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Virtual Hymn Singing and the Imagination of Community

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Abstract

Many individuals derive great personal benefit from participation in singing communities. In the spring of 2020, however, the activities of these communities were rudely curtailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This ethnographic study considers a virtual choir organized by the music director at a church in Massachusetts. For eleven weeks, participants were invited to submit recordings of themselves singing hymns and other selections. These were then mixed into a podcast-style ‘service’ that was published on the church website each Sunday morning. Unlike most virtual choirs, the object in this case was not to create a pristine replica of a choral performance but rather to capture the untrained and unrehearsed sounds of a singing congregation. As a participant, I carefully documented my experiences throughout the ‘Hymn Singing in Isolation’ project, and upon the project’s conclusion I interviewed ten other participants concerning their own experiences. My purpose was to discover whether participation in this project served to sustain and/or create community, and to understand what role singing played in that process. Participants’ experiences were influenced by a variety of factors, including whether or not they were members of the church. However, all participants reported a bifurcated experience: While recording their contributions was often lonely and even isolating, consuming the completed podcast was meaningful and provided participants with a sense of community belonging. I propose *bifurcated musicking* as a frame for understanding how participants in this and other virtual choirs are able to access a communal experience. Grounding my discussion in research on congregational singing and virtual choirs, I conclude that any analysis of a virtual choir must consider the points of production and consumption as distinct experiences, and that communal sentiment arising from participation varies widely according to the way in which each individual conceptualizes their relationship to the imagined singing community.

1 Introduction

In March 2020, the rapid spread of COVID-19 throughout the United States closed the doors of countless places of worship. Religious communities were suddenly faced with the need to move their weekly services online. Many pursued real-time solutions, gathering via video conferencing platform or using social media to broadcast traditional services that were conducted by only a few celebrants. These approaches, however, share a significant shortcoming: They eliminate the possibility of incorporating collective singing into the soundscape of the service. In the case of a broadcast, there are seldom enough people present. In the case of a video meeting, the lag makes synchronous singing impossible (Daffern et

al, 2019). North Hadley Congregational Church (NHCC)—located near Amherst in Western Massachusetts—came up with a novel solution. For eleven weeks spanning March to May of 2020, music director Chris White assembled a weekly podcast service that included the collective singing of hymns. To accomplish this, he and pastor Gordon Pullan solicited individual recordings from congregation members and other friends. White then mixed the submissions into a remarkably lifelike facsimile of congregational singing as part of what came to be termed the ‘Hymn Singing in Isolation Project’ (HSIP). This ethnographic study, which combines participant-observation with semi-structured interviews, seeks to understand the ways in which the HSIP fostered feelings of community participation among contributors. While individual experiences varied, I found that most imagined themselves as participating in a singing community. The participant experience, however, was divided across unique ‘singing’ and ‘listening’ events, resulting in a type of mediated participation that I have termed *bifurcated musicking*.

1.2 Podcasting at North Hadley Congregational Church

A state of emergency was declared in Massachusetts on March 10, 2020. When church leaders began to consider their alternatives, they were constrained by the fact that NHCC does not have Internet capacity and is located in a cellular dead zone. In our conversation, music director White reflected on the process of deliberation. ‘It didn’t seem like the right decision to do something like a Facebook Live,’ remarked White, referring to a solution enacted by many other congregations. ‘When we started thinking about what we might otherwise do, it was more a process of elimination.’ The first podcast, created and published on March 15, was simply a recording of an in-person service, created for the benefit of those who could not be present. The service followed the standard pattern, and included both congregational hymns and a choral anthem performed by a handful of singers. A photograph that accompanies the podcast on the NHCC website shows six socially-distanced congregants in attendance. As the pandemic worsened, however, church leaders decided that it would not be responsible to continue to meet in person, even though later orders permitted gatherings of up to ten people.¹

Beginning with the service on March 22, therefore, White assembled a podcast that resembled a traditional service in format but consisted entirely of individual recordings made in the respective participants’ homes. The first synthetic podcast, which is typical of the series, contains two hymns and choral responses to various prayers and blessings. As would be the case with an in-person service, certain prayers are recited collectively by multiple voices, while the scriptural readings are delivered by parishioners. The musical prelude and postlude both relate to past epidemics—a practice begun the previous week and carried throughout the series. Each podcast was published with a time-stamped outline to guide the listener through the service (or allow them to navigate directly to elements of interest).² In addition, the podcasts were burned to CDs for the benefit of parishioners without Internet access, and transcripts were produced for those without any means of consuming the audio product. These materials were circulated among those who required them.

All hymns and collective songs were recorded by HSIP participants, who included members of the NHCC choir, members of the general congregation, and friends of White and Pullan from outside the church community. According to White, there were about twenty participants in the project, half of whom belonged to the church and half of whom did not. In a given week, about eight singers from each population submitted recordings. Singers were supplied with the materials needed to facilitate their participation by Thursday evening of each week. These were published to the NHCC website, and included simple instructions for making a good recording, an accompaniment track (usually recorded on the organ) for each selection, and sheet music and/or lyrics. Each selection also bore additional instructions (for example, sing parts on all but the last verse) and a time stamp to indicate the first congregational entrance following the introduction. A typical set included two hymns with organ

¹ Governor Charles D. Baker issued COVID-19 Order No. 13 on March 23. This order limited in-person gatherings to ten people, and was later extended by COVID-19 Order No. 21 (March 31) and COVID-19 Order No. 30 (April 28). ‘COVID-19 State of Emergency’, Mass.gov, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-state-of-emergency>, accessed August 3, 2020.

