Musicking in Cyberspace:

**Creating Music and Fostering Global Community
through a Virtual Choir**

A thesis
submitted by

Melanie Armstrong

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Abstract

This thesis serves as an exploration of collaborative music-making and the emergence of community within cyberspace. Using Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir as the basis of my inquiry, I examine the unique circumstances of participation in an Internet-based choral ensemble and how such circumstances differ from those of an offline choral ensemble. I highlight the experiences of individual participants, gathered through recent ethnographic research, to demonstrate how a unique set of idealized relationships are enacted through this collaborative project that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. I argue that these relationships serve as the foundation for a meaningful community and enable participants to gain new understandings about themselves, others, and the world. In this way, the Virtual Choir refutes common assertions that online experience will replace offline experience and that the Internet is serving to isolate us from each other and our worlds.

This thesis contributes to the growing academic discourse on open-source collaboration, digital culture, identity formation, and community in cyberspace. These areas have gained prominence in recent years as the Internet and social media have assumed an increasingly integral role in our everyday lives. The Virtual Choir embodies the ideals of cyberspace—intercreativity, open access, and exchange across cultures—and thus proposes a valuable model for collaboration and community in this Digital Age.

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Introduction

Digital technology and social media have played pivotal roles in both cultural and societal shifts in recent years. One striking example can be observed in the political and social revolutions that occurred throughout the Middle East in 2011, known popularly as the "Arab Spring." Individuals pursuing societal change utilized the Internet and social media to communicate with one another and organize protests, aggregating their voices to foment a revolution. This technology gave a voice to those who have felt voiceless, uniting a collective to effect significant change. It is both important and timely to examine some of the ways in which our world is transforming under the influence of such technologies.

In a less extraordinary yet equally significant sense, Internet technology has fundamentally reconfigured the means by which we engage in the activities of our quotidian lives. Within our highly networked society, communicating with one another via textual means and locating, accessing, and exchanging information are all fairly simple and expedient tasks. The world has become smaller and vast stores of information are available for consumption at the click of a mouse. Cultural and economic material, once exchanged in atom-based formats, has been digitized and re-packaged into byte-based formats. In this way, our basic conceptualization of music as a commodity has evolved and, by extension, our conceptualization of how to create, consume, and exchange music has evolved. Music was once regarded as a fixed "product," regulated by an organized, powerful, and restrictive industry. In recent years, it has been rendered ephemeral, mutable, and available for appropriation by anyone with an Internet connection. Of relevance to this thesis is

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that Internet technologies have enabled open-source collaboration (or "crowdsourcing") from across the worldwide population of Internet users, a development which has had significant implications for our understanding of what it means to "musick" in this modern age.[1]

In this thesis, I examine an instance of modern "musicking," as exemplified by Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir. My aim is to explore the significance of this project and demonstrate how the Virtual Choir may be regarded as a means to unite geographically- and culturally-disparate participants in meaningful community, a vision that challenges common assertions that technology contributes to the breakdown of interpersonal connections and thus isolates us from each other.[2] Observers have expressed concern over the amount of time which some users spend "connected" to the Internet or mobile devices, to the point where their offline lives are nearly eclipsed by their online ones. Such a social trend can be troubling for those who regard in-person interaction as paramount in creating and sustaining community life. However, I believe this trend can have positive social outcomes, as well. The Virtual Choir exemplifies some of the promise of emerging technologies and demonstrates how they might be employed to create something that is beautiful, transformative, and culturally and socially significant.

In Chapter One, I provide an overview of some of the technological developments that have had the most profound impacts upon the production,

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[1] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).
[2] See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

consumption, and reception of music as cultural material. In this Digital Age, the

Internet and digital media technologies have emerged quickly, transforming music

production and consumption in remarkable ways. In Chapter Two, I provide

additional contextual material by outlining the distinctive nature of the Virtual Choir

project. I consider its history, mission, and timeline, as well as who participated and

how the project operated. I discuss the appeal of its creator, composer Eric

Whitacre, and how his work has been received.

In Chapter Three, I present the experiences of Virtual Choir participants,

compiled during fieldwork research I conducted in the summer of 2011. Here, I

present the stories of those who participated and examine their motivations for

participation and their reactions to the final "performance." Through these stories,

we gain an understanding of what it means to musick in this unique manner and the

value that participants derived from this collaborative experience.

In Chapter Four, I present a theoretical analysis of the Virtual Choir. I take a

closer look at the nature of this collaboration and what the geographically-disparate

participants were actually "doing" when they made music together asynchronously.

I employ Christopher Small's theories regarding "musicking" and the enactment of

idealized relationships in my analysis of the Virtual Choir as an instantiation of our

collective desire for connection with each other, with ourselves, and with music. I

also problematize how these idealized relationships may contribute to the

construction of community within the Virtual Choir.

In Chapter Five, I conclude by considering the concepts proposed in the

preceding chapter as tools for understanding how the musicking that is done by the

Virtual Choir may allow us to "live better" in our worlds. I argue that this online project enables deep human connections and thus "new planes of existence" that enhance "real," offline life. The "virtual" is not merely a substitute for the real, as some observers have warned.

Research Methodology

To date, there has been little scholarly attention paid to Eric Whitacre, his music, and/or the Virtual Choir. That being the case, I relied heavily on a wide range of biographical, musical, and critical material drawn from popular magazines, trade journals, and social media channels (blogs, Facebook, and online news and popular culture outlets) to provide the material found in the first two chapters. I complemented such material with analysis drawn from the academic discourse on virtual communities and cyberculture.

The nature of my field-based ethnographic research reflects and represents the fundamental character of this community as one that is predicated on networked, "virtual" linkages across boundaries of geography and of time. The stock-in-trade of this community is computer-mediated communication (CMC) and it seemed only fitting to engage in virtual "e-fieldwork" in order to obtain my ethnographic material. Utilizing technology as a tool for communication and connection in the research process aligned my own investigative framework with the creative and communicative framework employed by this community. Virtual interviews were conducted through a variety of Internet-based channels: conversations conducted via personal messaging systems (e-mail, Facebook, and

YouTube) and video responses to the video I uploaded to YouTube.[3] I was also able

to meet one Virtual Chorister in person to conduct a more conventional interview.

In addition, I drew from the vast collection of participant comments and virtual

dialogues posted to various websites which hosted online discussion boards or

similar venues for participant interaction. I further complemented information

gathered through these sources with information gleaned via media coverage of this

project.

Relying primarily on "e-fieldwork" as a means to gather ethnographic data

raised certain questions in regard to the validity and authenticity of the stories

elicited. Admittedly, the responses I received were different from those I might

have received if I had interviewed my collaborators face-to-face. Text-based

communication is qualitatively different from in-person conversation, as the latter

incorporates spontaneity and subtle social cues that can dictate the tone and

direction of the conversation. Written communication can be protracted over a

period of time, during which individuals may thoughtfully and purposefully craft

their contributions to the conversation. Yet I do not feel that text-based

ethnography makes the participant stories less valid or less authentic. In fact, some

collaborators may have expressed themselves in a way that brought their truest

voices to the fore, as some people are just more comfortable with the written word.

As Howard Rheingold pointed out in his ground-breaking study of the virtual

community found in the WELL,

> Some people—many people—don't do well in spontaneous spoken
> interaction, but turn out to have valuable contributions to make in a

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[3] "Virtual Choir 2.0 Ethnography," YouTube video, posted by "melle76a," August 3, 2011.

conversation in which they have time to think about what to say. These people, who might constitute a significant proportion of the population, can find written communication more authentic than the face-to-face kind. Who is to say that this preference for one mode of communication—informal written text—is somehow less authentically human than audible speech?[4]

Denise Carter similarly recognized the value of the written word in conveying participant stories: "By encouraging participants to write about their experiences in detail I was exploiting their storytelling as a form of narrative inquiry, because as Connelly & Clandinin suggest, 'Stories are the closest we can come to experience when we and others tell of our experience (1994, p. 415; 2000)."[5] The written word, whether communicated through journaling or through Internet-mediated communication, is a useful tool for getting at the truth of one's experience and should thus be considered a valuable component of ethnographic inquiry.

This thesis serves as an entry point into discussions surrounding the wider social implications of Internet technologies in our lives. In many ways, these changes represent a reorientation of cultural and social values. This thesis explores some of these processes by problematizing what happens when a group of strangers from disparate geographic locales and various cultural backgrounds come together through Internet channels to create music collaboratively.

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[4] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 8.
[5] Denise Carter, "Living in Virtual Communities: An Ethnography of Human Relationships in Cyberspace," *Information, Communication & Society* 8.2 (2005): 151.

1. The Impacts of the Internet and Digital Media Technologies on the Consumption, Distribution, and Creation of Music

Technology and the Development of Music as Cultural Product

Technological advancement has long been intimately enmeshed with the development and growth of human civilization and its cultural forms.[6] New technologies are typically borne out of a desire to streamline and enhance humankind's interaction with the environment—both the environment of the natural world which humans inhabit as well as the environment of the social and cultural worlds humans construct. Tools are devised to till the earth and encourage a bountiful harvest which may sustain life, while language is devised to facilitate communication between individuals and thus foster a collective ethos that may also serve to sustain life. Technology responds to the will of its human agents as the latter attempt to more fully understand, interact with, and control the environment around them—in effect, to live better within the world.

Both the products of human imagination and innovation, "technology" and "culture" can be said to exist alongside one another in complementary fashion, one feeding the other's development and vice versa; neither dimension of human creation operates or evolves in isolation from the other. Indeed, the two have been closely intertwined throughout the course of human civilization: technology arises from within a specific cultural milieu while the practices and values that

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[6] For discussions of technological development and culture in western civilization, please see: Andrew Murphie and John Potts, *Culture & Technology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Terry S. Reynolds and Stephen H. Cutcliffe, eds., *Technology & the West: A Historical Anthology from **Technology & Culture*** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Gary Krug, *Communication, Technology and Cultural Change* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005).

characterize that milieu are, in turn, uniquely shaped by that technology. Murphie

and Potts call this "the culture/technology dynamic."[7] Indeed, if we consider *techne*,

the root of the word "technology," we see that its definition actually aligns more

closely with concepts commonly relating to culture: "[a]n art, skill, or craft."[8]

Modern conceptions of the two realms have often overlooked their once intimate

and synergistic relationship, partly owing to the fact that technological innovation

has become increasingly detached from embodied human experience.[9] However,

technology and culture should not be considered as distinct or opposing entities. As

Deborah Wong has noted, "technology is a cultural practice and… an examination of

technological practices in context is the only way to get at what technology 'does'."[10]

Therefore, below I examine some of the most significant contextual examples in

which technology has both responded to and acted upon cultural forms, with

specific reference to music as a creative human practice.

Since the final decade or so of the twentieth century, many of our lives[11]—

both those of individuals and those of local and global communities— have been

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[7] Murphie and Potts, *Culture & Technology*, 10.

[8] techne, n. *Oxford English Dictionary Online.* Third edition, March 2010; online version June 2011. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/view/Entry/273538; accessed August 17, 2011.

[9] It is not uncommon to encounter characterizations of modern technologies as "cold", "inhuman", or antithetical to cultural and societal enrichment.

[10] Deborah Wong, "Plugged in at Home: Vietnamese American Technoculture in Orange County," in *Music and Technoculture*, ed. René T. A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 125.

[11] Here I refer primarily to the lives of those inhabiting industrialized nations, although I believe it would be safe to say that the lives of most global citizens have, at the time of this paper, been impacted to one degree or another by the far-reaching influence of the Internet and digital connectivity.

profoundly impacted by the evolution and subsequent proliferation of Internet and new media technologies. The "Digital Age" has brought complex and rapid change onto the modern cultural landscape, presenting both a wide array of opportunities for novel interaction and experience, as well as profound societal shifts that some commentators have found unsettling or even problematic. Increased automation and connectivity can effect enhancements in efficiency and communication at the same time that they can serve to disconnect us from our "real," embodied lives, experiences, and interpersonal relationships.

My interest here is not necessarily to weigh the meritorious impacts of the Digital Age upon our modern lives against the deleterious, but to highlight some of the societal and cultural changes precipitated by recent technological innovations. At the time of this writing, there are a multitude of websites, software programs, and other digital technologies concerned with music production, distribution, and consumption; however, in this chapter I illustrate but a few of the most significant of such innovations, which have collectively set the stage for an Internet-based collaborative project like Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir. In so doing, I shall call attention to meaningful transformations to the processes of community-building, interaction, and cultural production and exchange brought about by the Internet and digital media technologies in recent years. I first provide a brief summary of some other historically significant technological innovations that had profound impacts upon the cultural practices of music-making, music distribution, and music consumption in their day.

To trace the lengthy and complex histories of the intersections of technology

and human culture is a challenging task. Here I highlight two notable technological

innovations that have preceded our modern era—the first of the two by nearly half

a millennium—and had enormous impacts on the development, reification, and

distribution of human culture and its products. Johann Gutenberg's printing press

and Thomas Edison's phonograph each represented watershed moments in the

histories of cultural production and exchange, in the same way that the Internet and

digital media have done in more recent history. While the impacts of these

technologies may not have been felt with the same swiftness and gravity as those in

this Digital Age, they prompted paradigm shifts in the ways in which human culture

was produced, consumed, and exchanged in their contemporary historical moments.

In this way, they provide an important framework for understanding the complex

transformations that have taken place in recent years. Further, they initiated a

conceptual path that would eventually lead to the digital music revolution.

Music as a Consumable and Distributable Product

In the mid-fifteenth century, Johann Gutenberg invented a printing press that

revolutionized the printing of text, a process that had previously been fairly

painstaking and had greatly limited the number of copies that could ultimately be

produced.[12] Gutenberg's press permitted a more expedient production process, thus

enabling a wider geographic distribution of printed texts. An important product of

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[12] Stanley Boorman, et al. "Printing and publishing of music." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/ subscriber/article/grove/music/40101pg1 (accessed August 18, 2011).

human cultural imagination, the written word, was thus able to be disseminated more widely than ever before. Towards the end of the fifteenth century in Venice, Octavio Pettrucci adapted Gutenberg's process and applied it specifically to the printing of polyphonic music scores.[13] Prior to Pettrucci's technological intervention, music had been documented in a necessarily limited number of handwritten manuscripts or existed solely in the itinerant musician's memory. Therefore, a limited number of cultural consumers experienced the songs these musicians carried with them. Pettrucci's printed scores enabled these songs to travel more quickly and to reach a much wider audience, extending beyond the boundaries that had been delimited by the oral transmission process. Moreover, scores had the effect of capturing and codifying the music so that it remained more or less the same when it reached the consumer. Previously, orally transmitted tunes would be subject to musicians' lapses in memory or individual culturally-determined stylistic preferences. Through printed scores, musical products began not only to be distributed more widely, but also to become more fixed and prescriptive in nature, able to be reproduced more reliably in performance and shared with other musicians in distant geographic localities.

The other major technological innovation I wish to mention here that transformed the production and consumption of music prior to the inception of networked computing came in the late nineteenth century, with Edison's invention of sound recording technology. His phonograph did for sound what Gutenberg's printing press did for the written word: sound was reified and suddenly available

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[13] Ibid.

for mass distribution and consumption. Prior to Edison's invention, those desirous

of listening to music either needed to attend a live performance or perform the

music themselves. Now, it was possible to experience a musical performance at the

time of one's choosing and, to an extent, in the location of one's choosing. It was no

longer necessary to have the means and socioeconomic standing to attend a concert

or festival, nor the training to perform music oneself; music reached beyond the

most elite class and began a steady trend towards democracy.[14] A broader swath of

society could now participate in the consumption of music and could do so from the

comfort of their own homes.

Both of these historically significant moments in music history had profound

impacts upon the ways in which music was created, consumed, and incorporated

into everyday life. They enabled the distribution of art music across a wider cross-

section of the population, expanding it beyond the narrow geographic and

socioeconomic confines it once inhabited. However, in light of recent technological

trends, such cultural impacts seem relatively unremarkable despite their enormous

significance at the time. The Digital Age has wholly transformed the ways in which

we perceive technological innovation, inuring us, to a degree, to the exceptional

nature of our modern existence and to the capacity we have to engage with our

natural and social environments in such an efficient and robust fashion. Recent

history has witnessed an expansion of opportunities for engagement with music and

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[14] Folk music, we might say, was by its very nature "democratic"; for the purposes of this paper, I refer here specifically to art music that had been composed specifically for "performance for performance's sake".

with other musicians and music lovers to a degree that could have hardly been imagined only decades ago.

The Rise of the Internet and Peer-to-Peer Music Distribution

In the 1980s and 1990s, as personal computing began to offer users functionality beyond basic mathematical and word processing applications— such as the opportunity to play games and engage in other entertainment and leisure activities— it saw a steady, if somewhat slow, growth in popularity. We, as a society, came to embrace life in front of the computer screen, fascinated by the technology's remarkable abilities and enamored with its capacity to entertain us and serve as a virtual companion during moments of solitude.[15] With the subsequent introduction of the Internet and e-mail, which steadily expanded beyond its initial base of users within academia and the military, our fascination with and reliance on networked computing technology grew in equal measure to the increasing opportunities to connect with our local and global communities. It is this enhanced connectivity, I believe, that has been at the root of so many of the major cultural and societal shifts in our modern lives.

The music industry and the processes of music production, distribution, and consumption have been subject to profound transformations as a result of emergent technology; perhaps in few other realms have the latter's impacts on culture been so keenly observed as in those of entertainment and leisure. The very means by which

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[15] In early computer game applications, the computer served as the user's opponent, or "companion", if you will; in many recent games, while the opportunity to play "live" opponents across the ether of the Internet is typically most appealing to users, there often remains the option to select the computer, or CPU, as the user's opponent.

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we experience and engage with music, both as consumers and as musicians, have evolved radically in recent years. By expanding "intercomputer" (and thus interpersonal) communication and exchange, the Internet and new media technologies have greatly impacted consumer access to and agency within the "cultural machine" of the music industry.

Two complementary innovations worked in tandem to blaze the trail for this trend of enhanced agency and cultural engagement on the part of the end user. MP3 software compression technology, developed through a German collaboration in 1987, enabled sound files to be compressed to a fraction of their size while retaining fidelity of sound.[16] These files of reduced size could more easily be made available on the Internet, and, eventually, peer-to-peer file sharing technology (P2P) gained widespread popularity among Internet users in response to this new potential to "share" music files in MP3 format. These two technological innovations operated synergistically to revolutionize the commercial consumption of music.

