

Singing Is Finally Back

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Members of the Regensburger Domspatzen girls' choir rehears in Regensburg, southern Germany, on Dec. 2, 2022. Christof Stache/AFP via Getty Images



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Commentary

It was three years ago about this time when I found myself at an outdoor Christmas market at a local church. Looking back, I'm

suddenly aware why it was outside and not inside, despite the cold weather.

In those days, the general belief was that COVID was inside and being outside was the way to protect yourself. This is in contrast to a year earlier when it was widely believed that COVID was outside so you had to stay inside.

Those were the days!

In any case, the childrens' choir began to sing Christmas carols. They stood outside on the steps of the church and sang beautifully. In any case, I think they sang beautifully but it was hard to tell because they were all wearing masks. Outside. In very cold weather. Without microphones.

In normal times, this might have seemed insane. But we gradually became used to extreme strange behaviors and biases. The first time I saw a young person in a mask I was shocked, but that was because I was fully aware of the age gradient of severity of the disease. In short, it was a seasonal virus that attacked the elderly and infirm, while leaving young and working-age populations largely untouched by medically significant consequences.

We live as part of the microbial kingdom. There is no such thing as non-exposure to a pathogen such as this, and you would not want that in any case. Nothing in the world is as deadly as a naive immune system. A major reason for the lengthening of lifespans in the late 19th century was travel and immunity training that comes with exposure.

For some reason, no one could talk about this truth in those days, since the de facto principle was zero exposure under any conditions.

This meant that singing in groups was among the practices targeted for extinction. On May 15, 2020, the CDC released a [quick study](#) on a choir practice in Skagit County, Washington. It chronicled how a choir practice involving 60 or so people on March 10 had spread COVID to many members of the choirs. Most people got sick and one died.

The publication of this study spread panic. It's the singing! Everyone stop singing!

The article might have been correct but there is no real way to know. It's not as if the choir members were not doing other things in the days surrounding the choir practice. They went to the store. They socialized. They went to the gas station. They visited friends. In short, they lived a normal life. Later studies demonstrated that the virus itself could be anywhere and everywhere such that not even living inside a refrigerator box provided protection.

The only possible way to demonstrate that it was the choir practice isolated from everything else—that is, if we really care about scientific rigor rather than merely creating a public panic—would be to conduct a seroprevalence study of the entire county, comparing exposure rates of singers to everyone else. Even that would not prove that singing causes infection but it would at least grapple with the biggest flaw in the study. Of course in those days, the CDC was not conducting such studies at all.

Why not? Well, the answer is that COVID exposure was far wider and deeper by then than was being advertised. A [study](#) by Jay Bhattacharya (incoming NIH director) from Santa Barbara showed rates of exposure and resulting immunity were far higher than was known at the time. It was his theory that the virus was already spreading wildly from many months earlier so that all this hopping around and scapegoating of particular kinds of gatherings was pointless. This study proved that actual exposure and infection was 50 times higher than existing “case” counts would suggest.

But in those days, there was no listening to reason, and everyone was anxious to find the activities that were the cause of the spread. They were labelled as bad, and the people who did them were denounced as public enemies. That meant that church choirs were largely disbanded.

A friend wrote me this morning that after nearly five years of this, his own church choir is only now recobbling itself. A big problem is that

the music directors themselves found themselves with no work to do. Already low paid, many were simply fired from their jobs.

Think of the problem for children's choirs in particular. It is essential that they constantly practice because their voices are changing so rapidly. Boys who were sopranos in one season can suddenly be basses a year later. Managing that transition is difficult and doing so requires great expertise. A whole generation was lost when choirs were disbanded for a year or two.

This was without precedent. There were boys' choirs in the UK that had been in constant uninterrupted session for 400 years that had to go to Zoom or simply stop meeting. That's how unprecedented this was. Many still have not recovered, either in personnel or repertoire or in the spirit of the group. Even today, many choir directors are bitter and demoralized by this.

Another feature of choirs that make them work is continuity. New singers learn from old singers. You know this if you have ever sung in one. Each section must have a "ringer" and many singers around them psychologically attach their voices to this one person. If that is absent, an entire section can suddenly become silent.

This is why founding new choirs is so incredibly difficult, especially with amateur singers. It takes years to develop a stable and usable repertoire. Breaking the pattern of regular rehearsals and performances can lead to disaster.

We might ask: Why was singing targeted for destruction? I wish I had the answer. Maybe it is that it is such a conspicuous activity with breathing and standing next to each other. Many secular people might just think it is the sort of thing we can do without. Surely we don't really need to sing all the time and can take a year or two off.

This is a strange view. In the long tradition of Psalm singing in Judaism, the voice was privileged as a way of glorifying God. In the theological sense, the breath that God gave to Adam gave him life and that was transferred to all of us. We in turn breathe back in song as an

act of gratitude, which is why singing in worship has played such a huge role in history.

This same sense transferred over to Christianity.

When the organ was invented in the Middle Ages, there was a long controversy about whether it should be used in worship. Some people said absolutely not since the human voice alone was suitable for giving praises.

But the advocates of the organ pointed out that the instrument works very much like a human body, with air pushed in and exiting through pipes that mimic the way people sing. Once it became clear that the organ was a tremendous tool for evangelizing people, it came to be approved. Indeed for a very long period before the Reformation, the organ was the only instrument allowed in Christian worship. The primacy of the voice was never questioned.

As a result, when singing came under fire in 2020, many people regarded this as a direct attack on their ability to praise God with others, which is to say the issue was soteriologically existential. It was interrupting their primary life mission, which is to obtain salvation for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Here we are at the holidays years later and singing is back. Carolers are out again, this time without masks, and crowds are pouring into churches for worship. May we never again take the right to sing for granted.

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