² All of the podcasts are currently available on the NHCC website: ‘Podcasts of Sunday Services’, North Hadley Congregational Church, <https://northhadleycongregationalchurch.org/sunday-services>, accessed August 18, 2020.

accompaniment, a choral response, and a non-traditional song (for example, Rogers and Hammerstein's *Edelweiss*, Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, or the Irish pub tune *Wild Rover*). White emailed participants three times every week: Once on Thursday to announce that the materials had been posted, once on Saturday to remind participants that recordings were due that evening, and finally on Sunday to announce that the podcast had been published. He also shared the podcasts to social media, as did many of the participants.

On June 21, the church adopted a new model whereby a core team of participants broadcast live over the radio from the sanctuary while parishioners listened from cars parked outside. These services were recorded and published as both podcasts and videos through the end of July. In total, therefore, NHCC published thirteen synthetic podcasts. However, the HSIP came to an end with the May 31 podcast, which was the eleventh in the series. The final two synthetic podcasts incorporated solo vocal performances by choir members in place of collective hymns and songs.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Virtual Choirs and Community

This is, first and foremost, a study of a virtual choir (VC)—a term that refers both to the audio-visual product created when individual recordings are assembled into a choral “performance” and the social process through which that product is produced. VCs have attracted significant scholarly attention since their emergence in 2009. The idea is usually credited to Eric Whitacre, and his ongoing VC project has been the subject of several studies (Armstrong, 2012; Konewko, 2013; Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019). Researchers have focused in particular on the power of VCs to emulate the community-building function of in-person choirs. In their investigation, Carvalho and Goodyear were surprised by ‘the intensity of the emotional experiences evoked by the artifacts created in VC, for those who have participated as choir members and on those who experience one of their productions’ (2014: 209). They documented the ‘sense of communion’ and ‘profound feelings of connection’ experienced by participants, even as they were denied the essential choral experience of singing together in real time (2014: 212; for a definition of ‘sense of community,’ see McMillan & Chavis, 1986: 9). Likewise, Fancourt and Steptoe reported that ‘VCs are associated with a greater sense of social presence’ than in-person choirs—a result that they described as ‘surprising (and contrary to our original hypothesis) given the fact that VCs involve low levels of both interaction and immersion’ (2019: 6). Other studies have examined the power of VCs to decrease feelings of isolation for online learners (French, 2017) and increase access to participation for disabled individuals (Paparó & Talbot, 2014 cited in Waldron, 2018; Armstrong, 2012: 69).

Some scholars, however, have taken a more skeptical approach to the subject of communal experience in online participatory music-making. As Literat has warned, a ‘sense of community building and identification, however conditional and however brief, [...] is much harder to attain in online crowdsourced artistic projects’ (Literat, 2012: 2972). Armstrong, in particular, has documented and given careful consideration to the great diversity of experiences among VC participants, finding that not all report making communal connections and some even find participation to increase their feelings of isolation (2012). Because her ethnographic methodology and research questions parallel my own, her findings will be cited throughout this article.

2.2 Hymn Singing and Community

While most VCs employ standard choral repertoire, the HSIP repertoire was composed principally of Christian hymns—a body of song that had significant (although varied) meaning to the participants. The power of congregational song to facilitate communal experiences even when participants are isolated has been well documented. Building on Anderson's argument that national anthems can inspire singers to imagine their own participation in a vast, unseen community (Anderson, 2006: 145), Hartje-Döll argues that the global engagement with worship and praise songs constitutes an ‘imagined community’ (2013: 139), while Lueck extends the same argument to Sacred Harp singers

(2015: 132). Ingalls has explored the process by which participatory engagement with evangelical song creates community in a variety of social settings, including online spaces, and her case studies include isolated subjects who found a sense of community connection through engagement with shared repertoire (2018).

Hartje-Döll has suggested that memory plays an important role in the community-building process, as each song is 'linked to specific events and emotions' (2013: 148). As Saliers has described the phenomenon, 'singing the same hymn over years installs it in a person's inner repertoire. Such bodily memory provides a storehouse of emotional and cognitive resources that can be called upon in various life circumstances' (2014: 67). The argument that memory instills sacred song with meaning is further supported by congregational music practitioners across Christian traditions (Bell, 2000; Ruth, 2005; Bradley, 2012; Tice, 2014).

Memory is often strengthened by ritual, which for Marini 'is the defining performance condition for sacred song' (2003: 7). Both Titon (2018) and Norton (2016) have documented the role of ritualized participatory singing in shaping the identity and social structure of religious communities, at the same time noting its power to forge strong interpersonal bonds, while Dueck has explored the centrality of a specific hymn to the ritual and self-identification of a Christian community (2013: 86). Participatory hymn singing can also constitute an ongoing 'ritual of release' with significant therapeutic properties (Calitz, 2017: 4).

