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New Media in Choral Practice: Virtual Choir as a Prophet of the New Reality

Naujosios medijos ir chorinė praktika:

virtualus choras kaip naujosios realybės pranašas

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Abstract

Changes and developments in performance practices of the twenty-first-century choir require a novel angle of approach. This paper proposes an attempt to analyze one of the newest choir performance platforms, the virtual choir. Media and social networks, which are no longer just channels of communication but rather intermediaries of cultural networks, are among the most important tools for creating a cultural environment that encourages artists willing to create new, different images (or refine the old ones). Moreover, the phenomenon of the virtual choir has proved to offer valuable solutions in the context of the current pandemic situation. The aim of the present paper is to analyze the dimensions of technology's involvement in choir performance and to discuss the pros and cons of such endeavors.

Keywords: virtual choir, choral performance, media, technology, new reality.

Anotacija

XXI a. choro atlikimo praktiką ir pokyčius reikia vertinti nauju požiūriu. Šiame darbe siūloma pabandyti išanalizuoti vieną naujausių chorų atlikimo platformų – *virtualų chorą*. Šiuolaikinės medijos ir socialiniai tinklai, kuriuos galima laikyti ne vien tik komunikacijos kanalais, o veikiau kultūrinių tinklų tarpininkais, yra vieni iš svarbiausių įrankių kuriant kultūrinę aplinką, kuri skatina menininkus, norinčius kurti naujus, kitokius vaizdus (ar patobulinti senus). Be to, *virtualaus choro* fenomenas pasirodė esąs vertingas sprendimas dabartinės pandemijos situacijos kontekste. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra išanalizuoti technologijų įtraukimo į choro atlikimą aspektus ir aptarti jų privalumus bei trūkumus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: virtualus choras, choro atlikimas, medija, technologija, naujoji realybė.

In the Middle Ages “mystery plays”, which brought together members of the community, used to take place in the churchyard of the Cathedral. Today, the situation is very similar. The difference is in that nowadays post-modern “mystery plays” are performed in electronic churches, that is, in video games, websites, dailies, accounts, forums and encyclopedias. Mysterious threads link representatives of various confessions (sexual orientation, sport, religion, science), which form sociology of future generations. (Maffesoli 2017: 40)

Global communication determines the fact that absolutely different phenomena constantly find themselves side by side and interact, which, in essence, changes our attitude to style, its integrity, polystylistics and the like. (Gaidamavičiūtė 2005: 348)

Introduction

Rapid technological progress in the twenty-first century contributed in part to the emergence of new musical forms and their use in of unusual performances. One of the latest inventions is the Internet, which is the medium of a new

reality offering many, most likely, yet undiscovered ways of performance and different accesses to the possibilities and variants of creation and performance. Today, a virtual space is made use of and included in creative processes ever more often, and occasionally it is encountered in the field of experimental art. Making use of the possibilities it offers, creators do not only undertake new things or discover unexpected ways to create, but also expand their understanding about unexplored resources such as the audience's involvement in the process, creative cooperation, virtual performance and the like. Virtuality opened the way to creating and investigating completely new practices.

In order to attract more public attention and the involvement of musicians, new creative media based on technology are being introduced. However, professional musicians are still often rather reluctant to let the audience into their creative work and performance, and are careful in choosing experimental methods and practices. This way of thinking has been particularly challenged in the last decade, and the internet may be considered the main icebreaker. Media and social networks, which are no longer just “channels of communication” but rather intermediaries

for cultural networks, are among the most important tools for creating a cultural environment that encourages artists willing to create new, different images (or refine old ones) to acquire special identities.

And indeed, creators undertake experimentation, projects that are specifically related to the Internet, and often bring together Internet communities, trying to involve professionals and amateurs or even people who have nothing to do with the field of music in their creative processes. Today, such projects as *The Virtual Choir*, *TransCoding*, *Walk That Sound*, *Stereopublic: Crowdsourcing the Quiet*, *Personal Soundscape Project*, *Blind Tapes*, and *Disquiet Junto* are well-known with certain Internet platforms created to implement them, and the initiators of the projects invite people from the outside to unite and to submit their comments, observations, and recordings of urban and nature sounds as well as recorded tracks of choruses singing, or to share their photographs or poetry. Later, the material collected is included in the process of creation or a musical composition; that material can also initiate change. All these projects are related to the culture of media in a virtual space, where different creative angles create partial changes.

The researcher Pamela Burnard says that:

A great number of ways of musical composition and radically changing forms that define the modern practice of composition require to review radically the concepts of creating music. (Burnard 2012: 114)

Hence, modern experiments of creative work in the Internet space, to my mind, are not fully understood, not carefully considered but are truly simply naturally chosen spaces by academicians as a space for creating and performing their compositions. However, this method adequately reflects what Burnard wanted to say—that the time has come to take a broader perspective on challenges and opportunities.

