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'Virtual choirs' and the simulation of live performance under lockdown

Under lockdown, freelance musicians' work of concerts, rehearsals and church services is suspended indefinitely. For musicians, performing is not just labour but also a source of emotional sustenance, identity and sociality, particularly for those who perform in ensembles such as choirs. Early into lockdown audio-visual content began surfacing on social media, presenting 'virtual' ensemble performances created by layering individually recorded videos of musicians performing in isolation. Such multi-track videos present a spirit of *communitas* and fortitude, invoking the power of music to 'bring people together'. For professional ensembles, they also remind audiences of their continued existence and respond to an urge to seek continuity for abandoned projects and routines. However, in contrast to the embodied and affectively engaged context of live ensemble work, the process of producing 'virtual choir' content is labour-intensive and heavily mediated by unfamiliar technologies. Ironically, these serve at every stage to emphasise how far from live music-making virtual performances are. The resources and expertise required to produce such content precludes most church-based and amateur choirs. The majority is produced by professional chamber groups[1] or opera companies.

The classical music industry has a fractured, mistrustful orientation towards internet-based technologies, being primarily structured around live performance. The first virtual choir was created and streamed online by composer Eric Whitacre in 2010, capturing the attention of choral singers around the world, though rarely replicated until now. The explosion of classical multi-tracked content has varied dramatically in terms of performance quality. Issues of poor tuning, intonation, approximate togetherness and limited expressivity have marred the output of even the world's best musicians, and noticeably singers more than instrumentalists. The disparities of smartphone microphones and personal earbuds that musicians participate through record and relay sound differently. Designed for speech, they often miss the complex harmonics of the classical singing voice, affecting tuning across separate takes. Singers of all standards have universally reported the experience to be stressful, disorienting and musically dissatisfying. This stands in direct opposition to their reported motives for participation, namely to feel a sense of togetherness and continue sharing musical experiences.

Baudrillard (1994) describes simulation as the nostalgic attempt to close the gap between replication and actual. 'Virtual choirs', in seeking to simulate the effect of a live performance, fail to replicate or simulate any aspects of live performance as a spatially, temporally situated act undertaken by embodied beings engaging in an immediate and intimate mode of co-creation. Unable to attend and respond to other singers' breathing, emotional states, vowel sounds, phrasing and expression, beyond basic

[1] *The Swan Consort*, author's freelance chamber choir (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6ZTBgENJno) Accessed May 2020.

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issues of ensemble alignment, virtual performances lack unity of style and emotion. The lack of a shared acoustic, with which singers' interact to amplify and blend their voices with others, is only poorly redressed by adding 'reverb'. Moreover, time lag in performance, production and audience response highlight the astounding immediacy of live performance. 'Virtual choir' is, effectively, a misnomer. Technologically simulated 'performances' during isolation cannot synthesise place, time, affect and emotion, which are not contexts for music-making, but are revealed as integral textures in the fabric of crafting musical sound.

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Reference

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The China–US blame game: claims-making about the origin of a new virus

On 12 March 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao wrote on Twitter, 'It might be [the] US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!' In a brazen response, President Donald Trump described the virus responsible for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as the 'Chinese Virus' (also termed 'Chinese coronavirus' and 'Wuhan virus' by his senior officials), implying that it originated in China where the first COVID-19 cases were reported in late 2019. This tug-of-war is currently being played out in political communications, the media and even public discourse, with accusations of slow public health responses, misinformation, media suppression and conspiracy theories – as both countries politicise the origin and impact of the COVID-19 virus, and blame each other for the pandemic.

Why and how is the virus's origin (which is currently unknown) being constructed as a problem, unlike in other coronavirus outbreaks such as Severe Acute Respiratory