2.3 Participatory vs. Presentational Music-Making

The HSIP also differed from typical VCs in its aim and associated mode of engagement. While VCs usually replicate presentational choral performances, the HSIP replicated participatory congregational singing. Turino theorized the participatory and presentational fields of music-making in his landmark 2008 study. He defined *participatory performance* as 'a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role' (26). Under normal circumstances, congregational singing is fully participatory: While participants might occupy different roles (leading, following, harmonizing, accompanying, even executing non-musical liturgical actions), the 'primary goal is to involve the maximum number of' congregants, and there is no sense of performing for an audience.

In considering the sound features that are typical of participatory musical practices, Turino concluded that they '(1) functioned to inspire or support participation; (2) functioned to enhance social bonding, a goal that often underlies participatory traditions; and/or (3) dialectically grew out of or were the result of participatory values and practices' (2008: 36). Features include repetition (e.g. the strophic form of a hymn), formulaic beginnings and endings (e.g. an organ introduction and conclusion), steady rhythms, consistent high volumes, and 'wide tuning' (45). This last element recalls Kiel's argument that 'Music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be "out of time" and "out of tune",' which Turino credits as the foundation for his own thinking (1987: 275). All of these observations are directly relevant to the HSIP, which sought both to replicate both the experience and sound of congregational singing.

3 Methodology

This ethnographic study (ethics approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Georgia, 4 July 2020), combines participant-observation with semi-structured interviews (Titon, 2021: 64; Dunn, 2005: 80). As a participant, I prepared for autoethnographic engagement by writing down thoughts on my experience each time I made a recording or listened to the podcast (White, 2003). Following the conclusion of the HSIP, White agreed to contact other participants on my behalf to ask if they would talk to me about their own experiences over Zoom. I wanted to understand whether or not participation in the HSIP had constituted a communal experience for them, and specifically to learn how they had conceptually navigated the temporal distance between the singing and listening experiences. Between June 24 and July 27, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants in the HSIP.

These interviews were between twelve minutes and one hour in length. My interview subjects included White and Pullan, who both contributed hymn recordings in addition to being otherwise involved in the design and creation of the podcasts. Of the eight other participants, three—Jenny, Lance, and Patricia—were members of the NHCC choir, two—Laurel and Anabelle—lived locally and had visited the church, and three—Kim, Rebecca, and Cheryl—were, like myself, friends of White who lived elsewhere in the United States and had never visited NHCC.³ Lance, Rebecca, and myself all had professional singing experience, while Anabelle and Kim are highly-trained musicians. The remainder of the participants were enthusiastic amateur singers, most of whom belonged to church choirs. All had a background in hymn singing, which would shape their experiences, but the religious beliefs of participants varied widely: Some belonged to various Christian denominations, one was Jewish, and one was non-religious. None were paid for their participation, and all contributed to the HSIP because they found it personally rewarding.

My study constituted an intervention into the community, insofar as HSIP participants were not aware of one another's identities while the HSIP was in progress (Janghorben et al, 2014). Over the course of our conversations, I not only came to understand the diverse experiences of HSIP participants but also shared information that altered each interlocutor's perspective on their own participation. Specifically, each singer who was not a member of NHCC had been under the impression that all other participants were members, and all participants were surprised to learn how many non-members had contributed their voices.

The experiences of participants certainly differed based on their relationship to the NHCC community, but there were also many commonalities across the group. I was explicitly interested in discovering how participation in the project created or sustained feelings of community membership and investigating the role of memory and imagination in shaping those experiences. Although I was interested in the significance of hymn singing to the participants, I did not inquire as to whether participation constituted a spiritual experience, which was outside the scope of my investigation. As Adnams has demonstrated, the personalized spiritual experiences of hymn singers vary widely even among those who worship together (2013: 186).

I approached these conversations with a degree of skepticism as to whether or not this project constituted an example of communal singing at all. When we make solo recordings in isolation, can we still be regarded as participating in a communal experience? And what role does our individual perception of the experience play in making that determination? To this end, I probed each interlocutor's unique experience of creating their recording on the one hand and consuming the completed podcast on the other.

4 Results

First, I will consider the motivations for the HSIP and assess the public framing of the podcast series. Then I will introduce *bifurcated musicking* as a frame for understanding how participants in this and other VCs are able to access a communal experience.

4.1 Podcasting Community at NHCC

It is clear from the NHCC website that the podcasts were intended to facilitate a sense of virtual community for parishioners. Each podcast is introduced with a brief text that often touches on the theme of the service, but that also addresses the topics of isolation and connectivity. It was hoped, for example, that the March 22 podcast would capture the sense of 'togetherness of a weekly congregational church service', while the March 29 podcast was accompanied by the promise of 'solace, community, and inspiration in our communal expression of faith, as we pray in isolation, together'. The process of podcast production itself—'recording our voices and song in isolation and layering them in community'—is described in terms that emphasize the construction of virtual community.

³ All participants other than White and Pullan, whose identity cannot be concealed in the context of this study, are referred to using pseudonyms.

When describing his motivations for creating the podcast, White emphasized the importance of sustaining active participation in the community: ‘I was worried that the folks in my congregation would feel really isolated [...] I was worried that if we just sort of stopped and it became a passive process where people just tuned in on Sunday morning to listen to something that they didn’t have any stake in that [they would become] more and more isolated from the church.’ This approach to providing a virtual church experience, therefore, was predicated on participation in all parts of the service. The purpose of the podcast was both to facilitate that participation and to serve as a sonic representation of the dispersed community.