In the present report I am going to look into the most popular product of the Internet platform in the community of the choral world, namely, the virtual choir, which was first created by the American composer Eric Whitacre. The virtual choir is an assembly of geographically dispersed singers performing choral works led by a conductor. Individual singers post videos of themselves singing their parts, and technicians coordinate the audio into a single performance. The choir, which is both the genre and the performer, changes and acquires ever new features like all the present-day novelties. Technologies, installations and lights, media, unusual spaces, the Internet space—all these are important elements that have consistently become a part of performances of a modern choir and modern musical compositions. The emergence of the virtual choir encourages us to ask the following questions: what features

distinguish it from the performance of a traditional choir; what is its artistic value; what is the motivation behind audience participation; what is the socio-artistic result of the virtual choir; and can this platform become the main form of performance for a choir in the twenty-first century?

The role of the choir in today's world

Choirs have existed in the world for hundreds of years, and they still play an important role in different spheres of cultural, political, religious, or social life. On the one hand, choirs directly contribute to the dissemination of different kinds of music (folk, modern, pop, religious, etc.). On the other hand, choirs as a socio-cultural phenomenon can encourage a social or public activity, unite different groups of people, including minorities, form and develop sub-cultures (school, colleague ensembles, choirs), and create social relationships and personal and group achievements on the local, national, and international scale. A certain structure supporting their development and continuous activity is necessary to carry out this kind of activity. Therefore, choirs are no exception and a certain hierarchy exists there too.

Today, in various spaces, we can hear, in addition to live choir performances or those of flash mobs, the most famous examples of choral music in various media and public spaces (shops, public spaces, squares, supermarkets), such as Carl Orff's *O Fortuna* from the stage cantata *Carmina Burana* or the European Union's anthem *Ode to Joy*, from Symphony No. IX, composed by Ludwig van Beethoven in 1823. However, choral activity is no longer just a regular constant justification for its meaning. Today, this art encompasses many more meanings.

Following the general trends in the scientific circles of the world, it is noticeable that for several decades there has been a lot of discussion about conducting, pedagogy, historical periods, and choral singing techniques as well as about the performance and the performer. Research examining performers' experiments, the social aspects of performing arts, and the search for new directions in performing music in virtual reality are gaining ground. Choir art becomes an object of research¹ in the context of various social phenomena.

The researcher Jacques Launay supplements and extends this idea in his article,² in which he speaks about his joint research with Eiluned Pearce and Robin I. M. Dunbar:

The ice-breaker effect: singing mediates fast social bonding. (Launay 2015)

The researchers try to find out how the choir helps to rapidly create social relationships.

<...> singing in choirs is useful in various ways. Recently we have publicized the investigation which reveals that group singing does not only help establish social relationships but does it extremely fast being an excellent ice-breaker. We also showed that communal singing is effective in seeking to unite large groups of people therefore this activity is ideal when seeking to expand our social networks. (Launay 2015)

It goes without saying that choral activity encourages social relationships and creates networks of people. Individuals meet one another in such cultural organizations as a choir; they rehearse, put on concerts and, through music, establish social links, which often, with the passage of time, move beyond the boundaries of mutual communication.

It is important that researchers increasingly appear throughout the world as well as in Lithuania who are interested in the historical or geographical as well as the social position of performers and their role in society, which influence the formation and choices of music performers. Lina Navickaitė-Martinelli (Navickaitė-Martinelli 2013), researching contemporary socio-cultural aspects in the lives and activities of musicians, highlights important issues that help to deepen the understanding of the current situation of cultural performers in society:

Socio-cultural issues such as school and tradition concepts, styles and identities, repertoire selection, competitions, various media, marketing, image building, verbal communication part – all this forms a significant part of the phenomenon of music performance. (Navickaitė-Martinelli 2013)

To these words of the researcher, I would add one topic that is currently actively considered in books and articles—virtuality and the influence of technology.

It seems that in the twenty-first century, technology plays an especially important role in music.

Technology is omnipresent. Hence, it is hardly surprising that it has had a profound influence on the art of music in the 20th and 21st centuries. It has altered how music is transmitted, preserved, heard, performed, and composed. Less and less often do we hear musical sound that have not at some level been shaped by technology; technology is involved in the reinforcement of concert halls, the recording and broadcast of music, and the design and construction of musical instruments. (Online Pianist 2016)

The Internet, technology, and music are three words that, together, have become synonymous with present-day musical life.

New approaches, technologies, and movements are integrated into Lithuanian choral music concerts quite passively and slowly. The reasons for this slow integration may be the size and staticity of the choir, the over-traditional attitude of conductors and choirmasters towards choral activities, or even their hostility to innovation, the capacity of choirs, and

geography. However, today, emerging genres and forms of dissemination as well as technologies are changing the stage performance, the concept of the audience, and the practice of performing music. It should be noted that the concert performance of many Lithuanian choirs is still often simply static, based on a traditional approach and repertoire³ and maintained within the framework of ordinary interpretive decisions. It is rare to see innovation—especially in a strange, unknown space such as the virtual one. Choirs that experiment include innovation. Although this innovation is rarely discussed, they break with traditions and established stereotypes, create new performance traditions, and presuppose a new approach to the ensemble as a group of performers, and new fields of research will help to establish the modern concept of choir.

