

Covid and Singing Update August 25, 2020

As promised, we've been monitoring the situation with the safety of group singing as it relates to singing in the Liturgy.

Although more scientific and empirical studies have been released in the last weeks, there has not been much situation changing information to share. It is still generally agreed in the music field that there are concerns about aerosolization during singing. Although it has not yet been peer-reviewed, the long-awaited Colorado fluid dynamics study, designed to apply specifically to singers, was released in August. Paraphrasing, that study states that (1) for thirty minutes or less while (2) wearing an (3) effective, tight-fitting mask (the study didn't find all mask types effective), with (4) *at least* six feet (preferably more) of distance between singers in (5) a specific spacing configuration, (6) in a room with specific ventilation requirements, singing *might* be less risky than the previous cases where singing individuals were sickened.

Does the Co-Cathedral assembly meet those study conditions? Some of them. Our church attendees are masked at in person Masses. Our church likely has better-than-average ventilation since it is new. Our seating configuration and length of time deviates from the study, and our in-person attendance is larger than the average choir. Can we meet the Colorado guidelines? In the coming year, our choral personnel may conduct some experiments of our own using these stringent guidelines. Expect that to happen with very small groups compared to the size of our singing assembly before we sound the "all clear" for large gatherings. In other words, we will keep doing what we're doing for the time being.

We remain in close contact with many peer musicians in cathedrals, churches and schools to share. Even with the guidance, implementations vary widely. Schools and universities around the country are generally cautious, holding singing events either strictly online or under extreme in-person conditions of distance, masking, ventilation, and testing of the individuals involved. There are local arts organizations that are not singing in person, and others (such as Houston Grand Opera) that are operating but testing all staff weekly for Covid. There are churches in our Archdiocese where quartets and octets are singing; there are also churches in this city which remained completely closed with pre-recorded music only and no clear re-opening date. There are other Archdioceses around the country that have banned singing. Given all these options, we are somewhat in the middle in our approach, in that we have some live singing with one cantor in the loft, but located far away from the assembly and the sanctuary for your safety and theirs.

We certainly do not like these findings or guidance to the field. Music becomes part of the professional's identity; it would be hard to express how difficult it is for a credentialed organist who has trained and trained others to enable group unrehearsed singing, to do the opposite even temporarily. We realize also that some others feel they are unafraid, in dissent from these scientists' research, and want to act now. We may discover in the future that these precautions were unnecessary; which would be preferable to discovering

we weren't cautious enough. In addition to reviewing the data, we want to honor all coming to the Co-Cathedral for Mass in person. While one person may feel safe singing, in spite of this data, someone near them may not. For now, following the lead of other experts in the area, we are continuing to err on the side of caution and asking you not to sing.

We also continue to take the long view. Music is an integral part of our liturgy. Moreover, ecclesiastical documents given specific musical directions for cathedrals to perform and teach music. We plan to continue our obedience to those documents, though it is worth noting that enough flexibility is given in those mandates that the current arrangements fully comply. We have put opportunities in place to keep those interested in singing and learning about music.

While our plan is to continue the status quo, we wanted to update you now: we continue to monitor current research, and empirical information which will inevitably emerge with time both locally and around the world. The cantor is singing antiphons in both Latin (as has been our practice since 2004) and the vernacular in place of the Gathering and Communion hymns, and we are following a "bookend model" for the Liturgy of the Word. The cantor and organ will continue to stand in the place of the assembly at the offertory and the recessional, often presenting for your meditation a lesser-known setting of the Proper texts of the Day. (If you'd like a more detailed explanation of what the Propers are, watch this space for an opportunity to learn more.)

We are pro-singing, and look forward to when it is safe to do so again. We thank you for your team spirit approach to modifications under the pandemic. And, it's important to note: Singing while listening to the live stream with your household is strongly encouraged! We have placed many sing-along resources on our YouTube Channel, Houston Co-Cathedral Music, where you can subscribe for great playlists. You can also find educational materials there for the domestic church. You can attend Open Loft through September 2, and also join us for sung Compline online the weekend of Sept. 18-20. We want to help you keep voices and minds in shape to lift the roof when the time comes!