As synthetic ‘recordings’ of imagined church services, it is natural enough that each podcast should have included hymns. The hymns, however, did not occupy a special place in White’s concept of the project, which he described as an ‘effort to recreate the communal.’ Instead, he thought of them merely as contributing to ‘the communal feeling of everybody participating in these rituals’—no different in essence than the prayers or readings. NHCC pastor Pullan, however, indicated that the hymns were central to his concept of the podcast project. ‘Music is critical to me in terms of worship,’ he said at the outset of our conversation, ‘and I would much rather sing than speak any day of the week, so not being able to do that communally is really problematic for me.’ Later, he reflected on the role hymns play in reinforcing his message for each service, describing it as ‘almost a cheap shot’ to program selections that he knows stir the emotions of his parishioners.

White and Pullan recruited additional singers to participate in the HSIP because NHCC is a small congregation. Neither White nor Pullan expressed any concern about the possibility that bringing in outside voices might alienate congregants, and there is no evidence that it did. To the contrary, Pullan found that the project made him ‘realize that we limit ourselves in terms of what community is’, and he celebrated the fact that ‘the community that wound up forming was probably much more diverse than we would have ever had walk through our door’. All the same, the fact that the participants did not all belong to NHCC community is significant both to the HSIP and to this study.

Also significant is the fact that White intentionally kept the identities of participants protected by using the bcc feature in his email communications. One reason for doing so was that he didn’t want anyone to feel pressured to contribute. He suspected that if the names of participants were made known, individuals might worry that others would notice that their voice was missing from a given podcast and feel guilty about skipping a week. However, he also had a more philosophical motivation. ‘Part of the thing about congregational singing’, he reflected, ‘is that you sort of become an anonymous voice in a crowd, and I think that that’s sort of what I wanted to have—the feeling [...] that you don’t know who else is singing around you, the voices [...] are very disembodied around you, and all you know is that you are contributing your voice to this final product’. Anonymity, therefore, was an integral part of the effort to recreate the experience of congregational singing.

4.2 Bifurcated Musicking

In 1998, Small proposed the term *musicking* to capture the holistic social process by which people ‘take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing’ (9). With this term, Small frames the study of music-making so as to include the full range of participatory activities. I have chosen to employ the term *musicking* in my own framework because no other term encompasses the acts of both singing and listening—acts that are temporally unified in a traditional choral setting, but split across two points in time (*bifurcated*) for the virtual choir participant. Conveniently, Small’s term also encompasses the various preparatory acts of the virtual singer, which in the case of the HSIP included corresponding with the project coordinator, experimenting with technology, preparing the recording set-up, and in some cases practicing. Some of these—correspondence and practicing—are shared with participants in traditional choirs, while others—personal use of recording technology—are unique to virtual singers. In seeking to understand how participation in a virtual choir compares with participation in an in-person choir, therefore, I will focus on the singing and listening

experiences, which for in-person singers are simultaneous but for virtual singers might be separated by days, weeks, or months. I describe this unique experience as *bifurcated musicking*.

I am, of course, not the first person to consider this aspect of virtual choir participation. In her study of participants in Eric Whitacre's early virtual choirs, Armstrong interrogated this 'temporal distance between the moment of "creation" and the moment of "performance".' She found that while the split 'weakened the significance of the experience for some,' others still found the 'performance' to be deeply moving and reported emotional responses that were aligned with the experience of in-person singing (Armstrong, 2012: 75). I seek to further probe this bifurcation in the related but distinct context of congregational singing, which—when practiced in person—has no presentational element.

4.2.1 The Singing Experience

Armstrong uses the term 'micro-performances' to describe the videos created by individual virtual choir participants—a term that I find to be equally applicable to the HSIP, despite the fact that the concept of 'performance' is in tension with the practice of participatory congregational singing (Armstrong, 2012: 57). Most of my informants did indeed feel that they were performing, and they exhibited the heightened degree of self-awareness that performance inspires. As Kim described it, 'you become self-conscious in a way that you are not when you are just in church singing'. She went on to explain how a flubbed word or harmony, typically insignificant, becomes 'embarrassing' in the context of making a recording. Patricia likewise responded to her first attempt with the feeling that 'oh, this is awful, I can't send this, this is just terrible', while Cheryl reported that 'the first couple times I would play it back, and really hated how it sounded'. Lance described the torment of coming to terms with his aging voice, although he ultimately described it as 'a growth experience' that was 'eye opening, and it had me face some truths about myself'. While the experience of making recordings could be meaningful, therefore, it tended to focus the participant's attention on their own voice and its shortcomings—something they had not previously experienced in the context of hymn singing. Most of my interlocutors, however, found that their experience changed over time. Although Rebecca reported taking a relaxed attitude from the start, Patricia became more comfortable hearing her own voice and Kim grew to accept imperfections (and the interruptions of her infant).

While recording, participants were aurally connected to the imagined church community by the sounds of White's organ. The organ was certainly significant to my own experience. I mentioned it several times in my journal entries, noting that hearing the organ helped me to recall my past experiences 'singing Easter hymns in packed churches' and made recording more meaningful in general. For all participants, organ served both to index congregational singing and conjure White in the singer's imagination (Turino, 2008: 8). The fact that White did not strive for perfection in creating his accompaniment tracks inspired me to take a casual approach to recording. At the same time, his production of 'live'-sounding accompaniments made the participatory experience feel more genuine and likely contributed to feelings of interpersonal connection while recording (Armstrong, 2012: 73).

