manager of a choir, you are confident that it is allowable to have your choir sing together provided you satisfy the regulations. You understand that the entire world is not expecting you to ensure the safety of every singer. At this point we know and accept that every activity exposes participants to risk so you are motivated to assist your singers to make informed personal choices about the risks that they are willing to take when it comes to singing.

Is that changed mindset enough? Well, I don't think so. To capture all of those things we think you need to make a plan and share it with your choir, or the parents of your singers when you are dealing with children. It is not good enough to ask your singers if they are happy to sing yet in the absence of clear guidance as to what they can expect the choir to do when they do come singing. That is not informed choice.

Thankfully the WA Government has created some tools which you can adapt to this purpose as So. Now we have confidence that our choirs can rehearse live and we see the merits in documenting a concise plan to share our approach with everyone in the choir. What are you going to put in your plan? Do you have to make it up yourself?

We have a second online meeting on Tuesday 30 June 2020 at 6:30pm to run through exactly how you should make your COVIDSafe Plan and what you should think about for your vulnerable singers, both now, with zero apparent community transmission, and in the future should community transmission appear in our midst.

My thanks again to ANCA for hosting this webinar. My thanks also to Nikki, Nicholas and Matt for their contribution to the discussion. I look forward to catching up on your comments and queries now and incorporating them into our next session on Tuesday next week. If you are happily on your way now we look forward to hearing you soon. If you are not yet happy, let us know. We'll keep making ourselves available to help as many of you as possible keep singing.