While some consumers were using these new technologies to upload and share their own self-produced music files, many more were sharing music files "ripped" from their own private compact disc collections of copyrighted music, compressed into MP3 format and then uploaded to the Internet. In the late 1990s, Internet software programs based on P2P technology, like Napster and Gnutella, emerged in response to the growing, yet still complicated, practice of MP3 file sharing. The function of these programs was to facilitate connections between computer users, enabling them to share MP3 files either via centrally managed

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[16] Reebee Garofalo, "From Music Publishing to MP3: Music and Industry in the Twentieth Century," *American Music* 17.3 (1999): 349.

servers in the case of the former service, or directly from one user's personal

computer to another in the case of the latter.[17] These programs provided users with

a means of locating and connecting with one another, linking digital music

collections across the globe. It also represented a novel mode of

distribution/cultural exchange in which there were multiple nodes of origin and

users could simultaneously be giving and receiving MP3s in a constant flow of file

exchange between essentially anonymous users.[18]

A community of like-minded music lovers began to coalesce around this

technology. Within Napster's first six months, more than ten million users had

signed up.[19] Expanding one's personal digital music collection at low or no cost,

with specific albums that users sought out for download, initially prompted most

users to join the community. The service had an added bonus, however, of

introducing users to new music, thus expanding not only their own personal music

libraries but also their familiarity with a range of artists and music genres. After

locating their intended download within another user's files, they might explore the

other MP3 files that the user had on offer. In this way, they could access implicit

recommendations on other music which they might enjoy and also get a sense of the

other user's overall taste in music and, by extension, of who they might be in "real

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[17] Lewis (2000, G1) makes the point that Napster was the most popular of the peer-to-peer
music sharing programs because of its simplicity. However, because it employed central
servers, users could be fairly easily tracked. Sites like Gnutella appealed to more tech-savvy
consumers and were more complicated because they did not use central servers, allowing
for far more anonymity. The latter software clearly posed a much greater threat to efforts
to thwart illegal sharing of copyrighted material.
[18] Markus Giesler, "Cybernetic Gift Giving and Social Drama: A Netnography of the Napster
File-Sharing Community," in *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture*, ed. Michael D.
Ayers (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 26.
[19] Ibid.

life." In this way, they might begin to understand something about this stranger with whom they were exchanging music across the ether, laying the groundwork for a potential interpersonal connection.

An unexpected dimension of the service began to take shape as "social listening" emerged, in which users specifically sought out like-minded users with whom to engage in file sharing and online discussion regarding shared musical interests.[20] Users had begun employing the technology to seek out social, albeit virtual, connections with other users. The central actions of MP3 file sharing— receiving files from and sending files out to other Napster users—were graphically illustrated in real time on the program's transfer screen; these visible representations of inter-computer connection were emblematic of the virtual connections between users that might be made possible through such technology. Napster also offered public chat rooms where users operating through the same central server (up to 6,000) could discuss both their musical interests as well as unrelated matters. Many users employed private instant messaging to connect to each other in real time online. A collective was forming, bound not only by a desire to broaden one's own base of musical knowledge but also by a longing to connect to a larger global community of like-minded individuals who shared a passion for music.

Most users were motivated by the desire to enrich their cultural and social lives when they participated in these file-sharing communities, yet some viewed this

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[20] Brown et al. 2001 referenced in Abigail Wood, "E-Fieldwork: A Paradigm for the Twenty-first Century?" in *The New (Ethno)musicologies*, ed. Henry Stobart (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 178.

technology as a vehicle through which they could shake the foundations of the recorded music industry and undermine its potency. By exchanging MP3 files of copyrighted music freely amongst themselves, consumers were, in effect, circumventing the music industry and thus shifting the power dynamics that had long characterized the distribution of recorded music. In this way, the community was able to effect what Giesler has called "disintermediation," or a system of exchange in which mediating third parties were nonessential. In his analysis of "cybernetic gift giving," the author states that the *polyadic* nature of knowledge and product transfer within the Napster community represents the instantiation of "consumers' emancipatory desire to share information beyond the conventional market sphere."[21] Indeed, Napster's founder, Shawn Fanning, had this desire of the consumer collective in mind when he conceived of the software as "a system that would be affirmatively powered by the users."[22] An "any-to-any" mode of distribution could effectively liberate consumers from the oppressive unidirectional cultural flow advocated by the record industry.

Giesler also notes that Napster's gift-giving economy presupposes a significant transformation of "music as a product" into "music as a gift."[23] The basic conceptualization of music as a proprietary, commodified object is dissolved in this paradigm, as a networked collective of music lovers bands together to alter what had been the prevailing dynamics of music distribution. What was once severely restricted in its exchange could now be owned by a collective; conceptions of

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[21] Ibid, 22.
[22] Fanning quoted in ibid, 36.
[23] Ibid, 26.

authorship and ownership are rendered nebulous in this digitally-networked

domain, marked by "a shift from individuality to community, from purchase to

sharing, and from ownership to access."[24] This sea change in the characterization

and distribution of music was beginning to have a ripple effect and, naturally, posed

a significant threat to the industry's financial interests.

Napster and Shawn Fanning were eventually sued by the record industry.

The successful lawsuit forced the discontinuation of Napster's services. It was one

thing to target an online entity that could, more or less, be controlled through legal

action, but quite another to try to control an entire population of Internet users.

When individual users—mostly college-age students—were targeted and forced to

pay hefty fines for their involvement in illegal file sharing, other users recognized

the potential ramifications of continuing their own involvement. These legal actions

enabled the large record companies to regain some of their potency in this new

system of networked music distribution. Like many online music services offered at

the time of this writing, www.Napster.com (now operated by Roxio) exists as a

subscription-based service through which paying users may "stream" (play)

selections from a large database of recorded music to their computer or other

Internet-enabled device. With such a service, the user does not actually *own* the

music files and cannot download them to their personal computers; the music must

be streamed live.[25] As long as the user continues to pay subscription fees, s/he may

access the music contained within the online database, and a portion of these fees go

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[24] Ibid, 37.

[25] It should be noted, however, that even a user of average technical ability can find ways to
"cheat" the system, so to speak, by recording music as it is being streamed live and saving
that file onto one's computer.

to the record companies for the use of the copyrighted material. For consumers

who see little value in actually owning albums in this digital age, such a service has

its value. However, the "renegade" and collective spirit that typified freewheeling

music file sharing in Napster's heyday has effectively been diminished as networked

music distribution has been restored, to a degree, to the control of corporate

entities.[26]

It is difficult to know how many early participants in MP3 file sharing were

aware that they were engaging in any sort of illegal activity. They likely had little

regard for or understanding of the ramifications of their actions. They may have

even taken pleasure in the knowledge that this new technology was allowing them

some control over a system that they believe had taken advantage of both artists

and consumers for too long. As Albert Kovacs argues, "through its decentralized

architecture, which promises free communication, the Internet has modified

concepts of property and information" such that users came to associate "copyright

infringement and theft of intellectual property with 'discourse' and 'sharing'."[27] It is

not unlikely that these file-sharing users felt, to a degree, that they were banding

together in a "virtual rebellion against copyright" and against the institutions that

had, for long enough, exerted dominance over the processes of cultural exchange.[28]

The "wild wild web" of the Internet was—and remains, to a degree—a fairly

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[26] This is not to say that the exchange of pirated music or other media files has ceased. "Bit torrent" services have been developed that allow users to share media files in a piecemeal fashion so that they are, for most intents and purposes, unable to be tracked to one single computer or end user.

[27] Albert Kovacs, "Quieting the Virtual Prison Riot: Why the Internet's Spirit of 'Sharing' Must Be Broken", *Duke Law Journal* 51. 2 (2001): 755.

[28] Ibid.

unregulated and unsupervised "locale" within which rebellion may be fomented and collective power established.

However, while freewheeling peer-to-peer exchange of music files may have been quelled by the recording industry's legal interventions, the will of the collective, as well as of the individual, to revolutionize music/cultural exchange and distribution in this networked era had not. Amateur musicians began to take greater advantage of digital recording and MP3 file compression technologies to produce high-quality recordings of their music and make them available via the Internet. These artists—who once would have required the backing of a recording company to reach beyond a local audience—found in the Internet a venue through which to publish and distribute their own music to a worldwide audience of potential listeners. Sites like CD Baby, which promotes itself as a "company run BY musicians FOR musicians,"[29] offer independent musicians a means of distributing music to fans in a way that is purportedly financially advantageous to the musician and obviates securing a recording contract and "selling out" to a large recording company. Artists are afforded greater control over their music and, to an extent, the trajectory of their careers; they can make the music they want to make and can put as much or as little effort into marketing that music as they wish. Consumers who value independent music and enjoy discovering up-and-coming artists operating outside the strictures of the music industry gravitate to sites like CD Baby. These sites function as a streamlined, and presumably more neutral, node of connection between artist and consumer where both parties have a degree of agency within the

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[29] "CD Baby: About Us", accessed July 10, 2011, http://www.cdbaby.com/About.

distribution and exchange of music, transacting more directly with each other and cutting out a middle party that diminishes artists' revenues and often controls artistic creativity. CD Baby provides the channel and the administration to support such artist-consumer connections but purportedly plays a minimal role in the regulation or supervision of the same.

This "any-to-any" mode of cultural exchange between independent Internet users represents what many might say is the democratic, utopian ideal of the world wide web and is the conceptual basis of Web 2.0; the interests and aspirations of both the individual and of the collective supersede those of financially-motivated corporate entities. Moreover, the talents of lesser-known artists are valued here and stand alongside those of artists backed by the previously dominant music industry. In this space, multidirectional cooperation, free interaction, and the exchange of independent cultural products are favored over the unidirectional, or "one-to-many," system of distribution promulgated and sustained by the recording industry. It is this "networked participation" of a diverse collective of Internet users that typifies music exchange and consumption in this Digital Age.

Social Media and Interactive Musical Experience

Another Internet-based innovation that has greatly expanded our understanding of the dynamics of music distribution and promotion is MySpace. An early social-networking website, it allowed users to connect with one another online in a fairly rudimentary fashion by writing social "testimonials" on each other's "pages" and broadcasting information about their own lives on personal pages for other users to

view.[30] Similar to related social-networking websites Friendster—which predated it—and Facebook—which has since refined the model, MySpace's primary function was to enable social interaction between users and to provide a means through which users could broadcast their individual social "capital" or status.[31] While it gained fairly widespread popularity among teenaged and young adult-aged users for some time, it was usurped in the social-media realm by Facebook, which emphasized exclusivity and, through enhanced interactive functionality, offered a more robustly social virtual experience.

However, MySpace excelled in one area: it supported music/media files and was able to host audio-enabled band or artist pages. Signed and unsigned musicians alike recognized an opportunity to develop an online presence where their target audience—young Internet users—had been virtually congregating for some time. The technology and the potential fan-base already existed and artists merely had to upload their sound files and customize their pages to reflect their musical identities. Here, unsigned musicians could operate on essentially equal footing with and in the same realm as record-company-backed musicians and could reach out to their existing and potential fans in a more direct manner. Such fans could post a message to the artist's page, commenting on their music or even asking a question of the

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[30] The site also allowed a user to customize his or her personal page such that visitors to the user's page would see an individual, stylized background theme and hear a song selected by the user; both elements were designed to advertise something unique about the user and his or her character.

[31] One of social media's many criticisms is its solipsistic nature, emphasizing self-promotion through the attachment of significance to the trivial and mundane aspects of a user's life; moreover, concerns have been raised over the increasing perception among young social media users that, based on the amount and type of information selected for presentation on such sites, other users' lives are more socially rich or meaningful.

artist. With this technology, the chasm that once separated cultural producer and

cultural consumer was bridged; artists at all levels could engage in an interactive

dialogue with their fans, communicating through channels previously unavailable to

them and thus enriching the experience of both artist and fan. In fact, in its current

formation, MySpace touts itself as "a leading social entertainment destination

powered by the passions of fans" that connects users to the "music, celebrities, TV,

movies, and games that they love."[32] The emphasis on both consumer agency and

on the linkages between consumer and cultural producer/product are significant.

YouTube has likewise played a unique role in influencing the realm of

popular music in recent years. The site's tagline, "Broadcast Yourself," follows from

the increasing emphasis on self-promotion via social media outlets and points to the

function of the site as "a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others

across the globe and... a distribution platform for original content creators."[33]

Through the site, users may post video files of all types, a small sampling of which

include: 'blooper'-style videos of themselves or friends engaged in ridiculous

scenarios and stunts; instructional videos on a range of subjects like fitness or

cooking; and videos of musical or other types of performances by both professional

and amateur artists alike. It is in this latter category that we find the story of a

home-grown music career only a networked generation could envision: the story of

Justin Bieber.

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[32] http://www.myspace.com/Help/AboutUs, accessed 17 July 2011.
[33] "About YouTube," accessed July 13, 2011. http://www.youtube.com/t/
about_youtube

A young musician who was primarily self-taught, Bieber posted videos of himself performing covers of popular R&B songs to YouTube so that his family and friends could see the performances that had garnered him a second-place win in a local talent contest. Hip-hop industry marketer Scooter Braun accidentally discovered Bieber while searching for videos of another singer. Braun saw potential in Bieber and went to great lengths to track down the young musician so that he might help launch the latter's career.[34] In order to achieve this aim, a plan was devised to film some more "raw" videos and build up Bieber's presence on YouTube as the first step towards creating a pop superstar, employing the momentum of social media to their advantage. Braun claims that he wanted to "give it to kids, let them do the work, so that they feel like it's theirs."[35] He knew that Bieber's videos had the potential to go "viral" among young YouTube users. While this strategy could be characterized by some as the machinations of a power-holding entity allied with the music industry, the collective voice of young music lovers would ultimately be the driving force behind Bieber's rise. The "one-to-many" mode of distribution of the past was deemed an ineffective strategy in comparison to the "any-to-any" mode that defined this networked, social-media-driven, era. Braun knew that these young Internet users would do the lion's share of the work with regard to building up "buzz" around Bieber. He also understood the inherent value in allowing these young fans to feel, to an extent, connected to and responsible for Bieber's rise, and

[34] Braun apparently "searched archives for photos of the theater where Justin had been videotaped busking... [then] tracked down Justin's school, calling board members, imploring them to call [Justin's mother]", as recounted in Jan Hoffman, "Justin Bieber is Living the Dream," *New York Times*, December 31, 2009, accessed July 13, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/fashion/03bieber.html.
[35] Braun quoted in ibid.

that they had a large amount of agency in crowning their own pop idol. Not only

was Bieber beloved by them, he was *one* of them. In this socially- and digitally-

networked era, the individual talents and collective will of young Internet users

have proven more culturally potent than the corporate machinations of music

industry executives. We shall see, in Chapter Two, that YouTube has played a vital

role in the realization of the Virtual Choir, as well.

Collaboration Goes Digital, Global, and Political

As Internet technology has advanced, even further examples of shifting trends in

musical production and consumption have emerged. While websites like CDBaby,

MySpace, and YouTube have enabled novel and multidimensional pathways for

music marketing and distribution, there have also been notable innovations with

regard to collaborative music making through digital means. As previously noted,

the notions of singular authorship and proprietary cultural products have come to

be contested in this networked and information-saturated age. As cultural material

has been increasingly appropriated by the collective, there has been an attendant

shift towards multiplicity in the creative process. For instance, songs or albums

released by the recording industry are sampled or used by amateur/underground

DJs and Internet-based music enthusiasts as the basis for "mash-ups," which then

get distributed over Internet channels. New musical creations—with multiple

authors—are thus produced.[36] The following web-based projects, in particular, are

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[36] One example of this is DJ Danger Mouse's unauthorized 2004 release of *The Grey Album*, a
popular mash-up of Jay-Z's *The Black Album* and the Beatles' eponymous release commonly
referred to as "The White Album." Further discussion of this mash-up can be found in Aram

testament to this general trend and thus bear mention here, although there are numerous other notable projects that could be included this category.[37]

A compelling example of digital music collaboration is found via the ThruYOU project (http://thru-you.com), conceived by Israeli musician and artist Kutiman. Designed to visually resemble the layout of YouTube but with a deconstructed, well-worn, "urban cyber-wasteland" aesthetic, the site's graphic representation is illustrative of its conceptual aim: to take deconstructed elements of unrelated—yet ultimately complementary—user-generated video clips and "reconstruct" this crowdsourced material into an aesthetically pleasing pastiche, or mash-up, of modern cyberculture. Many of the video clips are taken from spoken instruction videos and recorded music practice sessions, but Kutiman has stitched these "micro-performances" together to create sonically seamless multi-layered funk tunes. Kutiman's project, as outlined on the site, is a "celebration of music and collaboration between people" and made social media waves for its novelty and innovation when it debuted in March of 2009.[38] While it cannot really be classified as a collaboration effort in the traditional sense—as one artist has appropriated material from other Internet users that was not intended by those users for such purpose—it does represent a novel interpretation of cultural exchange and artistic creation in our modern, digitally-driven era. Rather, it exemplifies what Aram Sinnreich has termed "the rise of configurable culture" (an expansion of Lawrence

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Sinnreich, *Mashed Up: Music, Technology, and the Rise of Configurable Culture* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

[37] For example, sites like www.masher.com and www.looplabs.com allow users to make their own mash-ups and remixes from existing music and video clips.

[38] http://thru-you.com/#/more/

Lessig's concept of "remix culture") and denotes broader cultural and social shifts brought about in part by technological mediation.[39] Cultural material from diverse sources can be combined in a synergistic fashion to produce novel cultural artifacts and thus effect new understandings and experiences of culture, firmly situated in the modern "technoscape" of evanescent geographic, temporal, political, and ethnic boundaries.

In comparison to ThruYOU's retroactive mash-up approach to the collaborative creative process, *In Bb 2.0* (www.inbflat.net), "a collaborative music and spoken word project" created by composer Darren Solomon,[40] offers an interactive experience, allowing the end user to create custom and endlessly reconfigurable musical soundscapes by playing the site's embedded video clips in various combinations. Based on Terry Riley's composition *In C*, all of the user-generated video clips were performed in the key of B flat and adhered to certain guidelines so that they would be optimized for play in combination with the other clips. A number of the clips were performed by Solomon himself, however, it is presumed that none of the submitters collaborated in advance to create clips that would intentionally combine with others in a specific fashion. What one submitter recorded was thus unknown to the other submitters, and each individual's musical inspiration would work in combination in unexpected ways. A visitor to the site, or the end user, can create his or her own "mix" or composition based on which video clips are selected and arranged for play. S/he can configure new customized cultural experiences upon each "performance." The receiver or consumer of the

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[39] Sinnreich, *Mashed Up,* 70.
[40] http://www.darrensolomon.com/

musical product is now also simultaneously its composer and performer, blurring

divisions between creator and audience and collapsing the processes of

composition, performance, and reception. The musical permutations are endless

and the resultant collaborations can verge on the sublime.[41] Every different

combination produces a new experience of sound, a new understanding of both

agency and collaboration in our Digital Age of music making.

  Marker/music (http://www.markermusic.com/) was inspired by Solomon's

In Bb 2.0 and similarly provides a video-based interactive musical experience for the

end user, although a geographical dimension is added through the embedding of

video files as "pins" on a Google Map of the community in which the videos were

recorded, Aberdeen, South Dakota. This visual representation of the various

localities at which the music making occurred points to the non-virtual,

geographical "place" of creation as a central aspect of the project. As "alocality" and

"panlocality" are hallmarks of cyberspace and the "virtual world," *marker/music*'s

creators were able, through the inclusion of the Google Map, to locate their project

in the "real world" and to thus "explore the concept [introduced by *In Bb 2.0*] by

producing the entire project locally in a single community, rather than through

internet-based crowdsourcing."[42] They demonstrated that the Internet can, despite

its very nature of being everywhere and nowhere at once, be situated within local

activity and place-based communities.

