

Ontario Sings: The Future Of Ontario Choirs

Photo Credit: Ontario Culture Days

By: Li Robbins

Here's a question for you. Which is the more popular Canadian pastime: playing hockey or singing in a choir? If you answered "choral singing" you'd be right. According to a 2018 Choral Canada survey, 3.5 million Canadians, (more people than live in Toronto), sang in a choir during the preceding year. That's about three times more kids in choirs than playing hockey and 50 per cent more adults.

Of course, while it's true that singing in a choir doesn't require expensive skates and sticks its appeal runs far deeper than merely being a low-cost, readily accessible activity. As composer John Rutter puts it, "Choral music goes to the very heart of our humanity, our sense of community, and our souls."

Ontario's choral music constituency is considerable, with Choirs Ontario estimating there are approximately 1.9 million choristers in the province. It's probably a safe bet that not one of those singers ever dreamed their choir would be considered potentially deadly, but that's pretty much what happened last March when choirs were suddenly viewed as possible "super-spreaders" of the COVID-19 virus. Rehearsals were abruptly halted; concert seasons cancelled.

Now, a year later, Ontario choirs are hopeful that with vaccines in the pipeline the times are changing for the better. Ontario Culture Days connected with a number of choirs in the province to see how they've survived – and hope to thrive in the season to come.

Chorus Niagara/Orpheus Choir

Robert Cooper, artistic director of both St. Catharines' Chorus Niagara and Toronto's Orpheus Choir, says the pandemic has underscored both the relevance of choirs and the determination of choristers to keep on singing – though it's been something of "a journey through many swings of emotion, frustration, despair and bewilderment."

"Singers are proud of their newfound resilience and acceptance of the new normal, new challenges, and adaptability," Cooper says. "That we've arrived at this stage and can look back at what we have achieved, and continue to tackle, gives us all a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction."

The "new normal" for choirs everywhere is digital. Notably, via virtual choir videos, where singers record parts individually, later edited together to create the appearance of a choir singing as one. There are also online "rehearsals," although platforms such as Zoom have such a disturbingly unmusical delay that it's impossible for choristers to actually sing together. But Cooper sees Zoom as a useful tool, one he'll use in future for post-rehearsal music reviews.

As well as folding in the new technology, hopes for the upcoming season include the pursuit of a return to community choral gathering (possibly with an incremental start) and pop-up concerts. Both will require re-energizing singers and re-engaging audiences, and as part of that effort there's a need to reconsider future program plans.

"What will the audience want to hear?" says Cooper. "It's a new zeitgeist."



Toronto Mass Choir

When Karen Burke, artistic director of Toronto Mass Choir (TMC), is asked if she imagines what the group's first in-person rehearsal will be like, she takes a deep breath.

"I almost don't want to think about it," she says. "Because it makes me cry. In thirty-two years we've never been apart this long. But some great music will come out of this, as well as a re-found love and appreciation for what we do and who we do it with."

The TMC's typical season includes twenty-some concerts, many on the road. The choir is also behind the annual PowerUp Gospel Music Workshop, held this year online and over two weekends. The pivot from an in-person conference presented a daunting challenge, but Burke says it's not without positive implications for the future – for instance a greater participation by international clinicians.

"If your mandate is just to sing, you're in trouble during a season like this," Burke says. "Our mandate is bigger; it's about providing access to gospel music. The touring will come."

Still, the aesthetic of singing gospel "relies on proximity" since the singers learn by rote, not by sheet music. But while the physical function of singing may take some time to return to full strength, there will be no shortage of readily singable repertoire – Burke figures the singers have about sixty songs in their heads.

Looking forward, the choir is poised to finish a new recording of hymns that was in the works prior to the shutdown, with hopes of a celebratory release concert in 2022.

Georgetown Choral Society

There's no such thing as a good year for a choir to lose a concert season, but it was particularly tough for the Georgetown Choral Society – 2021 is the 50th anniversary of the entirely volunteer-run group, and its intended concert theme was "United We Sing."

But Laurent Thibault, board member in charge of marketing and promotions, says that the pandemic has helped all concerned to become more "creative and flexible."

Artistic Director Christopher Dawes' embrace of new technology means that choristers now learn more effectively on their own and may be able to participate remotely in future live rehearsals. (A definite boon for rehearsals held during Canadian winters!)

As with many choirs, concert tickets and membership fees are a key to survival. But even with the absence of in-person rehearsals Georgetown's members rallied, most paying full fall fees, which eased immediate financial worries. There are other, considerable concerns connected to restarting though, given that most of the group's choristers skew older. Currently the hope is that regular rehearsals will resume if not in fall of 2021, in January 2022.

"The pandemic has increased our determination to survive this challenge and ensure that the choir sings for another half-century," says Thibault.



Peterborough Singers

Early last March the Peterborough Singers had just begun to rehearse Verdi's Requiem when news of the then-potential pandemic accelerated, making the Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) even more spine-chilling to sing. But when rehearsals were suddenly curtailed choristers and audience alike responded in a way Artistic Director Syd Birrell had not previously experienced.

"It's a big positive for me to realize that singing in a choir and listening to a choir perform are of such great value to people. Until choir was taken away, people had not expressed this in such a tangible way. As a consequence, I value my leadership role in a new and deeper way."

One tangible form of that expression has been through considerable financial donations, hugely helpful in planning the upcoming season. Concert dates, and guest artists are booked, says Birrell, with details TBA once there is "full confluence that we are able to safely start up in the fall."

Meanwhile, the choir is far from dormant. Online activities, (from trivia nights to recipe sharing), and new ways to experience music (for instance, small group masked and distanced singing, plus a new video series called The Organ Talks) have kept the flame alive. Still, Birrell is quick to acknowledge the road ahead will not be easy, saying it's vital to "listen to the dreams, the hopes, the concerns and the fears of all choir members" during the transition back to safely singing together. But the goal is clear.

"We just want to sing!" he says. "We want to stand shoulder to shoulder with our friends and make music. The rest we can figure out as we go."

Li Robbins is a freelance writer and editor.

Featured image: Toronto Mass Choir, Hyunwoo Hwang, 'Oh Happy Day' Photography

ARTS & CULTURE CHOIRS CONCERTS ONTARIO PERFORMANCE

f t @ in X ↗

GET CREATIVELY INSPIRED BY THESE SHOWS, CLASSES AND EVENTS

ONTARIO SINGS: THE FUTURE OF ONTARIO CHOIRS >

ON
CULTURE
DAYS

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

Email address:

Your Email Address

SUBSCRIBE

Terms of Use | Privacy Policy