



Plan B: How to Make a Virtual Choir Video

Carolyn Shiau and Vaughn Chauvin – Phoenix Chamber Choir

BCMEA Virtual Conference – October 23rd, 2020

Who are we?

- Vancouver based community ensemble
- Phoenix has been involved in creating Virtual Choir videos to help choristers stay connected with each other and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We have started our season off with a mix of virtual choir videos and small group recordings presented as an online concert.



The Basics



- A virtual choir is a compilation of individual video and audio files that are recorded **separately** and combined later in an editing studio to create a final product.
- Many people have asked **if you can use video conferencing software to create one of these videos?** The answer is no. There is too much time lag, and the audio and video quality depends mostly on your internet connection.

Note: You can use videoconferencing software to facilitate recording audio

Why make a virtual choir video?

- Offers **self-reflection and critique**:
 - You learn a lot about how you sound to everyone else by listening/watching your own individual recording
- Highlights a singer's **musicianship** (or deficiencies!)
 - Singers may have to make many attempts to get through the piece if they haven't prepared it thoroughly enough
- It is an **opportunity to sing** and an excuse to learn and practice
- **Satisfaction with the finished product**



Keep students engaged in choir!

A1 - Carolyn.MOV
A1 - Catherine Audio.m4a
A1 - Catherine Video.mp4
A1 - Hailey.mov
A1 - Shannon.MOV
A2 - Carolyn 1.MOV
A2 - Carolyn 2.MOV
A2 - Elizabeth.mov
A2 - Meghan.mp4
B - Jordan Audio.m4a
B - Jordan Video.MOV
B - Justin.MOV
B - Tyler.MOV
B1 - Vaughn Best Take.MOV
B1 - Vaughn Take 2.MOV
B2 - Vaughn Take 1.MOV
Conducting Terre Neuve.mov
Conductor - Nicholle ending.MOV
Conductor - Nicholle opening.MOV
Cue Track.m4v
pitches.wav
S - Dale.mp4
S - Emily 1.MOV
S - Emily Backup Take.MOV
S - Erica.mov
S - Kira Alt Ending.wav
S - Kira Audio Full Take.wav
S - Kira.mov
S - Leanne Audio.mp3
S - Leanne.mov
S - Leslie.MOV
S - Natasha Audio.m4a
S - Natasha Video.mov
S - Pippa B only.MOV

Is it worth having singer videos?

- The most challenging part of one of these projects is handling singer videos
- There are many options for a project that have a visual component other than videos of singers
- Audio only is MUCH more manageable

Basic Requirements for Singers

- **One recording device**
 - Usually a smartphone
 - The quality of the audio and video recording from a smartphone will usually outpace any household camcorders
- **A device to play the guide track**
- **Headphones**
 - Critical to prevent the guide track from being recorded along with the singer
- **Time, patience, energy, and enthusiasm**



Basic Requirements for Organizers

- Access to someone to assist with video/sound editing
 - Can be done internally or contracted out
- Editing equipment (computer and software)
 - Even if hiring editors for the final audio and video, some editing will be required in creation of the guide track
- Sharing platform
 - YouTube, Facebook, school website, etc.
 - Sync licensing (if streaming live)

Step 1: Choose a piece of music

- Extremely important decision
- If possible – choose piece of music you have sung together previously
- Your first project should be:
 - SHORT! (2 minutes is plenty)
 - Steady tempo
 - Fun to sing

You are asking singers to record a single straight take with no mistakes all the way through. (many blooper videos...)



Step 2: Create a guide track

- The guide track is the audio singers will listen to while recording their part.
 - Keeps singers in time together
 - Can keep singers in tune
 - Can improve the overall experience for the singer
 - Promotes relaxed and confident recordings





Guide Tracks

- There are two options for audio:
 - Piano or instrumental reduction
 - Recorded by a pianist or instrumentalist
 - A MIDI file generated from music notation software (Sibelius, Finale, etc.)
 - Vocal guide tracks
 - Singers sing along to a previous recording or purchased recording from another group
 - A combination of each voice part recorded separately and then combined

Guide Track Tips

- Leave space at the beginning and end of the track
 - Singers will need to start several devices and get in place before singing
 - A few seconds in the recording before and after the piece can be helpful in editing
- Needs a starting pitch or tuning note before
- Prep beats are also critical
- Output the track as an .mp3 file rather than .wav or .m4a
 - A smaller file that can often be emailed
 - Can be played by any device (Apple, Android, etc.)
- Some very brief verbal instructions can be included
 - Remind singers to relax, smile, etc.