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[41] By playing only two of the embedded video clips nearly simultaneously, I was able to create a beautiful composition that gave me chills.
[42] http://www.markermusic.com/

"Place" as a concept and "panlocality," as one of the typifying aspects of cyberspace, are explored more extensively through the next two projects I examine. In this way, they may be regarded as thematic antecedents to the Virtual Choir project. The aim of these projects is to connect the world and its diverse peoples through music and represents an ideal application of the unique abilities of the Internet and digital media technologies to effect global social change through the process of collaborative creation.

Nearly a decade ago, Los Angeles-based filmmaker Mark Johnson encountered Roger Ridley, a guitarist and vocalist, performing *Stand By Me* along the 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica. The performance so inspired the filmmaker that he felt that "[Ridley's] voice, soul, and passion had to be shared with the rest of the world."[43] It was then that the *Playing for Change* (PFC) project (www.playingforchange.com) began to take shape. Johnson and the project's co-founder, Whitney Kroenke, filmed Ridley's performance as one track of video and audio material, and then traveled around the world to film other international artists performing the song along with Ridley's initial track. The resultant "ensemble" performance, featuring thirty-five musicians from around the globe, was the first of what now totals nearly fifty "episodes" of such collaborative intercultural performances produced by PFC. The video went viral after being posted online and "transformed Playing For Change from a small group of individuals into a global movement for peace and understanding."[44] In this first episode, Ridley's spoken

[43] http://www.playingforchange.com/journey/musicians/35/Roger_Ridley
[44] Description of "Stand By Me" video episode, http://www.playingforchange.com/episodes/2/Stand_By_Me, accessed 17 July 2011.

introduction underscores our collective need for human connection and support, regardless of our backgrounds: "[n]o matter who you are, no matter where you go in your life, at some point you're gonna [sic] need somebody to stand by you."[45]

Subsequent episodes have included unsigned amateur musicians like Ridley together with internationally-acclaimed recording artists like Bono, Manu Chao, Baaba Maal, and many others. In these performances, cultural musical motifs are woven together. The sounds of the Indian sitar combine with the Irish bodhrán in a sonic display of global unity. PFC has also been able, through technology, to include video and audio tracks from the late Bob Marley as part of these collaborative performances. Not only are geographical and cultural boundaries surmountable with digital media technology, temporal and dimensional boundaries dissolve before the power of the Internet.

While the phenomenon of remote musical collaboration was not entirely new when PFC began their collaborations,[46] the application of such technology to the advancement of global social and political agendas was. In episode number eight, "War/No More Trouble," musicians from around the world, many of whom are from areas that have been deeply affected by political conflict (i.e., Israel, Congo, Northern Ireland, South Africa), sing the virtues of global understanding and peace. The success of and response to the project prompted its co-founders to launch the

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[45] Transcription of spoken intro to "Stand By Me" video episode, ibid.

[46] It has become fairly commonplace for individual artists in music ensembles to record tracks remotely and send them in digital format to be aggregated into one "collaborative" recording. It is rumored that indie pop duo The Postal Service chose their name because of their unique methods of long-distance collaboration, in which one member sent, via United States Postal Service, a DAT of a song to the other who would then edit it, add his own vocals, and then mail the completed version back to the other. See Locklear, Fred, http://arstechnica.com/old/content/2004/11/4376.ars, accessed 17 July 2011.

Playing for Change Foundation in 2007, which has as its mission a more concrete

aim of "providing resources to musicians and their communities around the world"

in order to effect global change through the "universal language of music."[47]

Moreover, they have organized live concert tours involving some of the many artists

they have recorded over the years, which Johnson believes to be "a physical

embodiment of the 'global family' the project meant to create."[48] He recognizes the

value of facilitating and honoring this type of multicultural human connection in our

modern lives, and attributes the project's success to "the power of transcendence"

because "[e]veryone in the world wants to be part of something bigger than

themselves."[49] It is in this same spirit of fostering community through the

universality of musical expression that Internet users across the globe have

embraced projects such as these and, as we shall see, of the Virtual Choir.

Conclusion

The Internet and its digital and social-media technologies have transformed our

engagement with the gamut of musical processes. No longer are we merely

receivers of the cultural products selectively chosen for distribution by the music

industry, or a "one-to-many" system of cultural exchange; we, as consumers, have

gained a remarkable amount of agency in what might be considered a

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[47] Playing for Change Foundation "Mission", http://playingforchange.org/mission, accessed July 17, 2011.
[48] Guarino quoting Johnson in Mark Guarino, "How a Little Jam Went Global," *The Christian Science Monitor,* September 21, 2009, Arts & Culture 17.
http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/?verb=sr&csi=7945
[49] Ibid.

disintermediated "any-to-any," or *polyadic*, system of exchange. We have applied

our collective influence in dictating the course and trajectory of popular music

trends and advanced the careers of artists who might have slipped under the radar

of the music industry's conventional practices. We are now vital agents within a

system that had, in previous eras, imposed musical choices upon us. Through the

Internet, we are now able to guide and shape the choices of music producers by the

power of our collective, connected "voices." Artists have developed ways to subvert

the system that once made our musical and cultural choices for us.

Enormous opportunities for human connection and musical collaboration

have emerged as a result of recent technological innovations. The "many-to-many,"

"any-to-many," "any-to-any" systems of exchange that define the multidimensional

open-source environment of Web 2.0 are fundamental elements of this new era in

musical collaboration and creation. It is this aspect of Music 2.0 which I shall

investigate further in the remainder of this thesis.

2. The Virtual Choir:
Eric Whitacre's Musical and Social Experiment

Who knows what the sound of one hand clapping is, but a choir of
hundreds of singers connected by nothing more than webcams
and an [I]nternet connection sounds, surprisingly, pretty sublime.

- Kim Zetter, Wired.com, March 1, 2011[50]

Inception of an Idea

In May 2009, a young fan of Eric Whitacre (b. 1970), soprano and aspiring composer

Britlin Losee (YouTube user name: "*POLYPHONYOFMYHEART*"), recorded a video of

herself singing one of Whitacre's compositions titled *Sleep* and uploaded the video

to YouTube. She included a prefatory spoken message to the composer, stating her

admiration for his music and her hopes to, one day, "be as different... and unique" in

her compositional style as he is.[51] Countless video files are uploaded to YouTube

(www.youtube.com) every day from users all over the world, and it is probably

reasonable to assume that many users "broadcast themselves" via the site in the

hopes of achieving their "five minutes of fame" if and when their videos "go viral."

Near-instant celebrity, or infamy in some cases, can be attained if one's video is

sufficiently impressive, novel, clever, outlandish, or shocking. However, the fickle

nature of social media and the sheer volume of material being uploaded to YouTube

is such that most users have no idea whether or not their videos will actually be

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[50] Kim Zetter, "TED 2011: Virtual Choir Joins Voices from 58 Countries,"
http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/03/virtual-choir/ (accessed August 3, 2011).
[51] "Sleep-Eric Whitacre-Message and Singing from Britlin," http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=3xGBWhWgydw&feature=player_embedded. Information, news updates, blog
entries, statistics, participant comments, and a chronological evolution of the Virtual Choir
can be found via the composer's website, http://www.ericwhitacre.com/the-virtual-choir.
 It is through this source much of the following background information was gathered.

seen. While some user-generated video clips do, indeed, receive a great deal of

attention, many more languish in relative obscurity, lost in the sea of

inconsequential and uninspired user-generated video material that predominates

within the "collective culture bank" that is YouTube. Given this fact, Britlin Losee

had her doubts that her video dedication could ultimately find its way across the

crowded ether and onto the screen of the composer, as evidenced by the text

caption she included beneath the video: "hopefully he will see this video and see

how thankful I am for him."[52] By addressing Whitacre directly, however, it is clear

that she *meant* and hoped that it would, knowing that the capabilities of social

media are such that her video "message in a bottle" just might end up at its intended

destination.

By Whitacre's account, a friend discovered Losee's video on YouTube not

long after it was uploaded and forwarded it via email to the composer.[53] Whitacre

was "deeply struck by [Losee's] spirit, and her voice, and her *chutzpah*" and, upon

watching the video, "the idea hit [him] like a brick" that, if he were able to gather

hundreds of similar videos, recorded in multiple parts (SATB), they could create the

"*very first virtual choir*" (emphasis in original).[54] His idea drew from the popular

practice of one person recording him- or herself singing multiple tracks of a song

and then stitching the tracks together to make a sonically cohesive whole in which

the singer harmonizes with him- or herself to create of a "chorus of one." Whitacre,

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[52] Ibid.

[53] "The Virtual Choir: How We Did It," http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/the-virtual-choir-how-we-did-it (accessed July 25, 2011).

[54] Whitacre blog post dated May 15, 2009, http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/oh-my-god-oh-my-god-i-just-had-the-coolest-idea (accessed July 25, 2011).

however, envisioned expanding this concept to incorporate multiple *different* contributors with unique voices.[55] In this way, it could *virtually* emulate, in the digital realm, the existing "real-life" convention of a multi-voice collaborative ensemble and thus represent something unique within the realm of cybercultural production. Using his established social media networks—primarily his weblog, or "blog"—Whitacre announced his idea on May 14, 2009 and solicited video recordings from his fan base and the followers of his blog, selecting the same composition Losee had recorded—*Sleep*—for the project.[56] He proposed a basic procedure in which participants would record themselves singing their individual parts while all listening to the same recording of the piece by the UK-based group Polyphony (http://www.polyphony.co.uk/).

The response he received to this proposal was incredibly positive, as evidenced by readers' comments on the blog post, a handful of which praised the composer's "genius" (readers "Chris", "Paloma Mantilla", and "Britlin"— presumably the same Britlin who featured in the original video) and nearly all of which expressed enthusiasm for the project and excitement about the prospect of participating themselves. In the same spirit of virtual collaboration that Whitacre had proposed, his readers responded in the comments section with suggestions for tackling logistical aspects of such a project, including how to make the sheet music

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[55] He also, perhaps, found inspiration in the YouTube Symphony project, which solicited audition videos from aspiring musicians around the world with the aim of flying the best one hundred to gather for a week of in-person collaboration. Whitacre's project would, by being based solely in the virtual realm, represent a comparative feat with regard to collaborative performance.

[56] Blog post is dated May 15, 2009, but there was an edit/addendum to the original post; comments to the post began on May 14, 2009 at 8:36 pm, suggesting that the time and date that the edit was made altered the time and date of the original post.

available to potential participants and the ideal method for recording oneself while

listening to the sample recording (i.e., wearing headphones so that only the

participant's voice, and not the Polyphony recording, would be picked up by the

microphone). In a blog post the following day, Whitacre addressed such logistical

concerns, crediting commenters for their useful suggestions and requesting help

from others to make the sheet music available in Finale or Sibelius. He also

provided a deadline for submissions and guidelines for recording and uploading. A

crowdsourced collaborative endeavor was underway.

In this same blog post, the composer referred to the project as the "*Sleep*

experiment," a precursor to a proposed composition written specifically for such a

virtual ensemble, to be premiered via YouTube and perhaps even with the official

backing and endorsement of the site—presumably with all the corporate

sponsorship and media fanfare that might entail.[57] In characterizing it as an

experiment, the composer revealed some uncertainty with regards to the project's

eventual success, yet the positive response from and active involvement by his fans

seemed to indicate that a rewarding social outcome and community ethos could be

achieved even if a satisfying musical "product" was not certain. By the following

day, the first video contribution was posted to YouTube and Whitacre's blog post

applauding this "first brave soul" (May 16, 2009) received numerous supportive

comments from his fans and served to encourage them to make their own

recordings. Affirming the collaborative, crowdsourced nature of the project, a man

named Scott Haines emerged from within Whitacre's fan base and offered to use his

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[57] http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/omg-omg-cool-idea-part-ii

sound engineering skills to edit the whole project together once all of the video

submissions had been received. The virtual collaboration solidified as commenters

dialogued not only with Whitacre but also with each other. In this way, a

community developed—individuals united by a common creative goal, interacting

and providing support to one another throughout the process.

The final result of this first experiment was revealed in July 2009 and its

apparent success prompted Whitacre to announce shortly thereafter, via blog again,

to "take the virtual choir a step further, and see if we can really start to make some

delicate, nuanced music together."[58] This time, for what would become known as

Virtual Choir 1.0, he chose his composition titled *Lux Aurumque,* making the sheet

music available for download on his website, and recording a video "conductor

track" for participants to follow as they recorded their own videos. The inclusion of

the latter could, in theory, bring the project closer to the "nuanced" sonic ideal he

envisioned, in which distinctions of style, dynamic range, and subtlety of gesture

would be integral components. Scott Haines would, again, work on a volunteer basis

editing and producing the final "performance."

Whitacre characterized the participation by his fans on this go-around as

"totally overwhelming,"[59] resulting in one hundred eighty-five videos from singers

in twelve countries. The social implications of the project were brought into

striking relief for the composer: "it was all about connecting… with these people all

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[58] Blog post dated July 13, 2009. http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/virtual-choir-project-ii-lux-
aurumque (accessed July 25, 2011).
[59] "Introduction to the Virtual Choir," YouTube video, 00:43, uploaded by
"EricWhitacresVrtlChr," September 22, 2010,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyLX2cke-Lw

over the world… these individuals, alone, together."[60] The universal and

fundamental desire to express oneself creatively and in collaboration with others

was simply, yet profoundly, exemplified through this project. Whitacre recalled his

reactions to Virtual Choir 1.0's performance of *Lux Aurumque*:

> I was actually moved to tears when I first saw it. I just couldn't believe the
> poetry of all of it—these souls all on their own desert island, sending
> electronic messages in bottles to each other.[61]

> The intimacy of all the faces, the sound of the singing, the obvious poetic
> symbolism about our shared humanity and our need to connect; all of it
> completely overwhelmed me.[62]

Many of Whitacre's blog followers and other observers echoed his profound and

optimistic sentiments:

> That was the most amazing thing I have ever seen on the [I]nternet! It's really
> amazing how we can all come together with our voices and make beautiful
> music; it gives me chills.[63]

> I am an old man, yet every now and then something makes me feel optimistic.
> This presentation did so. Please, continue the experiment; you are making
> hope.[64]

The video also struck a chord, so to speak, with the media and garnered much

attention and acclaim for its innovation, beauty, and message of unity and peace.

Within the first month following *Lux Aurumque*'s release on YouTube, Whitacre

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[60] Ibid, 00:47.

[61] Transcript of Eric Whitacre's TED conference talk entitled "A Virtual Choir 2,000 Voices Strong," filmed March, 2011,
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/eric_whitacre_a_virtual_choir_2_000_voices_strong.ht ml (accessed August 4, 2011).

[62] Blog post titled "The Virtual Choir: How We Did it," March 23, 2010.
http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/the-virtual-choir-how-we-did-it, accessed July 25, 2011.

[63] Comment by "Meyli" on April 18, 2010 in response to blog post of March 23, 2010.

[64] Comment by "tom" on March 27, 2010 in Ibid.

claims it had received "a million hits"[65]—a true example of "going viral" and a

testament to the power of the message the project exemplified. It was evident that

this was a project that had real value and durability. It clearly merited further

exploration. The composer saw *Lux Aurumque* as "just the beginning" and stated an

ultimate goal of composing an original piece specifically for the Virtual Choir and

premiering it in cyberspace.[66]

While the broader reception of the project was generally positive, not

surprisingly, it was met with some criticism from detractors who felt that that true

"ensemble performance" can only be achieved through physical co-presence. They

charged that technology was threatening to erode the true meaning of making music

collaboratively. One Whitacre blog follower, or one-time visitor drawn to his blog

upon discovery of the Virtual Choir project, asked:

> But how about the pleasure of singing together?... Isn't it a little bit sad to be
> alone in front of the computer and not live the music together in live[sic]? I
> hope technology will never replace a real choir!![67]

Another commenter acknowledged the beauty of the project while also voicing

concern about its nature:

> I find the "singing together, alone" concept bittersweet. There is an energy
> you can't get except in physical presence. But this comes about as close as
> I've ever seen to achieving it.[68]

However, some critics were quite harsh in their assessment of the project:

> As cool as this was, it really defeats the idea and purpose of a choir. A choir is
> a group of people singing together as one voice, not people singing alone and

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[65] Transcript of TED 2011 talk.

[66] Blog post March 23, 2010.

[67] Comment by 'Maud' on March 26, 2010, in response to Whitacre's blog post of March 23, 2010.

[68] Comment by "Acrophile" on May 6, 2010 in response to Ibid.

their voices being mashed together… I think what you did is great, but don't call it a choir.[69]

This project does raise philosophical and epistemological questions concerning the nature and definition of concepts such as "performance," "ensemble," and "collaboration," and one could justifiably choose to look upon the "intrusion" of technology here as a potential hindrance to the creative process. While I will consider such issues in the following chapters, it is important to stress the significant opportunities for novel interaction and musical engagement afforded by technology in this realm. Such opportunities may rightly be regarded as vital complements to, rather than functional replacements for, "real-life" or offline collaborative music-making that has as its basis physical and auditory co-presence.

Virtual Choir 2.0: A Record-breaking Endeavor

Following an enthusiastic response to *Virtual Choir 1.0*, Whitacre wished to push ahead with another performance, setting the ambitious goal to break what was, at the time, the record of nine hundred participants in a "virtual" musical collaboration. This had previously been set by the MTV & Dell "Amplichoir," with their crowdsourced rendition of the song *Lollipop*.[70] By this time, Whitacre had

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[69] Comment by "Kim" on November 16, 2010 in response to Ibid. Notably, Whitacre replied to this comment, refuting her claim by offering the Oxford Dictionary's definition of "Choir". Of the one hundred and eighty-six comments on this particular blog post, most of which were highly complimentary, this is the only comment on which Whitacre chose to reply.

[70] "MTV & Dell Amplichoir," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYSkIrcItUs. Accessed August 17, 2011. The relative simplicity of *Lollipop* and the lack of sonic cohesion in the "performance", in my opinion, renders the feat less impressive than fun and novel (at the time); certainly, by requiring participants to read music, or be able to learn well by ear from

been signed to the Decca record label and had, presumably, additional resources at his disposal, as well as the corporate backing, to launch a more elaborate project. In the summer of 2010, Decca built a YouTube channel dedicated to Virtual Choir 2.0 (http://www.youtube.com/user/EricWhitacresVrtlChr) while Whitacre recorded a conductor track for *Sleep*, his selection for this next iteration and a return to the conceptual roots of the project.[71] He wished to give the song another shot, as the first proto-"performance" of the Virtual Choir had really been more of an experiment to see if this type of collaboration were possible.

