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Non-participation in online Sacred Harp singing during the COVID-19 pandemic

ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of Sacred Harp singers took their activities online, adopting and adapting various platforms for the purpose of participatory music-making. While many singers found online activity to be meaningful, others did not, and an additional group lacked access altogether. This study, which was conducted by means of an online questionnaire, surveys the experiences of Sacred Harp singers who were unable or unwilling to participate in online singing. It documents the practical concerns and negative experiences that contributed to non-participation and considers the impacts of non-participation on the Sacred Harp community. Although technological barriers denied access to some singers, dissatisfaction with the online singing experience was the most significant factor in non-participation. Even with the improvement of online platforms, however, many singers will remain unable to participate in virtual singing due to lack of access to a private domestic space.

INTRODUCTION

When the COVID-19 pandemic brought a halt to live music-making in early 2020, musical communities of all types had to find ways to sustain their relationships and activities in the online world. Participatory communities faced

unique challenges, for current technology does not facilitate seamless multi-directional virtual music-making. Musicians, however, were quick to adapt existing platforms to meet their needs. I previously examined the practices of online Sacred Harp singers, who found ways to continue singing together using Zoom, Facebook Live, Jamulus (a low-latency audio communication platform) and the 'virtual choir' model. Through an ethnographic process, I uncovered various ways in which online singing met participants' needs, even as it failed to fully replicate the in-person experience. However, my methodology only engaged singers who found online activities meaningful; the voices of those who were unable to participate or who found online singing to be without value remained silent. For this follow-up study, I sought out Sacred Harp singers who did not participate regularly in online singing and examined their reasons for abstaining. My purpose was to establish the reasons for non-participation and evaluate the effects of non-participation on individual singers and the larger community. I discovered that, while some singers faced technological barriers, most refrained from participation after finding that online singing was not enjoyable or adequate as a substitute for in-person activity. As a result, local communities have fragmented as interpersonal relationships change or dissolve and individual singers find new pastimes or re-evaluate their participation in Sacred Harp.

BACKGROUND

Online Sacred Harp singing

Sacred Harp singing is a participatory tradition with roots in the eighteenth-century United States. The practice takes its name from the songbook *The Sacred Harp*, which was first published in Georgia in 1844 and has been revised many times into the present day (Cobb 1978: 4). *The Sacred Harp* is a shape-note songbook, meaning that it employs a notation system in which noteheads are assigned shapes depending on the scale degree being indicated (Bealle 1997: 1). Many of the singers who participated in this study use other shape-note books as well, although the two modern editions of *The Sacred Harp* are by far the most widespread, and the designation 'Sacred Harp singing' is often used to connote a broader shape-note practice.

Between the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, Sacred Harp singing was practised principally in the American South. A revival in the 1980s, however, provoked interest throughout the United States, and singing communities can now be found around the globe, with active groups in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Sweden and the United Kingdom (Caudle 2021). Although singers value the history and traditions of their practice, Sacred Harp singing continues to evolve as participants with diverse interests and backgrounds negotiate a balance between continuity and innovation. While many singers profess Christian beliefs and consider Sacred Harp singing to be a spiritual practice, others belong to non-Christian faith traditions or do not identify as religious (Clawson 2011: 90). It is therefore impossible to generalize about the significance of Sacred Harp singing to participants. Within Higgins's community music framework, Sacred Harp can be regarded both as 'music of the community', insofar as it reflects Christian values and Southern heritage, and 'communal music-making', insofar as it brings members of local (and translocal) communities together in musical activity (2012: 4). Scholars have extensively theorized the Sacred Harp 'community', which is described

by Clawson as 'a community (composed of many smaller communities) […] created and maintained around a shared practice' (2011: 4) and by Miller as a 'diaspora' (2008: 28).

Sacred Harp singing is characterized by distinctive rituals. Most members of the community attend local 'practice' singings, often held on a weekly or biweekly basis, and travel to participate in a regular cycle of all-day 'annual' singings and multi-day conventions (Miller 2008: 49). Hospitality is a key value, and a lavish 'dinner on the grounds' plays a significant role in formal gatherings. 'Traveling' is common, and participants form meaningful relationships both with local singers and with singers whom they encounter only at annual events (Miller 2008: 46). At a singing, participants take turns calling and leading songs. When it is a singer's turn to lead, they stand in the centre of the 'hollow square' formed by the four sections (treble, alto, tenor, bass), which are set up to face a central point. The physical arrangement of the room is important. First, it eliminates any meaningful role for an audience; auditors might sit around the edge, but they are largely invisible and ignored. Second, as any singer will tell you, the best place to hear the music is from the centre of the square (Clawson 2011: 12). The effect of Sacred Harp singing, however, is powerful from all positions in the room, for participants typically employ an unrestrained style of vocal production and sing at a very high volume. Most of the songs are driven by an unrelenting rhythmic pulse and some are very fast-paced.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all in-person Sacred Harp activities came to an immediate halt. However, individual singers and local communities quickly found ways to sing together online, and regular activity had recommenced by the end of March 2020. Online Sacred Harp singing has taken a variety of forms. Most participants gather in Zoom either to sing along with recordings (video and/or audio) or to take turns unmuting to sing one vocal part as a solo, with others invited to sing along muted. Several local communities have taken to using Jamulus, either on its own or in conjunction with Zoom. While Jamulus can offer low-latency audio communication to singers who have fast internet and are in close proximity with one another, it does not support video. Connecting simultaneously through Zoom allows singers to see one another and also makes it possible for non-Jamulus users to join in. A sizeable group of singers has taken to using Facebook Live to overdub vocal parts in real time. An individual will broadcast themselves singing along with another live broadcast – a process that can be repeated until the vocal texture is complete. Other participants can sing along without broadcasting. Finally, many singers have participated in Sacred Harp 'virtual choir' projects, for which they submit a video of themselves singing along with a guide recording. These videos are then assembled into a video 'performance' (Morgan-Ellis 2021a).