Nonetheless, even today, technology is not the main element in the traditional performance of a choir; it is only an additional element (if it is necessary). Usually, we can see a tablet from which singers read the musical notation, a telephone, that the conductor uses to prompt the tone, stage lighting, sound recording equipment, and other technological devices. In live concerts the main thing is the performance of the musical composition learned during the rehearsals, the conveyance of the interpretation, the relationship among the performers themselves, the relationship between the performers and the conductor, and the relationship between the performers and the audience. The moment “here and now” is the most important and passes irreversibly. Nevertheless, little by little, the choral performance also changes: the ideas of a choir, major challenges and the increased use of technologies and experimentation have an impact on the aesthetics of the performance and the established habits of a static choir. Moreover, general issues of social norms, society, and communities are ever more often reflected in the performance. Therefore, the image of the members of a choir, the conductor, and the concert atmosphere changes. All these factors in this new reality contribute markedly to choral art as the creation of a socio-cultural phenomenon of the twenty-first century and are of significance both on the modern stage and in virtual spaces.

What is a virtual choir, and what was the first one in Lithuania?

Eric Whitacre,⁴ who was the first to implement a virtual choir, defines the virtual choir as a universal phenomenon created by the singers of a choir that rallies people from all over the world who love music and are able to look at choral singing in a modern way (Whitacre 2020). *WhatIs* explains that the virtual choir is an assembly of geographically dispersed singers performing choral works. Individual singers post videos of themselves singing their parts (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) (Rouse 2013). Although there are many



Virtual Choir: Lithuania.
Juozas Gudavičius, *Kur
giria žaliuoja* (2016)



Virtual choir:
Lithuania. *We Wish
You A Merry Christmas*
(2017)



Virtual Choir: Lithuania
[Vol. 2]: Václavas
Augustinas, *Sanctus*
(2018)



Virtual Choir: Lithuania
[Vol. 2]: Vincas Kudrika,
The National Anthem
(2018)

Figure 1. Virtual choirs in Lithuania 2016, 2017, 2018.

descriptions and they all are similar, we can unambiguously state that the essence of this project is people's involvement. Without their contribution, we would see only a video recording of the image of the conductor and would hear only silence. Therefore, the involvement of people in the creation of the concept of a musical composition and its performance, linked with the help of technologies, is the essential principle of the process.

The most famous virtual choirs created by Whitacre include Virtual Choir 1.0—*Lux Aurumque*, Virtual Choir 2.0—*Sleep*, Virtual Choir 3.0—*Water Night*, and Virtual Choir 4.0—*Fly To Paradise*. In the United States as well as in other countries, virtual choirs from all over the world have also been formed. The results illustrate that technologies can unite choir enthusiasts, both professional and amateur. How was it possible to form a choir when not a single rehearsal took place and members of the choir were often people who did not know one another?

The first virtual choir of this type in Lithuania was created in 2016. In 2017 a virtual ensemble was created. In 2018, a second and a third choir were formed (see: Figure 1). In 2020, during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, at least six other virtual choirs were created.

The first virtual choir in Lithuania was created in 2016 as the applied part of Ingrida Alonderė's master's thesis. The main goals and objectives of the project were to promote and encourage choral singing in the country by non-traditional means; to perform a well-known and significant work by a Lithuanian composer, uniting as many patrons and fans of this art as possible; to include performers from different social backgrounds, of any age; to strive to promote the development and dissemination of choral art at the national level; and to create the first virtual choir in Lithuania.

The participants of the project perform Juozas Gudavičius's (1863–1938) song *Kur giria žaliuoja* (Where the forest grows green) (lyrics by Ksaveras Sakalauskas—Vana-gėlis [1869–1946]).⁵ The virtual choir's *Kur giria žaliuoja* is an attempt to prove that it is possible to create such a medium in Lithuania. The target audience consisted of choral music lovers, professionals, and conductors from Lithuania. The main operating platforms were the website www.virtualuschoras.lt and a Facebook account. The most important things on the online platforms were to present the idea of a virtual choir, describe the whole work process in detail, including how the organizers prepare the performers and the most important things to pay attention to: clothing, lighting, absence of background noise, and the technical measures required for participation (computer, camcorder, microphone, remote choristers, and a virtual conductor).

Today, the virtual choir is a global phenomenon as well as a Lithuanian one—a living idea that is expanding and varying in different forms. Countries and nations sing a wide variety of songs chosen for the occasion, and instruments or

even an entire orchestra are added. With the help of technology, all inaccuracies are smoothed out, thus presenting the best option for listeners.

Social aspect and artistic value

The environment, social norms, society, communities, global issues, image of choristers and conductor, the concert atmosphere, and technology—all of these factors contribute significantly to the development of choral art as a socio-cultural phenomenon and are significant on the modern stage and in the virtual space. Choirs become participate in advertising and social networks because much attention is paid to attracting the viewer and listener, trying to draw attention by creating something special, untested, or attractive. The choir seems to accommodate so much in its activities that it is difficult to grasp the boundary where culture, social life, or community building begins and ends. It can be said that social identity is realized through cultural expression. Therefore, in the activities of the choir, sociality and culture cannot exist completely separately.