Step 3. Figure out how to get the best recording of the singer

- Meet with the singers in advance
 - Singers will need guidance on how to make a good recording
 - A video-conference planning session is very helpful
 - Discuss deadlines!!
- Consider a checklist or cheat-sheet
- Video and audio can be recorded separately
 - Less to think about for the singer during each recording
 - Audio can be synchronized to video during editing
 - The video-only recording has to have audio to be synchronized



Placing the microphone and/or camera



The microphone should be within a few feet of the singer



Remove noisy items from the room



All of the following have been heard on Phoenix virtual choir submissions!

Squeaky chairs

Dogs (shaking collars, scratching, barking, drinking/eating)

Fans

Street noise (cars, sirens, etc.)



Put the recording device on something stable

No human can hold a camera still enough to not be noticed

3b – Placing the microphone and/or camera

- The most important thing to do is record a sample and listen back
- Listen for audio problems (distortion, crackling, etc.)
- Check video for lighting, placement, etc.
- Be sure you are okay with everything visible in the background of your video!





Getting good audio

- Most of the videos in our projects are recorded using a smart phone or a laptop
- Many **external microphones** exist – helpful, but not necessary
 - Advantage – better control of recording (gain, distortion, noise reduction)
 - More “depth” to the sound
 - Can be less noisy (not always)
- Ideally:
 - **clean** (little to no background noise)
 - **dry** (free of too much reverb)
 - **direct** (has you in foreground and not too far away)

Pick the best recording spot

- Depends on whether the video and audio are being recorded together
- Great options for audio – soft walls with less noise
 - A walk-in closet
 - Your bedroom
 - Inside your car
- Great options for video – clean and/or interesting
 - against a clean wall
 - In front of a painting
 - Outside
- If recording audio and video together, you have to strike a balance





Step 4: Create a timeline for submitting recordings

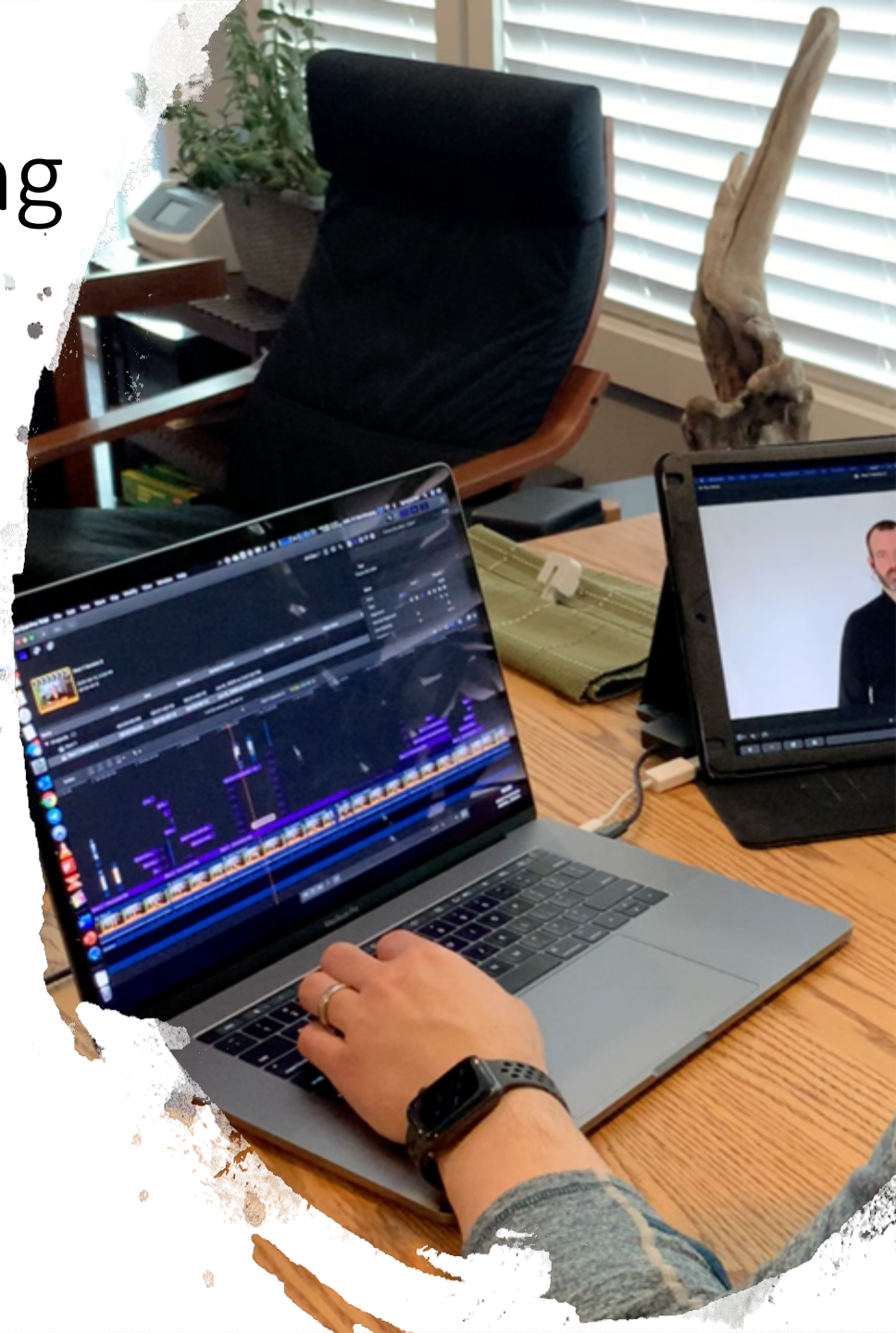
- Provide the following to singers:
 - Guide track
 - Instructions on how to set themselves up to record
 - Schedule including deadlines for submission (1-2 weeks to record and submit)

