

# Virtual Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs

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One of the many losses brought about by corona virus has been that of choral singing. Almost overnight a nation of songbirds has been silenced...or has it?

Since Holy Week I have been running a virtual church choir as well as singing in another one. What does that mean? Put simply, I record myself playing the instrumental accompaniment and then send it out to my singers with a PDF of the music so they can listen to it through headphones on their computer whilst singing their part into their phone. They then email the resulting sound file to me and, using a freely downloadable programme called Audacity, I combine them all to sound like a choir, mix the tracks down to mp3 format and email them out to my church (St. John the Baptist, greater Whitbourne, in this context.) These then get played during the zoom service for the congregation to sing along to in their homes.

That's not a choir, you might say; and in many ways it isn't. A choir is a living, breathing organism, a group of people making music together, a team, a well-oiled machine, a family. Where then is the real-time sensation, the precisely timed drawing of breaths, the eye contact, the emotion? How sterile an exercise just to sing into your phone!

I thought that too when I first started, motivated initially by a sense of loss, isolation and boredom. But as time goes on, I realise that not only have more people joined, but we've actually got better, and when the vicar insisted recently I have a week off, I actually missed it. Once the piano backing is recorded, I also sing my own part over it and send both out to singers so they can hear my imperfect efforts and match their voices to mine. Initially everyone's timing was slightly out, phrases starting earlier in some voices than in others, final consonants were placed at different times; but as time has gone on, people are listening more carefully, breathing with me and singing more as one.

As a conductor, I am the first to acknowledge my singers' vocal abilities way outstrip my own and it has been a salutary experience to have to provide vocal leadership on these recordings and be confronted with the reality of the gap. Singing with headphones on is a totally different experience. Somehow the sense of pitch is affected and things can go badly wrong. How many times have I thought I'd done a perfect 'take' only to cringe upon listening back, hold my head in my hands and exclaim 'but I teach them not to do THAT!' Many takes later and it would still only be adequate.

Without these virtual choirs, however, my singing life would have died altogether. I have kept in touch with friends from various groups (of course geographical location is no longer a barrier and anyone can send a voice file); even made new friends and learnt new repertoire. People who would never in a million years have sung in a church choir before are now cheerfully singing hymns and psalms. We share jokes and cheer each other up in the necessary to-ing and fro-ing of emails, so I hear their voices in what they write ('sorry Kate, a bit gravelly this morning: please ignore my top D's', 'the dog joined in on this one') as well as literally hearing their voices in their recordings. Individually we may not be Aled Jones or Charlotte Church, but together we sound good and we continue to share many of the things that make choral singing such a triumph of the human spirit.

Here are links to two examples:

[Crown him with many crowns](#)

[Love divine, all loves excelling](#)