Participants often found themselves preoccupied with technological concerns. Cheryl described herself as 'focused on the mechanics' of producing a good recording, which required a great deal of trial and error. Likewise, Laurel took two weeks to figure out how to make a recording and required guidance in using the voice memo feature on her phone. She also had a hard time keeping the house quiet and was frequently interrupted by phone calls while recording. Even White found himself frustrated by the difficulty of using headphones while recording vocal tracks. All of these concerns have previously been documented among VC participants (Armstrong, 2012: 61-62).

4.2.2 The Listening Experience

It became clear across my conversations that the experience of listening to the podcast was almost entirely unrelated to the experience of creating a recording. While most participants did not find a communal experience in the recording process, many did in the listening process. Naturally enough,

however, these experiences differed based on whether or not the participant was also a member of (or familiar with) the church. Patricia is a church member, and she found that the podcasts were surprisingly successful at capturing the character of the services. 'I did not think I was going to really like them', said Patricia of the podcasts, 'and I have to admit, from the first one on, they affected me pretty deeply'. Lance, another member of the NHCC community, agreed that the podcasts allowed him to 'get in touch with' the spirit of the congregation, and he found a 'communal experience' in the act of listening for familiar voices. Overall, however, he described the act of listening as 'really a solitary experience', more akin to meditation than churchgoing. Rebecca, however, reported that the 'sense of community was very palpable' when she listened to the podcasts, despite that fact that she was unfamiliar with the congregation. Her experience might have been shaped by the fact that she has a long history of engaging with church services recorded by a much-loved congregation that she left many years ago.

Participants were more likely to find the act of listening to constitute a communal experience if they approached it imaginatively. Cheryl, who has never visited NHCC, reported perhaps the most vividly imaginative listening experience. 'I could picture myself sitting in a pew', she recalled. 'Not in the choir loft, because in the choir loft we had a tendency to stay together a little better, but you know what congregational singing is. You have singers, and you have non-singers, and people do the best they can, so it was more like sitting in a pew'. Janet's ability to locate herself in a specific part of an imagined church reflected her long experience as a singer in both choral and congregational settings. Church members, naturally enough, exploited their familiarity with the space and congregation to enact more specific listening experiences. Lance reported that he would picture each member of the small congregation, and even named those who we knew would be listening to the CD instead of streaming the online podcast. Laurel, who is not a member of NHCC but has visited, also reported an imaginative experience: 'If you visualize sitting in a pew and just singing, then that comes alive in the podcast. Because especially in a podcast you can close your eyes and make believe you're in a pew, even though you're in a much more comfortable chair, so you feel like you are contributing to a community'.

The unique sound of the hymn singing in the podcasts—the sound of participatory music-making—certainly shaped the listening experience for all participants. White commented on the process by which he sought to replicate the sound of congregational singing. 'If I was putting effort into aligning', he remarked, 'I was putting effort into *not* aligning, because if we actually aligned the voices—if I made it sound, like, all the consonants crisply aligned—it wouldn't sound like congregational singing. So, the imprecision was kind of the point, and the imperfections were kind of the point'. Participants confirmed that White was successful in his aims. Patricia recalled her initial horror at the messiness of the assembled hymn recordings, but quickly realized, 'No, this is perfect, this is communal singing, this is exactly what it is and what it should be, and everybody adds something, and in the jumble it created something quite powerful'. Lance described the podcast as 'not a finished product' and 'a rough cut', but he didn't mean these to be pejorative. Quite to the contrary, the unfinished quality of the podcasts constituted their chief merit: 'It's perfect. It's the way it should be. And that's what I feel. That's the continuity between the services. That's where I feel the connection'. Lance further described the podcasts as a 'translation, sort of an interpretation of what the services were', suggesting that they captured the spirit of the congregation even as they failed to replicate the experience of sitting in church.

Non-members also found the sound of the podcasts to be compelling, and each associated it with their own memories of past participatory experiences. 'It was really cool to hear how much it really did sound like a live, in-person congregation', commented Anabelle. 'That was really remarkable'. Kim and Cheryl both agreed, laying further emphasis on the issue of alignment described by White. 'Honestly, it sounded a lot better than I thought it would', remarked Kim. 'It wasn't perfectly aligned, but that sort of added to the charm, I thought, in a way that I was surprised by. I thought it would just sound kind of bad, but it didn't'. She further commented on how the organ helped to 'keep the sound together' in a way that paralleled in-person congregational singing. I wrote in my own notes that the podcast 'definitely feels like a live broadcast. [...] The sounds of the congregation make it easy to imagine the service taking place in person. In fact, it takes no effort at all'. However, my response to the non-alignment of the vocal tracks

was not identical to that of my interlocutors. ‘I can really *hear* the fact that the singers are unable to hear one another’, I wrote after listening to the May 15 podcast. ‘It’s a little distressing. I feel their isolation—like they are all groping for some sort of community but are essentially deaf and blind to one another’.