The announcement of *Virtual Choir 2.0*, via Whitacre's various social media channels on September 22, 2010, was timed to coincide with the release of Whitacre's new album, entitled *Light & Gold*. In his blog announcement, he stated his goal of receiving more than nine hundred submissions and invited anyone and everyone who wished to participate, while setting a deadline of December 31, 2010. Within a few hours, the first few enthusiastic participants had uploaded their videos to the YouTube channel, two submissions from the USA and one from Portugal.[72] A few days later, a man named Tony Piper, a singer and technology consultant from London, built a web-based system by which the video submissions could be tracked and shared a link to the system with Whitacre and his management team. Not long after, a Google Earth application was incorporated into the project's technological and social media profile; the "Virtual Choir Earth View" was launched to graphically,

other participants who uploaded early on, and to learn an independent vocal line that requires a great deal of sensitivity, Whitacre was setting the bar high.
[71] "The Making Of—The Virtual Choir—Eric Whitacre," http://ericwhitacre.com/the-virtual-choir/making-of (accessed July 25, 2011).
[72] Ibid.

and in virtual 3D depiction, represent the project's geographically diverse

participation. Participants could "geo-tag" their video submissions to indicate the

geographic location from which they were recorded. In this way, a dimension of

"locality" or "place" was transposed on to this project that was grounded, so to

speak, within the fundamentally "placeless" and amorphous ether of cyberspace.

The international character of this project became vividly and interactively

comprehensible. Users could take a virtual "trip around the world" by "spinning"

the interactive Google globe, watching the videos embedded in the maps therein.

Piper additionally volunteered to manage the Facebook page for the Virtual Choir

(www.facebook.com/virtualchoir), which functioned as a vital channel not only for

the dissemination of information and updates regarding the project, but also for

interaction and support between participants. "Fans" of the page could engage in

discussion, share links (pertinent to the VC and otherwise), pose questions, and

request technical support; Piper was an integral nexus in the development and

maintenance of this virtual community.

Social media outlets heralded the ambitious undertaking represented by

Virtual Choir 2.0 with much fanfare and Whitacre's team received an unexpected

response from fans and other curious singers. While submissions did not

immediately come flooding in following the September announcement, by mid-

November, eleven thousand Internet users had downloaded the music Whitacre had

made available through his website.[73] Still, within a few weeks of the deadline, the

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[73] Ibid. The author recalls submitting an email address to www.ericwhitacre.com, to which
a web link to the sheet music for the soprano 1 part was then sent. Conceivably, such a
mechanism could allow not only tracking of how many users had indicated interest in

number of actual submissions received indicated that the initial goal of nine

hundred participants remained ambitious.[74] After an adjustment of the submission

deadline due to the holidays, impacts on connectivity from severe weather, and this

lower-than-desired participation rate, the end tally came to two thousand and fifty-

two videos from users in fifty-eight countries. Having far exceeded his initial goal,

Whitacre was surprised and delighted. The task of collating and editing all of those

video files, however, would be formidable.

Fortunately, as made possible through the project's backing by Decca, the

resources available for production of the final "performance" were considerably

greater than they had been for *Virtual Choir 1.0* and a more robust team could be

employed. It took a number of months to complete the arduous task of configuring

all the audio tracks as well as designing and executing the animated rendering of

Whitacre and his virtual choristers. With such a large number of video clips to

incorporate into the final layout, the design team would need to be creative in order

to depict them all in an impactful and aesthetically-pleasing manner. They decided

on a "network/planetary system" theme to animate Virtual Choir 2.0, shown in

figure 1.[75]

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participating in the project, but could also aid in the expansion of an e-newsletter
subscriber list for use by the artist or by Decca. However, the author does not recall
receiving "unsolicited" email updates from or about the composer.

[74] It should be noted that submissions were not "sent" to a particular party and could thus
not be "received" by someone. Rather, video submissions were uploaded to YouTube and
were required to be titled and tagged in specific ways to mark them as contributions to the
project that would then be "gathered" and combined.

[75] Ibid.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Virtual Choir 2.0. Photo courtesy of 'Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir' Facebook page. http://www.facebook.com/virtualchoir (accessed August 7, 2011).

Such a rendering—which featured Whitacre as a sort of messianic or celestial entity

at the center of orbiting "planets" that had on their surfaces video thumbnails of

participants from the various geographic regions—was an innovative and clever

way to address the logistical challenge presented by including over two thousand

video thumbnails into the final montage. The sheer enormity of the project is

conveyed in this visual schematic. In comparison, *Virtual Choir 1.0*, with its stage-

like imagery and arrangement of video thumbnails in typical "choir formation" of an

arc facing the conductor, merely attempts to graphically emulate its "real-life"

counterpart—see figure 2.
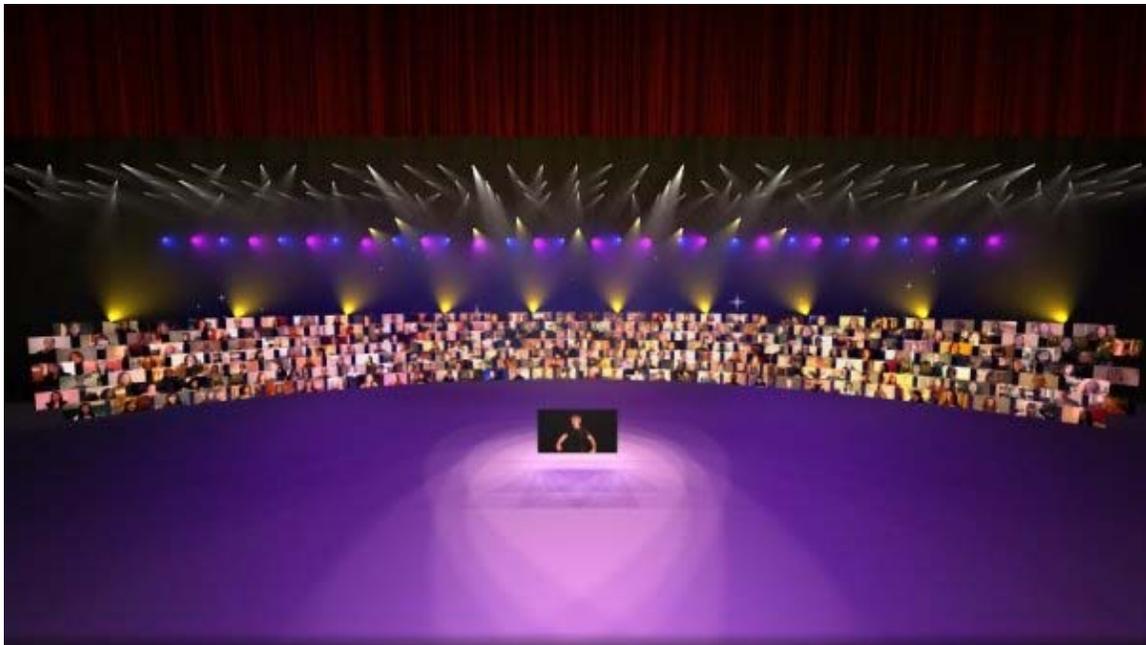
Figure 2. Screenshot of Virtual Choir 1.0. Photo courtesy of 'Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir' Facebook page. http://www.facebook.com/virtualchoir (accessed August 7, 2011).

The imagery of *Virtual Choir 2.0* speaks more poetically, if a bit heavy-handedly, to the global and "metaphysical" nature of this collaboration.[76] Furthermore, the golden "webs" that visually connect each planet in the system orbiting around Whitacre serve to highlight the fundamental human linkages we all share despite our surface-level differences in "real," or offline, life. Participant reactions to this imagery will be discussed in Chapter Three.

On March 1, 2011, a month or so prior to the official premiere of the Virtual Choir 2.0 "performance," Whitacre spoke at TED 2011, a conference that features some of the most innovative and progressive thinkers working in a whole range of fields: arts, medicine, science, and the media. In the first session of the conference,

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[76] If one reads just slightly deeper into the imagery employed in 2.0, it is possible to understand it as acknowledgment of the "gravitational pull" that Whitacre, as a sort of "larger-than-life" persona, exerts among his followers and within the field of contemporary classical choral music.

entitled "Monumental," Whitacre previewed the first two minutes of the video and received a full standing ovation from the audience—a feat that was considered quite remarkable by some commentators.[77] Clearly, the innovative endeavor and its attendant message of peace and unity across our increasingly connected, yet fragmented, global community resonated profoundly with observers and offered a vision of hope through artistic collaboration across cultures.

A month later, the official premiere of *Virtual Choir 2.0* was celebrated with a live launch at the Paley Center in New York City and a simulcast via YouTube.[78] Participants were invited to attend, thus overlaying the "virtual" with the "real" in a sort of "augmented reality." Those who had participated in the project via the digital realm could now meet their collaborators, after the fact, in the analog realm. As with Virtual Choir 1.0, participants and observers alike remarked that the final collaborative piece was poignant and beautiful in its reflection of the fundamental desire to connect with others and to find common ground across cultures in this age of uncertainty, increased isolation, and global unrest. The Internet, generally considered responsible for a reduction of in-person connection in "real-life," could also be employed to reconnect people in our modern era in different, yet beautiful, ways.

The Composer and the Phenomenon

While I have addressed the project's conceptual and logistical evolution, a question remains as to *why* and *how* such a project could come together as effectively as it

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[77] Zetter 2011. http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/03/virtual-choir/
[78] Ibid.

did. What musical and extra-musical forces factored into its success?

In short, much of the project's success seems to have hinged upon the composer himself. Eric Whitacre is, in essence, a modern Renaissance man: a man with talent, charisma, business savvy, creativity, and seemingly boundless energy. His musical talents only account for part of his success; they are augmented by business acumen and personal charisma that combine to make him something of a force of nature. His music has been wildly popular among choral singers (although he does compose for instruments as well), with a significant portion of his followers being high-school and college-aged vocalists. The characterization of his fans as "followers" is intentional and significant, as he has attained a cult-like following more akin to that of a rock or pop star. His good looks and magnetism have helped elevate him to a more influential position than that of merely a talented composer of contemporary classical music. Whitacre acknowledges that one of his early aspirations was to be a rock or pop star, such was his fondness in the 1980s for bands like Depeche Mode and Duran Duran.[79] In attempting to account for his own success, he has said, "[t]he composer in me wants to think that it's happening because I'm tapping into the deepest part of our collective psyche with my music… [b]ut the marketer in me thinks maybe it's the hair."[80] While he makes such self-deprecating statements in jest, it is clear that he is aware of the extra-musical factors that have played a role in his success.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article on June 19, 2011, Chloe Veltman described him

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[79] Transcript of TED 2011 talk.
[80] Quoted in Chloe Veltman, "His Chorus of Admirers Grows; Eric Whitacre Moves Beyond the Choral Sphere with Soaring Works and a Push into the Public Eye," *Los Angeles Times* Sunday Home Edition June 19, 2011.

as "the first bona fide rock star to have emerged from the decidedly unglamorous field of contemporary choral music."[81] He has been described as a "juggernaut"[82] whose diverse musical influences account for a "populist stance"[83] in his compositional style. His music, along with that of a few of his contemporaries, seems to have been a catalyst for the revival of interest in contemporary Art music among young people in recent years.[84]

There are certainly many factors that account for Whitacre's wild popularity and rise to "rock-star" status. He blends diverse musical styles and influences into accessible, coherent compositions. In his youth, the composer claimed little interest in classical music, but recalls a transformative moment in his first year at University of Las Vegas that ignited a musical spark. When he encountered Mozart's *Requiem* in university choir—which he had joined primarily to meet "cute girls in the soprano section"—"suddenly everything was in shocking Technicolor."[85] At the age of twenty-one, after finally learning to read staff notation, he composed his first choral work, *Go Lovely Rose,* as a tribute to the conductor of the university choir, whom he credits as being the catalyst for his passion for music. The work ended up being published and he eventually found himself studying Master's-level composition under John Corigliano at the Julliard School.

Whitacre's musical gift seems to have been, to some degree, innate, drawing

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Steve Smith, "A Juggernaut Rolls into Carnegie, Chorus in Tow," *New York Times* June 17, 2010 C3(L). *Academic OneFile.* Web. (accessed July 27, 2011).

[83] Veltman, 2011.

[84] No doubt, a show like *Glee* has also helped to elevate the status of the "choir geek", but its focus on pop and rock music likely cannot have contributed to the rise of contemporary classical ensemble singing.

[85] Transcript of TED 2011 talk.

on his earlier passions for vocal-centric electropop/rock music and his more recent

enthusiasm for classical music. It has been observed that his music "emerged,

apparently fully formed, at the age of 21 with his first published work."[86] The

composer acknowledges that the geneses of his talent and compositional style were

not necessarily typical. Many aspiring composers spend a great deal of time

mastering theory and concerning themselves with "the rules" of composition:

> I'm not saying that I broke the rules or had any kind of brilliant approach to it
> because of my innocence, but it seemed natural to me: I wanted to try writing
> for choirs so I just did it![87]

He has also spoken of a frustration with the academic process of "studying"

composition, noting that some of his time at Julliard was marked by periods of

paralysis in which he "couldn't write a note."[88] The intrepid and natural approach

he has taken to composition and to his career has, no doubt, contributed to his

success and has set him apart from other composers. His aptitude for writing lush,

evocative music, coupled with his confidence and industriousness, has enabled him

to establish a flourishing career and has resonated with his devotees—singers and

conductors alike. He seems to relish every opportunity to be involved in creating

and sharing his passion for music: lecturing, guest conducting, and collaborating

with other composers (he recently worked with Hans Zimmer on music for *Pirates*

of the Caribbean 4). He is very much in demand these days and has recently taken

on the role of "Composer-in-Residence" at Sidney Sussex College Cambridge, in the

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[86] James McCarthy, "Without Fuss or Fanfare, Composer Eric Whitacre Has Finally Achieved International Recognition," *Gramophone* July 8, 2010. http://www.gramophone.co.uk/ features/focus/eric-whitacre-choir-master (accessed August 3, 2011).
[87] Whitacre quoted in Antonia Couling, "Signed, Sealed, Delivered... The Rise and Rise of Eric Whitacre," *The Singer* Aug/Sep/Oct 2010, 11. http://www.rhinegold.co.uk/thesinger
[88] Ibid.

United Kingdom.

Whitacre's Music

While some observers have lamented what they perceive as Whitacre's lack of

"technical assurance" and stated that the young composer has yet to "fully

integrat[e] his predilections into an identifiable musical voice,"[89] many note that a

distinctive style can be heard in his music, and it is one that has come to be

described as "Whitacre-esque"[90] and has inspired some imitators. Whether or not

his compositional voice represents something wholly unique among the wider cadre

of contemporary choral composers, or if a more general style has merely become

associated with him through his prominence and extreme popularity, is not the

concern of this paper.[91] And, to a great extent, it is irrelevant, as all composers draw

influence—subconsciously or otherwise—from a variety of sources, some of which

might be other composers, contemporary and otherwise. However, I do wish to

highlight here some of the stylistic gestures and compositional themes that have

made his works so popular.

Commentators often describe Whitacre's style in broad strokes with terms

like "lush" and "mysterious." His music is characteristically dramatic and evocative,

full of rich harmonies and well-placed suspensions that take the singer and the

listener on an emotional journey. James McCarthy, of *Gramophone* magazine, has

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[89] Byron Adams, "Recording Reviews: "'Cloudburst' and Other Choral Works,"" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2:4 (November 2008), 592.

[90] Matthew Oltman, music director of Chanticleer, quoted in Veltman, 2011.

[91] For more in-depth discussion of his compositional style and its relation to those of contemporary composers, see the Ph.D. dissertations of Kenneth Lee Owen and Andrew Lloyd Larson.

eloquently summarized the unique and powerful nature of Whitacre's music, as

founded in the harmonic aesthetic of Renaissance vocal music:

> For many, the appeal of music from this period is in the use of harmonic
> suspensions—the moments between changes in prevailing harmony when
> two or three notes cluster together briefly before moving apart and
> "resolving."
>
> These clashes of harmony provide colour as well as a sensation of tension
> followed by release—an ebbing and flowing of emotion. In Renaissance
> music these suspensions are generally held for very short periods of time
> before resolving, whereas in Whitacre's music they can be sustained over the
> duration of an entire piece. The resulting music bathes the listener in myriad
> colours that follow the emotional contours of the text. It's Whitacre's ability
> to immerse listeners, and indeed performers, in his music that continues to
> motivate and inspire choirs around the world.[92]

An example of what McCarthy describes as tension with delayed resolution can be

heard throughout one of Whitacre's most well-known choral works, *Lux Aurumque*,

especially at the beginning. Whitacre relies on a "pyramid" motive, in which simple

harmonies expand out to densely-voiced, suspended sonorities without a

subsequent resolution.[93] One does not really hear these tone clusters as

dissonances seeking resolution. They seem more to vibrate and shimmer, bathing

"the listener in myriad colours," as McCarthy suggests.

Further, as Grant Gershon, music director of the Los Angeles Master Chorale,

has stated, the composer "has this extraordinary ear for vocal color"—a sensitivity

to tone and timbre that makes his pieces not only beautiful to listen to but also

fulfilling for choristers to sing.[94] Whitacre attributes the latter partially to an

embodied response to the unique sonic experience created by human voices singing

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[92] McCarthy, 2010.
[93] Minneapolis-based composer Abbie Betinis introduced the author to the term "pyramid"
in relation to Whitacre's composition style.
[94] Gershon quoted in Veltman, 2011.

in close harmony: "somehow with human voices when they're that close together, it's exquisite for me… singers are maybe having a physiological response when they're singing my music—that it tingles them in the same way it does me."[95] His music may thus resonate deeply in both the souls and bodies of listeners and performers. It is no wonder, then, that over one million copies of his choral compositions in sheet-music form have been purchased by choirs worldwide.

Listeners have responded intensely to the atmospheric and narrative nature of Whitacre's music, which reflects his oft-referenced love for the dramatic music of the cinema. In his recent opera *Paradise Lost*, he incorporated elements of both classical music and electronica, and he has stated that some of his recent influences have been progressive artists like Björk, Radiohead, Nine Inch Nails, and Sigur Rós.[96] It is likely the diversity of influences represented in Whitacre's music that has appealed to younger listeners; he seems to have found a way to make classical music culturally relevant once more and to recuperate its perceived value within the wider field of musical genres.

Of course, as is the case with most cultural products or producers embraced fervently by the public, not every critic has praised Whitacre's compositional voice. Some have interpreted his compositional techniques, especially a heavy reliance on suspension, as merely exploitative devices, producing music that is somewhat on

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[95] Whitacre quoted in Couling, 2010.

[96] Bahr, Jon, "Lush Life," *Playback Fall 2005*. http://www.ascap.com/playback/2005/fall/ radar/whitacre.html (accessed August 3, 2011).

"the saccharine side"[97] and "has all the depth of a Hallmark greeting card."[98] Subjective interpretations aside, his methods are arguably effective in responding to the wider popular demand for a profoundly moving and cathartic musical experience.