Step 5: Method for submitting files

- A central person should be designated to collect the recordings and rename the files as they arrive
 - Renaming as you go saves a lot of time in the long run
 - Choose a specific naming strategy that includes part and name (eg. A1 – Sarah, B2 – Larry, S1 – Fiona)
- Video files are often too large to email as an attachment and you may need to consider:
 - File sharing service (Google drive, Dropbox)
 - Can require an expanded storage capacity
 - A 3-minute clip at 4K resolution from an iPhone could be over 1 GB
 - File-transfer service (WeTransfer, etc.)

Arranging for Editing

- The editing process takes the most time
- Each video must be lined up and synchronized (and then arranged on the screen if doing video)
- Video projects with multiple singers can require more computing power
 - It can definitely be done by amateur video editors but requires some skill
- There are many online resources



[illegible][illegible]



More manageable options:

- Projects that only require audio from singers
 - Significantly less to worry about from a technical perspective
 - Visual component ideas:
 - Photos of students learning at home
 - Collaborations with art classes
 - Photos of students in outdoor activities
- Lower stress level for participants

Rehearsing online – a new frontier

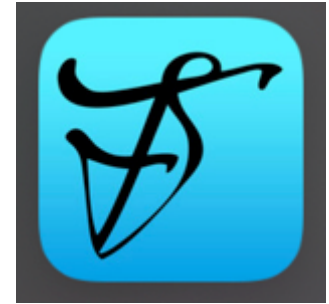
- Online rehearsals can be used to reach singers who may not be able to join in-person classes.
- Challenges:
 - All singers need to be muted due to time delays
 - The conductor does not get audible feedback from singers during this process

Vox Panacea – an online choir?

- Our experience comes from the new choir – Vox Panacea, started in this summer to provide a musical outlet for soprano and alto physicians during the pandemic.
 - Meets exclusively online
 - Many singers have not sung in a choir since high-school but have been eager to connect with others
- How do you create the feel of a choir when singers cannot hear each other?



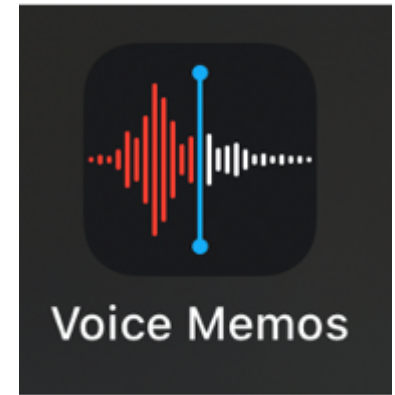
What we CAN do online!



- Warm-ups and rhythm games
- Music learning by rote
- Display of a score with YOUR markings already in there!
 - Can display by sharing your screen and a PDF of the music
 - Can utilize tethering of a tablet that has music on it. (Apple OS users may use forScore application for this)
- Conductor needs to rely on visual cues rather than audible ones
 - Posture, vowel shapes, breathing technique, relaxation of muscles, energy
- Using the online platform, we could guide singers through successful audio recording of themselves in real-time!

Your turn!

- Take out your smart-phone and find a voice recording software.
 - Apple OS – Voice Memos (in Utilities folder)
 - Android OS – ASR Recording
 - Motiv Audio (Shure)
 - Any video camera on a smart phone will work
- Find somewhere stable to put your phone and ideally at about an arms-length away
- Use headphones to plug into the device where you are viewing this conference session
- Put one headphone in your good ear and leave one headphone out



Getting ready...

