Choir in the Time of Pandemic

Dear Friends,

A lot has happened in the last month. For people around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed our way of life. Choirs, by their nature, are synonymous with large group gatherings. Singing has been declared one of the worst things you can do if you’re trying to stop the spread of the Coronavirus. It has meant cancelling the rest of our season and creating a contingency plan for moving forward. We know this will eventually resolve itself and requires our patience and cooperation in the meantime.

Luckily, it hasn’t prevented us from finding other ways to get together in support of our community. Singing City held its final in-person rehearsal on Tuesday, March 10. Since then, we have been meeting via ZOOM at our regular rehearsal time. It’s not an app that lends itself to singing together, but it does give us a chance to check in with each other and do a little solo singing at home while Jeff accompanies on piano. Jeff and the choir are working on a recording project that we will share with you later this month. Peter Crimmins, a reporter for WHYY, put together a story about how Philadelphia area choirs are coping—including Singing City. Read/Listen here.

Choir members have stepped up to help Singing City create an Emergency Relief Fund for fellow choir members in need. Their generosity is not surprising. This is a community that cares deeply about the well-being of its members. From monetary donations to offers to run errands and do grocery shopping, Singing City is there for each other.

In this issue of Singing City Notes, you’ll find a letter from Jeff, photos from our Winter Festival of Voices that took place in late February (that seems like a lifetime ago...). We also bring you stories from two choir members who are health care providers— Deb Clarke and Melanie Rainford.

We are happy to report that, though we have had to cancel our May 3 performance of Stephen Paulus’ To Be Certain of the Dawn, we are hoping to reschedule the concert for this fall. We’ll keep you posted as things continue to unfold—the situation changes day by day.

Teen Voices of the City Ensemble (T-VOCE), our collaborative youth choir, continues to meet via Zoom and is working on a music/video project to be completed this spring. We will get it to you as soon as its ready.

A housekeeping note: Friends Center is closed except to pick up mail and grab something you need to work from home. The best way to reach us is by e-mail. I can be reached at lauren@singingcity.org; Cortlandt’s address is cmatthews@singingcity.org.

We miss you all and look forward to being back together as soon as possible. I hope you and your families are faring well. Stay safe and we will be in touch again soon.

Lauren Anderson, Executive Director
Singing City’s Winter Festival of Voices brought together Singing City Choir and youth choirs from across the region, as well as Esperanza Charter Dance Ensemble. Top row, l. to r.: Rosemary Schneider and members of Teen Voices of the City Ensemble (T-VOCE); Elizabeth Weigle with the Grace Notes of Agnes Irwin Middle School. 2nd row: Jarrett Roseborough with Pine Forge Academy Choir; Esperanza Charter Dance Ensemble and director Tania Y. Ramos. 3rd row: Keith Valley Middle School Choir, Mindy Rubinlicht, director; Northeast High School Concert Choir, Jay Fluellen director; combined choirs. Photos by Margo Reed.
How strange it is to write these words to you from your home, on Easter morning, my first in more than 40 years of standing before a choir in a packed church, conducting “Hallelujah...” And in this festival of Passover, with its message of freedom and the will to persevere with faith against all odds, many of us wonder how we will get through this awful pandemic. We wonder, what will life look like when that day of freedom finally comes?

While none of us knows the answer to that question, as clarity about that future comes, I believe we will be poised to be a greater society. I believe that we are in the midst of learning something profound about our core life values. That, the love we have for each other is stronger than we realized (the old axiom, “absence makes the heart fonder” never seemed more true.) That, perhaps our lives were too cramped full of non-essential activities and that this forced slowing down might not be such a bad thing. That, even with the limitations of video meetings, rehearsals, and teaching, good things are possible: connections are sustained, wise decisions get made, and learning takes place.

For example, during his lesson this week, one of my first-year Yale students, confined at home in his apartment in New Haven with a pitiful 3-octave digital keyboard, burst out with, “I’ve just had an epiphany!! I understand now.” (He was learning to improvise using one of Messiaen’s most challenging modes of limited transposition.) The look of joy on his face was the highlight of my week, and one of the loveliest moments of my teaching career.

At the heart of humanity is the essential need to be in community with one another. And, unlike 9/11, when people rushed together to be in community, we have to rush away from community into isolation. That is why the Singing City community is even more important right now. The connections we have made through years of hard work, great concerts, and choir tours, as we have grown in our friendships with another, will carry us through COVID-19. I am certain of that. I wish all of you the very best during this strange time and can’t wait to see you when freedom returns at last.

Jeff Brillhart
Artistic & Music Director

Photos: Jeff at the piano during Singing City’s concert tour of Mexico July 2019; T-VOCE during a rehearsal break; audience members at the Winter Festival of Voices in February.