Beyond the characterizations of his music as dramatic and lush, many also reference the accessibility of Whitacre's compositional idiom. Not only does he compose music that singers truly like to sing, he writes in a way that enables singers of various skill levels to perform this delicate yet intricate music. While the beautiful dissonance of his harmonies gives the impression of requiring a highly accomplished choral ensemble, the fairly straight-forward nature of the individual vocal lines, both with regard to rhythm and melody, does not, in fact, require singers to have extensive experience with singing. As the composer has himself stated, his music "has a heavy dose of pragmatism" and is "relatively easy to perform" so that a "not-so-great singer [can] find themselves in the middle of one of these shimmering moments."[99]

It is this very emphasis on accessibility, both in his music and in his personal style, that has so enraptured his fans and has marked him as unique among modern composers. Business savvy and a forward-thinking orientation may have initially prompted him to enter the burgeoning realm of social media, but it is clear that he remains an active proponent of such technology as a powerful tool not only to

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[97] Laura Barnett, "Life in a Day: YouTube's Top Cultural Contributions," *The Telegraph* June 3, 2011. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/8554849/Life-In-A-Day-YouTubes-Top-Cultural-Contributions.html (accessed August 3, 2011).
[98] "A New York-based chorus director" quoted in Veltman, 2011.
[99] Ibid.

promote his music but also to engage with his fans and incorporate them into the creative process. Whitacre has always taken a populist stance, one that he has described as a "blue-collar approach… no pretence, no preening"[100] and that has flourished through musical engagement with his audience.

As of August, 2011, the composer's Facebook page had over 67,000 "fans" (unique Facebook users who have "liked" his page) and his Twitter account had over 12,000 followers. Furthermore, his blog, www.ericwhitacre.com, links out to twelve different online social media and retail websites. Whitacre participates actively in these social media outlets (often multiple times per day), posting links to interesting music projects or other pop culture media, but often just interacting with his fan base. In so doing, he projects a down-to-earth "everyman" sort of persona that appeals greatly to his fans. His Facebook page often features "wall posts" (messages that can be viewed by both Whitacre and other users) from fans either praising his music or asking him all manner of questions; it is rare for the composer to not reply with at least a brief comment or word of encouragement. Interestingly, although not surprisingly, he recently posted a blog entry soliciting from his readers name suggestions for his next Decca album.[101] One of the composer's mantras, emblazoned on T-shirts available for purchase through his website, is "Choir Geeks of the World Unite"—a tribute to both the powerful effects of musical collaboration and to his alignment with his fans. As he frames it, prior to his experience with the UNLV choir, he had had little desire to associate with "choir geeks", but then, in the

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[100] Ibid.

[101] Blog post titled "Help!," dated July 30, 2011. http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/help (accessed August 7, 2011).

transformative moment of being immersed in Mozart's *Requiem*, became "the

world's biggest choir geek."[102]

Who Constitutes the Virtual Choir?

It is useful, at this point, to take a brief look at the membership of the Virtual Choir,

in aggregate, before we examine some of the individual participant stories and

experiences in the next chapter.[103] After Whitacre's invitation in September, 2011,

two thousand and fifty-two total video entries were received from fifty-eight

nations, with approximately fifty-four individuals or entities submitting more than

one entry.[104] As previously noted, when participants uploaded their videos to

YouTube, they were requested to "geo-tag" their submissions to situate them on the

interactive Google Earth map. This geographical data showed that the majority of

entries came from the United States, with the United Kingdom, and Canada coming

in second and third places in the final tallies (1149 entries; 277 entries; and 119

entries, respectively). Given that Whitacre is an American composer who also

works frequently in the United Kingdom, this distribution is not surprising.

However, it is a testament to his worldwide reach, and to the power of social media,

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[102] Whitacre quoted in Adam Sweeting, "Interview: Eric Whitacre, Virtual Choirmaster," *The Arts Desk* October 19, 2010. http://www.theartsdesk.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view =item&id=2432:interview-eric-whitacre-virtual-choirmaster&Itemid=29 (accessed August 3, 2011).

[103] By its very crowdsourced nature, the membership of The Virtual Choir is not fixed; with each subsequent iteration, a different group of participants will be involved. Thus, the author uses the membership of Virtual Choir 2.0 for the basis of discussion here. Membership of VC 3.0—set to be announced in fall or winter 2011—will surely be different from that of VC 2.0.

[104] Data comes from "Stats—The Virtual Choir—Eric Whitacre," http://ericwhitacre.com/ the-virtual-choir/stats (accessed July 25, 2011).

that entries were received from so many other nations as well. For example, Thailand and Indonesia each contributed over twenty entries, while South Africa and Belgium each contributed ten. One or two entries were submitted from Austria, Denmark, Croatia, Madagascar, Kazakhstan, Slovakia, and Uruguay. Despite the relatively large number of contributions from Thailand and Indonesia, the majority came from nations that would be considered industrialized, which unsurprisingly reflects prevailing disparities in access to the Internet across the globe. Overall, however, the diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented among the total contributions points to the wide reach of Whitacre's celebrity and the increasing influence of social media. As I shall demonstrate in Chapters Four and Five, it also highlights the basic human desires we share to overlook difference, to connect to one another, and to work toward a collective goal.

Another notable dimension of this project is reflected in the age range of participants. While information regarding one's age was not requested at the time of submission, Whitacre highlighted two participants in his TED talk who either provided the information or presented in their videos in such a way that made their ages fairly evident. The youngest participant was a girl of nine, named Georgie, while a man named David appeared to be one of the most mature participants, probably around the age of seventy. I feel that such a wide age range among participants is significant partly because it demonstrates the project's appeal beyond Whitacre's fan base of teenagers and young adults. Such an age range is unusual in a "real life" choir. On rare occasions, such as in church- or synagogue-based choirs, would one encounter a choral ensemble that has been able to

incorporate such a wide range of voices, temperaments, and levels of musical skill. In this respect, the Virtual Choir project offers a unique opportunity for musical interaction and collaboration without regard for some of the more mundane logistics of rehearsing and performing in "real-life" choirs: adhering to behavior and attention expectations, blending of vocal timbres, and aligning of musical abilities.

Establishing and Maintaining Participation

In an effort to guide participants' performances in a manner similar to how they might be guided in a "real-life" ensemble, Whitacre and his team provided both a conductor track and an instructional video[105] in which the composer-cum-conductor outlined the musical nuances he wished each participant to consider as they performed and recorded. These included emphasis on legato throughout the piece, attention to diction, and where to stagger breathing. Such guidance prompted participants to reflect upon issues of musicality in advance and prepared them to deliver as sensitive and satisfying a performance as possible in absence of the sonic and visual feedback physically co-present performers enjoy.

Once participants' "micro-performances" were recorded and uploaded, many visited the Virtual Choir Facebook page that was created and administered by Tony Piper, as a means to attenuate their involvement and connect with others who had participated. Here, they congregated to maintain contact and share their excitement as the project's submission deadline, and then the premiere date, neared. They conversed not only with Tony—the virtual nexus of this virtual forum—but also

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[105] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWCTKnbqE6s (accessed August 16, 2011).

with each other, via wall posts and follow-up comments to wall posts. They

provided encouragement and support to those who had already submitted their

videos, but also to those who had not yet done so. In this way, the Virtual Choir

participants began to collectively constitute something of a "community," united by

a common goal to contribute to and witness this project's eventual success. To what

extent a group of geographically-displaced and culturally-divergent individuals such

as this might be regarded as a community will be explored in Chapter Four. In

addition to the group bonds that were forming as a result of the Virtual Choir,

participants also began to make individual connections with each other that could

reach beyond the confines of the Virtual Choir experience, capitalizing on shared

feelings of good will and the creative energy of this unique project.

Conclusion

In the preceding account, I have outlined the evolution of the Virtual Choir and

examined how its creator was able to foster musical collaboration in cyberspace. I

have shown how the project, predicated on the powers of crowdsourcing and digital

innovation, represents a unique achievement. The Virtual Choir responds to a

fundamental shared desire to connect with each other through music, and does so

by means of a medium that is more often criticized for its integral role in recent

societal shifts away from in-person, analog connection. It proposes new

opportunities for interpersonal communication and understanding in the modern

world. In the following chapter, I present stories and experiences of the Virtual

Choir's individual participants to demonstrate the human impact of this project.

This ethnographic data will exemplify how participants evaluated their

involvement, what struggles they encountered, and the ways in which their

perceptions of themselves, of others, and of music have changed as a result of the

Virtual Choir.

3. Virtual Choir Ethnography: Participant Stories

Researcher as Participant

When I first learned of Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir in the spring of 2010—through

a national news story I saw on television that featured Virtual Choir 1.0's

performance of *Lux Aurumque*[106]—I was struck by its simple and beautiful message

of global unity and peace. This was all the more impactful because the Internet is

more often criticized for its dehumanizing effects than praised for its humanizing

impact. I have been involved in choral singing for much of my life and had recently

performed this particular piece in my own choir. I was both impressed by what the

one-hundred and eighty members of the Virtual Choir had collectively accomplished

and intrigued by the opportunities for online collaboration and intercultural

exchange such a project presented. As a student of ethnomusicology, I was curious

as to what participation in such a collaboration might entail and what it could

ultimately mean—could it replicate the experience one has when participating in a

"real-life" choir? Collaborating with other musicians in such a way necessitates an

expansion of our understanding of "the musical encounter" and proposes a new

range of opportunities for "musicking" in this Digital Age.[107] I knew that I both

wanted to perform with—and study—the Virtual Choir.

In September 2010, when Virtual Choir 2.0 was announced, I was

enthusiastic about getting involved. I signed up through Whitacre's website and

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[106] Unfortunately, the author did not note the channel or specific news show at the time and cannot recall at this late date.

[107] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

received the PDF of the soprano one part via email. Yet, as the busy fall semester

wore on, I found myself bogged down with work and school obligations. The

December 31 video submission deadline was fast approaching and I had barely

looked at the music. Given my extensive background in music and choral singing, I

assumed that I would have little trouble preparing it. As the December holidays

were upon me, I knew that I needed to buckle down and make my recording.

As I set out to record, I realized that the actual process was not as easy as it

appeared. Whitacre had stipulated that we record in front of a white background,

which was not easy to find in my small condominium. He also wanted minimal

ambient noise, similarly difficult to find in a multi-unit condominium building in a

loud urban neighborhood. I set up my laptop on a side table piled high with books

so that the webcam would be as level as possible with my face and performed in a

standing position. I do not fit the common stereotype of the "diva" soprano who

relishes any opportunity to display her talents and therefore tried recording in my

bathroom so as to not be disruptive to my neighbors and to mitigate embarrassment

on my part if they were to hear me. My laptop's on-board microphone was not able

to get a clear recording of my voice as it soared up to the climax of the piece. I had

to make numerous adjustments to the input until I found the ideal level for my

particular equipment.

On top of the technical hurdles, I struggled to perform my part in a manner

that was sensitive enough to blend with other voices but also sufficiently pleasing to

be regarded as a unique contribution to the project. Add to this a desire to execute

the line "perfectly" in one take without ambient noise or other interruptions and to

appear to be loose and relaxed while not maxing out the audio levels. Suffice it to say that the technical, musical, and logistical obstacles involved in such an endeavor made me feel somewhat disconnected from the fulfilling experience I have when performing and collaborating in a live setting. While this recorded "micro-performance" involved some of the same elements that go into live performance—trying to blend with others, wanting to execute your line perfectly because one continuous take is all the audience will hear—it felt like a wholly different process to me because of the technical obstacles and the fact that I had neither the sonic feedback nor the support of other voices. Despite the frustrations I encountered, I was excited to be participating in such an innovative collaborative project and looked forward to seeing the finished product.

I submitted my video on December thirty-first. There was then a four-month period during which the production team gathered all of the submissions and incorporated them into the collaborative montage performance. During that interim period, I kept an eye on the project updates that the Virtual Choir team—primarily Eric Whitacre and Tony Piper—posted via Facebook and on Whitacre's blog. I also followed the discussions and general "buzz" surrounding the project online. It was evident that many of those who had participated felt a great sense of accomplishment and camaraderie. We eagerly awaited the final video release in April, 2011. Through their active involvement with the Facebook page and in discussions occurring elsewhere online (i.e. the www.TED.com "conversations" function), participants also demonstrated a desire to interact and share their individual stories and experiences with one another. As the premiere date neared,

the collective anticipation gave rise to increased contact among participants via online channels. During and following the live premiere, many convened once again online to share in the afterglow of their performance.

I did not, myself, engage to a high degree with the online activities of these participants, partly because I have not had much time to do so but also because I am fortunate to have a very fulfilling "real-life" outlet for ensemble choral singing. I have sung for ten years with a Cambridge-based chamber choir called The Oriana Consort, and have felt that it has offered me a rich musical experience. However, I was intrigued and gratified to read about the experiences of other participants in the Virtual Choir. I have also, as explained in my methodology section above, had conversations, both on- and offline, with some of these participants. Here, I proceed to examine participants' experiences with the Virtual Choir. In Chapter Four, I analyze these stories and examine broader implications for collaborative music-making and community in cyberspace.

The Musical Histories of Participants

Within the Virtual Choir, a variety of musical histories are represented. Some participants have had extensive experience singing and performing in their offline lives while some have a passion for performance but possess little to no formal background in music. For instance, Tresa from Ohio, who is a music teacher and owns her own music studio, told me of her active involvement in music throughout her life:

> My music experience began early in life as I began piano lessons at age 7 or 8.
> My parents were both musical, especially my mother's side of the family who

played a variety of instruments. A short time later, my parents located a voice teacher and thus those lessons began. As long as I can remember I loved music, especially singing and mine is a typical story of growing up in a musical home and participating in choirs and other groups both inside and outside of school surroundings and in church.[108]

Tresa also shared with me the important role music played in her youth as her family moved numerous times:

I can truthfully say music was a lifesaver in that turbulent time of transition and cultural change. It became a lifeline that kept me anchored as I became involved in choirs and theatre arts.[109]

Darrell, a participant from Chicago, also notes an extensive history with music and performing:

My musical background is that for 39 years I have performed vocal & instrumental music… I have sung in numerous vocal groups, including 5 barbershop quartets and 3 barbershop choruses, I have a particular liking for a cappella singing.[110]

While a number of participants have ample opportunity to make music collaboratively in a real-life setting, many participants have had either intermittent involvement or a major gap in musical activity over the years. Tristan, from Manila, Philippines, spoke of how he never had the opportunity to perform music:

…before all of this, I had a little bit of experience in singing. I was a baritone and I also sang in college, but I didn't really perform, so it was a little bit of a frustration of mine. I went through the training process but, eventually, I had to leave the Chorale, so it was one of the biggest regrets, or mistakes, that I've done in my life.[111]

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[108] E-mail message to author, August 7, 2011.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Facebook message to author, August 13, 2011.
[111] "Response to Virtual Choir 2.0 Ethnography," YouTube video, 1:48, posted by "tristful," August 23, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4pc0SEc1dg&feature=watch_response.

Helen, a citizen of the UK who grew up in the United Arab Emirates, wrote to me of

her active involvement in music growing up, but this involvement was focused on

the piano and the oboe while she invested little in singing:

> While I was in some school choirs growing up, I never considered myself
> much of a singer… I was always very self-conscious about my voice, having
> not been trained in any way. I was also often laughed at by more able singers
> at school.[112]

For Helen, although she had had quite a bit of musical training, singing was not a

focus in her youth and was a source of some anxiety. Shortly, we will see how her

performance in the Virtual Choir was different.

On the other end of the spectrum, we find stories of participants who had

done very little singing before or who were new to the genre of classical choral

music. Simone, from the Netherlands, sings often in her offline life but the Virtual

Choir introduced her to an entirely new vocal experience:

> …participating in the VC was my first experience singing in a more classical
> type of music/choir, as IRL [in real life] I sing in a Soul- & Motown choir…
> which of course is a very different music genre… It was also my first
> experience in learning a piece on my own![113]

We also find the rare story of participants who have little to no experience with

singing at all:

> I've never sung in a choir. I'm not a vocalist… When I heard Sleep, I was
> compelled to sing…so I did… As was so eloquently phrased by another
> participant: At least I didn't sing in the rests or rest in the sings.[114]

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[112] YouTube message to author, August 4, 2011.

[113] Facebook comment on August 4, 2011 to wall post by Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir
regarding the author's thesis research on August 4, 2011,
http://www.facebook.com/virtualchoir.

[114] Facebook comment by Deborrah B. to Discussion Board post on Eric Whitacre's Virtual
Choir entitled, "Tell us your VC Story," January 2011,
http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=96697614927&topic=30473.

The project's inclusive nature is one of the ways in which it is remarkable and an embodiment of the ideals of open-source collaboration: even those with little experience may participate, as their passion for music—and not their vocal talent— made them valuable contributors. There was no audition process, and the Virtual Choir team states that all submissions were included, save for "[a] very small number of audio tracks [that] were discarded due to technical errors in recording or upload."[115]

The Appeal of the Virtual Choir

Just as there are a wide variety of backgrounds represented among Virtual Choir participants, singers' reasons for participating in the project are also varied. Some had been ardent followers of Whitacre and his music and were thus excited to be involved in any project he might propose. Many participants found it thrilling to be able to collaborate and interact with a modern musical icon. Courtney, a young singer who was involved with the Virtual Choir from the beginning, with what has been termed the "*Sleep* Experiment," explains how she first became involved:

> I found out about the project way back around 2009 when it was just starting out as an idea on Eric's blog (at the time) SoaringLeap.com. As a huge fan of his, I checked it often and was always willing to be apart [sic] of anything he was hoping to create…[116]

Leighann, a young singer studying Music Education at Stephen F. Austin State University in Houston, Texas, also told me of her excitement about being able to collaborate with the composer:

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[115] "The Making Of—The Virtual Choir—Eric Whitacre," http://ericwhitacre.com/the-virtual-choir/making-of (accessed December 10, 2011).
[116] Facebook message to author, August 22, 2011.

It meant a lot because Eric Whitacre is… a phenomenal composer… and to be able to sing in a choir of his… And the fact that we get to all connect with him… it's so cool![117]

Helen likewise relished the opportunity to play a part in what seemed to her a

project of high caliber, led by an accomplished figure like Whitacre:

I suppose the first thing that attracted me to the Virtual Choir was contributing to the sound of, or so it felt to me, a professional choir, conducted by someone at the top of the field.[118]

Maria liked not only the format of this collaboration, but the fact that she, possessing

what she feels is little musical talent, could connect with Whitacre:

Unlike most participants, [I am] not a singer and wouldn't do well at an audition. So, a virtual choir, where I could pick from many takes, is the only way I could sing with my favorite composer.[119]

Some participants simply found the prospect of being involved in such an

innovative endeavor, regardless of who was at its creative helm, too intriguing to

pass up. Tresa told me of her initial reaction to the project:

I was both captivated and smitten by the whole concept… the intrigue of actually being involved in something that was totally fresh and new captured my interest. The technological possibilities were so fascinating to me.[120]

Tristan had an equally profound reaction to *Lux Aurumque* and felt compelled to get

involved:

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[117] "Response to Virtual Choir 2.0 Ethnography," YouTube video, 2:33, posted by "pianisimobella," August 5, 2011,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFHMQ142O9w&feature=watch_response.
[118] YouTube message to author, August 4, 2011.
[119] Maria P., response to TED Conversations thread entitled "If you were a member of Virtual Choir, Eric Whitacre's incredible global collaboration please share your story & journey with us & the world," April 3, 2011,
http://www.ted.com/conversations/1710/if_you_were_a_member_of_virtua.html.
[120] E-mail message to author, August 7, 2011.