The characteristics of choral activity are accurately reflected in the definition in the Lithuanian dictionary, which says that its members are united by common aspirations and are related to each other “through productivity,” in this case common cultural relations and goals: “Community is a historically formed group of people related to each other; a team of common interests”; or “communal—belonging to the community, related to the community.” So the choir, we might say, is an integral part of something larger and swings like a pendulum between society and culture. Socio-cultural connections and interactions are the essential principles that create a community of singers. In recent years, one of the most interesting topics of research is how choruses perform in the virtual world to achieve a collective goal—fulfillment of artistic vision and the creation of a cultural product.

The table below represents the comparison between a traditional and virtual choir. The main differences between the two types of choirs are highlighted (see: Table 1).

It goes without saying that the major difference between a live concert's “here and now” and a virtual performance is that in a virtual performance, a video clip filmed and recorded by the conductor and singers is placed in a virtual space and created by video and audio artists in advance. With the help of technology, a choral performance becomes a part of the modern world in the Internet space. Having examined the differences presented in the table, it is possible to divide these differences into four categories in which different changes take place:

- 1) major differences;
- 2) the choir, the conductor—the audience;
- 3) the conductor—the choir;
- 4) the audience—the conductor.

Traditional choir performance	Virtual choir
<i>Main differences</i>	
Live performance	Performance recorded in advance
General rehearsals take place	Everybody rehearses separately
No possibility for anyone (a performer, the conductor) taking part in the performance to correct themselves	There is a possibility for everyone (a performer, the conductor) to correct themselves
Music collectively performed “here and now”	Everyone records video and audio tracks individually
Static performance (with the possibility to move, dance, etc.)	Video clips can be presented in various ways, with different aesthetics, using animation and other techniques.
Mutual cooperation (performers, the conductor)	No cooperation altogether, everyone performs the musical composition individually
The performance is given in the way it was rehearsed and planned	In a video clip it is possible to add technological effects to enliven the performance with a particular visual style and audio effects
<i>Choir, conductor – audience</i>	
Contact with the audience	No contact with the audience
The audience influences the performance	The audience has no influence over the performance
<i>Conductor – choir</i>	
General rehearsals—facilitation of work	Individual rehearsals—a more difficult task when the performer does not hear the entire choir
Not necessary to make use of technologies	It is necessary for the performer to learn to film themselves, to record the sound, and to look comfortable in front of the camera
The performance is presented in the way it was rehearsed prior to the concert	A video clip is created using technologies and presented virtually
The conductor sees and controls the choir singing in front of them	The conductor films themselves in advance as they imagine the choir in front of them
<i>Conductor – audience</i>	
The audience sees the back of the conductor	The audience sees the front of the conductor
The audience (almost) always sees the conductor	The conductor may be absent

Table 1. The main differences between traditional and virtual choral performance

The virtual choir differs from a traditional choir in all of these categories, breaks the traditional framework, and changes the general understanding of what choral performance is. Upon seeing the obvious differences, various questions arise: will the virtual choir prevail over the traditional choir at present/in the future? Which choir format is more valuable, and why? What is the artistic and social result of both types of choir? (See: Table 1)

The virtual choir is noted for its individualized performances. Each singer and the conductor must record and film themselves without any other members of the choir being present. However, they must understand (by viewing the conductor’s video recording) how to interpret the piece being performed. Without exception, video-audio

recordings with mistakes appear: mistakes are made in pronunciation of the words, in starting the song too soon or too late, a syllable is left off, the song is rushed, the performers do not watch the conductor throughout, everyone sings at their own pace, with incorrect dynamics, without the correct intonation, and so on. Therefore, in these cases it is possible to “improve” or “to clean up” the quality of the performance with the help of technologies, and to vary the ideas in creating the visuals and sound effects. The artistic result, which is possible to edit endlessly, becomes the final arrangement of the whole material.

The artistic value of the traditional performance is most often measured by the conceptuality of programs, the professionalism of the performance, interpretations, the

number of people in the concert halls, their impressions, and coverage in the mass media, on social networking sites, on television, and on the radio. Advertising and different media become an important component of both types of choirs, which today also become a social “persona.” The socio-cultural aspect strongly influences both forms of choral performance. The virtual choir is often “squeezed” into the social framework: singing nuns, children who never learned to sing, or the self-expression of religious minorities, for instance. This idea allows everyone, through the help of technology, to sing, express themselves, and create music even with limited resources. Therefore, under the influence of the new reality, traditional choirs change too—images and self-representation are reconsidered, the importance of social media and websites become of great importance to the formation of their image, and the need to take part in public practices and to express their own opinion on significant communal issues arises. The modern choir, which tries “to keep pace with the latest fashion,” finds the internal and external guidelines of its existence of immense importance, from the rehearsal space to the warm embrace backstage after the concert, or after the video is broadcast on the TV news.

