Online Singing

Dear Fellow Singers,

Here are some personal reflections which you might find helpful. For accomplished Online Singers and Musical Directors there is likely to be little here that you do not know but it might be helpful to have these thoughts set down in script for you to mull over.

Singing in the Zoom Room

Over the last year of Lockdown, choir singers and others of that ilk have become familiar with the term, "all mute please" as a precursor to singing in the Zoom Room.

In one choir we are asked to apply 'Original Sound' during our warm-up before muting for the main rehearsal. Original Sound may help the Musical Director to hear participants as we sing to each other in parallel from our diverse locations on the Internet. Sorry, to me our 'live' voices still sound like a cacophony.

As we know the issue is 'latency', the delay effect separating the arrival of the audio signal _between_ us and making it out of sync with our personal video signals.

I_n particular_, the competing voices heard by our MD and Accompanist are all arriving out of sync to them too, in a disorderly jumble.

In short, we cannot sing together with Open Mics in the Zoom Room.

Compiling audio and video files.

As a result, when online in rehearsal mode, we sing with our Mics Muted where only the MD and Accompanist are allowed Open Mics. As singers, after a while, we have become used to singing alone to ourselves in our homes, watching our fellow singers displayed on our devices but unable to hear them, perhaps concluding that for the moment:

Zoom Singing is as good as it gets and far and away better than **not** singing.

One upside is that we are encouraged to singalong in mute with other sections which means we have less down-time in rehearsals.

Audio files and their compilation.

As an extension of our online rehearsal singing, like many others around the world, some of our groups have gone further, learning to create our own personal audio and video files which we submit for **Compilation** into a Concert or Performance.

There are a range of ways of doing this using smart phones, tablets and laptops. One popular method is to record to an App called **Audacity** - more on this later.

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These sound files are then sent over the Internet to the **Compiler** (a Sound Engineer cum Video Editor), a new member of our support team and vital during this current Lockdown Choir period.

Some online groups have many thousands of contributing singers and are now global choirs. Amazing! Unthinkable a year ago. I imagine that for the **Compiler**, choosing and blending these many sound files must be a daunting process with dud files being quickly deleted. However, surely this will **not** in any way detract from the pleasure of the participants because, with hundreds of selected voices in the final, blended mix, it is **impossible** (?) to pick out an individual voice, I assume.

In my own recent experience, singing in smaller groups of up 10 to 40 contributors, individual voices can be certainly be heard and the skill of our **Compilers** is to edit out faulty elements of the sound files received to achieve a 'best blend' for each piece and for each ensemble.

This is why, in my view, it is more worthwhile to concentrate our personal efforts on polishing our **audio** contributions using **Audacity**, see below.

Recording Video files for compilation.

In some groups we are invited to add **video** files , which may be submitted with or without audio. If combined A-V files are submitted, these are normally dealt with as separate audio and video files during the editing and compilation process.

With smaller choirs or even when small groups of 4 to 5 singers are displayed in Zoom Galleries it is **impossible (!)** for the viewer to detect 'out-of-sync' images _between_ contributors. For larger groups, where thumbnail images are the norm, detail is lost and the images become a blur.

If images are large enough to enable us to watch individuals, it can often be observed their video is out of sync with the compiled audio signal. This arises because audio and video files are normally processed differently by the **Compiler** before being re-combined.

Indeed, in the case of amateur singers encouraged to become video _performers_, most of us find the making of these videos highly stressful. Often this is etched on our stern faces or worse, the recordings we make show us 'heads down'. Unnerved by exposure to the camera while trying to focus on singing, we are tempted to seek comfort by focusing on our musical scores, items which may or may not be in shot.

In the Zoom Gallery this can come across as a semi-furtive performance, distracting and unpleasant for our online audience. In my view, very few amateurs have the poise to sing directly to the probing eye of the lens.

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As we all agree it is the <u>sound</u> of our singing which is paramount so perhaps it would be best to avoid the hassle of video compilations and use instead happy, relaxed and smiling head and shoulder photographs?

