

SongFest/ANCA Webinar June 24th

“Strategies for singing with and without COVID”

Comments by Dr Nicholas Bannon UWA

It is vitally important that policy applied to choral singing at the time of Covid-19 takes note of the value to human beings of exercising their capacity to sing ... as much as it does the responsible measures required to prevent the spread of this terrible disease. I would therefore like to begin by voicing the concern that some political and media commentary appears wilfully ignorant of the nature and value of singing, if not openly hostile to what is actually a universal practice across all human societies rather than the obsession of a small proportion of people that can be lightly dismissed without consequence.

Evolutionary studies of the ability to sing suggest that it evolved prior to language, and a recapitulation of this sequence can be heard in the early vocalisations of infants, responding to their carers in pitched vocal sounds as the basis for the eventual acquisition of speech.

At the other end of the life cycle, people with dementia may entirely lose the ability to speak ... but retain their capacity for song. This can be exploited in rekindling or retaining vocal communication, between a patient and their partner ... as well as in the social uplift provided by group singing.

If it appears perverse to commence consideration of the nature of singing through reference to two subsets of the population not usually associated with choral performance, my intention is to illustrate that song offers lifelong companionship to every human, conferred in our genetic inheritance. The ability to sing well, and to enjoy doing so, is released where the family, educational experience, or the communal environment (whether it be church or pub) provides the appropriate stimulus to participation.

So ... in preparing this response to the Songfest questionnaire Matt has reported, I wanted to remind a predominantly choral audience of the wider contexts in which singing needs to occur if choirs themselves are going to prove sustainable and not be viewed as a minority pursuit.

Two former students are practising as qualified Music Therapists in Perth hospitals. Singing to and with patients is essential to the capacity for therapeutic and palliative care they have trained to provide. They are still employing

singing in their repertoire of interaction, responsibly applying the same kinds of spacing and protection that we are discussing for choirs. But I find it encouraging, even exemplary, that they have continued while many of our choirs have had to stop.

Much of my work in music education has been as part of an international network advocating for the benefits to every child of well-taught vocal and musical experience. Again, we face the problematic field of whether governments can demand the return of all children to school; as well as the considerable difficulty of imposing spatial separation and stringent hygiene practices on toddlers. But what we also need to consider is the potential retardation of sensory-motor and auditory integration that singing provides, both in its consequences for producing a generation of children less able to sing, and for the effects this may have on language skills, mathematics, and social intelligence. All of these are, by the way, extensively documented in a literature that politicians ought to read!

My colleague Robin Dunbar in Oxford has measured the health benefits of group singing ... and found it uniquely able to reduce pain thresholds. Other projects around the world reported in the excellent book published by UWA neurologist Alan Harvey illustrate that singing boosts the immune system and reduces stress levels. So, before we commence our defence of singing from the condemnation of ignorant journalists, we need to place it within this wider context of normality and the good that it achieves.

A passing remark, then regarding government responsibilities should Covid-19 set in for a long duration. I have seen online, simultaneous music teaching, including choral rehearsal, in widely separated communities in Brazil, Canada and Iowa. This is because their wifi networks are connected by fibre-optic cabling: the technology turned down by the Abbott government.

So let's present this element of balance: the principal that singing is too important to be placed in the box of what we should be told not to do. Yes, we must face the bottom line: that we adopt measures which minimise singing together as a means of transmitting the virus. But we need to achieve this through a balanced position that also represents the dangers of not singing.

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