Other elements of the sound production also elicited comment. Lance reflected at great length on the sounds of the various rooms in which individual contributors made their recordings, the fact that White made no attempt to keep background sound consistent, and the sense of moving around between spaces that listening to the podcast provided. His thoughts on how the recording process shaped the sound of the congregational singing were particularly insightful: ‘When you’re singing in a congregation you can hear yourself, and you might be able to hear, up close, the closest people to you, and then sort of this general sound out here. Here, everyone was singing this distance [*holds up hands to indicate about one foot*] from the recording, and so that’s what was recorded, so you could hear everyone singing more or less at the same level, and it was really intimate’. In the podcast, space was compressed such that every singer was just a few inches away from the listener, creating a sense of closeness that cannot be achieved in person. The same sense of intimacy has been documented in Whitacre’s VCs, for which participants film themselves close-up in domestic spaces (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014: 217; Armstrong, 2012: 102). Rebecca also commented on the ways in which the podcasts were able to synthesize impossible sonic spaces, although her attention was drawn to the environmental sounds (for example, a stream, or footsteps, or a café) that White sometimes introduced into the mix. She described these sounds as contributing to ‘an aural experience for a listening congregation, a listening audience’, suggesting that their inclusion might have diminished the participatory experience.

White only applied environmental sounds to the non-traditional selections, which he often manipulated in creative ways. He was aware that this could have a significant impact on the listening experience, especially for project participants. ‘You know what the final version of a hymn is going to sound like’, he pointed out, ‘but people weren’t sure [...] what *The Internationale* was going to sound like, or what *You’ll Never Walk Alone* was going to sound like, so it was a surprise. You were rehearsing for a final product that you didn’t know what it was going to be until you listened to it. So I think that tickled some people, that it was exciting on Sunday morning to hear what the final version was going to sound like’. In her study of crowd-sourced works of art, Literat described two types: ‘transparent’, in which participants know what the final product will sound like, and ‘opaque’, in which they do not (Literat, 2012: 2970). She suggests that opaque projects ‘are in the most acute danger of being criticized for objectifying the crowd for the benefit of the artist and of the artwork’, and I found that HSIP participants were indeed likely to associate White’s settings of the non-traditional selections with his creative agency, not their own (Literat, 2012: 2977). Because each participant had a personal relationship with White, however, this became a point of pride. ‘The other thing that’s so cool about it’, remarked Cheryl, after learning that many HSIP participants knew White from places other than NHCC, ‘is that it’s all about Chris’s notion, Chris’s imagination, and his cleverness, and all these people whose lives he’s touched somewhere’. Pullan remarked that for him ‘the exciting parts are the parts that I didn’t put together’, suggesting that part of the podcast’s appeal lay in its ability to present the listener with soundscapes that could not be predicted.

Finally, participants commented on the experience of listening for specific voices, including their own. ‘Of course you like to listen for your own voice’, remarked Jenny, although many of my interlocutors indicated that they were ashamed to make the admission. ‘I will confess—I’m not too proud to confess—that I would listen to see if I could hear my own voice at any point’, admitted Anabelle. She also grew adept at recognizing the voices of other participants, even though the individual singers were unknown to her. NHCC members commented on recognizing one another’s voices, but also failing to recognize unfamiliar voices. Jenny, for example, was always able to identify Lance (‘you could pick out his voice anywhere’), yet wondered who it was that had a ‘beautiful, beautiful soprano voice’ with which she was unfamiliar. I personally found listening for my own voice to detract significantly from the communal experience. ‘I find myself trying to find my own voice in the texture’, I wrote on April 12,

‘which is definitely not the point. Quite the opposite: Doing so alienates me from the participatory experiences, since listening for myself turns this into a performative experience’. For this reason, I enjoyed the podcasts significantly more in the first two weeks of the HSIP, before I started contributing.

4.2.3 Bridging the Gap

Although he acknowledged the challenges and shortcomings of bifurcated musicking, White expressed hope that participants in the HSIP would synthesize their recording and listening experiences into a single, whole experience analogous to that of participating in an in-person church service. ‘You got to have the experience of singing the Easter hymns’, he recalled, ‘but the two parts of it, the singing and then the hearing of the final product, are disconnected in time in a weird way. But you get to put those two together and feel like you had an Easter service this year. Or at least that’s how I felt about it’. White’s concluding remark indicates his understanding that not all participants would necessarily synthesize their experiences in the way he intended. As my investigation demonstrated, the degree to which participants were able to connect their recording and listening experiences varied greatly. The ability to make this connection corresponded with the participant’s tendency to imagine themselves as part of a singing community. As Armstrong also observed, ‘the imagining of others alongside them—the vision of a possible physical interaction—was a powerfully instructive tool and enabled participants to adopt [an] outward orientation’ (Armstrong, 2012: 116).

Some participants developed the ability to make this connection over time. Lance, for example, described how his conceptualization of his own participation transformed from ‘more of a solo performance’ to ‘more of a congregation’ experience as the weeks passed, and he described the process by which he developed a ‘communal attitude’, which culminated in the conviction that ‘this is a group, I’m singing with people, I’m not meant to be perfect, it’s just me singing the hymn’. Anabelle, on the other hand, reported feeling engaged in a communal experience from the start: ‘When I was recording, I would be picturing his church and what it would sound like. [...] I was picturing myself in a future congregation. I knew that I was recording myself, but I was picturing what it would sound like as a congregation’. Her familiarity with the NHCC sanctuary allowed her to imaginatively place herself in the space, and she actively did so even while focusing on producing a quality recording.

