

Written evidence submitted by ORA Singers

Submission to the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport Inquiry on the Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors

This submission is concerned only with professional chamber vocal ensembles and performances designed purely for the purpose of recording, broadcast or streaming, without a live audience.

ORA Singers is an award-winning, UK-based charity that commissions, performs and promotes outstanding choral music. Founded by Suzi Digby OBE, its conductor and music director, and supported by philanthropic foundations, private donations and others, ORA is one of the world's foremost commissioners of contemporary choral music, performed alongside Renaissance masterpieces in celebrated concerts and recordings. ORA supports and develops young composers, including through its ground-breaking Young Composers Competition for students from non-fee-paying schools.

As an organisation primarily concerned with commissioning and recording choral music, ORA has been less directly affected by Covid-19 than most other musical or arts charities. Nonetheless, we had to cancel or postpone several major events planned for 2020 to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Thomas Tallis's iconic 40-part motet, *Spem in Alium*. Instead of raising substantial new funds, we have had to curtail our plans and cut our costs. Of our small staff (one full-time and one part-time employee supported by freelance consultants), one was furloughed for six weeks, returning to work when we were awarded a grant from the Arts Council for our Emergency Composers Fund (www.orasingers.co.uk/composers-fund). Our conductor and music director, Suzi Digby OBE, has also been able to access support from the scheme for self-employed workers. All have been working from home. We are also taking the opportunity to develop our online presence, including with the virtual launch in August of our new album, a recording of *Spem in Alium* together with the world premiere of a major new work by Sir James Macmillan.

Music's vital contribution to our lives has become even more apparent during this pandemic. The resumption of live musical performances, on a limited basis, is hugely welcome. But the longer it remains impossible for professional singers to perform together, the more people will be forced to leave the profession and the more organisations will be forced to close, with lasting damage to our country's musical and cultural life.

As a responsible employer of professional singers, ORA has been thinking carefully and consulting widely about the conditions under which it would be safe for ourselves and other small chamber choirs to resume performances designed purely for the purpose of broadcasting, recording or streaming, without a live audience.

We are aware, of course, of the fears that have been expressed about the possibility that choral singing may be a very high risk activity in the context of Covid-19, particularly given the cluster of infections associated with choirs in Washington DC, Amsterdam and Berlin in the early days of the pandemic. From published reports, however, it seems clear that these were pre-lockdown events when the seriousness of the Covid threat was not widely understood: people greeted each other as friends with handshakes, hugs and kisses, shared refreshments and stood very close to each other as they sang. Nothing of the kind could or would be contemplated now.

As far as we know, there is no scientific evidence connecting singing with a heightened risk of Covid-19. Indeed, a few studies (such as the one by the Institute of Fluid Mechanics and Aerodynamics in Munich), suggest that singing does not create a noticeably greater risk of infection than speaking; the Munich researchers point out that “singing does not expel a large volume of air in jerks like coughing or sneezing”. A detailed analysis by Swiss professional organisations recommends 2-metre social distancing between singers, or 4 sq m of space per performer. We await with interest the findings of further studies.

In the absence of scientific evidence about the alleged risks of singing, we believe that, just as workers in other sectors are being urged to return to work, subject to their employers making their workplaces as safe as possible, so professional singers should be allowed to return to work in safe conditions.

In drawing up the following recommendations, we have paid particular attention to the Government’s guidance for employers, employees and the self-employed: Working safely during COVID-19 in offices and contact centres (11 May 2020) and to the more general guidance from Public Health England.

Specifically, we propose that professional vocal ensembles and choirs should be allowed to resume performances, without a live audience, for the purpose of recording, broadcast or streaming, subject to the following conditions:

- Appropriate health and safety assessment by the organisers to ensure that risks are identified and, as far as possible, mitigated
- No clinically vulnerable or extremely vulnerable individual to take part in a performance, whether as a singer or in any other role
- No individual with symptoms that could indicate Covid-19, or who has tested positive for Covid-19 within the previous week, to take part
- No compulsion on any individual to take part
- Two-metre distancing between all individuals at all times
- A maximum number of people, depending on the size of the venue, allowing for social distancing (ie 4 sq m per person)
- The physical placement of singers should be designed not only to ensure social distancing but also, as far as possible, to avoid face to face or even direct side-by-side positions
- Each singer to use and retain their own score (or scores to be retained and ‘quarantined’ by organisers for appropriate period afterwards)
- Provision of hand washing facilities, hand sanitisers etc
- Provision of masks to be worn when not singing
- All participants to bring their own water bottles etc; no communal refreshments

As with other sectors, these guidelines should be kept under review in the light of general developments in the disease as well as any relevant localised outbreaks. The development of an effective vaccine would, of course, transform the situation. Alternatively, if mass testing, with rapid results, becomes available, that could provide important further assurance to singers and organisers.

We hope that it will not be too long before audiences can also return to live performances, even if social distancing remains necessary. But the immediate priority is to enable professional musicians to make music and professional singers to sing, thus providing delight and comfort to the public and ensuring that Britain’s unique, centuries-old choral tradition flourishes in the years to come.

June 2020