

READYING THE VOICE AND HEART

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As we make ready for the summer months of Ordinary Time, we pray for just that: a time that is no longer unprecedented or inconceivably difficult. Another Easter has come and gone without, in many places, the glorious descants, triumphant anthems, and crowded churches. It almost seems presumptuous to hope for a return to our choir stalls and lofts. Many of us do not know exactly when we will be able to sing together again in choral ensembles, but we have many reasons to hope that it can happen by the fall. This is good news.

How can we ready our voices and hearts for the return? Many of us have not sung in person for over a year. We may share a collective fear of how it will feel to expose our work to other listeners. As we come out of this long period of hibernation, we wonder how we will reawaken our vocal techniques and dust off our performance skills. Singing into computer screens required us to scale down our resonance, our gestures, and our joy, and for most of us, watching church services online greatly diminished

our sense of spiritual community. We may have been unable to commit to a practice regime, without scheduled performances on the horizon and no idea how our profession would look on the other side. Simply getting through the long winter in lockdown was hard enough.

But these challenges have taught us all something wonderfully valuable: resilience. We are now more intentional about choosing to engage with music, for it is no longer something that integrates seamlessly into our days. We are developing tools that we will employ for the rest of our lives: how to work independently without a formal structure, how to care for each other in challenging times, how to adapt to new technologies, and most importantly, how to internalize the fact that we are stronger than we ever knew. As recently as January 2020, none of us would have believed we could survive this long without live musical experiences (not to mention all of the other things we have missed), and yet somehow we have.

The abilities and talents we had before the pandemic are still with us. We relied on our deep wells of personal strength to sustain us through this impossible year, and because of this, we know we have the resources to jump back in when it is time. Start your tentative steps of return now. Sing a little bit each day, not because you have to but because you want to. It doesn't

matter what you sing or how well you sing it. You are simply testing the waters. Stretch your body and reconnect with your breath. Listen to recordings of your favorite choral pieces with joyful anticipation, and put aside the sorrow that may have plagued your listening during this past year.

Singing as an act of faith

Once you have begun to shift your mindset, you can consider the physicality of singing and how that will also change for you now. After more than a year of singing alone in our homes, with microphones and screens as our only means of sharing our voices with others, we need to recalibrate our instruments. Many singers have trouble conceptualizing the concept of "projection" of both sound and self. Even when we are not enduring pandemic restrictions, we must practice for the larger venue (the rehearsal room, the nave, or the concert hall). One of my teachers gave me invaluable advice: we must always sing by feel rather than by sound. We can never hear the sound as others hear it because we are the instrument, and the sound we hear is often deceptive. Singing is literally an act of faith. If you find this idea daunting, reframe it as liberating, because your vocal experience can remain constant in any situation if you are guided by your sensations rather than by the sound you

receive back from the room. A quick way to simulate this is to practice with your fingers plugging your ears (or with cotton balls in them) so that you get used to singing without hearing yourself. Try recording part of your practice so that you can hear it afterward. Alternate singing with and without the sound blockage until both ways feel equally familiar. When

we are unself-conscious about sound, we free ourselves to express our inner hearts using our own uniquely beautiful voices.

We need courage to open our hearts to the possibility of joy after so long in the shadows. As Christians, we know that Lent always leads to Easter. We suffer the dark days and anticipate the glory to come. This time in our lives has

been like an extended period of Lent. But every year, spring does arrive, and this year is no exception. "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises," the psalmist writes (Psalms 98:4). Take a deep breath, steady your heart, and prepare to open up your voice for all to hear once more. You are ready. •