…when I saw it… I felt fantastic—it was breathtaking. And it made me feel that I wanted to be part of something like that.[121]

Chuck, an active choral singer from the Boston area, was intrigued by the novelty, innovation, and viral nature of this musical collaboration:

…it was, indeed, really freaking cool. And so I started keeping an eye on [Whitacre's] blog 'cause he was saying, like, 'We're gonna do this again.' And so, I knew, whenever this happened again, I wanted to be in on it this time 'cause that's cool. It's one of those Internet things that just happens. And, I should do it 'cause why not?[122]

Hillel, one of the very few Virtual Choir participants from Israel, shared with me that the novelty of the project had prompted him to jump "at the opportunity to sing something in this new way"[123] and Darrell likewise indicated that the project's "wow factor" played a part in his reasons for getting involved: "…it was a huge deal, it was popular and when I watched the first virtual choir project, I yearned to be part of something so amazing…"[124]

Other participants sought an outlet to express themselves in new ways or to reconnect to musical performance. Michelle, a US citizen who moved to Chile for work a few years ago, told me of her desire to be involved in collaborative music again, something that had fallen to the wayside as academic pressures increased while working towards her Ph.D. and after moving to Chile:

During graduate school, music was a very important part of my life. Sometimes when it seemed like I would never earn my Ph.D. simply walking over to the music building and singing for a few hours would be all that kept me sane. One of the hardest things I've ever had to do was give up singing

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[121] "Response to Virtual Choir 2.0 Ethnography," YouTube video, 0:54, posted by "tristful," August 23, 2011,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4pc0SEc1dg&feature=watch_response.
[122] Personal interview with author, August 22, 2011.
[123] YouTube message to author, August 24, 2011.
[124] Facebook message to author, August 13, 2011.

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completely during the last 8 months of my thesis in order to focus 100% on my dissertation… After I left Florida and move to Chile, I found myself very isolated. There is a music school here, but I'm not a native Spanish speaker and it's very difficult to take choral direction in a language not your own… I was really missing the connection that you feel when you are singing in a choir… Unfortunately, about three years passed without any serious singing… [I was] thinking perhaps I'd never get back to choral singing, when the chance to do the VC surfaced.[125]

A few other participants spoke about a similar withdrawal from engagement in collaborative music-making owing to illness or disability. The Virtual Choir represented an opportunity for them to participate despite the limitations imposed by their circumstances. A woman named Narelle, from New Zealand, shared her story of social and musical isolation:

I have a health challenge that complicates vocal sound, range, and control. I'm not strong enough to be part of a real-time choir. Real-time socializing is rare… Virtual Choir gave me the opportunity to IGNORE all these things!… Because of broadband [I]nternet, I can pursue music education and experience while I wait for my body to be freed.[126]

The fundamental mechanism for collaboration in the Virtual Choir presented not only opportunities for active singers to combine their creative energies in a novel fashion but also the possibility for those with little experience or limited access to participate in the creation of something culturally innovative and personally fulfilling.

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[125] YouTube message to author, August 4, 2011.

[126] Narelle W., response to TED Conversations thread entitled "If you were a member of Virtual Choir, Eric Whitacre's incredible global collaboration please share your story & journey with us & the world," April 7, 2011, http://www.ted.com/conversations/1710/if_you_were_a_member_of_virtua.html.

The Logistics of Participation

As I mentioned with regard to my own experience, the logistical aspects of

participation in this project presented some unexpected challenges. At the same

time, however, it allowed for new insights into my own strengths and weaknesses

with regard to performance and encouraged me to be more mindful of musical

nuance. Some participants' experiences resembled my own in this respect while

those of others differed in significant ways. Tresa characterized the process of

learning and recording her part as one of humility:

> ...I must confess I was humbled that I was actually challenged by something
> that seemed to be so easy at first. I now have been teaching music for over
> 25 years and as I began learning this choral piece, I would never have
> believed it would have taken me as long as it did to actually learn and get it
> recorded and uploaded to You[T]ube. I felt a little better when I later heard
> Eric say that he and Hila tried to record individual parts and they too found it
> challenging.[127]

She also noted that a significant challenge for her had been "trying to blend with

other voices [she] could not hear but only imagine."[128] Rozalind, an alto from the

UK, acknowledged the strange scenario of singing in this technologically-mediated

way: "[i]t is very odd to sing to the computer, and I felt very self conscious..."[129]

Daniel, an undergraduate student from Vancouver, likewise characterized the odd

nature of his experience:

> I had never recorded myself performing before, and it was pretty nerve-
> wracking! Every little mistake and intonation is laid bare, it really made me
> self-conscious about my voice.[130]

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[127] E-mail message to author, August 7, 2011.
[128] Ibid.
[129] YouTube message to author, August 5, 2011.
[130] YouTube message to author, August 4, 2011.

Many participants discussed the experience of making numerous recordings as they, like I, struggled to achieve the "perfect" take. Cory, a young musician, conductor, and composer based in Washington, D.C., blogged about his own experience participating in the Virtual Choir:

> ...I lost track of the number of times I had recorded my voice part. Was this take 10 or 30?... I started to sing, though it felt more like an exercise in discipline and accuracy than in musicmaking.... Like many participants in the Virtual Choir, I had already spent hours making numerous takes of my vocal track—all in an attempt to get my recording perfectly aligned to Whitacre's conducting, and to express the nuance conveyed through his gesture.[131]

Others came to view this frustration as a valuable part of the experience. Julie, an active choral singer from New Jersey who also was able to sing with Whitacre in a concert in New York City that coincided with the *Sleep* premiere event in April, 2011, felt that the arduous task of recording required that she invest her whole self. This level of effort established her emotional commitment to the project and became an important step in the process. In a message she wrote to the composer after the concert in New York, she articulated the value of her experience over the months leading up to the premiere:

> Between the blood, sweat, and tears making the VC video, making countless friends during the process, VC 2.0 release at the Paley Center, and the grand opportunity to rehearse and sing under your direction, I am still flying high![132]

Julie's frustration during recording was rewarded, in the end, with the satisfying experience singing live with the composer himself. Her total commitment to the

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[131] Cory Davis, "My Experience Singing in Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir 2.0," Cory Davis Music (blog), April 15, 2011, http://www.corydavismusic.com/2011/04/my-experience-singing-in-eric-whitacres.html (accessed August 18, 2011). Also published at www.SingerNetwork.org, a service of Chorus America.

[132] Facebook message to Eric Whitacre from Julie S., as shared with author in e-mail of August 29, 2011.

project paid off in an intensely moving experience that enriched her life. However,

not many participants were lucky enough to augment their experience of the Virtual

Choir in the same way; the majority participated solely in its "virtual" component.

After making a recording that was, in his words, "good enough," Cory began

to reflect on the meaning of contributing to this collaborative endeavor in such a

solitary manner:

> The process of producing my video certainly wasn't what I would consider
> the fun part of singing in a choir—it lacked the interpersonal interaction, the
> dynamic adjustments based on the other singers and the conductor, and the
> sheer thrill of being surrounded by that wash of sound.[133]

Chuck felt similarly about his own experience:

> It was… isolating. Because I know what it's supposed to sound like and you
> have the MIDI parts playing in your ear, and you have the conductor there,
> but not having somebody on either side of you… you lose something from the
> experience.[134]

Accompanying the feelings of isolation that arose in the recording process

were often feelings of vulnerability as participants' individual videos would be

available for view on YouTube. For many, the potential for their contributions to be

scrutinized apart from the larger work left them feeling exposed. Chuck noted,

"[y]ou feel naked when you put [the video] up there."[135] He also made an

interesting analogy when describing the process of making these individual

recordings that would become part of a larger collaborative work:

> I guess it's kinda like building a house—you know what the finished product
> is supposed to look like, but you're building this room and, for a long time, it's
> just studs and everything like that. So you bring in the drywall guys and they

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[133] Ibid.

[134] Personal interview with author, August 22, 2011.

[135] Ibid.

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put up their stuff and you have to kind of trust that, after they're done, it's all gonna come together in the end, but they're not gonna see the finished product until everybody's had their say. So… you're doing your bit as best as you can. But it's still a little cold and lonely—then you send it off into the abyss and you know it's gonna come back and be refined. But, it's definitely lacking something from the experience of singing in a group.[136]

As if to salvage one of the more traditional elements of ensemble singing and overlay it on top of this solitary process of recording, some participants used the earliest video submissions as guides in learning their own parts: "[t]hanks… for having performances and other people singing my part available to help me to learn."[137] In a way, by singing along with others' recordings, they could alleviate some of the feelings of isolation intrinsic to this solitary process. Simone, who had never learned a piece on her own before, was one of those who leaned on her fellow Virtual Choristers in the learning process: "I had a lot of help by other people who had already uploaded their video, so I had enough videos to practice with!"[138] And some found comfort in the knowledge that participants' individual yet shared struggles with learning and recording their parts was something that bound them together as a collective:

> Although the singular performance dynamic of the VC also doesn't allow for tuning a song or creating live performance moments… the resulting video of Sleep will show little 'ol me singing "alongside" world class singers. Knowing

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[136] Ibid.

[137] Facebook comment by Jane L. to Discussion Board post on Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir entitled, "Tell us your VC Story," December, 2010, http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=96697614927&topic=30473.

[138] Facebook comment on August 4, 2011 to wall post by Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir regarding the author's thesis research on August 4, 2011, http://www.facebook.com/virtualchoir.

that they all had moments struggling with and learning the piece, just as I did… is a comforting and communal place.[139]

For others, in contrast, the experience of recording themselves turned out to be a gratifying and affirming one. Helen, recalling the criticism she had received from other singers in the past, told me that she enjoyed the solitary process:

> This was why contributing to Sleep in the way we did worked very well for me; I felt like singing alone helped me to concentrate on the conductor track a lot better than I would have done worrying about whether other people were judging the sound of my voice. I also felt a lot less pressurized [sic] than I would in a concert situation, as I knew if I made a mistake, I could just delete the video and try again.[140]

While the logistical aspects of sharing in this collaboration proved frustrating and isolating for some, it offered others a non-judgmental creative space within which to indulge and nurture one's musical passions.

The Premiere of Virtual Choir 2.0's Sleep

Once participants had recorded and uploaded their parts, there remained a few months before the final video would be ready for release. In that interim period, the online excitement surrounding the project waned a bit. Leighann, despite having been excited to sing in a choir of Eric Whitacre's, says that she and her friends, who had also participated, had forgotten about the upcoming premiere, but were excited

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[139] Facebook comment by David J. to Discussion Board post on Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir entitled, "Tell us your VC Story," December, 2010, http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=96697614927&topic=30473.
[140] YouTube message to author, August 4, 2011.

when they saw that the day had arrived.[141] For some, seeing the fruits of their

collective labors only months down the road added an aspect of delayed

gratification to the project. The temporal distance between the moment of

"creation" and the moment of "performance" weakened the significance of the

experience for some.

For others, however, their excitement increased as the premiere date neared

and they continued to interact with each other through online channels, sharing

their individual stories and fostering general feelings of goodwill and camaraderie.

No one knew how the production team could possibly combine all of their videos

effectively into a collaborative whole, so anticipation regarding the finished product

was high. Once participants saw the video of *Sleep*, on April 7, 2011, they were

almost universally pleased—if not thrilled—with the outcome and its attendant

message of international collaboration across cultural divides and levels of musical

ability. Many participants, like Michelle in Chile, spoke of feeling a sense of unity

and communion upon watching the video:

> When the final video came out, I was really pleased. I certainly felt much less
> isolated than I had. Even if I didn't get the "shivers" that I used to when
> singing with a large group while I made the video, I got them when I listened
> to the final recording. In the end, it's given me hope that I CAN still find a
> place for my voice.[142]

Courtney, who had been the first participant to upload her video for both *Sleep* and

for Virtual Choir 1.0's *Lux Aurumque*, was deeply moved by the outcome:

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[141] "Response to Virtual Choir 2.0 Ethnography," YouTube video, 4:09, posted by
"pianisimobella," August 5, 2011,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFHMQ142O9w&feature=watch_response.
[142] YouTube message to author, August 4, 2011.

...by the end of the video I was crying like a baby because it was more than I had imagined it would be... when I saw the planetary graphics I was blown away because I didn't know how they could pull [it] off or if they could pull [it] off and they certainly did... And the best part was... that the sound was just as good as a live performance. No one sharped or flatted, everyone sang everything correctly and everything was musical.[143]

Maria, a participant who attended Whitacre's TED talk in March, 2011, during which he had previewed the first two minutes of the video, summed up her reactions to that preview, and her gratitude to Whitacre, in poetic and eloquent terms:

The track was so shimmering and beautiful that I hope you'll release it as an mp3... The polyphony, the multiplicity of voices is like cherubim glimmering in another dimension. Thank you for making this happen. For bringing us together under your golden wings.[144]

This "bringing together" is one of the most significant messages of this project and one that resonated most profoundly with participants. Tresa articulated the project's unique character:

The Virtual Choir afforded everyone an opportunity to be a part of a huge community without judgment. Regardless of nationality, politics, economic status, musical ability, etc., they were all accepted and significantly woven into a most magnificent work of art...[145]

She also expressed her feelings of connection with other Virtual Choir members: "There was just a sense of weaving a myriad of lives together through the music and the light strands and I felt as though I could sit and chat with any member as if we actually knew each other."[146] Courtney likewise felt this strong connection:

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[143] Facebook message to author, August 22, 2011.

[144] Maria P., comment on Eric Whitacre, "Still Flying High From My Experience at TED," Eric Whitacre (blog), March 3, 2011, http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/still-flying-high-from-my-experience-at-ted.

[145] E-mail message to author, August 7, 2011.

[146] Ibid.

...you're not just singing with someone from your town, you're singing with someone from China or from England. And even though you're not physically there by that person, you still receive the same emotional connection because everyone shares the same vision: [t]o create beautiful music for everyone to see.[147]

While participants stressed the positive and collaborative nature of the project and its accompanying message of unity, some also voiced their disappointment with the final result. Julie, who spoke very positively about her overall involvement with the Virtual Choir, referring to her participation as a "profound experience," still noted frustration. She felt that the performance was anticlimactic and was disappointed that the video only featured a few of the very many participants: "I was surprised at how it caught me each time I didn't see myself for even .5 of a second" and "[it] made me feel less... part of the project."[148] I could not see my own video either and sympathized with her. Tristan, who was able to see himself a few brief times, understood this desire to see one's own contribution to the project, although most recognized that the fundamental value of the project lies in the collective effort. He expressed sympathy for me when I told him I had not been able to see my own contribution:

> I somehow feel sad for you that you weren't able to locate your own video. Even if there's this concept of being part of a large project- that it doesn't matter if the individual contribution is identifiable- it would still feel nice, a great plus, to actually see oneself in the final result.[149]

Even if the goal is to collaborate and blend your singular voice with others from around the globe, it is affirming for the individual to see—and hear—his/her own

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[147] Facebook message to author, August 22, 2011.
[148] Facebook chat session message to author, August 29, 2011.
[149] YouTube message to author, August 23, 2011.

contribution. However, for some, like Chuck, just knowing that he had helped to

make the larger project possible was sufficient:

> Yeah, I know that I'm in there somewhere. And, it's the same thing whenever
> I hear recordings of performances that I was in, I can't hear myself… And I
> don't care because I know that I'm there. And I know that I was a part of that,
> and that's fine.[150]

While recognizing the social value of the project in facilitating worldwide

collaboration, some have challenged the characterization of the project as a "choir."

Cory felt conflicted about the exact collaborative nature of the project:

> When I finished watching the video for Virtual Choir 2.0… I did find myself
> captivated by the metaphysical implications of the piece. When I stop
> thinking about it as just a choir, and rather as a technological feat of coming
> together via social media and the [I]nternet, it struck me as quite lovely.[151]

And some, like "Misssable," a Canadian participant who wrote about her Virtual

Choir experience at The Choir Girl blog, admits that she did not feel quite as moved

as others did upon seeing the video. Prior to the release, she had also questioned

Whitacre's "search for communion," a concept embraced by other participants:

> When I first read [Whitacre's quote from his TED talk about participants
> seeking connection[152]] I just thought, "That's so sad. I didn't do the Virtual
> Choir because I am lonely and trying to forge some kind of fictitious
> connection with others."[153]

Both Cory and "Misssable" raise important questions about the fundamental nature

of ensemble singing and about the validity of Internet-based "communion," a topic I

explore at greater length in Chapter Four.

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[150] Personal interview with author, August 22, 2011.

[151] Cory Davis, "My Experience Singing in Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir 2.0."

[152] "Human beings will go to any lengths necessary to find and connect with each other."

[153] "Misssable," "Virtual Choir Musings," The Choir Girl (blog), March 3, 2011,
http://thechoirgirl.blogspot.com/2011/03/virtual-choir-musings.html.

The Impacts of the Virtual Choir on Participants

While most participants spoke about the ways that their collective online

connections created a feeling of communion, some participants used these

connections to meet choir members face to face. As noted earlier, Julie has made a

number of personal connections that she found especially fulfilling. Because she

participated in the April, 2011 concert connected to the *Sleep* premiere event, she

was able to meet some of the other participants in real life. In this way, she was able

to augment her virtual experience with a physical one, meeting her virtual

collaborators in person. Maria, a participant based in New York City—the location

of the premiere—stated that she would be hosting and meeting other participants in

connection with the premiere:

> A girl from New Zealand will stay with me in New York for the premiere on
> April 7. I'll meet [others] that week too… We are friends because of the choir.
> The vision we now share, of creating experiences that unite people across
> borders, across space and time, despite individual differences, is thanks to
> this [c]hoir.[154]

Darrell told me of his experience organizing an in-person Virtual Choir "reunion," of

sorts, to coincide with a barbershop convention that he would attend in July, 2011:

> …[two] weeks before the mens [sic] barbershop harmony convention in
> Kansas City, it occurred to me that I could search out the Kansas City area for
> Virtual Choir singers and invite them to hang out! A mere 24 hours after I had
> just thought about it, I had found 20 virtual choir singers in Kansas City
> including the lyricist of SLEEP, [sic] Charles Anthony Silvestri… I had four
> virtual choir singers attend, as well as four interested guests, even Ingrid
> who flew in from Germany for vacation showed up who sang in the VC 2.0!
> We had a GREAT time, everyone was involved somehow in other musical

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[154] Maria P., response to TED Conversations thread entitled "If you were a member of
Virtual Choir, Eric Whitacre's incredible global collaboration please share your story &
journey with us & the world," April 7, 2011,
http://www.ted.com/conversations/1710/if_you_were_a_member_of_virtua.html

endeavors, and Mr Silvestri joined all of us for a flash mob barbershop mens [sic] singout with thousands of men singing.[155]

While the majority of participants have not had these same types of experiences of "augmented reality," in which the virtual realm has overlapped with the physical, many have established gratifying online connections—through Facebook, primarily—with other participants. In sharing their Virtual Choir stories and musical experiences with each other, many have found a common ground that has supported ongoing online friendships. Jessica, a young singer from Michigan, related her experience of the Virtual Choir community to reporter Jeffrey Kaczmarczyk of the Grand Rapids Press:

> I think the most amazing part is the connections I made with people across the world… [t]here are people I actually talk to on Facebook—people that enjoy and love the things I do.[156]

These shared interests and passions not only served as a source of personal enrichment for participants; they have also motivated participants toward further collaborative projects. Jack—one of the more active members in the Virtual Choir's Facebook community—recognizing a valuable opportunity to employ their collective voices to effect positive change following the earthquake in Japan in early 2011, organized a Facebook group called "Let's Sing for Japan!" This group's aim was to produce a Virtual-Choir-like collaborative recording of a song that could

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[155] Facebook message to author, August 13, 2011.