Through participant observation and a series of interviews, I determined that online Sacred Harp singing has served to both sustain and reshape the community. It has allowed singers to access communal memories, maintain significant rituals and grow as musicians, with the result that it has proved a deeply meaningful activity for many. New communities have formed that, while still geographically based, are open to participants around the world. Each week, for example, roughly the same group of singers participates in the Salt Lake City Zoom singing, although only a minority are Utah residents. The move to virtual environments has increased access for some while diminishing access for others. Singers who were previously isolated from local groups are

now able to participate on a regular basis, while others who lack equipment, internet, technological fluency or interest cannot participate at all (Morgan-Ellis 2021a).

Online music-making during COVID-19

A remarkable literature on participatory music-making during the COVID-19 pandemic has already emerged, with the result that we know a great deal about the online activities of participatory music communities, the power of those activities to sustain community and the barriers to participation faced by members of those communities. Published studies and personal accounts consider online jamming (Kent 2021; MacDonald et al. 2021; Morgan-Ellis 2021b), rehearsing (Rowan 2021), teaching (Menard 2021), music therapy (Dowson et al. 2021) and livestream performance as a site for sustaining community (Bajakian 2021; Margolies and Strub 2021; Patterson 2021; Risk 2021). Several broad studies of participatory musicians have examined the rise in online activity, tracked the preservation of wellbeing benefits as musicians move to online venues and documented dissatisfaction with online music-making platforms (Draper and Dingle 2021; Onderdijk et al. 2021). This new body of research builds upon pre-existing studies concerning virtual choirs (Armstrong 2012; Carvalho and Goodyear 2014; Fancourt and Steptoe 2019), online music communities (Waldron 2009, 2018) and hybrid music communities that combine online and in-person elements (Waldron 2013; O'Flynn 2015). However, the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, which all but eliminated opportunities for in-person music-making and introduced additional stresses into the lives of musicians, has transformed the ways in which technology is used to build and sustain music-making communities.

In their large-scale study of online choral participation in the United Kingdom, Daffern, Balmer and Brereton identified and described a full range of experiences. The modalities reported by study participants – categorized by the authors as multi-track, livestream and live teleconference – are essentially equivalent to the 'virtual choir', Facebook Live and Zoom modalities utilized by Sacred Harp singers. The authors identified the non-existence of seamless low-latency communication technology as the most significant obstacle to participation. When considering the available modalities, they found that lack of infrastructure (technology, hardware, internet access), lack of technological skill and comfort (especially security concerns), lack of private domestic space, lack of confidence as a solo singer and 'Zoom fatigue' all prevented or limited participation. Study participants reported an increased awareness of the significance of the social aspect of their singing activities, which was not adequately supported in online environments. Similarly, the authors emphasized the fact that in-person singers 'share the same room acoustic, consciously, and subconsciously reacting to and interacting with their own and each other's sound in the shared acoustic space' – an element of the singing experience that is of great significance to Sacred Harp singers (Daffern et al. 2021). Finally, participation in online singing did not always contribute to an individual's wellbeing; some study participants reported increased stress, sadness and loneliness (Daffern et al. 2021).

Other studies echo the findings summarized above. Multiple authors have commented on the challenges posed by limitations in internet access, especially in rural areas (Morgan-Ellis 2021b; Patterson 2021) and among

aging populations (Dowson 2021) and lack of facility with technology and equipment (Draper and Dingle 2021; Kent 2021; Morgan-Ellis 2021c; Rowan 2021) that can itself be prohibitively expensive to obtain (Dowson 2021; Bajakian 2021). Even when all other challenges are overcome, lack of access to a private domestic space (Morgan-Ellis 2021a; Rowan 2021) and 'Zoom fatigue' (Menard 2021) can prevent participation, while issues with sound quality are impossible to fully overcome (Bajakian 2021; Patterson 2021; Risk 2021). While all of these authors expressed concern for those who lack access to online music-making, none were able to probe the experiences of those individuals or explain what lack of access meant in their lives. These are important questions, given the well-documented role that participatory music-making – singing in particular – plays in individual wellbeing (Clift et al. 2008; Norton 2016).

RESEARCH METHODS

Research participants responded to a questionnaire combining demographic, multiple-choice, check-all-that-apply and open-ended items, which I circulated widely online by means of Sacred Harp Facebook groups and the Fasola Discussions e-mail list (see the appendix). The questionnaire remained open from 9 March until 15 April 2021, during which time I collected 107 valid responses. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at my institution, and all participants granted informed consent.

The questionnaire was designed to capture information regarding the relative significance of known obstacles to participation in online singing, to identify additional obstacles and to accumulate qualitative data regarding the significance of non-participation in the lives of singers. Respondents were provided with lists of known obstacles and asked to indicate which had contributed to their non-participation. I divided the obstacles into 'practical concerns' and 'negative experiences'. 'Practical concerns' included obstacles that might prevent or limit access (e.g. poor internet), while 'negative experiences' addressed shortcomings in the available platforms (e.g. the inability to see other singers in Jamulus). The list of obstacles was derived from the literature and from my previous qualitative research interviewing participants in online Sacred Harp singing. The open-ended items invited additions to the pre-set lists of reasons for non-participation and encouraged respondents to reflect on their experiences with (and without) online singing. I derived themes from the written responses using a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006: 238). Below, excerpts from open-ended responses are identified by the location of the individual, the length of their experience and the number of the question to which they responded.