The artistic activities of the choir are multifaceted. In addition to cultural activities, concerts, travel, and participation in festivals or competitions, members participating in choir activities have the opportunity to engage in various socially important events and social actions as well as build a community. The choir community creates and experiences an inner life, and its members choose to engage in such activities for various purposes. First, members desire to participate in cultural activities. People often join a chorus to become more socially active: they want to strengthen communication skills, to find like-minded people, and to feel like a member of the community. Although the word choir itself presupposes a cultural context first and foremost for many, the members of the ensemble spend most of their time as creators of communities and enjoy the relationships they build there. In any case, individuals in the choir experience a mix of social and cultural life. The choir, being an effective icebreaker, helps to forge social ties. Therefore, choral singing, I think, is a particularly valuable activity in today’s world, even when in a virtual format. The aspect of the internet medium with respect to a virtual choir, to a greater extent than a live performance, changes the face of the choir, which becomes more open. When we watch a video clip, we can see and hear the different stories behind the face and voice of each participant. Some participants struggle to cope with their emotions and technological challenges, others offer an intense emotional experience as a personal contribution, while still others demonstrate a great deal of diligence and perseverance. Huge efforts are seen and felt: to make the recordings sound better, members of the choirs

load their rooms with boxes, hang sheets on the walls, and use desk lamps to illuminate their faces.

Virtuality, as a real action, stimulates a play, encourages the exchange, a change, maintenance of relationships, that is, actually forms a society. And this is done with the help of two essential characteristics, [...] by establishing a communication relationship with others. (Maffesoli 2017: 30)

Michel Maffesoli is right in stating that virtual reality helps us establish contacts and communicate with others. This, however, takes place during a live performance too. Is either version of the choir more “real” and does one or the other make a better connection with the audience? Perhaps it is difficult to measure this factor because each mode reflects a certain type of link that is being built when a person listens to a live choir or watches a video clip created in advance. Every spectator feels the flow and meaning of music very differently. Therefore, it would be an exaggeration to claim that one type of choir has a greater advantage over the other. There is no doubt there are skeptics and biased opinions, especially with respect to technologies and virtual reality; however, globalization makes us reconsider many things anew and find ways to adapt ourselves when creating, performing, and listening to music.

Nevertheless, with regards to the artistic result, again it would be difficult to decide which is more “real” or more artistic. The virtual choir is still a rare phenomenon, and many conductors and members of choirs of the older generation do not recognize this “abnormal” performance as legitimate. This negation makes integration of virtuality into the activities of choirs more difficult. Therefore, the artistic result, when such performances are assessed, can be distorted. For example, when we review the performance of a virtual choir, many of us will see only animation, unsynchronized faces, and a video clip that seemingly does not fit into the world of choral art; therefore, the musical and verbal expression and value of the musical composition are often assessed secondarily. Even music critics and composers who assessed innovative choirs in Lithuania wrote primarily about the moments of video clips. As Raimonda Žiūkaitė wrote:

Image projections, which I would call a step forward from the childish, playful animated motifs of waves and trees of the first project, left an impression on me. (Žiūkaitė 2018)

And this is how Monika Sokaitė criticizes the choirs created during the time of the pandemic:

[...] when moving choral singing into a virtual space, a part of the visual aesthetics determines their success to a great extent. Chorų choras (The Choir of Choirs), which, seemingly, poses a challenge by its very title to other projects, still had to make an effort to do all of its “homework” because the visual quality left much to be desired. (Sokaitė 2020)

Motivation

I would like to touch briefly upon motivation. What encourages the performers to become involved with a virtual choir? What are the motivational differences between participating in a traditional vs. virtual performance? I represented only the major differences in Table 1; however, beyond doubt, many more could be identified.

Motivation is a very important component in performing any choral program, whether becoming engaged in the activities of a virtual or traditional choir. This theme should be analyzed more thoroughly. However, let us try to look at the essential motives a person may have for participating in a virtual choir. When we try to explain the motivating factors, we are primarily faced with different social circumstances, differences in the ages of participants, and the problem of professional training and employment. Moreover, invitations to take part in projects and broadcasting via different social media, on television, or on the radio create different degrees of involvement in the project for the performer, beginning with spontaneous, immediate reactions and strong experiences as well as concerns about the creative process.

Technologies used to facilitate remote singing require more discipline for learning choral parts than singing in a choir live. This factor motivates performers, because sometimes it can be difficult for singers to use new technology while simultaneously engaging with new material. Singers can experience a variety of technical issues, including

inappropriate hardware, incompatible software, and inability to use equipment properly. Such issues can lead to frustration and anxiety, resulting in loss of motivation. However, the choir singers' expectations of being part of an ensemble or being motivated by a personal challenge often help to overcome technical hurdles with the assistance of others and to be actively involved in the projects being created.

In the Table 2 I identify the certain points as motivations for participating in the performance of traditional or virtual choirs (see: Table 2).

