

Singing the world well again

Voices of Singapore has been bringing people together through song since its viral virtual singalong of Home in April

Amanda Chai

In between presentations and school coursework, third-year university student Amir Mirza makes sure to find time to attend virtual choir practices with the Voices of Singapore (VOS) community chorus every Wednesday evening.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) undergrad continued singing with the choir even after practices were moved onto Zoom because of the pandemic.

"It's something I look forward to every week. As a university student, things get really hectic sometimes. (The practices) keep me stable and grounded," says the 24-year-old bass. "Besides the singing, there is also the social part of being connected with friends."

During the sessions, members log on and sing alone, muted, while chorus leaders lead vocal warm-ups and score revision – a new experience with "limitations", but worthwhile, he says.

"At the end of the day, it's about the passion for singing – it is a source of comfort and solace for us, and something we use to express our sorrows and grief in this critical period. Even though it's online, we share our voices together."

Better known as the group that organised the 900-strong virtual singalong of Dick Lee's Home in April, VOS started out as an annual choral festival – the VOS Choral Festival – in 2015.

Only in March last year was the VOS Choral Society officially formed and registered as a non-profit arts organisation, with five permanent chorus groups under it: the Children's Choir, Ladies Choir, Community Chorus, VOS Singers and Coronation Singers.

VOS founder and artistic director Darius Lim, 34, believes the choir is one of the first to go online and try virtual practices. It happened because of a Covid-19 scare back in February.

"One of our members had been exposed to a Covid-19 patient from the Safr cluster," he says, referring to a cluster of Covid-19 infections traced to a Chinese New Year gathering in Safr Jurong. "We freaked out, to say the least. So we cancelled the whole season of concerts and decided to virtualise everything."

Snowballing stories of families and friends separated abroad because of the pandemic touched him: "We thought, what if we have a virtual musical platform where we can unite families? Although they're not physically together, it'd give them some sense of comfort."

The Home video garnered over 226,000 views on Facebook and sparked a nationwide singalong.

Chorus members have been kept busy since. In June, the children's choir presented a migrant worker virtual choir project A World To-



gether, in partnership with local charity Healthserve.

In July, there was a singing project with Unicef, fund-raising concert ChildAid, and the VOS Choral Festival that featured other local choirs. Most recently, the entire choral society sang in the President's Star Charity concert yesterday.

Anyone can join the community chorus, which has no auditions. Members range from 18 years old to 80 and come from all walks of life, says Mr Lim. In fact, interest in the community chorus has skyrocketed in the past six months, with the full strength having tripled from 48 to 165.

Some are even based overseas and call into the weekly virtual practices at odd hours of the night.

"I think a lot of the motivation comes from riding off the interactions and one another's energy," Mr Lim says. "We may be on Zoom, but it's not just me talking – the chat bar on the side is constantly ringing with people asking questions. It's a very interactive thing."

Val Chong, who sings in the children's choir, believes singing with VOS helped her mental health and wellness during this time. "The circuit breaker period was challenging for me as I felt disconnected and isolated from the rest of the community. I missed the physical interaction of performing together in a choir," says the 17-year-old School of the Arts Singapore student.

"But the weekly practice sessions made me realise the power of music as a creative platform. We had fun games and activities that bonded us, and our conductor Mr Darius would always check in on our well-being and mental state. I am proud to call the choir my second home."

HEALING WITH SONG

Besides such community projects, VOS has also been an advocate of using music to further medical research here.

Since 2015, Mr Lim has been running a dementia prevention research choir in partnership with Jurong Town Council and the NUS.

To determine if singing in a choir can prevent dementia, senior volunteers were given choral training once a week. Every few months, they took MRI scans to investigate the efficacy of choral singing on their emotional and mental health, says Mr Lim. NUS piloted the research, while he led the music planning – which VOS took over last year. The initiative has been put on pause indefinitely since February.

VOS also started a music-making programme for children with special needs last month. Supported by Temasek Trust, the free 10-week-long programme takes place entirely over Zoom.

The pre-recorded sessions show two conductors, trained in special needs education, singing and using props and visual aids. Children get to learn rhythms and songs, and sing in other languages.

"The programme is very physical – there is a lot of kinesthetic movements; tapping of the shoulders and feet. It's music-making just for fun, with no emphasis on choral excellence," says Mr Lim.

Response has been robust, with more than 60 sign-ups from both within and outside the special needs community.

And soon, higher-functioning individuals "wanting a challenge" will be able to get their fix too. VOS will pilot a special needs chamber choir in January, called Starlight Voices. "It will cater to the higher-functioning individuals who are looking for greater challenges in music, where they can sing in parts

and do serious choral work," Mr Lim says.

In the next six months, he also plans to start corporate choirs – a "huge thing" in countries like Wales where he did his postgraduate studies. Such corporate recreational activities have been proven to build friendship and workplace harmony, and improve the work-life environment, he says.

"We ultimately want to bring singing to offices because that's where the highest stress levels are."

On his passion for such projects, he says his aim is simply to bring choral music to the masses, and advocate that "everyone can sing".

Growing up, he found the choral scene exclusive, with its main audience being friends and family of those performing.

Life-changing experiences watching the National Day Parade rehearsal in Primary Five, and at a rugby match in Wales, also made him realise the importance of community spirit in culture-building.

"There were 60,000 men in the stadium cheering, and they spontaneously broke out into song, singing their Welsh songs," he recalls. "There was no stigma in male singing, and everyone was just so proud of where they come from."

"Experiences like these really helped me to feel we are building something bigger than ourselves. That's what I feel most passionate about – giving people renewed purpose through music."

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Local choral society Voices of Singapore, led by founder and artistic director Darius Lim (above), was likely one of the first choirs to hold virtual practices (left).

Those weekly sessions have become a source of comfort for many through this pandemic.

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