

*Stephanie King LaMotte*

## “I’D LIKE TO TEACH THE WORLD TO SING.....”

Before, my weeks were filled with music. Rehearsals with choirs and ensembles, big and small, made squeezing in dinner challenging. From an elite 14-voice a cappella group, to a large community chorus, many nights of the week were devoted to rehearsal time. Sunday was a work day with choir practice and church services. The rest of the week was filled with choosing music from hundreds of options, planning musical programs, making rehearsal tracks, composing new music, or practicing the piano. Ah yes... the joys and stresses of a choir director’s life! I love it and miss it desperately.

The coronavirus thief broke in and stole my livelihood, as he did for so many others. It was crazy the way everything ground to a halt. Not knowing much about the virus back in March, we still realized right away that getting together was a bad idea. During one weekend, all the performing arts groups in town decided to suspend rehearsals and performances for a few weeks. We were shocked, but knew it would only be for a short while. So, I happily hunkered down at home and attacked projects that had been on the back burner—organizing files, going through the storage unit, putting photo albums together. It was great to have time to be quiet at home and get things done. For a while. Until it wasn’t.

As the leader of numerous groups, I had a responsibility to learn all I could about this deadly virus. I watched the news, read the papers, and scoured the internet for breaking stories. I missed my singers, and wanted to know how soon we could safely be back together.

Meanwhile, beginning with the second week at home, I started writing a weekly newsletter to my choirs, as a way to stay connected and encourage them as best I could. Sometimes I sent music to sing, or links to listen to. I sent stories about how songs were written, and articles about the composers

who wrote them. Soon I was sending photos, and writing more personal stories about my life with my husband at home on the Chesapeake Bay. I put together questionnaires to find out more about the choir members, and turned them in to quiz games for all to enjoy. “I rode in a hot air balloon in New Mexico. Who am I?”

As a country, we were pulling together to fight this virus, until we weren’t. Small cracks became crevices, then death-defying canyons, and soon we couldn’t hear each other because everyone was shouting at once. Republicans and Democrats both defiant and sure their side is right. At least, black and white came together to insist on racial equality and a re-evaluation of the hate that divides us.

We wrestled with the great injustices being repeated year after year, and decade after decade, and longed to do more, do *something*, anything to let our dear brothers and sisters know we are one with them. Time ticks on as we question right and wrong, and discover greater and greater injustices as a regular occurrence and *pattern*, far more than we even realized. We long for change and are determined that this time will be different, that the thousands and millions of voices united together **MUST** be heard. We hope, and we pray, and we breathe.

As passions ran deep, I incorporated these current events in to my newsletters, and the “Tuesday Tidings” became something the choir members looked forward to. I wanted to stay connected—to keep spirits high, to remind us that we are a team and are there for each other. It was great, but it wasn’t the same. Where is the music?

Music enriches our lives like nothing else. You know that favorite song that brings a smile to your face the instant it starts to play? A song conjures up a place—the smell, the taste, the memory of being there. Music engages our emotions, and stirs up our passions. We feel, we sense, we sigh, we smile.

As choirs and singers around the world were stuck at home, the internet was flooded with special renditions of favorite songs. Everyone rushed to create a “Zoom-like” recording that featured voices and photos woven throughout a tapestry of song. I was bombarded by choir members asking if **WE** could do that, assuming it was simply a matter of planning a Zoom meeting and singing together. But no! It doesn’t work that way. Because of latency issues and lagging internet speeds, we cannot all sing together in a virtual meeting. We tried it, and it was hysterically funny, because it didn’t

work AT ALL! You would perhaps hear a voice here or there, but nobody was singing together. It was funny, and it was sad, all at the same time.

Of course, it *is* possible to produce a beautiful recording with proper equipment, recording individual voices and instruments from home, then having a trained producer put it all together. It sounds lovely, but is not the experience of singing in an ensemble. People join choirs because they like to sing, yes, but it is much deeper than that. It is the joy of making new friends, sharing in a common hobby, working together to accomplish a lofty goal. Singing in a choir is fabulous, and we all miss it dearly.

If you had told me back in the beginning of March that *singing* would be one of the most dangerous things you could do, I would have laughed out loud! Are you kidding me?! But that's exactly what is happening with Covid-19's assiduous move among us. Worse than sneezing or coughing, singing can propel the virus much farther due to the way a singer breathes deeply and engages the entire body in producing a pleasing sound. Instead of a 6-foot social distancing standard, singers must stand 16 feet apart to be safe.

It is a sobering truth that singing is just too dangerous right now. In early summer, most choir programs cancelled all upcoming Fall rehearsals and programming. We are hoping against hope that we can sing in the Spring, either through the creation of a vaccine, or perhaps new ways of screening for the virus or preventing its spread that we are unaware of right now. Reality strikes fear in our hearts, but hope springs eternal.

My husband is not a musician, but loves to listen to music and sing along. He played an Andrea Bocelli song for me the other day, and out of the blue, I started crying. Music is the beauty of life. Music reaches deep inside and tugs on our heart strings. It is the color in the rainbow, and the understanding of our humanity. Music is passion and music is love. No wonder we miss it so!

"I'd like to teach the world to sing...in perfect harmony!" We may not be able to sing or harmonize in a choir the way we want to right now, but together, we hold on to HOPE, knowing that day will come. As a people, we can choose to put aside differences, sow harmony and peace, and find a healthy way of living. Music is within and around us, and will empower us to overcome the bully coronavirus. Without music there is no life, and without life there is no music. Keep breathing, keep singing, keep loving. Sing and thrive. Live on.