RESULTS

Characterizing the respondent pool

The typical respondent was an experienced and active singer who exhibited significant dedication to Sacred Harp. On average, respondents had been singing for about nineteen years, with a minimum experience of two years and a maximum of 70 (some life-long singers indicated they were estimating). The largest group of respondents (35; 32.7 per cent) indicated that they had attended a local Sacred Harp singing at least once a week before the onset of the pandemic, with 34 (31.8 per cent) attending about twice a month and

22 (20.6 per cent) attending once a month. Twelve (11.2 per cent) respondents attended local singings less than once a month, while three (2.8 per cent) did not attend local singings (most likely because they did not have a local group). Respondents were similarly active in terms of traveling. Twenty-four (22.4 per cent) reported traveling to a Sacred Harp singing more than ten times a year, while 52 (48.6 per cent) travelled several times each year. Twenty (18.7 per cent) travelled about once a year, eight (7.5 per cent) only occasionally and two (1.9 per cent) never travelled to a singing. Respondents hailed from 31 US states, two Canadian provinces, Scotland, Ireland, England, the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

Respondents were asked to report on the activities of their local Sacred Harp communities, with an option to select responses and/or input answers into a text box. The largest number (35; 32.7 per cent) indicated that their local groups were singing regularly online. This suggests that there are a large number of 'closed' online singings in addition to those that are publicized and open to all. Three respondents commented that their local groups were singing online but not regularly, and two reported that their local groups had been singing online but had stopped. Nine (8.4 per cent) reported that their local groups were regularly meeting online to socialize but not sing, and nine (8.4 per cent) reported that their local groups were singing in-person. According to the comments, in-person singing was most often outdoors and therefore restricted to the warmer months. It seems that most local communities fragmented during the pandemic, with individual members pursuing their preferred activities: 'Some locals sing in person; some sing online; some do not sing' (GA, 70+ yrs, Q5). Finally, several singers reported having completely lost touch with their local communities: 'I have not had any contact with them, as I am not on any Social Media, and they do not seem to want to communicate by email' (UK, 15 yrs, Q5).

Most of the respondents (90; 84.1 per cent) reported some experience with online singing. Fifty-one (47.6 per cent) had participated in live-led Zoom singing, while 45 (42 per cent) had participated in video-led Zoom singing. Thirty-eight (35.5 per cent) had participated in Facebook Live singing, 37 (34.6 per cent) had participated in a virtual choir, and twenty (18.7 per cent) had sung using Jamulus. Four (3.7 per cent) had participated in Sacred Harp singing on TikTok.

Practical concerns

Sixty-four (59.8 per cent) respondents indicated they were prevented from participating due to practical concerns (Figure 1). The most common obstacle, affecting 21 (19.6 per cent) respondents, was lack of access to a suitable space in which to sing. In their comments, singers described diverse home situations that prevented participation, including the presence of roommates and family members, concerns about disturbing neighbours and the need to accommodate children:

> I live in a one-bedroom apartment with my partner who (for good reasons) does not like religious singing. If the timing lines up and he's on a walk/hike when I'm in the mood to sing, great! But this doesn't line up too often.
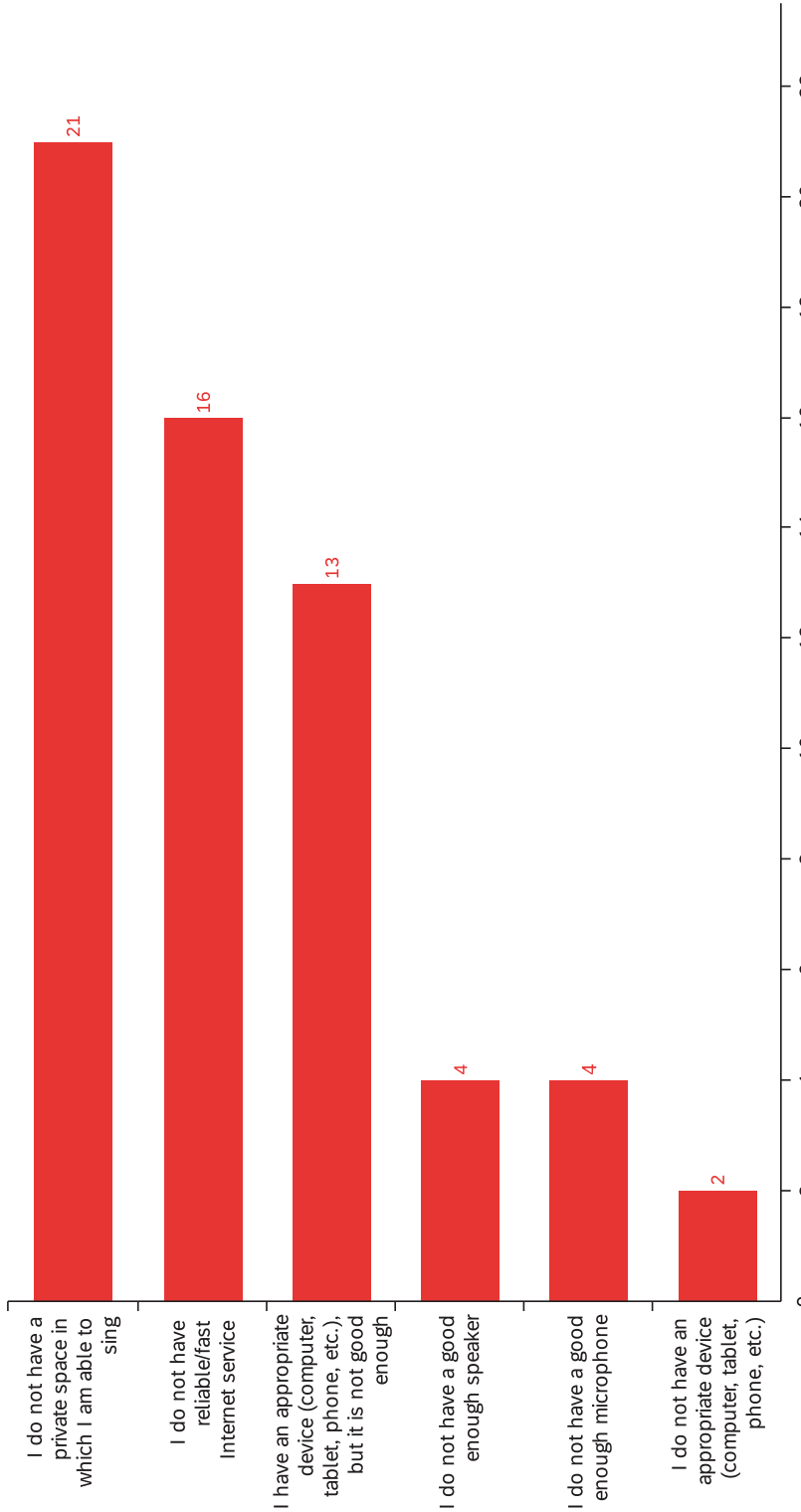>
> (WA, 6 yrs, Q8)

Figure 1: Bar graph displaying the number of respondents who indicated that each of the listed practical concerns prevented them from participating in online singing (Q7).

