

## Distanced practice makes perfect for Masterworks Chorale amid pandemic

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BY PRECIOUS FONDREN / THE BLADE



Chorale Director Tim Cloeter records the choir's rehearsal at Perrysburg First Church on Saturday, December 5, 2020.

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Performances normally pack the Masterworks Chorale's holiday-season schedule, but not this December.

It's a tough time to be a choir, Tim Cloeter, the chorale's artistic director, explained in a recent note on the group's website.

Singing vocalists can't help but produce aerosol particles — those microscopic droplets that are large enough to carry the coronavirus but small enough to float in the air for hours — so “there is simply no safe way for singers to gather in a room together to sing,” the note read.

That means no concerts against the backdrop of glittering holiday lights; no harmonies echoing through Epworth United Methodist Church; no sharing classics and carols with audiences of friends and families.

But just because the group can't perform doesn't mean they can't practice, Mr. Cloeter's online note explains. Pitch, tone, sight-singing, and diction can always be improved upon, and even the best choirs can benefit from a tune-up. So in a display of the sort of ingenuity and perseverance that Toledo-area residents have displayed time and again throughout the pandemic, Masterworks Chorale found a unique way to do just that.

About six times a week, carloads of Masterworks Chorale singers pack into the parking lot of Perrysburg First United Methodist Church, where Mr. Cloeter also serves as choir director.

Instead of practicing together inside like they did in March, they instead remain in their cars while Mr. Cloeter passes out eight wireless microphones.

“A member will bring a fresh ziploc bag, will open the bag in his or her car, and will not touch the inside of the bag,” Mr. Cloeter explained. “I put the mic in the bag. They seal it up and use it for the rehearsal.”

After Mr. Cloeter hands out the mics, he returns to his keyboard inside the church to conduct. While most organizations and clubs have turned to Zoom and Skype to stay connect, the choir prefers to use technology that’s more analog than digital.

Each car functions as its own sound booth, with rehearsal held over the radio with a mixer and short-range FM radio transmitter. Choir members — and any curious listeners — turn their FM radios to 88.3, and the magical sounds of chorale singing begin.

“Individual singers can contribute from within their enclosed cars and hear the entire group in the moment,” he said. “They can respond in the moment. There’s no latency. There’s no lag between what we’re hearing and what we’re doing.”

Masterworks Chorale’s unique way of rehearsing follows nearly a year during which choir groups across the country have largely stopped singing in close proximity to one another for fear of spreading the coronavirus.

According to a Center for Disease Control and Prevention [study](#), the often loud and sustained act of singing can produce larger amounts of respiratory droplets and aerosols than speaking.

“It became obvious immediately that we couldn’t meet any longer to rehearse in a room, couldn’t meet in a room to perform, couldn’t invite an audience in good conscience to come watch a concert,” Mr. Cloeter said.

One week before the group’s annual march concert, leaders decided to cancel the remainder of the chorale’s season. Then over the summer Mr. Cloeter and the rest of the 48-year-old choir’s board dreamed up the new method of singing, and haven’t looked back.

“We believe that the formative power of choir music is really being together,” he said of the group’s decision to abstain from Zoom rehearsals. “We were not very interested in those asynchronous methods for creating choral music like virtual choirs.”

“We wanted something where we could hear us breathing together. That really signifies us being one.”

In a normal year, the choir would be rehearsing for a number of holiday performances and competitions. This year the group is rehearsing for a compilation CD that will supplement an annual Christmas concert. They are also rehearsing and recording for a virtual chamber concert in March.

Chorale singer Tom Sheehan, 70, has been part of Masterworks for 35 years and was surprised that singing into a plastic wrapped microphone didn’t impact the choir’s sound.

“It’s amazing that singing through the plastic doesn’t seem to affect the sound in any terrible way,” he said. “It’s not like singing in the same room together but it’s definitely better than not singing together.”

The group shut down rehearsals last month when Mr. Cloeter tested positive for the coronavirus and had to quarantine. Thankfully his case was mild, relatively speaking.

“I felt really fatigued and achy for 36 hours, but a couple days later I felt fine for the rest of the time that I isolated,” he said.

Singer Katharin Mason-Wolf said she couldn’t imagine going the entire year without Masterworks.

“Once you get used to singing together it’s hard to stop,” she said. “Even taking the summer off, you really miss it. The thought of going for an entire year without being able to get together and singing together just didn’t seem right.”

Ms. Wolf joined the chorale 10 years ago and said outside of the camaraderie, she loves simply making music with talented people.

“The majority of it is rehearsing, but then there’s doing a performance and sharing something we’ve worked hard on with the community,” she said. “Even though it’s not our normal way, it does make things feel normal.”