A Day in the Life of an Urgent Care Physician During COVID-19
by Deb Clarke, soprano 2

The alarm goes off at 5:45 am. Time to get up for another day of battle. I shower, dress into scrubs, let the dog out, make coffee. I grab my 2.5 gallon Ziplock bag, civilian clothes, and food for the day that was made by my family the evening before. By 6:30 am I am on my way to the front lines. I am a physician at MedExpress Urgent Care in Brookhaven, Delaware County, PA. As I write this, the number of Coronavirus confirmed cases in PA is 11,510. The number today in Delaware County is 708, with 14 deaths. Sadly, there will be many more.

MedExpress Urgent Care is a 7-day-a-week walk-in medical facility. We never know who, how many, or what conditions patients are walking in for. Due to the national lack of test kits, our company has grouped centers and designated one in the middle to be the testing site. We are grouped with the State of Delaware centers, with MedExpress Newark as the test site. Although Brookhaven is not testing, we are screening and treating presumed COVID-19 cases. Patients who meet the current testing guidelines of fever, cough and shortness of breath are either sent to Newark for testing or to the ER by ambulance if they are medically unstable or at a significant risk of becoming so. We also provide patients who meet the criteria for testing with information about other sites in the greater Philadelphia area.

After evaluation, patients with mild symptoms are directed to go home and quarantine themselves for 14 days. The issue of the lack of adequate testing for COVID-19 is one of the most frustrating aspects of this pandemic. Even for those sites who do testing, the swabs are sent out to labs and take 4 to 14 days to get the results back. Not having rapid testing at all medical facilities puts everyone at risk. We assume that any patient who walks into our center for any reason can have the virus. It is also very frustrating to have patients whom we tell that they have a presumed mild case, but because we cannot prove it, they refuse to believe that possibility and indicate that they will not quarantine themselves. One of the reasons why this virus continues to spread.

We continue to see patients for the myriad of urgent care issues, including acute illnesses, exacerbations of chronic conditions, and injuries. No one knows how many asymptomatic carriers are out there. For over a month we have been wearing masks and gloves when seeing all patients. If at the initial screening upon entering our center it is deemed that the patient may have early or mild symptoms of COVID-19 we don the full personal protective equipment, now commonly known as PPE, and see them in the designated isolation exam room. Fortunately, our company has been able to provide all that is needed to protect all of us in the center and, thus, our families and loved ones. Every employee in our company has stepped it up to treat all patients with dignity, compassion and professionalism. Helping patients handle the stress and anxiety of all components of this pandemic is one of the most important parts of our day.

Most of our days run from 12-14 hours of providing patient care. At the end of the day we often debrief and discuss any procedures we wish to change or add to the next day. Before leaving the center, I take off my scrubs, put them in the Ziplock bag, leave the sneakers on top of my locker, wash up, then put on my clean clothes to make the trek home. Upon arriving home, those clothes go in the washer, I shower, have a snack, then go to bed, getting what rest I can before the next day’s battle. All that I have learned in the 25 years of being a physician has adequately and confidently prepared me for this fight.

Notes
I am a nurse, and my role is professional development for the Nursing Department at a very large academic medical center in the city. Although I am currently on LOA recovering from surgery (I will be back at work next Tuesday), I had the opportunity recently to visit my colleagues after a post-op appointment. I could see how hectic and stressful this time has been on everyone. My supervisor mentioned she’s been consistently working 70-hour weeks. They have spent much time educating our healthcare staff on the proper technique and sequence to safely put on and remove PPE; all regular hospital training has been cancelled, and the things they must do (like nursing orientation and CPR training) they’ve rapidly had to come up with creative online or ‘social-distance friendly’ solutions.

Given nationwide equipment shortages, staff are asked to re-wear masks intended only for single-use. Right now, upon entering the hospital all staff are given 1 mask, and 1 plastic baggie and told - this is ‘your mask’ for the foreseeable future to wear at all times (only exceptions are eating and drinking), per a new hospital policy. I received my mask and baggie, and that day I went home and bought a UV light on Amazon so I can try to sanitize it when I get home. I’m still waiting for it.

I know our nurses are brave, and always rise to the challenge to deliver excellent patient care; that said, I have spoken to several, and they are scared - scared of contracting the disease and getting very sick and/or bringing it home to their families. A close friend of mine, who I’ve known for over 20 years, is a nurse in Brooklyn right now. A week ago, he was displaying COVID-19 symptoms, and had recently spoken with a surgeon who ended up being diagnosed with it. When he went to the ED, he was denied a test although he displayed all the standard CDC criteria. They said, ‘everyone should just assume they have it’ and was told to head back to the operating room to work. When I checked, the NYC Health Department’s website in fact said that “unless you’re hospitalized and a diagnosis would impact your care, you will not be tested.” Needless to say I was checking in on him every day, and thankfully his symptoms have mostly subsided. This is a very scary time, and people should not underestimate this virus. I am a little uneasy to officially be back to work next week, but I want to do my part and help my colleagues as best as I can. Hopefully, Philadelphia has done what is needed to flatten our curve. Stay safe out there, and wash your hands thoroughly and often!

Melanie Rainford MSN, RN, NPD-BC (and Alto 1)