> I share my home with other people and we try to keep noise from disturbing each other as much as possible. Video calls for work, and some socialising, are noisy enough to be a problem.
>
> (Ireland, 7 yrs, Q8)

> There is no privacy in my home. I don't feel comfortable singing Sacred Harp music in front of family members who do not care for that kind of music.
>
> (NY, 4 yrs, Q8)

> I live in an apartment. I don't sing at home because I feel very exposed. The sound carries too well through walls and windows, and I'm shy to begin with.
>
> (CA, 51 yrs, Q8)

> I have a two-year-old child whose sleep schedule often conflicts with scheduled virtual singings. I don't want to wake him by singing out loud.
>
> (WA, 7 yrs, Q8)

Although lack of access to a private space is a relevant concern for all participatory musicians, it is of special significance to Sacred Harp singers, who typically sing at top volume. Many respondents indicated that they could not sing at home the way they would at an in-person event: 'Apartment with roommates, sacred harp style singing is quite loud' (CA, 4 yrs, Q8).

Sixteen (15 per cent) respondents reported poor or unreliable internet access as an obstacle to participation. In reality, lack of internet access must pose a significantly larger problem, given that this study employed internet-based data collection methods and therefore did not capture responses from singers with no internet access at all, or those who use the internet but do not engage with social media or e-mail lists. According to data collected by the Pew Research Center in early 2021, 93 per cent of American adults use the internet (90 per cent in rural areas). There are significant differences between age groups, with 99 per cent of those between the ages of 18 and 29 using the internet but only 75 per cent of those 65 and older. Only 77 per cent of American adults have access to home broadband (72 per cent in rural areas), which is necessary for some forms of online participatory music-making: 'My internet is not fast enough (by a long shot!) for Jamulus' (MD, 21 yrs, Q8). Broadband also improves the experience with other modalities: 'I live in a rural place and the internet connections simply are not good enough. To get to someplace with decent enough internet to run Zoom with video is about a three hour drive, presuming the roads are not muddy' (KS, 17 yrs, Q8). In addition, slow internet hinders other forms of participation: 'My internet connection is not good enough to reliably upload videos and is definitely not good enough to download software and videos to enable me to edit together a virtual choir piece' (Ireland, 3 yrs, Q8). Cost prevented some respondents from securing adequate internet access: 'I can't afford the monthly expense of wired internet, which rules out Jamulus and systems like it, and I can't afford connectivity charges for 2 devices, so can't join Facebook Streaming' (MA, 43 yrs, Q8). This respondent's situation is not uncommon, given that 15 per cent of all Americans rely on smartphones for internet (17 per cent in rural areas) (Pew Research Center 2021). Finally, respondents found that the pandemic

further hindered their ability to improve connectivity: 'Internet used to be good, but lately it drops constantly. I have not felt comfortable having a service person inside the house to fix it' (CA, 8 yrs, Q8).

The other selectable options all concerned equipment. Thirteen (12.1 per cent) respondents reported that their computer or other device was not good enough to facilitate participation:

> My computer has 'outdated' software that will not run Zoom or any other on-line singing software. It also tells me I have only 4GB of storage left so I cannot download anything. Current virus restrictions prevent anyone coming into my home to 'fix' it, and the company I used for this has gone out of business due to the virus.
>
> (UK, 12 yrs, Q8)

Four (3.7 per cent) reported inadequacies with their speakers, which must be able to produce sound at a high volume in order to replicate the in-person experience, and four (3.7 per cent) reported problems with their microphones. One respondent mentioned their camera: 'The camera on my computer is unreliable and requires taking my computer in to be serviced, which I cannot do because of having to remain in isolation' (NY, 4 yrs, Q8). Although a camera is typically not necessary for participation, it certainly contributes to feelings of social connectivity and group belonging. Finally, two respondents (1.9 per cent) reported they do not have a device that will facilitate participation.

Although the selectable options did not address technological skill, many respondents described a lack of ability to operate their devices or connect to singing platforms in their open-ended responses. In some cases, age was an evident factor:

> I am in my 80s. I have a very basic level of computer skills that enables me to do a few things (emails, research) but no love of the electronic world. I prefer reading a book to sitting at a computer. I have had problems with Zoom, and am not technologically savvy, so I prefer to do without until circumstances change. I do not do Facebook.
>
> (TN, 45 yrs, Q8)

Others expressed lack of interest in online networking as the primary barrier to participation: 'I do not wish to participate in online events, as I do not wish to have an online "presence" beyond emails' (UK, 15 yrs, Q8). Finally, some reported apprehension concerning internet use: 'Don't have adequate knowledge of computers and this Zoom thing. Plus the one time I tried to use it my computer was hacked. So I'm extremely hesitant to even try it again' (GA, 50 yrs, Q8).

Finally, a significant number of respondents indicated they did not participate in online singing due to ways in which events were scheduled and advertised: 'Time zone issues. Not being certain of needing to be "invited". Simply forgetting. Would probably do more if I felt there was a more regulated notification system' (WA, 16 yrs, Q8). All of these complaints were common, and they attest to new challenges presented by the online singing infrastructure. Although there is a central calendar that includes most public online singing events and that is regularly promoted in Facebook groups, it is clear that many respondents were not aware of it.

Negative experiences

Ninety-four (87.9 per cent) respondents reported negative experiences with online singing that have resulted in their losing interest in the activity (Figure 2). A majority of these respondents (61; 64.9 per cent) reported they do not feel like they are singing with other people, with a large number (50; 53.2 per cent) similarly indicating that online singing does not feel 'live' (percentages in this section are in reference to the number of study participants who responded to this item, Q9). Although the responses to selectable options were revealing, independent themes emerged from the open-ended responses. Respondents described the loss of physical interactions, inadequacies in the sound, lack of skill, changes in the social environment and the unwanted sensation of performing. These themes can be paired with the quantitative data to offer a nuanced overview of negative responses to online singing.