[156] Jessica Ann Smith quoted in Jeffrey Kaczmarczyk, "Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir 2.0 was an amazing experience, says Michigan member of online glee club," *Michigan Live*, April 12, 2011,
http://www.mlive.com/music/index.ssf/2011/04/eric_whitacres_virtual_choir_2.html
(accessed August 18, 2011).

make "the world just a little bit better by sending out a message of hope to Japan

through something each and every one of us can give- our voices."[157] Such virtual

collaborations enhance the impact of transnational artistic collaboration. They can

not only raise funds for relief efforts but they can also inspire hope and solidarity

through the beauty of shared music. The capacity for a worldwide digital project

like this to have a positive impact upon the world and its citizenry was also

articulated by David, another active member in the Virtual Choir Facebook

community. In a story for The Kamloops Daily News, he shared with reporter Mike

Youds the significance that the Virtual Choir had for him: "[i]t can open doors and

work towards peace through art."[158]

Global solidarity and compassion for our fellow humans around the world

can not only be articulated through such cross-cultural projects but can also be

fostered through the individual transformations that occur in the hearts and minds

of the participants. Whether she realized it or not, Leighann recounted what, to me,

seemed a shift in her own understanding of the world and the diversity of its

constituent cultures:

> ...it opened us up to hear the different accents that you don't usually hear
> every day in the US. Like, we listened to the UK videos and the people from
> Italy and the people from Russia... Australia, Canada, Iceland... and it's just
> hearing the vowels, the different textures... it's really cool... and it gives you

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[157] "Let's Sing for Japan!" Facebook group,
http://www.facebook.com/groups/singforjapan/ (accessed September 1, 2011).
[158] David Johnson quoted in Mike Youds, "When the world sings in harmony," *The Kamloops Daily News*, April 28, 2011,
http://www.kamloopsnews.ca/article/20110428/KAMLOOPS0501/110429820/-1/Kamloops/when-the-world-sings-in-harmony (accessed June 30, 2011).

different perspective of how our voices come together in one when we sing.[159]

Leighann expanded her worldview by watching various individual video submissions of Virtual Choir participants from around the world and examining the linguistic and cultural differences she identified. We see how the project helped foster a more globally-oriented perspective in at least one participant.

Individuals discussed other positive impacts brought about by their participation in the Virtual Choir. Jennifer, a music teacher from Albany, found that the experience has afforded her new insights into her own technique and has reinforced the value of taking risks:

> Through recording my videos, I have become more aware of my singing, both sight and sound, and it has made me more comfortable with my voice and I hope a good model for my students. It's a great example of how putting yourself out there and pushing your comfort zone a bit can open you to new experiences and possibilities.[160]

Tristan remarked on how he has reevaluated his relationship with music since his participation in the Virtual Choir:

> ...aside from re-igniting my love for singing and music, the virtual choir experience somehow made me feel confident...[i]n the sense that my objective to sing was NOT to please others, but to improve more on my own, and to embrace singing as a pastime/interest.[161]

Helen likewise characterized the positive impacts of her Virtual Choir involvement:

> ...working up the courage to take part has improved my self-confidence considerably, I never used to sing in front of anybody else- not even quietly

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[159] "Response to Virtual Choir 2.0 Ethnography," YouTube video, 5:23, posted by "pianisimobella," August 5, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFHMQ142O9w&feature=watch_response.

[160] YouTube message to author, August 30, 2011.

[161] YouTube message to author, August 23, 2011.

to myself. I'm sure I'm not the only person who found that it helped me feel better about my voice.[162]

Like Helen, others were similarly able to work through the fears of judgment and criticism that had stifled their creative efforts for too long:

> I grew up with a classical conductor father who taught me my efforts were never good enough (99% in a music test was 1% wrong), so doing solo in dance, song or acting has always been challenging… once [the video] was up on Google Earth, I knew it was acceptable for the group and have made peace with myself.[163]

As a result of their involvement in the Virtual Choir, quite a few participants claim to be more involved in music in "real life" and to have been inspired to join choirs in their local communities. Tresa stated: "[t]he whole experience set me on a path of exploring new composers and choral groups in general."[164] Moreover, the Virtual Choir has also—as evidenced by the extensive media coverage the project received—had the important effect of bringing choral music to the attention of the wider public. And this, it seems, was one of Eric Whitacre's ultimate goals. He wished to inspire both singers and non-singers alike to become more involved with the performance, and appreciation, of choral music. As he stated in a Decca Q&A video, in response to a question I submitted to his Facebook page regarding the implications of the Virtual Choir on the future of collaborative music making:

> … the most exciting part is not really *knowing* what it will be. I certainly think it will never *take the place* of an actual living, breathing choir in a room… it's just a different thing. It's a way of expressing ourselves and… somehow coming together in an online community, which can only be a good thing. I see the Virtual Choir mostly as… a nice gateway drug for people who don't

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[162] YouTube message to author, August 4, 2011.
[163] Story of Australian participant posted on "Stories—The Virtual Choir," http://ericwhitacre.com/the-virtual-choir/stories (accessed July 25, 2011).
[164] E-mail message to author, August 7, 2011.

sing or who are thinking about singing. And so, they try the Virtual Choir, they're moved by it a little bit, and then they might go to an actual choral concert. Or buy that Mozart *Requiem* CD they've been thinking about.[165]

Conclusion

The foregoing participant stories have brought meaningful context to the Virtual Choir as a cultural and social phenomenon of our modern era. We have seen the diversity of backgrounds represented among the participants and heard the individual—and sometimes very personal—experiences of a selection of Virtual Choristers as they struggled with the logistics of participation and with executing a "perfect" take absent the benefit of sonic feedback and support from other voices. Some participants felt that this manner of performance suited them well and allowed their true voices to come through, while others viewed it as a frustrating exercise in humility. We have also learned of the moments of discovery and connection that these participants experienced—connection both to themselves and to fellow music lovers across the globe. Participants were prompted to examine more closely their involvement with music in their offline lives and were also inspired to interact with other Virtual Choristers from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. These stories demonstrate the unique circumstances of engagement with this collaborative project and reflect not only the richness and diversity of experiences of those involved but also the variety of ways in which these experiences have been interpreted and consequently incorporated into conceptions

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[165] "Eric Whitacre answers your questions (May 2011)," YouTube video, 4:19, posted by "deccamusic", May 25, 2011,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=CgzSq-bUGEw#!.

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of self and of a global community. They provide a rich foundation for a more

thorough analysis of the Virtual Choir's ultimate significance, undertaken in the

following chapters.

4. Musicking in Cyberspace: The Articulation of Ideal Relationships and the Development of Community

How do we begin to understand and analyze the new possibilities for musical engagement and collaborative cultural production actualized by the Virtual Choir? How do we assess the emergent configurations of community arising from this project? Further, what implications does the project have for the future of offline music communities and for society more generally? In this chapter, I examine the Virtual Choir as an instantiation of broader social and cultural transformations taking place as technology asserts increasing influence over our quotidian work, social, and creative lives.

As I discussed in the preceding chapters, the mode of cultural production and the creative milieu that define the Virtual Choir combine to represent a uniquely modern phenomenon: the aggregation of individual "micro-performances"—with multiple temporal and geographic provenances—into an ensemble "macro-performance" presented in the immaterial digital realm. In the following analysis, I wish to focus on two main themes in an attempt to better understand the social and cultural import of this uniquely modern collaboration. First, I shall examine what is actually happening when the participants in this project make music together in isolation from one another, temporally displaced and at disparate geographic points across the globe. I draw on Christopher Small's theory that the act of musicking brings "into existence a set of relationships that model the relationships of our world, not as they are but as we would wish them to be, and… through musicking we learn about and explore those relationships… [such that] musicking is in fact a way

of knowing our world... and in knowing it, we learn how to live well in it."[166]

Second, I shall examine the significance of such idealized relationships and examine how and if a collective of individual Internet users such as those found in the Virtual Choir might constitute a "community," exploring both the role of the individual within the collective and the relationships between such individuals. In Chapter Five, I shall examine the implications of this project for our understandings of and engagement with community and musical collaboration in both online and offline settings.

I wish to demonstrate how a community like that proposed by the Virtual Choir and the project around which it coalesces may give rise to valuable social outcomes at the individual, group, and global levels. I illustrate the ways in which the relationships enacted through the Virtual Choir's musicking might make possible "new planes of existence"[167] that reorient participants' and receivers' understandings of themselves and the world around them, enabling them to "learn how to live well in it."[168] These new planes of existence may serve as a catalyst for a renewal of our engagement with our offline lives and with our global community.

In so doing, I highlight the ways in which this project might refute, or at least reframe, perceptions of cyberspace as a lonely and impersonal place, and support the notion that social capital and a global orientation can, indeed, be fostered through networked collaborative cultural production. The Virtual Choir offers hope in the face of claims that the Internet is disconnecting us from each other and is

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[166] Small, *Musicking*, 50.
[167] Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture,* trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
[168] Small, *Musicking*, 50.

encouraging us to retreat into our own individually-constructed and isolated "virtual" worlds that have increasingly little relevance for our "real," embodied lives. Toward the aim of illustrating some of the humanizing qualities of computer-mediated communication (CMC), I will additionally address Sherry Turkle's concern that we are increasingly "alone while together" in this digital age. I propose that we alternatively consider the inverse understanding of the concept as being "alone *yet* together."

Theme One: Musicking Together in the Virtual Choir

Christopher Small has proposed that "the fundamental nature, and thus the meaning, of music lies… in what people do."[169] This may seem like a simple and obvious statement to ethnomusicologists and to many musicians. This premise undergirds and validates our inquiries into how music fits into human culture and the ways in which music gives meaning to our lives as members of human societies. Yet it is important to stress that such a formulation places the preponderance of music's cultural meaning within the acts of engaging with music and the processes of human interaction that attend that musical engagement. The "musical product" as an object of inquiry has value as an expression of the composer's individual cultural positioning, but offers little useful information as to what social or cultural processes are at work when those involved in the performance of the "musical product" are actually performing. On the surface, it might appear that Virtual Choir

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[169] Christopher Small, "Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space," lecture presented at the University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, June 6, 1995. http://musekids.org/musicking.html.

participants are simply recording themselves singing, in isolation, and then sending

those recordings out into the immaterial ether of bits and bytes to be aggregated

into a larger "performance" by a team of digital technology experts. However, on a

deeper level, what they are "doing" in this process is, in actuality, something far

more complex and meaningful, despite the seemingly impersonal nature of this

collaboration. It is through this unique act of "doing" that we understand the

particular value of this project.

Small has argued—through his reinterpretation of the word "music" as a

verb, an activity—that "musicking," beyond the essential act of producing musical

sound, reflects and articulates a set of relationships among participants and

between participants and the world around them—perhaps not as they currently

are but as they would ideally be. As he elaborates:

> ...when we music, when we take part in a musical performance, the
> relationships that together we bring into existence model those of the
> cosmos as we believe that they are and that they ought to be. We do not just
> learn about those relationships, but we actually experience them in all their
> beautiful complexity. The musicking empowers us to experience the actual
> structure of our universe, and in experiencing it we learn, not just
> intellectually, but in the very depths of our existence, what our place is
> within it and how we relate, and ought to relate, to it.[170]

Musicking is at once "exploration as well as affirmation and celebration"[171] of who

we are as individuals and of the relationships we have with each other. The Virtual

Choir, like all instances of musicking, enacts and explores a complex network of

relationships—a "pattern which connects us to ourselves, to other humans, and to

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[170] Small, "Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space."
[171] Small, *Musicking*, 134.

the rest of the living world"[172]—allowing participants to understand themselves, each other, and their world in new ways. That this instance of musicking is uniquely executed in a "pastiche" fashion and takes place in an exceptional "physical" setting are important and are issues that I address below. I begin my discussion by demonstrating the ways in which the Virtual Choir's musicking is similar to more conventional musicking in the regard that it is exploration, affirmation, and celebration of our relationships with ourselves and with others.

The Virtual Choir has enabled participants to view themselves and their unique abilities from a new vantage point. The success of this project—an innovative experiment in crowdsourcing—relied on the involvement of numerous amateur singers, most of whom would likely have had little opportunity to engage with either their favorite composer or his music on such an international scale or in such a public arena prior to the era of the Internet and social media. Many of these singers spoke of the thrill of being involved in such an innovative project, of having their individual contributions valued and desired, and of being able to connect both with a revered composer like Whitacre and with singers across the globe. In this respect, "average" Internet users and fans of choral music were afforded a sense of individual agency in the success of the project and were consequently able to recalibrate their assessments of their own musical contributions. Singers at all levels of ability were on equal footing in this project. From this, the less accomplished singers gained both confidence in their abilities and a sense of musical authority.

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[172] Ibid, 200.

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Further, in making their "micro-performance" video submissions, individual participants were compelled to examine how they present themselves both musically and physically and assess their own musical strengths and weaknesses. For some, like Tresa, this process was enlightening, though occasionally tinged with frustration and self-criticism, and afforded insight into how to improve technique. For others, like Helen and Tristan, it was an opportunity to make peace with their own, or others', judgments and criticisms. They were able to accept their own abilities and recognize that what they have to offer is sufficient and uniquely valuable. For them, striving for technical perfection is a futile objective and, in a sense, inauthentic to their own musical voices. This afforded some, like Tristan, a renewal of confidence in his own skills and a revival of interest in pursuing musical activity offline. In these respects, their involvement with the Virtual Choir enacts an ideal relationship with oneself in which one possess a better understanding of one's own abilities and is more confident and motivated to pursue and engage in creative activities. Furthermore, participants spoke of the value of self-acceptance in regard to their musical abilities and contributions.

Small recognizes the individual's relationship with the self as an important aspect of musicking, but is especially concerned with how the individual relates to others during performance. The act of musicking collectively, as a social process, can serve to establish, refine, and challenge interpersonal and intra-group relationships. In the context of the Virtual Choir, each individual contribution realized its full potential only in collaboration with the contributions of others. The value of the group was evident as individuals recognized the limitations inherent in

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musicking in isolation. Their collective efforts, and the support they provided to each other through the course of those efforts, enabled their linkages to deepen. It was important to the group's initial coherence that the individuals within the group shared some key characteristics (such as passions for choral singing and for Eric Whitacre's music), but the true value of the group's development is evidenced in the diversity of individual backgrounds represented in its membership. The project's inclusive nature—perhaps, in some respects, more advocated than actual at present[173]—represents the ideals proposed by emerging Internet technology and "open-source" collaboration. That the opportunity to be involved is potentially open to anyone with an Internet connection, regardless of geographic location or individual identity, reflects an idealized social order in this modern age—a nonhierarchical network of relationships that allows equal access and privileges polyadic exchange unfettered by the constraints of time or space.

The individual videos that were submitted by Virtual Choir participants, linked as they are through the Google Earth mapping application, collectively function as a "hyperdocument," comprising the network of virtual musical and personal connections that define the Virtual Choir project. Each video, or cluster of videos in regions with numerous submissions, has a corresponding marker on the

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[173] Some observers might argue that, despite the variety of backgrounds of the Virtual Choristers, the fact that they all share a familiarity with Western choral music implies a common cultural and/or socioeconomic background. However, there were a number of members who claimed to not know how to read music or to have had any experience with this sort of music previously. Further, the issue of global disparities in access to computer and/or Internet technology is not dealt with in this thesis, but is a critical issue to consider when making claims regarding inclusivity.

map, represented by a tree[174]—a visual representation of the various localities at which the individual "micro-performances" were recorded and uploaded. The map serves as a tangible and legible document of participants' contributions, evidence of their connections across geographic space. Moreover, when one clicks on a tree upon the map, it is possible to open that video in YouTube, which also provides graphical evidence—by way of the "recommended videos" sidebar—of linkages to other Virtual Choristers. In this way, individuals can activate those hyperlinks in order to locate others who are involved in the project.

This idealized "hyperdocumentation" of the world of Internet users—where all are connected to all—is visually articulated through the imagery employed in the Virtual Choir performance. The cosmic/celestial theme implies a collective transcendence of the physical realm, a rejection of the particularities that serve to differentiate and separate us in the offline world. Participants' creative energies and expressive voices—their "essences," captured in and depicted by video thumbnails—are extracted and elevated onto a theoretical, or "virtual," plane in which they are woven together to create something greater in the aggregate. These essences are linked via golden beams of light—a shimmering web that connects us all, activated by the vitality of human creativity, collective orientation, and sonic harmony—highlighting our shared humanity and undergirding our international community. The values that we cherish as global citizens—mutual acceptance and understanding, solidarity, and pride in the collective effort—are reflected in the visual representation of the Virtual Choir's unique musicking.

[174] The same tree imagery is used on the cover of Whitacre's 2010 Decca album entitled *Light & Gold*.

Living Better in the World

Small's theory emphasizes that the idealized sets of relationships enacted through musicking ultimately help us to live better in the world. Through their involvement in the Virtual Choir, individual participants have come to new understandings of their own musical strengths and weaknesses and how they might improve their technique and performance presentation. Some have been able to build confidence in and acceptance of their abilities, thus enabling them to more fully enjoy and participate in future musical pursuits. The value of their own unique skills and what they can contribute to both the world of music and to society more generally is reinforced, encouraging them to seek out a richer experience of life in the offline realm. The relationship to the self is explored, affirmed, and celebrated.