Now, a few weeks on from first posting this piece, a new development.

In one of my choirs, we are about to record two pieces using VGTs. We shall submit these for Compilation and then, in the Zoom Room in Gallery Mode we shall sing along to a 'broadcast' of the Compilations, while muted while our Host uses the Record feature to capture our singing/ This video will then be 'melded' with our audio compilation. How this will 'appear' I have yet to learn.

Of course, there will be Latency in the broadcast of the Compilation arriving at each singer but, given the savings of time and angst by avoiding individual videos, I am hopeful this will be successful.

Voice Guide Tracks.

When I joined the Mackintosh Choir five years ago, they had already established the provision of what they called "their secret weapon" – **voice guide tracks (VGTs).**

And so, at the start of each choir session, alongside our batch of music scores, we choristers are sent Dropbox links which allow us to download **VGTs** for our voice part, S1, S2, A1, A2, T1, T2, B1 and B2. These **VGTs** are prepared for us by professional singers, each voice part *exactly synchronized to the underlying piano track.*

With the advent of Zoom Room Singing, this approach has become commonplace. Without these **VGTs** it would be virtually impossible to produce and compile Zoom Choir Concerts from individual contributing voice files.

Perhaps the widespread provision of **VGTs** is our first and most enabling 'bonus' for choirs and other singers in lockdown/isolation.

Perhaps the second bonus arises in the Zoom Room from the use of 'screen sharing' for scores and voice files and playing *YouTube* clips. In this way, our MDs can teach us the fine detail of what they want from each voice part to help us master the music we are singing. In the Zoom Room, while still in our homes, we are in a virtual one to one

environment with the MD. For someone like me with tinnitus, dulled hearing, failing eyesight and easily distracted, this is a HUGE bonus.

Self-recording for self-improvement.

The third bonus for enthusiasts has been the use of **Audacity** to self-record and self-improve, practising alone at home with annotated scores, singing with our **VGT** 'partner' in our headphones, then listening back to what we have just sung to our mics.

Oh, how daunting and dispiriting that can be, at first.

However, those of us who use this approach generally agree, with extensive repetition, we can **self-improve** our performance, driven by the goal of a looming submission deadline for our audio contribution to the current online project.

Yes, for those of us who are less experienced and less gifted singers, this can involve many hours of frustration (and fun (!)) but the reward is a sense of achievement when the final 'click 'is made to SEND, and off goes our WAV or MPS file to the **Compiler**.

Using Audacity.

For me, another huge bonus of Lockdown singing, a technique very recently discovered, is that by importing my **VGT** file into **Audacity,** it is easy to set up a mini loop to play the trickier parts of the song over and over, singing with my **VGT** partner until the note sequence becomes embedded.

If you have not discovered **Audacity**, I urge you to seek it out. Its free, see the links below and follow the pathway to find the version for your audio recording device.

Think of our MDs and Accompanists.

Here is a thought which has been brewing over these last months.

For our MDs and Accompanists, the online singing experience **must** be dispiriting. At every rehearsal these stalwarts come to us in the Zoom Choir and try to be upbeat, jolly and helpful. *But with **ZERO** live audio feedback*, these sessions **must** be excruciatingly frustrating.

It behoves us to repeatedly offer up our thanks to these heroes.

And we must not forget to render thanks to our new best friends, the **VGT** singers and clever A-V **Compilers.**

A thought for the Future

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When we get over the Jordan of this Pandemic back to the Promised Land of Live Singing we once enjoyed, let us please remember to continue to use our **VGTs** and **Audacity** to self-rehearse and self-improve, using these tools alongside the most important element of all, **live rehearsals.**

Wasn't life so much better when we could meet and greet and sing live?

Enjoy,

John Bonthron, March 2021.

Audacity: Available free for many different devices from:

https://www.audacityteam.org/

Here is a link to a *YouTube* tutorial, there are others, lots:

https://youtu.be/DJhIlsLH32I