This imaginative experience, however, was not common. Kim remained ‘focused on a good performance’ throughout the project and never experienced recording as a communal activity. Cheryl, likewise, felt throughout that the activity of recording was entirely presentational. ‘I was about doing the best I could’, she reported, ‘so that the end product was something useable for Chris. I didn’t imagine that there were other people here. I didn’t think of it that way. It was about production for me’. At least while recording, neither of these participants was able to connect their activity either to the anticipated outcome or to their memories of past participatory experiences. Jenny suggested that the process of making a recording might even have an isolating effect: ‘It’s kind of lonely when you’re just recording it on your own’, she reflected, ‘and the only thing that makes it tolerable is that you know it’s gonna be combined with the other voices’. In her case, thinking ahead to the assemblage of the virtual ensemble improved her experience, but she did not find the process of recording itself to offer a sense of community. My own experience was imaginative, but my sense of community was very limited. ‘It is easy to imagine being present in church and to imagine the other voices [while recording]’, I wrote on May 10, ‘but it’s a very abstract form of connectivity—more about remembering social relationships than building or experiencing them. Listening to the podcast is also a neat experience, but still detached. I can easily imagine a congregation singing together. But I don’t feel as if I am a part of that congregation’.

Armstrong likewise observed variation in the imaginative and communal experiences of VC participants at the point of recording. Some of her informants, for example, imagined themselves blending with a choir, while others reported that recording was, in the words of one participant, ‘more like an exercise in discipline and accuracy than in musicmaking’ (Armstrong, 2012: 71). Like Jenny, several of

Armstrong's informants also described how the recording process increased their feelings of isolation (Armstrong, 2012: 72).

However, the fact that HSIP participants were singing hymns—a body of familiar music with significant personal meaning and communal associations for each individual—shaped the experience in remarkable ways, and while repertoire has remained tangential to other VC studies, it is of central importance to this one (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014: 221). When a project participant sang a hymn, even if they were distracted by feelings of self-consciousness or technological concerns, they conjured up memories of singing that hymn with in-person communities.

In describing the significance of hymns to the podcasts, Pullan praised the power of memory to sustain feelings of connection with the church community: '[Hymns] carry memory, they carry hope, and they live in you more than a sermon would. And it will come back during the week and you'll sing it as well'. There is no question that the hymns were entangled with valued memories for all of the participants; indeed, this was the primary motivation to participate for some. For Cheryl, the HSIP represented 'a chance to sing hymn tunes that I haven't sung since I left the Episcopal church'. She related the hymns to 'my childhood and my young adulthood', and reported that to sing them 'felt good, it was like coming home'. She specifically mentioned the hymns associated with Palm Sunday and Easter, which allowed her 'to go back and touch some of that again, to remember Holy Week'. As someone who was raised in the Episcopal church myself, and who sang for six years with a professional Episcopal choir, I have similar associations with these hymns, which call to mind all of the communities with whom I have sung them before. The experience I shared with Cheryl speaks to the power of hymns to connect the singer to a vast imagined community that spans both time and place (Bradley, 2012: 129).

Kim's associations with hymns are quite different, since she is in the habit of singing them alone and with her family. When she recorded hymns for the HSIP, therefore, she experienced it as an extension of her casual hymn-singing habit, not a reference to past church experiences. For her, singing hymns 'out of context' instead of as part of the liturgy largely stripped them of power. In other words, she did not participate with the 'sacred intentionality' that can make hymn-singing 'part of effective ritual action' (Marini, 2003: 7). Kim agreed that 'hymns are steeped in memory, and a sense of family', which is why she enjoys singing them in the first place, but reported that the familiarity of the music did not stimulate imaginative connections with church or community.

Many other participants, however, found that the communal connotations of hymn-singing—an activity characterized 'by the experience and continued practice of singing together'—shaped their recording experience (Saliers, 2014: 65). For Jenny, it was the hymns that caused her to feel that she was participating in a communal activity. She found that 'it felt really comforting to sing something that you just knew for so many years, and even though you weren't together with people, there was something together about doing that. [...] It's remembering singing them together, is really what it is'. The high value that she placed on the hymns' 'bondedness to the past' underpinned Jenny's decision to only record selections with which she was familiar (Bell, 2000: 40). Singing hymns served to transport Laurel back to communities with whom she had previously shared the activity: 'I could place myself in North Hadley. I could place myself in my church. I could place myself in the church I grew up in. Anywhere I had sung that hymn, I could have placed myself, and internalized it as a community experience'.