In Lithuania, the participants of virtual choirs primarily wanted to identify the idea with this of a product of the twenty-first century that has encouraged experimental creation and the dissemination of choral music. The motivation behind the first virtual choir was to present songs that are regularly performed at choral festivals, at the most important choral events, and which are included in the repertoire of all Lithuanian choirs. The second time, two virtual choir performances were released in 2018: Vincas Kudirka's *National Anthem*, and a completely new work, never performed live by any choir, was created for the specific media of the virtual choir. *Sanctus* was created by composer Vaclovas Augustinas. This time, the developers of the project presented an innovation—the creation of a new work and its performance for the first time in a virtual space, an accomplishment that no one in the world had achieved at that point. The experiment was a great success, and the piece *Sanctus* is often included in the choir's repertoire.

Virtual choir	Traditional choir performance
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Admiration for the idea, concept, and technologies of the virtual choir. 2. Admiration for the composer of the musical composition being performed, its interpretation, and the conductor. 3. Active involvement on account of general ardor, the desire to become a part of the virtual choir. 4. Incidental involvement in the processes of the activity that an individual enjoys, due to the persuasion of their friends. 5. Involvement of the whole choir on account of the intense motivational activity of the leader or manager. 6. Involvement due to facilitated technical conditions when there is no need to deal with technology but only to arrive at the recording studio to perform a musical composition or to be filmed. 7. Contact with the organizer of the project. 8. Professional objectives. 9. The desire to be a part of the virtual community. 10. Inability to take part in the activities of a traditional choir. 11. A challenge for the singer to film themselves, to record an audio track. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Admiration for and interest in choral activities, the desire to give concerts with the team as a whole. 2. Interest in the results of the choral activities. 3. Interest in the work of the conductor of the choir, in interpretations. 4. Feelings of identity and fellowship that develop when belonging to a specific place, organization, or a social group. 5. Socio-cultural relations and interactions, the creation of relationships inside and outside the group. 6. Objectives of personal improvement. 7. General striving for artistic purpose. 8. Active involvement of separate individuals due to their friends' participation in the activities of the choir. 9. Professional objectives. 10. Trips, camps. 11. Family tradition of participating in collective activities of this nature.

Table 2. Motivation for traditional and virtual choir participation

During the pandemic, choir singers, choristers, and amateurs have little need to be motivated. The circumstances themselves have created an excellent environment for initiating and presenting new virtual choirs in Lithuania. The choral community has been forced to stop all rehearsals, concerts, festivals, and trips abroad, so it is important to utilize new, modern, technology-based ideas as soon as possible to enable as many people, both choirs and performers as possible to participate in projects created by professionals and amateurs. Therefore, the virtual choir is an almost ideal platform to provide the opportunities to implement such projects. Those who were interested in the novelty of this idea, as well as enthusiasts of choral music, became most strongly motivated.

Despite the initiative of the organizers of the Lithuanian virtual choirs project, there was a lack of advertising and dissemination of information to attract future participants, so in the beginning everything progressed slowly in the creation of each virtual choir. Over time, as the information spread more widely, more singers were expected to join, but the uptake was still very slow. I think some of the lack of popularity and motivation on the part of singers for this project was due to the problems of its technical implementation: most of the participants were often faced with technical challenges. For others, it may have seemed to difficult an undertaking and still others were afraid to sing alone in front of the camera.

And yet, many choir singers took an interest in the project and took on various technical and singing challenges to become part of the overall experimental choir. A large number of singers participated because they wanted to see their video recording in a general clip of the virtual choir. Another group consisted of the people who supported the creators of the project, their work, and their ideas.

Quarantine virtual choirs in Lithuania

Having mentioned the Lithuanian virtual choirs, let us move on straight to an exceptional period—the quarantine. The image shows several pictures of the latest virtual work of Lithuanian choirs (see: Figure 2).

During the pandemic, the choral community in Lithuania was forced to discontinue all live rehearsals, concerts, festivals, and tours abroad. Therefore, it was important to take up modern, technology-based ideas as soon as possible, which would enable as many people as possible to take part in these activities. In this simple, albeit compulsory manner, the choral world changed in the twinkling of an eye. Shortly after, new virtual choirs started to appear in the Internet space: Vilnius University choir (57 singers) performed the beautiful Lithuanian song *Lietuva brangi* (Lithuania dear), thus supporting stars of the Lithuanian pop scene

and physicians working during the pandemic, Chorų choras *Vakar ir visados* (The Choir of Choirs *Yesterday and Always*), the Vilnius City Municipal Choir Jauna muzika (Young Music) performed *Da Pacem, Domine*, Bjelle and the Virtual Kaišiadorys KC Chamber Choir Do# performed *Baltas paukštis* (The White Bird, words and music by Vytautas Kernagis), Choir Vilnius performed the song *Kokia nuostabi, Lietuva esi* (You are beautiful, Lithuania, by Kipras Mašanauskas, arranged by Vitalijus Neugasimovas), and the Kaunas School of Sacred Music Choir Improvises performed *When you believe* (see: Figure 2).

Each virtual choir created was unique in its purpose, for example to support medical staff, to sing for all the victims of Covid-19, or to prove to the public that even in such conditions a choir can sing. It is important to note that all the choirs that appeared in the virtual space were formed very quickly. This means that technical matters did not pose any particular difficulties for the choir community. The other side of the coin is that by engaging in virtual activities, many singers, managers, and conductors had the opportunity to work remotely. It also demonstrates how such creative groups are able to adapt and implement their ideas without gathering for rehearsals.