Many respondents enumerated physical interactions that cannot take place in an online environment. Their comments are worth quoting at length, for respondents evoked a range of physical experiences they considered essential to the Sacred Harp experience:

> Singing is social, and I do it for the friendships as well as for the music. If I can't hug my fellow singers, why would I go online to sing? We're not in the same space, and to me it doesn't fulfill my brain and body's need for social interaction. Physicality is important, including the physicality of sound. If I can't hear the sound ringing together in the same way, why would I go online to sing? If it's really just the songs that are important to me, I'll just sing them on my own or with my spouse. From a musical perspective, it is simply not the same experience that satisfied my soul, and I don't want to spend a large amount of time and effort in front of a screen for an experience that doesn't feel 'real'. I'd rather spend it in other ways.
>
> (MA, 8 yrs, Q10)

> Online singing is an uncanny valley. I miss making eye contact with people as our parts weave together. I miss feeling the vibrations of people tapping their feet. I miss hugging my friends and making small talk with acquaintances. I miss hearing voices surrounding me blending with mine.
>
> (FL, 20 yrs, Q10)

> I have to eat my own food. I can't share glances across the square or make remarks to my neighbour.
>
> (Germany, 14 yrs, Q10)

> Sacred Harp is group singing with visual interaction across the square, interacting with seatmates during and between songs, hearing the full 4-part harmony and fitting my part into it. None of this is present with zoom. I can sing along with a recording in my living room and don't need a zoom session to remind me of how lacking that experience is.
>
> (WA, 32 yrs, Q10)

The sense of 'liveness' was particularly absent in video-based Zoom singing, in which participants sing along with video (or sometimes audio) recordings. Thirty-three (35.1 per cent) respondents indicated they do not like singing
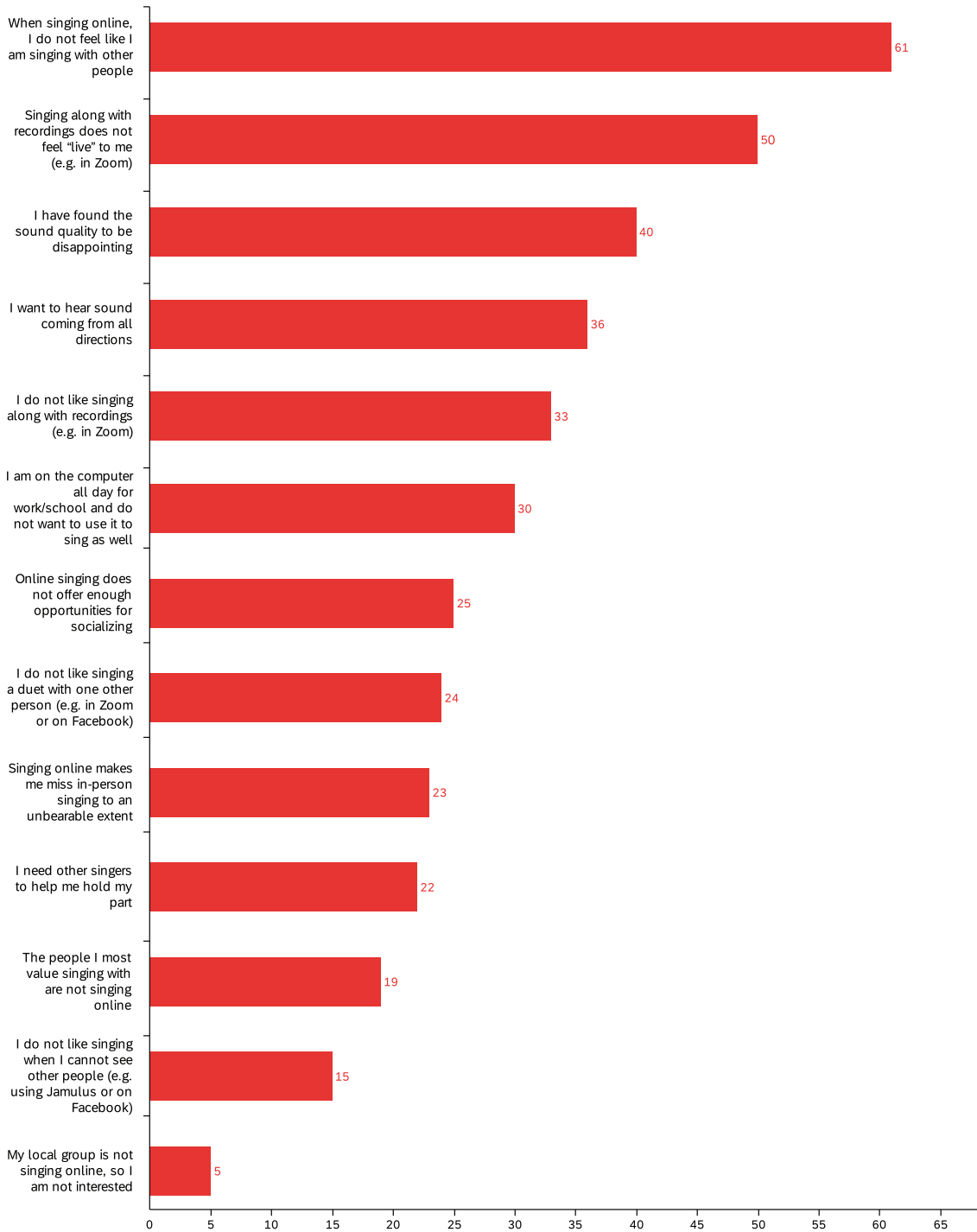
Figure 2: Bar graph displaying the number of respondents who indicated that each of the listed negative experiences prevented them from participating in online singing (Q9).

along with recordings in Zoom, with many commenting that they would rather sing along on their own than in a Zoom meeting. The fixed nature of recordings was also problematic: 'With Zoom/recorded singing there is no way to control the tempo or key' (US, 2.5 yrs, Q10).