Most participants also described the sense of ritual that recording hymns engendered, whether it originated in the repertoire or the broader act of contributing to a communal project. As Marini has noted, the 'ritual process' associated with sacred song 'does not only occur in traditional religious environments' (2003: 7). HSIP participants developed their own rituals that echoed those of in-person religious communities. Laurel described the complete experience as a 'ritual [that] completed itself when I heard the podcast'. She simply moved her hymn-singing practice from Sunday mornings to Saturday nights. The ritual aspect helped her to feel connected to a community, 'because you're so used to doing it with

people that staying at home puts your mind in that environment, so that you can go into that ritual and do it, especially with the hymns that we knew'. Other participants found value and connection simply in the act of making a weekly contribution to a communal project. 'Those early months of the pandemic were really surreal and I felt really disconnected', recalled Anabelle, 'and my friend Chris asked, can you do this. [...] I hadn't been asked to show up to anything in a couple weeks, and I was like, yes, I can do this, this is totally safe, this is a skill set I have, I have the technology, yes, I'm showing up for this, something I can do, right now! [...] So, it was kind of exactly what I needed at that time'. I also identified 'the act of "showing up" for one another' to be important to those who participated in online Sacred Harp singing during the pandemic (Morgan-Ellis, 2021). Patricia was less enthusiastic about the project, but agreed to participate 'just to help the church along'. Over time, however, she found that participation gained in significance. 'I need to do this,' she concluded, 'and this is okay, and at least I'm singing'. In her study, Armstrong found that 'collective action and task-orientation' were at least as significant to the development of communal sentiment as was a shared passion for singing, and it seems clear that a dedication to the HSIP likewise played a role in feelings of community membership (Armstrong, 2012: 116).

5 Discussion

Although there are parallels between the HSIP and other VCs, the experiences of participants in this project were shaped by its unique architectural dimensions. The most significant of these was the complete absence of interaction between participants as part of the HSIP. Participants in some VCs—most notably, those formed and directed by Eric Whitacre—are encouraged to engage with one another in online forums (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014: 216). The Whitacre model also invites participants to contribute by sharing expertise or curating online spaces and makes individual contributions publicly available (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014: 219). All of these architectural dimensions increase the likelihood that participants will feel as if they are participating in a communal activity. The fact that some HSIP participants knew each other and maintained contact outside of the project while others had no idea who else might be contributing produced additional variation between experiences.

It would seem that White's decision to keep participants anonymous had significant repercussions. Although Kim enjoyed participating in the project, the anonymity prevented her from having a communal experience. 'I didn't know who else was doing it', she recalled, 'so I think that makes it not feel like a community—certainly not in the way that a church feels like a community. But even in a more vague sense, since I didn't know who was being melded together with my little recordings'. Rebecca, however, was able to find a 'sense of community' while listening, and her thoughts frequently turned to other podcast consumers, even though she was unfamiliar with the NHCC congregation. 'If someone is at home listening', she reflected, 'and wants to sing along, they won't be singing along by themselves. They will be singing along with a collective'. Anonymity did not stifle her access to an imaginative communal experience.

Cheryl's experience was shaped by written discourse that surrounded the HSIP during the eleven weeks of podcast production. Because Cheryl is used to online communities in which members interact with one another, she did not at first think of participation in the HSIP as a communal activity. Several weeks into the HSIP, however, White developed the relatively innocuous habit of addressing his emails to the 'Isolated Hymn Singers', which caused her to begin to imagine herself as part of a community. This same effect has been documented in the administration of other VCs (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014: 217). In the case of the HSIP, the effect was reinforced by media coverage that included a local NPR story that emphasized the power of the podcasts to connect members of the NHCC community (Kaufman, 2020). As a result, Cheryl began to imagine herself as belonging to a community and participating in a communal activity.

Interestingly, my scholarly intervention also had the effect of changing my interlocutors' perception of their own participation in the HSIP. Although opportunities to interact with other participants is a typical feature of many VCs, it was generally denied to HSIP participants until I began to reach out to them. Their conversation with me was each participant's first conversation with one of their fellow contributors and, for many, the first time they had reflected on the experience. In this way, it mirrored the real-life encounters that many VC participants end up having with one another as a result of their participation (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014: 218).

6 Conclusion

I concluded most conversations by asking each participant point-blank, 'Does this count as community singing?' The answers were, predictably, mixed. The ensuing discussion, however, brought out some significant insights that apply to the investigation of VCs specifically and the study of community singing more generally. Laurel argued that any act of participatory singing could become a communal experience, including singing along with the car radio or a musical film. 'I think it's a human need to reach out and be a part of something', she reflected, 'and using your imagination'. In considering crowd scenes in musicals, she concluded, 'If you were singing along to that, but not present with those people, is it a community experience? Yes. Because in your head, you're there. And it's all what your perception of where you are when you're singing is. I've been on Broadway dozens of times!'. Lance was also eager to shift the definition of community singing to focus on the individual imaginative experience. 'How are you connected to community anyway?', he pondered. 'Is it your imagination that's the connection, or is it the actual physical presence, is that a connection? Can you feel no connection when you're in a group of people?'. This last remark undermines the assumption that in-person participatory singing is necessarily communal. It can be, of course, but the burden is on the individual participant to make the connection. Likewise, the burden is on the individual VC participant to imagine themselves as engaging in a communal activity.

It is no surprise that Laurel and Lance were among the HSIP participants who reported experiencing the greatest degree of connection to an unseen community. Both actively engaged their imaginations while singing and listening. As this study indicates, imagination is the crucial factor in determining the degree to which participation in bifurcated musicking replicates the experience of in-person musicking. Because HSIP participants were denied the opportunity to learn about or communicate with one another during the course of the project, the imaginative element increased in significance. All the same, many participants successfully forged connections with an imagined singing community—connections rooted in their memories of past hymn-singing experiences.

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