

## Sing with the Larks - a Primer for video recordings in virtual choirs

So, you want to join a virtual choir, but the thought of recording yourself freezes you in place? Be a lark! Unlike other birds who sing as they perch, larks sing together while flying - a joyous sound. Virtual choirs require different strategies than the ones you use to prepare for an ISC Masterworks concert. Whether you are singing live, or as a member of a virtual choir, you remain a choral musician. I have had fantastic experiences singing in virtual choirs, and I have had one terrible experience. The terrible experience taught me what to look for, and how to feel when I recorded, so all was not lost! When a friend asked for advice on how to prepare, implement and execute a video recording for a virtual choir, I put together the suggestions below. I hope this blog persuades you to try a virtual choir recording.

In a virtual choir, you sing with musicians from around the world. In Eric Whitacre's "Sing Gently", there were nearly 18,000 of us from around the world - from an isolated gorgeous natural tenor in a remote Nigerian village to singers struggling for breath after recovering from covid-19, to singers who unexpectedly lost a loved one and dedicated their performance to the ones they loved, to singers who sing because they must. This sense of global community brought me a great sense of peace from the barrage of difficult media in the US. I threw myself into the Facebook community established by each choir, not to contribute, but to learn about those I would sing with. There are no auditions - as long as the clap you make to mark the start of the recording is audible, your recording will be used. You cannot fail!

First, look for virtual choirs planning music you love, or music you have always wanted to learn. Scores are often free. If scores must be purchased for copyright reasons, the price is usually lowered as the choirs partner with publishers. Then go to the virtual choir pages and check the following:

- There will be a conductor video (you can check prior recordings to be sure the conductor is clearly giving down and up beats).
- There will be rehearsal audio or video tapes for each part for you to sing with. These are essential to figure out when tempo changes, and to set your entrance and exits.
- There will be several Facebook, or You Tube rehearsals that can be accessed any time. I sing with two UK-based virtual choirs, A 12 noon BST rehearsal is 7am EDT - too early for me! If there are live Zoom rehearsals, go to them as you can ask questions via chat.
- Nice-to-have: interviews with experts on the music and vocal technique classes. This is an extra dimension than gives more than can be accomplished in live rehearsals.

Be prepared to spend more time than in live ISC rehearsals, learning the music, and identifying emotions or colors you want to emit. Set your intention of how you want to sing this in 3 words - nothing technical - "breath, joy, go" is one example. Print it out where you can see your 3 words. Now I will assume you are good to go and want to plan your recording. Keep things simple - it's your voice they want, not your looks, home or garage! Make your plans as an ISC choral musician preparing for the first concert. Keep things simple! I jerry-rigged a lot at the beginning, but soon realized investment in a couple of cheap props was well worth the money and freed me from worrying whether my phone would fall, or laptop would slide out of place.

To keep it simple, test the app "Virtual Chorister" for your phone or iPad. The app allows you to use a split screen with conductor recording on top, and your image below. Using earphones, the

music will go to your ears and not the recording, and your voice will go to the phone recording. If this works for you, it means you only need your phone (1 device).

Find earphones that work for you. After ordering and returning many options, I ended up with a fairly ugly over-the-ears open-back set that allow me to hear the music accompaniment very clearly. Do NOT use wireless earbuds as there will be a noticeable time lag between the audio track and your voice.

If you do not like the Virtual Chorister app, you will need a laptop (or iPad) for the headphones/earbuds and conductor video. Get some kind of tripod. I used a short (about 12") tripod holding my iPhone on top of my piano - perfect height with no image distortion of the head. Stand the tripod holding the phone on the laptop keyboard, so you get a nice self-image and can see conductor. To free the phone/tripod from the laptop, I eventually bought an adjustable table stand for my laptop. I could tilt it and organize the video recording, so I could look at the phone camera (gives better face shots and makes you look as if you are watching the conductor like a hawk). You are an ISC choral musician, after all!

I used the microphone on my phone at first but was never happy with the sound quality. I bought a Shure microphone (my most costly item) to plug into the iPhone (or iPad), and I use the Shure video recording app. The video recording is stored in the camera's photos. From there, I airdrop the recording to my laptop, and then submit it as directed.

Before I set up, I will check location and light for the video. Walk around the house with your phone camera on to find where the best light is at what time of day, and where. I usually record mid-morning as lighting is optimal. Best light means your face looks good, with even lighting. I found natural light was much easier to manage than waiting until evening, and juggling lighting. We can't always choose the most flattering location in live concerts, so take advantage of this aspect for a virtual choir!

Try to have a plain, clean background behind you - a wall is better than a curtain. I take down a couple of my artworks and use an off-white wall. Any shade of white, taupe, or grey or a pale rose color background seems to work best when I look at other singer's backgrounds. Make sure the environment can be quiet - no dehumidifiers, wandering pets or partners, thunderclaps, etc. You want to feel as you do just before you walk on stage for an ISC concert.

Once I have the light and location organized, I set everything up, and then will rehearse to the concert audio/video recording a few times without the headphones, record a couple of takes, and then listen back to my singing against the accompaniment. **DO NOT JUDGE YOUR VOICE.** I check for mistakes in onsets and offsets, and any horrible off-pitch or rhythm moments that need a bit more rehearsal. I check if my voice sounds free (no straining on high and low notes); my throat seems open (no tight muscles at base of throat); and if I can sense color/intention/emotion. I also listen for the odd lovely moment to confirm I might be able sing this competently. Rejoice in your voice!

Optional: Sometimes I will load the recording into Audacity (free computer software) to check my clap has a clear audible signal (who wants to be rejected because their clap was not clear?), my breathing is not noticeably audible, and the singing intensity is constant (a good way to diagnose if you are properly supporting the voice!)

Wear black or plain color top with simple neckline - patterns are too distracting- and no T-shirts. Think ISC uniform, and dress less formally but equally smartly. Check some virtual choir photos to see what look you want to project. Keep the image very simple (you'll feel better too). Remember this is a choir recording and the voices are most important. However you set up, check there are no image/color distractions. You are setting your version of an ISC concert stage.

The biggest part of all this is **ATTITUDE!** Practice until you are comfortable. When it comes to the day to record, put yourself into the same mindset as for an ISC concert. **DONT** think about technical voice stuff or your set-up. Imagine all of us in ISC lined up ready to go onstage and go from there. It's a choral piece, not a solo. Focus on your intention for the piece, whatever image you have acquired for it, then go through your pre-performance prep, think "go", and sing. You need to do this **EVERY** time you run a possible submission recording - it quiets the mind and gives you the right focus.

Decide the day you will record, and how long you are going to mess around with recordings (**I** may do 3-5 runs and reserve 3 hours) on **THE DAY**. Then take your best recording and submit. It will not be **PERFECT**. That is not the goal. The goal is to sing as well as you can on the day you record. If you cannot shake your voice loose, or go beyond 6 recordings, **STOP** and set another day to record.

Make your recording 5 or more days before the deadline. If you leave until the last minute, you may not be able to load your video, and then stress goes **UPPPPP!**

Be sure to listen to the finished video of the choir - it is a different experience from a live performance, and very emotional. You are listening to a global community coming together in peace.

**LIFT UP YOUR VOICE AND SING!**