The sonic experience was criticized on various grounds. Quantitative responses revealed that poor sound quality (40; 42.6 per cent) and the loss of the 'surround-sound' effect characteristic of Sacred Harp singing (36; 38.3 per cent) were among the most common negative experiences. However, concerns about sound went much further, encompassing both production and perception:

> I also think that the actual experience of voice production is quite differ-ent. On zoom, I don't think I was ever really singing the way I would in the hollow square, for all kinds of reasons. My neighbours are one concern, of course. I also don't think that listening to sound on head-phones or my computer speaker is really conducive to it. Is it literally just not loud enough? Or is it something else about being surrounded by people who are singing? I'm not sure.
>
> (Quebec, 23 yrs, Q10)

Respondents also commented on the lost experience of blending one's voice with those of the other singers and on the fact that they did not enjoy hearing their own voice in isolation:

> I didn't experience blending voices and joining in singing. I was sing-ing isolated in my home which was not ticking the boxes for me. It was good to see friends and to visit with them, but I couldn't hear their voices and it did not feel satisfying.
>
> (GA, 10 yrs, Q10)

> I don't like how my voice sounds, which is kind of a sad thing to say. It's actually pretty funny – I really thought my voice sounded as good out in the world as it does in my head. So that doesn't make me eager to add my voice to virtual choir.
>
> (Quebec, 23 yrs, Q10)

Dissatisfaction with the sonic experience also explains why 24 (25.5 per cent) respondents did not enjoy live-led Zoom singing, for which a single participant (or perhaps a co-habitating pair) unmutes to sing one vocal part. Although some singers appreciated the intimacy and 'liveness' of this method (Morgan-Ellis 2021a), others found the thin and/or incomplete texture to be disappointing:

> I find the live (where a single party leads a song) ones slow and painful because it is such a pale comparison of live singing. The same goes for Facebook live events where no one is providing a piggy back video of other parts.
>
> (VA, 13 yrs, Q10)

Many indicated that lack of skill prevented participation from being an enjoy-able experience. In some cases, this was lack of skill on the part of others – specifically singers who live-lead in Zoom and/or broadcast over Facebook:

> My group lets each person pitch their own, and sometimes the results were unsingable. Singing against someone singing bass, for example, was really difficult.
>
> (MN, 30 yrs, Q10)

> The ones I can join are very chaotic, don't keep good, consistent time as song progresses.
>
> (WA, 6 yrs, Q10)

In other cases (22; 23.4 per cent), the respondent reported that they lacked the skill to hold their own part without the support of a section:

> I am not a good sight reader so without the support of multiple people singing the same part around me I get lost easily.
>
> (CA, 32 yrs, Q10)

> I'm still new enough that it's very hard to hold my part against only one voice, and I feel like I can't lead songs that I don't know well enough to sing on my own. So there's less that I can do at a singing and I'm not even doing what I can do well.
>
> (WI, 2 yrs, Q10)

Even for skilled singers, the platforms posed challenges regarding togetherness, balance and musicality:

> It's much more difficult to keep everyone in time. It requires a lot of concentration and computer time. It's difficult to get a feeling of the mood of the class and the room, affecting the suitability of a song or pitch. I.e. lack of presence and feedback.
>
> (Germany, 14 yrs, Q10)

Singers who used Jamulus, the only platform to facilitate multidirectional real-time communication, reported problems with latency: 'Jamulus singing doesn't sound good, people get out of sync, it's just not fun' (CA, 10 yrs, Q10). In addition to latency, Jamulus singers are challenged by the absence of a visual element – which itself made the activity unpleasant for a sizeable number (fifteen; 16 per cent) of respondents.

Respondents indicated a wide variety of concerns regarding community and social interaction. Some (25; 26.6 per cent) indicated that online singing did not offer enough opportunities for social interaction, which was highly valued, while others found that the social interaction was not satisfying: 'Generally discussions don't feel natural (due to Zoom limitations and people not understanding the use of mute) and limited by time or a limited number of folk dominating' (Scotland, 10 yrs, Q10). Others, however, reported changes to the structure of the singing community that made participation unpleasant. While only five (5.3 per cent) respondents indicated they had no interest in online singing because their local groups were not meeting online, nineteen (20.2 per cent) indicated that they were not interested because the individual singers they most valued were not participating: 'I regularly travel to Alabama and Georgia to sing. Most of the traditional singing community, including family and good friends, are not singing online. If they were, and found it rewarding, I might consider

it' (MI, 15 yrs, Q10). In some cases, valued local singers disappeared from the community, while in others, non-local singers came to dominate online gatherings in ways that were not appreciated:

> Some individuals dominate all comments. These are not people I have ever met, so I don't really care about their opinions. They are not local to the host, but they are deferred to.
>
> (OR, 20 yrs, Q10)

> The Montreal group was singing online during the first lockdown (March–May 2020). Over that time, the people who were actually singing with the group morphed, so that there were really only a couple of Montrealers left. The leaders, in particular, were fantastic, but not from Montreal, so I somehow felt like I (as a Montrealer) had to do a great deal of work of being grateful, and being one of the organizers, and, since I didn't feel like I actually knew the people involved, this was kind of draining.
>
> (Quebec, 23 yrs, Q10)

The social structure of online Sacred Harp singing is invariably different from that of in-person singing, which is decentralized and democratic. I had previously encountered concerns about the foregrounding of certain singers in the case of Facebook singing (Morgan-Ellis 2021a). In the case of Zoom singing, it is typical for a single host to facilitate the event, which can create conflict:

> One thing not mentioned above is that online singing tends to have at least one host/primary person who's facilitating the interaction. The people who play those roles most often aren't always my favorite people, and since 'singing' online means spending extra time with them (and not with others who have opted out) it's a less attractive proposition.
>
> (Location redacted to protect identity, 10 yrs, Q10)

Some respondents reported that their participation in online singing felt like a performance: 'I don't feel like I'm singing in the hollow square but at some type of performance which Sacred Harp singing is not!' (GA, 50 yrs, Q10). I previously noted this phenomenon among those who broadcast their participation using Facebook Live (Morgan-Ellis 2021a). Zoom singers, however, also reported feeling unusually exposed in the online environment: 'I hate seeing myself onscreen, but if I don't turn my camera on, I feel like I'm not really "there" and the experience is even less satisfying' (OR, 5 yrs, Q10). Participants in virtual choirs are especially likely to feel as if they are 'performing', as has previously been documented (Morgan-Ellis 2021c):