I would like to take a closer look at two virtual quarantine choral performances: Gintautas Venislovas's *Vakar ir visados* and Vaclovas Augustinas's *Da Pacem, Domine*. Both choirs were formed in about a month and a half. 152 singers sang *Vakar ir visados* and *Da Pacem, Domine* 24.

The musical composition *Vakar ir visados* for a mixed choir by the composer and choral conductor Gintautas Venislovas was performed by as many as 152 singers from 16 traditional choirs; that was why it was called the Chorų choras (The Choir of Choirs). The initiator of this virtual choir, Linas Balandis, notes that the text was highly relevant to the pandemic situation and hoped that soon it would be possible to get back to the state of “yesterday” and to return to life as it was before the quarantine. The above-mentioned Monika Sokaitė wrote about the visual side of this choir, which was not performed too satisfactorily. The interesting thing is that the choir was organized, created, and broadcasted extremely quickly, which testifies to the fact that the activity of a choir of this type requires only the creation of an Internet platform to exist, even without having met in the rehearsals.

The second virtual choral performance I want to mention is the musical composition *Da Pacem, Domine* created by the composer and choral conductor Vaclovas Augustinas specifically for a virtual platform during the pandemic. It was performed by the choir Jauna muzika (24 singers). Here we are faced with another important aspect—the speed at which choirs and choral conductors as well as composers able to join the virtual reality with their creative work can adapt themselves to it within a short time. The composer devoted the opus to all the victims of the pandemic.



Vilnius University choirs. Juozas Naujalis, *Lietuva brangi*



Choir Vilnius. Kipras Mašanauskas, *Kokia nuostabi, Lietuva esi*



Choir of Choirs. Gintautas Venislovas, *Vakar ir visados*



Kaišiadorys KC Chamber Choir Do#. Vytautas Kernagis, *Baltas paukštis*



Vilnius City Municipal Choir Jauna muzika. Vaclovas Augustinas, *Da Pacem, Domine*

Figure 2. Quarantine virtual choirs in Lithuania

After looking through the examples, it becomes clear that choirs differed considerably in their ideas, visual presentation, the number of singers, the singing, and technical quality of creating a video clip. The choir *Vakar ir visados*, though with significant singing and technical troubles, reflected a happy, cheerful mood and showcased well-known, historically outstanding Lithuanian personalities. An overburdened visual presentation was combined with good humor and even afforded the performers the opportunity not to dwell on the mistakes as images changed at a fast speed. In its turn, the choir *Da Pacem, Domine* reflected different

moods. A quiet prayer-like, professional performance was masterfully created by an image artist and presented as a good example of the virtual choir (quality, the contents, interpretation, visual presentation, mood, technologies).

Generally speaking, the pandemic period proved that choral communities are highly creative and readily adaptable. After the conditions had changed, all measures necessary were taken “in a speedy way” to ensure the existence of choirs so that they could sing, rehearse, and present their ideas, songs, and even online rehearsals. Owing to the Internet, all this became accessible with the easy click of a button. These different

examples of virtual choirs belie the belief that choirs cannot carry out their activities in a virtual space. Hence, it can be said that it has been proved that virtual choir performances have an opportunity to become of equal worth as traditional performances. Finally, in this case it is more important to stop denying what is obvious and to accept this platform as a new opportunity to develop, to learn, to experiment, to improve skills, to adapt to the twenty-first century, to combine tradition and technologies, to establish contacts all over the world, and to share cultural knowledge creatively.

Conclusions

After reviewing and analyzing the emergence and development of the virtual choir globally and in Lithuania, it becomes clear that this platform is being increasingly chosen among choirs. Choral groups want to keep pace with the twenty-first century, try new things, experiment, and apply various interdisciplinary techniques to the choir. The growth and modernization of the choir seems to be combined not only with performance traditions and innovations, but also with socio-cultural aspects. Today, the choir has become a public persona looking to integrate into community life and to express its views on various issues.

The purpose of this article was to try to predict whether a virtual choir could become a prophet of the new reality. When the hard times came (due to Covid-19), choir communities mobilized and tested their options, moving all their activities into virtual reality. Choirs' adaptability is proof that they can exist outside of traditional performance and practice venues.

Here are some more generalized conclusions that reveal the changing face and activities of the choir, given the circumstances of today:

- Thus far, the traditional performance has remained the most important form of choral expression, so perhaps it would be inaccurate to say it will become a rarity.
- The socio-artistic result of one choir is not necessarily better than that of another. It all depends on the chosen message, the idea, the tools, and the methods of conveying the message.
- The quarantine period proved that choral communities are highly creative and readily adaptable.
- It has been proved that the virtual space can become a platform for the self-expression of fully-fledged choral communities.
- Choral communities and composers are able to adapt themselves quickly to unexpected difficulties.
- Choirs often become social players in conveying important messages to the public.
- Choral video clips created with the help of technologies can both improve or worsen the aesthetics of a musical

work, can either help, or on the contrary, prevent the viewer from engaging deeply with the message being conveyed.