- We will give you the signal to start recording – we need silence at the start of the recording, just like a real performance.
- We will start playing the audio guide track and sing through the first verse of Somewhere Over The Rainbow.
 - Track has piano and a lovely soprano from Phoenix (Kira Fondse) singing the melody.

Somewhere over the Rainbow

Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high

There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby

Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue

And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.



Level Two!

- Now, we will try this again!
- This time, you can record yourself again singing the same line together with Kira...
- OR... try to harmonize with the solo line for fun!
- Ready?

Somewhere over the Rainbow Take Two

Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high

There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby

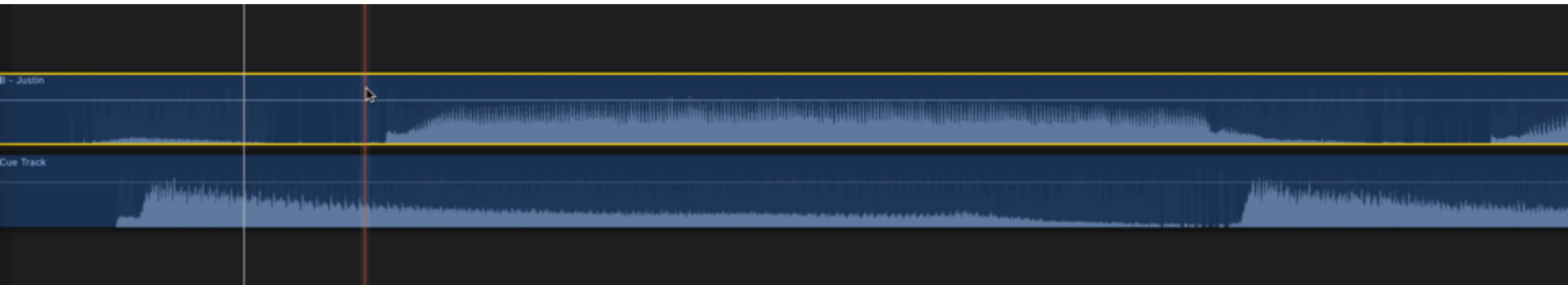
Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue

And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.



Congratulations!

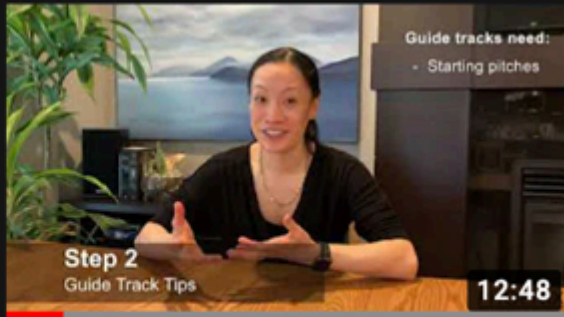
- You have now started creating the tracks for your audio virtual choir!
- When recording these online, we had a guide track with just the alto line to support singers who needed to hear their part while recording.
- To line these up, there are multiple software platforms you can use:
 - Apple OS: Garage Band, Logic
 - Windows OS: Audacity, ProTools
- Match the shape of the curves to each other and line them up with a piano track.
- Balance the volume of each track and add a little reverb
- Add some pictures and you've got yourself a virtual choir!



Hearing each other for the first time!

- It is not perfect, and the notes are not always in tune, but it is still an accomplishment to have created it.
- We were able to add singers from our fall session to our original summer session recordings.
 - Potential to create a growing archive of students singing “together” from year to year on a favourite song!
- We have created a video to go with this track for Phoenix’s Virtual Concert this Saturday, made from submissions of photos and videos from choir members. The effect is just as magical and they are super proud to be sharing it with family and friends.





How to Make a Virtual Choir Video on a Budget: Part 1

Phoenix Chamber Choir • 4.4K views • 4 months ago

This video walks you through what we have learned about making Virtual Choir Projects on a budget. The first of two videos, this ...

4K



How to Make a Virtual Choir Video on a Budget: Part 2

Phoenix Chamber Choir • 1.6K views • 3 months ago

This video walks you through what we have learned about making Virtual Choir Projects on a budget. The second of two videos, ...

4K

Where to learn more:

- Two videos on our YouTube channel
- Guides you through the process including editing with Final Cut Pro X



Thank you!

Neither of us would be doing the things we are doing today without the inspiration of our music teachers throughout school and our many wonderful experiences in choirs throughout life

What you do brings immense value to education and enriches the lives of your students and society.



Questions?
(admin@phoenixchoir.com)

Come hear us!



Saturday, October 24th (Tomorrow) - \$10 CDN
“Live” at 7:30 pm and available until October 31st

<https://Phoenixchoir.com/concerts/>