> When recording a part to submit for a song which will be stitched together, I find I put a lot of pressure on myself to get the shapes and words perfect because I'm recording myself and know that this will make putting the end video together easier for the editor. However, it's very difficult to achieve in one take and can be frustrating. I miss the sort of one take aspect of a real singing where if you mess up on one part you've already moved on to the next song before you can think about it and no one around you really notices.
>
> (Ireland, 3 yrs, Q10)

Finally, 'Zoom fatigue' played a large role in non-participation, with 30 (31.9 per cent) respondents indicating that they do not want to use a computer for recreation after spending all day in front of a screen for work or school. All of the negative experiences listed above were associated with the consequence that online singing made many participants (23; 24.4 per cent) miss in-person singing to an unbearable extent, with several commenting that online singing had a negative impact on wellbeing: 'Sometimes I feel *more* lonely with attempts at Zoom singing' (Scotland, 10 yrs, Q10).

Community consequences of non-participation

Study participants reported a range of negative consequences in terms of personal wellbeing, including overwhelming feelings of loneliness and isolation. These consequences were significant and attest to the central role that communal singing in general and Sacred Harp in particular play in participants' social, emotional and spiritual lives. In some cases, respondents found their lives to be completely upended:

> I have honestly wanted to die. This sounds overly dramatic, I realize, but I have a very demanding work life and singing is really the only recreational thing that I do. I haven't figured out what to fill that space with. Nor have I been very successful in keeping up with singing friends in other ways (over the phone, etc.). I feel like I have been holding my breath for an entire year, trying not to fall apart.
>
> (KS, 17 yrs, Q11)

> Since I substitute Sacred Harp for church and much of my social life is taken care of through that Sacred Harp, I'm kind of without a rudder in a rather large storm. Keeping in touch by phone or email, although worthwhile, has been exceedingly time-consuming. I work 2 jobs, both of them almost full-time. So making the time to keep in contact has been difficult, but I continue to do it.
>
> (IL, 25 yrs, Q11)

For these singers, the challenges posed by the pandemic revolve around lack of access to an activity and community that is deeply meaningful. Although they have struggled, a return to in-person singing will resolve their concerns. Other singers, however, have reported the dissolution of relationships and an accompanying sense of betrayal that will not be so easily resolved:

> Sacred Harp singing has been my life since I discovered it at a singing school in May 2009. […] I have […] many singers who I thought were friends in GA and AL. But since the virus I have found that for all but a valuable few in the US (I can count these on one hand) I am 'out of sight out of mind'. That hurts deeply. Virus restrictions mean no singing at all in England (I have not sung even with only five others since November). I have lost the one activity that would help me get through this. I have also lost my social activity. I send many emails, letters and cards but crave in-person singing more than I can say.
>
> (UK, 12 yrs, Q11; redactions to protect identity)

However, a few singers found that the opportunity to take a break from involvement in Sacred Harp and re-evaluate their activities had a positive impact:

> It was devastating at first. We were going to like 40 minuted singings a year and dozens of regular small singings. I was so fortunate to have fallen in love with, and made a home with, a Sacred Harp singer before the pandemic hit. As it turns out, our small monthly singing and always singing in my head (or out loud, alone or with my fiance) is almost enough. […] I don't think I will ever go back to singing in person as frequently as we did. We love staying home and I can't imagine going back to the heavy travel we engaged in before.
>
> (GA, 10 yrs, Q11)

> I have missed the camaraderie. But I have to say that Sacred Harp was one of many pleasures that I have missed from a fulfilling life. I put most of my mental energy into finding new and safer pleasures. But also, I am an organizer and the year without singing has revealed how tired I have become of drumbeat of obligation.
>
> (OH, 50 yrs, Q11)

As these comments suggest, permanent changes have already taken place in the Sacred Harp community that will have lasting repercussions. In some cases, individual singers simply do not plan to resume the same level of activity. More significant, however, are the relationships that have been fractured. Many of those who do not participate in online singing feel forgotten and sidelined. Others have watched in dismay as their local communities break into factions:

> People sing with their close friends in secret, and I feel like it is damaging the (more or less) egalitarian footing that we were all on pre-COVID. Since we have not been permitted to gather as a whole, the group dynamics feel a bit more juvenile – a bit like high school. It has made me very sad to watch the group dynamics devolve.
>
> (Quebec, 2 yrs, Q11)

I previously documented the ways in which Sacred Harp singers have organized themselves into new online communities to the benefit of participants (Morgan-Ellis 2021a). The present study, however, emphasizes the ways in which online singing has been destructive to communities at both local and translocal levels.

DISCUSSION

Although a significant proportion of singers – probably underrepresented in this study – are unable to participate in online singing due to technological barriers (lack of internet connection, equipment or skill), a much larger number decline to participate because they do not find the experience to be satisfying. When asked what changes might be made to online singing to make the experience worthwhile (Q12), many respondents indicated that they would never be interested in online singing because they either were fundamentally resistant to technology use or did not believe that online platforms

could ever replicate significant elements of the in-person experience (also documented in Onderdijk et al. 2021). Others suggested that improvements to the technology such that participants could both see and hear one another in real time would satisfy their needs.

In media studies, the degree to which a visual medium replicates reality is termed 'transparency' (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 24). A high-transparency medium is itself invisible (or nearly invisible) to the viewer, while a low-transparency medium draws attention to itself and to the fact that the contents are mediated. When Sacred Harp singers report that online singing does not feel 'real', they are objecting to the low transparency of the medium, which interferes with the immediacy of their experience. When they express hope for improvements in the technology, they are hoping for higher transparency. Interestingly, the degree to which individual singers perceive the transparency of a given medium is highly variable. As I discovered in my previous study, many singers find Zoom, Facebook Live and/ or Jamulus to successfully replicate the experience of in-person singing; they are able to dismiss the technological interface from their awareness and gain direct access to the participatory experience (Morgan-Ellis 2021a). Singers in the present study, however, were more likely to be aware of the medium, and it interfered with their participatory experience to an unacceptable extent: 'I just have no interest in singing to a computer device' (TX, 55 yrs, Q7).

