

Video Work Brings Singers Together

By Nicole S. Colson



As concerts are largely held online right now, it has been difficult for performers who are used to audience interaction and feedback.

Conductor Matthew Leese had done such great work on a virtual concert featuring three international choirs during the summer, he was asked to create another such event this past fall.

Leese, conductor, baritone and director of the Keene State College Vocal Consort and Concert Choir and artist-in-residence with **Boston City Singers**, worked with Jane Money (artistic director of Boston City Singers) to create a 25th anniversary concert last April for the Boston City Singers. The concert was to feature two choirs from New Zealand (Leese and Money's shared home country) and one from Croatia, as well as the Boston City Singers on stage for the event in Cambridge, Mass.

Instead, the pandemic hit and the concert was cancelled. The piece they'd selected to perform, "Hine e Hine," a Maori lullaby written by Fannie Rose Howie in 1907 and arranged for mixed choir by David Hamilton. **Boston City Singers' Tour Choir** also planned to perform in New Hampshire with the Keene State College Concert Choir, with a further performance of "Hine e Hine" scheduled to close the program in May.

With some pivoting, Leese and Money were able to create the experience online. The concept at the forefront of the project from the beginning was making singers who are far apart in other countries feel like they are singing side by side — in person, not on a screen.

Leese, who has been recording concerts for more than 20 years, had some technical and editing experience, so was confident he could make it work. Money used her iPhone to record the audio, her Amazon Kindle to read the sheet music and her laptop to record video and watch a pre-recorded clip of Leese conducting the piece.

Leese recorded the piano part first, which opens the video, followed by a model audio track. The final step was editing the audio to blend the voices and adding thumbnail versions of all of the video submissions into one to create the final virtual choir; then upload the video to YouTube.

The result was so successful, Money approached Leese to create and direct another video — this one featuring Boston City Singers and the Keene State College Concert Choir. Together, there were 76 singers between the ages of 12 and 26, some participating in person (including at Keene State) and some virtually.

It was Money's idea to commission an arrangement of the Wexford Carol, a traditional Irish Christmas carol with lyrics dating back to the 12th century. She called upon a friend from university in New Zealand — composer David Hamilton — to help.

"She thought of him because he writes so well for the voice and has worked with different levels of age groups and ability levels," Leese said. "She knew she could describe what we need to him. It was an amazing way for her to work with an old friend and someone she trusted."

Leese also reached out to an old college friend to collaborate — Joseph Legaspi, director of music at St. Peter's University in New Jersey.

Leese called the carol "comforting and beautiful," but not easy. "It's a great teaching piece with great intervals." As he and Money began to look through arrangements of the ancient tune, there wasn't anything that fit the ensembles they wanted to include, and not one with piano accompaniment.

So, they had to create their own. Beginning in late September, a group of Keene State student singers helped him put together practice vocal tracks; Keene State staff pianist Christopher Evatt created a piano track.

"We thought it was a way to make this musically enjoyable for people to practice with — that's important when learning virtually," Leese said.

This project was more enjoyable for Leese, he added, for one because he had already learned the hard lessons from producing the summer project.

"We were starting together knowing it would be virtual," he said, as compared to the video created over the summer, which was supposed to be a live performance.

"I didn't have to relearn software, so I was able to do more fun things," Leese said, citing creation of a story board as if he were writing a film script. "I figured out how I would feature every single singer at one point and together as the climax of the piece. It was a new way of looking at how I would put it together. It was much more satisfying."

He began by creating the audio, layering and editing individual recordings. Then came the video to go with the storyline he designed. Everyone's hard work earned some significant attention: the video has been viewed thousands of times (so far) on multiple platforms and featured in several high-profile holiday presentations including Trinity Candlelight Carols in Boston.

"It's gotten amazing reception," Leese said. "These singers are missing concerts and feedback from the audience. For them to feel and know people really appreciate it, that's everything."

https://www.sentinelsource.com/elf/video-work-brings-singers-together/article_811fb5e8-55dd-11eb-ada4-a324ba63b004.html