- A modern choir finds the internal and external guidelines of its existence very important, from the rehearsal space to the warm embrace backstage after the concert or the video is broadcast on the TV news.

Endnotes

- ¹ Recent research on the choir has different starting points. The first is theory and methodology developed in the cultural and social sciences. The second covers historical musicology. *Choir in Focus 2010* writes that current choral research combines traditional musicological disciplines based on the humanities, practice-based artistic research in the field of music, and social science-oriented research in music education. The authors of the study argue that the main scientific challenge now is the development of common approaches, combining theories, research traditions, and methodologies with different traditions at the forefront (Geisler, Johansson 2010: 13).

- ² See: *The Ice-Breaker Effect: Singing Mediates Fast Social Bonding* by Pearce, Launay and Dunbar (2015). Extract from the summary:

It was suggested that singing helps develop and facilitates establishing social relations. However, it is not clear whether these relations result from the features characteristic of singing or any social involvement can have a similar effect. In this semi-naturalistic research, in the course of seven months, we observed newly formed singing and non-singing (craft or creative writing) adult classes.

During the investigation it was proved that any social activity brings together certain groups of people acting jointly; however, the link between the individuals of a singing group was established much more quickly than individuals participating in the creative process. Access to the Internet: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rsos.150221> [last checked 2020 09 29].

- ³ Repertoire is an integral part of the life of any global choir. In most ensembles it is formed in the course of concert activities. In Lithuania, a large part of the repertoire consists of choral opuses being performed globally, but Lithuanian identity necessarily "lives" in it as well. The so-called classical composers are sung most often, most of whom have created easy-to-remember, melodic songs and hymns, followed traditions, used classical harmony, aligned with the works of the Romantics, and rarely incorporated innovations in musical language. At the end of the twentieth century, however, bolder contemporary creations, often influenced by new global trends, began to flow into the treasure-chest of choral classics.

- ⁴ Eric Whitacre's choral music is some of the most popular and is performed around the world. He is a composer, conductor, innovator, orator, and a successful distributor of his records. Although his work is very diverse and multifaceted, Whitacre has mostly written for the choir. Whitacre has currently formed six virtual choirs. Each time, the number of singers from different parts of the world grew. The choir has changed to include new means of musical expression, eclectically mixing sounds and images in an even more expanded art form (more see: Alonderė 2016).

- ⁵ Juozas Gudavičius's *Kur giria žaliuoja* (Where the forest grows green) was chosen because of its importance for the choral life of Lithuania: it is regularly performed at song festivals, the most important choir events, and in the repertoire of almost all Lithuanian choirs. The reasons for the popularity of the song are the relevance and artistic attractiveness of its content: Ksaveras Sakalauskas—Vanagėlis composed words about the beauty of the homeland, the purity of folk morality and national feelings, and the invitation to unite. The most important feature of the chosen work is a Lithuanian song that has become a tradition and is well known to every choirmaster. Gudavičius's *Kur giria žaliuoja* was performed by 100 virtual choristers.

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Santrauka

Šiuolaikiniai kūrybos eksperimentai interneto erdvėje yra viena mokslininkų dar iki galo nesuprastų, neapmąstytų ir paprastai natūraliai nepasirenkamų erdvių kurti ir atlikti kūrinius. Ir vis dėlto naudodamiesi šiomis galimybėmis kūrėjai ne tik imasi naujų dalykų, atranda ir išranda netikėtus būdus kurti, bet ir plečia suvokimą apie neištirtus klodus, tokius kaip auditorijos įsitraukimas į procesą, kūrybiškas bendradarbiavimas, virtualus atlikimas ir pan. Ši technologija atvėrė kelią kurtis visiškai naujoms praktikoms ir jas tirti.

Choras – ir žanras, ir atlikėjas – kinta ir įgauna vis kitus bruožus. Technologijos, instaliacijos ir šviesos, medijos, neįprastos erdvės, interneto erdvė – visa tai yra svarbūs elementai, nuosekliai tapę šiuolaikinio choro pasirodymų ir kompozicijų atlikimo dalimi. Šiandien vienas populiariausių chorų pasaulio bendruomenėje internetinės platformos produktas – virtualus choras, kurį pirmasis sukūrė JAV kompozitoriui Ericas Whitacre'is. Ši naujovė leido pažvelgti į chorą, atlikimą, dirigentą, auditoriją dar mažai tyrinėtai aspektais.

Naujoji realybė skatina iš naujo apmąstyti vizijas, savęs pristatymą, atsiranda socialinių medijų ir interneto puslapių svarba įvaizdžio kūrimui, formuojasi poreikis dalyvauti visuomeninėse praktikose, reikšti savo nuomonę svarbiais bendruomeninei klausimais. Virtualaus choro atsiradimas verčia kelti klausimus: kokie bruožai jį skiria nuo tradicinio chorinio pasirodymo; kokia jo meninė vertė; ar ši platforma gali tapti pagrindine choro pasirodymo forma XXI amžiuje?