It seems that a participant's experience with online singing will vary in part based on which factors of in-person singing they value most highly and seek to replicate. Here, we might consider online music-making platforms as primitive virtual reality (VR) systems, insofar as users typically hope to access elements of the in-person experience. Scholars of virtual reality have written extensively about the ability of VR systems, whether fully or partially immersive, to conjure powerful responses from users (Daffern et al. 2019). Bowman and McMahan have highlighted the distinction between 'immersion', which is a characteristic of the system itself, and 'presence', which, whether 'physical' or 'social', is determined by the response of an individual user and may vary based on that user's state of mind, experience with VR and other factors (Bowman and McMahan 2007: 8), although media that is interactive, high-resolution and low-latency is most likely to encourage an acute sense of presence (Onderdijk et al. 2021). There is evidence that shared experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic heightened feelings of presence (specifically social presence) for participants in mediated musical events that took place during the pandemic (Swarbrick et al. 2021). With a complementary view, Gilbert argues in his study of perceived realism in virtual environments that the construction of 'authenticity' is the defining factor. Authenticity is determined at an individual level and 'refers to whether the virtual environment provides the experience expected by the user, both consciously and unconsciously' (Gilbert 2016: 322). Whether considered in terms of presence or authenticity, experiences with online Sacred Harp singing are likewise dependent less on the platforms than on the individual singers who engage with them. It is therefore not clear that improving the technology will itself make the experience of online singing universally satisfying. It is also necessary for individual participants to possess a fluency and comfort with technology that allows the device to 'disappear' and the experience to become 'real'.

However, even with fully realized transparency/presence/authenticity and the resolution of technological barriers, many singers in the present

study would not be able to participate in online singing due to lack of a space in which to sing. While there is reason to assume that internet access and communications technology will continue to improve, the living situations of individual singers are unlikely to change – and as long as a singer is prevented from participating by the presence of family members, roommates and neighbours, no technological improvements will grant them access. As community musicians and organizers consider the possibilities for increased online music-making, this barrier must be addressed.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic will come to an end, and in-person Sacred Harp singing will resume. However, the impacts of the pandemic on the Sacred Harp community will be felt for a long time to come. Individual relationships have been both broken and forged. While some singers have coalesced into new online communities based around preference for specific singing platforms, others have lost access altogether. Some of these singers will not come back, either because they have turned to other forms of music-making or because they feel betrayed by their former communities. Others will change their habits, perhaps traveling less or stepping back from organizational roles. Disagreements about appropriate behaviour during the pandemic and participation in private in-person singings have also produced rifts in the community. When singers come together again, the community will have changed.

Online music-making, however, is here to stay. The past year has seen rapid advances in the technology used to facilitate virtual participation, and many singers have expressed a desire that online activities be sustained. It is vital that researchers continue to track the experiences of musicians – both positive and negative – and that organizers consider and address the full range of barriers to access.

APPENDIX

1. How many years have you been involved with Sacred Harp singing? _____
2. Where do you live? (if USA or Canada, indicate state/province) _____
3. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I attended local Sacred Harp singings:
   about once a week or more / about twice a month / about once a month / less than once a month / never
4. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I travelled to participate in Sacred Harp singings:
   many times (10+) each year / several times each year / perhaps once a year / less than once a year / never
5. Which of the following describes the current activities of your local group?
   ___ Members are regularly singing online
   ___ Members are regularly singing in-person
   ___ Members are regularly socializing online but not singing
   ___ My local group is not doing anything
   ___ I do not have a local group

6. Which of the following types of online Sacred Harp singing, if any, have you experienced?
    ___ Zoom singing with recorded video/audio (a DJ shares recordings)
    ___ Zoom singing with live leading (one person unmutes to sing a part)
    ___ Facebook Live singing (singing along with a live broadcast)
    ___ Jamulus singing
    ___ TikTok
    ___ virtual choir (submitting a video to be combined into a group 'performance')
    ___ Other: _____

7. Which of the following *practical concerns* has prevented you from participating in online Sacred Harp singing?
    ___ I do not have reliable/fast internet service
    ___ I do not have an appropriate device (computer, tablet, phone, etc.)
    ___ I have an appropriate device (computer, tablet, phone, etc.), but it is not good enough
    ___ I do not have good enough speakers
    ___ I do not have a good enough microphone
    ___ I do not have a private space in which I am able to sing
    ___ Other: _____

8. If practical concerns prevent you from participating in online Sacred Harp singing, please explain. I want to fully understand the obstacles you face. Please address each item that you marked.
    _____
    _____

9. Which of the following *negative experiences* has prevented you from participating in online Sacred Harp singing? (check all that apply)
    ___ My local group is not singing online, so I am not interested
    ___ The people I most value singing with are not singing online
    ___ Online singing does not offer enough opportunities for socializing
    ___ When singing online, I do not feel like I am singing with other people
    ___ I do not like singing along with recordings (e.g. in Zoom)
    ___ I do not like singing a duet with one other person (e.g. in Zoom or on Facebook)
    ___ I do not like singing when I cannot see other people (e.g. using Jamulus or on Facebook)
    ___ I have found the sound quality to be disappointing
    ___ I want to hear sound coming from all directions
    ___ I need other singers to help me hold my part
    ___ Singing along with recordings does not feel 'live' to me (e.g. in Zoom)
    ___ I am on the computer all day for work/school and do not want to use it to sing as well
    ___ Singing online makes me miss in-person singing to an unbearable extent
    ___ Other: _____

10. If *negative experiences* prevent you from participating in online Sacred Harp singing, please explain. I want to fully understand why you do not enjoy singing online. Please address each item that you marked.
    _____
    _____

11. What has lack of access to Sacred Harp singing meant to you in the past year? What impact has it had on your life? What do you miss about in-person singing?

———————————————————————————————
———————————————————————————————

12. What change(s), if any, would make it possible or worthwhile for you to participate in online singing?

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