In the Virtual Choir, individual contributions—both valued in and essential to the success of the project—are linked to the larger network of contributions in a "hyperdocumented" collaborative effort. The nonhierarchical nature of the collaboration represents a democratic ideal—still far from realized in most realms of the "real" world—that privileges passion over virtuosity. In this project, it is not essential to have had extensive musical training provided one possesses passion, enthusiasm, and dedication. Indeed, Small characterizes a "good performance" as one that encourages the active involvement of all participants, regardless of technical ability:

> If the function of musicking is to explore, affirm, and celebrate the concepts
> of ideal relationships of all those taking part, then the best performance must
> be one that empowers all the participants to do this most comprehensively,
> subtly and clearly, at whatever level of technical accomplishment the
> performers have attained. Such subtlety, comprehensiveness and clarity do

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not depend on virtuosity but reflect, rather, the participants' (that is, both performers and listeners) doing the best they can with what they have.[175]

Not only is each contribution deemed equally valuable to the project's success, each participant must contribute equally to ensure that success. All share, in equal measure, both the burden and the rewards of the work. In many ways, then, this project articulates a vision of idealized relationships in which there is a balance between and among individuals and in which we all work in concert to achieve a collective goal. This vision may be extrapolated to a larger social realm beyond the Virtual Choir, enabling participants to better understand how they, as individuals, might fit into their communities, both locally and globally. If Small's theory about musicking is correct, then the relationships enacted through the Virtual Choir must emulate those we deem desirable for our world—both its online *and* offline versions. The acceptance of all members, or potential members, of a particular community and the valuing of each member's unique skills are general principles that could foster a more peaceful, open, democratic, and productive offline world. While each of us may theoretically recognize the value of such principles in our lives, the Virtual Choir, through musicking's predication on the bodily "paralanguage" of gesture,[176] helps illustrate this in a profound and corporeal manner, thus serving as a powerfully instructive tool in reinforcing their value in our offline interactions.

I would like to briefly address the unique mode of collaboration and the exceptional "space," or physical setting, in which the Virtual Choir occurs, the

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[175] Small, *Musicking*, 215.
[176] Ibid, 61.

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primary factors which make this project distinct from most other musical

collaborations. Essential to any analysis of musicking, Small has argued, is that

> [w]e take into account not just what the performers are doing and certainly
> not just the piece that is being played or what the composer, should there be
> one, has done. We begin to see a musical performance as an encounter
> between human beings that takes place through the medium of sounds
> organized in specific ways. Like all human encounters, it takes place in a
> physical and a social setting, and those, too, have to be taken into account
> when we ask what meanings are being generated by a performance.[177]

Typically, the musical activities to which we as ethnomusicologists focus our

research occur in specific settings with discrete physical and social localities within

which all participants engage in musicking synchronously. The Virtual Choir defies

such spatial and temporal preconditions and its unique significance derives exactly

from this difference. In such an asynchronous "performance," the concepts of

process, product, and how the two interact are called into question. How does the

locus of such asynchronous performance—the nebulous "everywhere and nowhere"

locality of cyberspace—impact our understanding of the musicking that occurs in

this collaboration?

The "physical setting" of the Virtual Choir performance is both multiple and

actual in that it encompasses all the physical localities at which individual

participants recorded their submissions and the physical localities at which the

performance is viewed by Internet users across the world. In another sense, the

"physical setting" is both singular and theoretical in that it is the immaterial notional

realm of digital information—of bits and bytes. If, as Small states, "[t]he physical

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[177] Ibid, 10.

space creates the social space,"[178] we must consider the unique nature of cyberspace as a "physical" space for musical performance. What kind of social space can it create? I would like to propose that cyberspace creates a social space that is open, non-hierarchical, innovative, interactive, and bears the unique and varied cultural imprints of each and every one of its users. It is a social space that, like cyberspace, cannot yet exist in the realm of the physical world for a variety of logistical reasons, but serves as an important model for human collaboration and interaction in our technologically-driven and increasingly globalized world. Michael Benedikt proposed, in the early days of cyberspace, one possible theoretical characterization of the construct—likely drawing from the "consensual hallucination" theory proposed by William Gibson in *Neuromancer* (1984)—as "[a] common mental geography, built, in turn, by consensus and revolution, canon and experiment; a territory swarming with data and lies, with mind stuff and memories of nature, with a million voices and two million eyes in a silent, invisible concert of enquiry, dealmaking, dream sharing, and simple beholding."[179] It is a space which we have created together and in which we conjoin our minds and hearts in creative solidarity.

Sociologist Mary Chayko proposes that we might conceive of cyberspace as *sociomental space*, which she defines as "the cognitive analog to physical space."[180]

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178 Small, "Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space."
179 Michael Benedikt, "Introduction," in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 2.
180 Mary Chayko, *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 22.

For her, it is "a kind of mental habitat"[181] "in which groups of people who may be physically separated create connections, bonds, communities, and entire social worlds."[182] Accordingly, she proposes a substitution of the term "virtual" with the term "sociomental," which has particular utility for how we regard communities that gather online. In her view, the former term "implies that whatever it describes is almost, or not quite, or 'not really' real"[183] while the latter is more descriptive and positive in its connotations. As she describes,

> [a]ny social exchange or environment in which people derive a sense of togetherness by being mentally oriented toward and engaged with one another can be described as sociomental. Two or more people must be involved in the exchange, which makes it *social*, and some degree of technological mediation is required to facilitate the connection and give us the opportunity to know of one another, which is the *mental* aspect.[184]

Virtual Choir participants, as we have seen, are "mentally oriented toward and engaged with one another" through their musical and social interactions, and can thus be considered to collectively inhabit a unique sociomental space.

Cyberspace is a space replete with possibility, innovation, and sociality. Its hallmarks are acceptance, opportunity, and unfettered interaction, which set it apart from offline, or physical, space. This space therefore serves as both fertile ground for the development of a community ethos as well as a unique setting for musicking. It is the open and inclusive nature of this setting, coupled with the network of relationships enacted through the Virtual Choir's musicking, that enable us to

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[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid, 23.
[183] Ibid, 10.
[184] Ibid.

consider the ways in which the group of individuals involved with the Virtual Choir may, or may not, constitute a community.

Theme Two: Virtual Choir as "community"

In comparison to other models of "virtual community," or "sociomental community," that have come before and to the majority of such communities that have garnered scholarly attention,[185] the Virtual Choir represents a unique entity. Other digitally-networked collectives have sought to emulate, to a degree, offline communities in their structure and function, and have exhibited such characteristics as group durability over time, relative constancy of and commitment from its membership, the exchange of knowledge and social support, and frequent and varied interaction among its members. The Virtual Choir differs substantively in some key respects. Chief among these is that the project was not conceived as something that would necessarily sustain itself over time or in which interaction among the group members was an expected component of its eventual success. As we saw in Chapter Two, the project was conceived as an experiment with a singular and discrete aim of producing a musical "performance" through the stitching together of individual micro-performances. Moreover, the project's creative momentum centered around a key figure—Eric Whitacre—without which the project could not achieve its aim. Such a project could, in theory, be successful without interaction between individual participants, given that all individual performances had to be routed through a central creative nexus. Nevertheless, a "community" of sorts emerged as a result of

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[185] Such as the WELL, discussed in detail in Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000).

this experiment. The grass-roots (rhizomic), innovative, and collective nature of

this project—the hallmark of "open-source" collaboration in our networked

society—encouraged participants to look beyond the essential aim of the project

and create their own social space within cyberspace where more robust interaction

occurred. What is the nature of such interaction and why is it unique?

The Individual Within the Collective

Before problematizing how a collective of individual Internet users might evolve

into a "virtual community," I first examine the unique circumstances of the

individual within this particular collective. In the preponderance of group

interaction that occurs in cyberspace, the individual participants involved are, for

the most part, unknown to each other and often share little of their true identities

through the course of their interactions. The opportunity to communicate

anonymously and/or to represent oneself via an idealized and fictitious identity has

appeal for many Internet users. As a disembodied "netizen" whose identity is

typically constructed primarily through textual means, one may choose to assume

an identity beyond that dictated by the constraints of one's actual life. In this sense,

the Internet has been regarded as a "great leveler." The potential benefits of this

leveling are clear: the identity markers, such as race or gender, and individual

physical characteristics, such as disability, which might dictate how one is perceived

in real life are hidden, allowing Internet users to be judged solely on what they "say"

(write) and what they contribute to online discussions and interactions. However,

the downsides are also clear: one might engage in deception and/or retreat into a

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false version of one's self. Further, anonymity is believed to facilitate antisocial

behavior online that would be considered unthinkable in face-to-face

interactions.[186]

In contrast, the Virtual Choir requires the participant to present his or her

authentic essence as communicated through the physical body and the expressive

voice. The "micro-performances" that were submitted to YouTube by the Virtual

Choir participants, and later combined into an ensemble "macro-performance,"

captured each individual's embodied physicality through both aural and visual

means and made it perceptible to both those involved with the project and to any

Internet user viewing the "micro-performances." In this way, the individual Virtual

Chorister potentially exposes him- or herself to judgment by the entire population of

Internet users. As we have seen, this aspect of the project made some people

trepidatious, yet also prompted many participants to think deeply about themselves

and their musical abilities. Others relished the prospect of their individual voices

being noticed among the many that combined to create the "macro-performance."

In either case, the mechanism for involvement in the Virtual Choir requires a full

commitment of one's authentic self to the project and presupposes one's willingness

to share that self with the community.

In this way, a dimension of embodiment is reclaimed in the "disembodied"

digital realm of cyberspace. Traditional markers of identity are brought to the fore

through the embodied participation of the Virtual Choristers. Social, cultural, and

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[186] For a short discussion of antisocial behavior online and its connection to anonymity, see Karen M. Douglas, "Antisocial communication on electronic mail and the internet," in *Mediated Interpersonal Communication*, ed. Elly A. Konijn et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 200-214.

ethnic identity markers are, to an extent, made evident through the individual's physically "present" body. Further, one's unique voice is presented as a component of this authentic, embodied self. This level of intimacy and authenticity is relatively unique within the realm of cyberspatial interaction and imbue the project with a depth of meaning that arises when individuals commit their genuine selves to a collective endeavor. The Virtual Choristers collectively articulated a sense of solidarity by being fully present and vulnerable together.

Individual contributions are also distinguished by the presentation of the individuals' unique physical surroundings as depicted in the video submissions. We are allowed to glimpse the intimate home settings of participants, with the varying array of decorative choices and the unique personal items that provide contextual information about the individuals involved in this project. Eric Whitacre spoke of the impact of seeing the teddy bear behind Britlin Losee in the initial recording she made for him—he felt that it brought an element of intimacy to her video message, as if he had been invited into her home. Through these displays of individuality, we get a sense of the variety of personalities and the diversity of backgrounds represented in the Virtual Choir, which both humanize the project and allow us to deepen our understanding of the participants. We are virtual guests in each others' homes, collectively sharing a level of intimacy and vulnerability that arises through musical expression. Just as the physical body has been effectively reclaimed within the digital realm through the intimacy of these videos, participants lay claim to a sense of place as their multiple localities juxtapose "everywhere" with the immaterial "nowhere" of cyberspace.

The Question of Community

In what ways does the Virtual Choir fit with conventional descriptions of community? Definitions of the word vary: some imply physical propinquity or common locality while others have as their basis shared belief systems or feelings of fellowship and camaraderie irrespective of geographic location.[187] The word community, by its nature, allows for multiple interpretations. Manuel Castells identified the nebulous nature of the definition as a source of confusion and contestation among early observers of online communities: "the term 'community', with all its powerful connotations, confused different forms of social relationship, and prompted ideological discussion between those nostalgic for the old, spatially bounded community and the enthusiastic supporters of Internet-enabled communities of choice."[188] In his seminal work on virtual communities, Howard Rheingold offers the following definition: "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on… public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."[189]

In significant respects, the Virtual Choir differs from the subject of Rheingold's study, the WELL, which overlaid online interactions on to a localized community network. Yet I would argue that the Virtual Choir does, to an extent,

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[187] *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007). s.v. "community," http://www.credoreference.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/entry/hmdictenglang/communi ty (accessed December 11, 2011). Definitions 1a and 1b refer to geographic locality, while definitions 3a and 3b refer to shared interests and fellowship.
[188] Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 125.
[189] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, xx.

involve the protracted interaction and the heightened human emotions to which Rheingold refers and which he claims are necessary for the establishment of "webs of personal relationships." Virtual Choir 2.0 rolled out over a six-month period—from announcement of the piece by Eric Whitacre to the premiere of the "performance." During that time, individual participants engaged in public discussions via the Facebook page—any-to-any and many-to-many interactions regarding the Virtual Choir itself, supplemented by discussion of a range of mutual interests and concerns. While interactions were especially numerous during the period leading up to key events in the timeline of the project—the submission deadline and the date of the premiere—they were effectively sustained during the interim periods, buoyed by communal energy and excitement. Discussions continued following the premiere and in anticipation of Virtual Choir 3.0.[190] These interactions have incorporated new individuals who have more recently heard about the project and wish to be involved in the next iteration. In this respect, it seems that participant interactions have been sufficiently prolonged and numerous so as to establish "fellow-feeling" and to foster collective principles and goals.

The Virtual Choir also conforms to Rheingold's second point, in regard to the activation of "sufficient human feeling" as a precondition for community. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, participants had profound reactions to both their involvement in the project and to the outcome of their collective efforts. This

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[190] On September 27, 2011 a blog post on Whitacre's site indicated that the next iteration of the Virtual Choir would be announced soon. http://ericwhitacre.com/blog/the-virtual-choir/virtual-choir-3 (accessed December 11, 2011). As of December, 11, 2011, there had yet to be an announcement, but discussions on the Virtual Choir Facebook page indicate that the announcement will go out in mid-December, 2011.

project had deep emotional significance for those involved, as evidenced by participants' characterization of their contributions in terms of "blood, sweat, and tears," and their reactions of "crying like a baby" upon watching the premiere. Through such intense expressions of humanity, participants were able to identify mutual connections and find common ground upon which relationships could be built. As mentioned previously, some participants have even pushed these Internet-based relationships further by meeting offline and weaving their digital life into their analog one.

It is evident that the definition of community is subjective and contestable, and one might posit that a wide range of human groups that interact at some length with sufficient emotional investment, including the Virtual Choir, might fit such a broad description. However, one might also justifiably question the degree of interpersonal commitment involved in this project: what is the nature of the relationships between those involved and is it feasible to provide the social support and/or reciprocity that is often associated with a functioning and thriving community? Typically, the strong ties that bind communities together develop over time, built on the intimacy of face-to-face contact and in conjunction with the commitment of human capital resources and social support by members living in sufficient proximity to feasibly provide such support to each other. However, some have claimed that the "accident of physical proximity" does not necessarily have intrinsic value in providing the foundations for a productive community. Licklider and Taylor state: "[On-line interactive communities] will be communities not of common location, but of *common interest*… life will be happier for the on-line

individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be

selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of

proximity."[191] Castells refers to a variety of sociological studies to support this

point: "The fading away of the residential community as a meaningful form of

sociability" seems to be connected to the trend of people "select[ing] their

relationships on the basis of their affinities."[192] This transformation in the ways that

groups organize themselves fits with Benedict Anderson's 1983 theory of "imagined

communities," in which shared cultural practices or commonalities of belief, and not

geographical proximity, might serve as the basis upon which a group of individuals

view themselves as a bonded collective. These "weak ties" of common interest and

general feelings of affiliation are what hold such groups together. By employing the

descriptor "imagined," the validity of such communities is challenged. I argue that

the "imagined" or invisible linkages of belief, cultural practice, or shared passions

are just as valid as the ones made "visible" via local street maps. Pierre Lévy has

characterized the less tangible types of bonds found in online collectives as potent

and legitimate:

> Along with cyberculture arises the desire to construct a social bond that is
> based not on territorial or institutional affiliations, or relationships of power,
> but on common interests, games, shared knowledge, cooperative
> apprenticeship, open processes of collaboration. Our desire for virtual
> communities reflects an ideal of deterritorialized human relationship,
> nonhierarchical and free.[193]

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[191] Licklider and Taylor (1968) quoted in Steven G. Jones, "Understanding Community in the Information Age," in *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995), 23.

[192] Castells, *The Internet Galaxy*, 126.

[193] Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture,* trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 111.

He further asserts that "virtual communities" are inaccurately termed "virtual"

because they are an actualization of the types of communities that are desired but

impossible in a world without networked computing:

> It's reasonable to claim…that such virtual communities bring about a true actualization (in the sense of effectively putting people in contact) of human groups, groups that were merely potential before the arrival of cyberspace. It would be far more accurate to use the term 'actual community' to describe the phenomena characteristic of collective communication in cyberspace. [194]

Whether or not affinity groups necessarily constitute communities in a

traditional sense remains contested. Internet technology is rendering the descriptor

"traditional" ineffectual on a daily basis. If one feels, qualitatively, that he or she

belongs to a group that is united by a common interest, purpose, or set of values, the

subjective experience of the group's members and the fulfillment each member

derives from his or her membership is of primary importance in defining a

community ethos. As Castells proposes, "[p]erhaps the necessary analytical step to

understanding the new forms of social interaction in the age of the Internet is to

build on a redefinition of community, de-emphasizing its cultural component,

emphasizing its supportive role to individuals and families, and de-linking its social

existence from a single kind of material support."[195] Castells conceives of this

qualitative shift as "the displacement from community to network as the central

form of organizing interaction"[196] and suggests employing the term "networks of

sociability" to describe Internet-based groups like the Virtual Choir because of their

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[194] Ibid, 110.
[195] Ibid, 127.
[196] Ibid.

ephemerality.[197] He allows for the evolution of such networks into community-like

entities once "they stabilize in their practice."[198] As Ananda Mitra has stated, "it is

relatively difficult (and perhaps fruitless) to arrive at a definitive description of

community because that itself is a provisional construct changing in meaning as new

technologies of communication evolve."[199] At the time of this writing, the third

iteration of the Virtual Choir was about to be announced, which seems to be

evidence of its progression toward stabilization.

I would argue that the Virtual Choir goes beyond a mere "affinity group" or

"network of sociability" in that it coheres primarily around collective action and

task-orientation rather than primarily around shared passion. Virtual Choir

participants have an end-goal in sight beyond sociability; they must pool their

collective creative resources and apply them to the execution of an innovative

instance of musicking. Gregory Barz, in his research on a Tanzanian *kwaya*—a

social and cultural collective based on physical propinquity—defines community

broadly as:

> …a group of people that gathers for a *reason*: whether it is to remember and
> recall, to share, or to create new experiences. Communities are often fluid
> social structures that allow people of similar or dissimilar backgrounds to
> cooperate on shared objectives.[200]

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[197] Ibid, 130.

[198] Ibid, 131.

[199] Ananda Mitra, "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet," in *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. by Steven G. Jones (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997), 56.

[200] Gregory Barz, "'We Are from Different Ethnic Groups, but We Live Here as One Family': The Musical Performance of Community in a Tanzanian *Kwaya*," in *Chorus and Community*, ed. Karen Ahlquist (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 25.

Although the Virtual Choir's tagline may be "Choir Geeks of the World Unite," the unity implied or sought by members is not based merely on one's identity as a "choir geek" but also on a "choir geek's" action and practice. It is both a community of choice and a community predicated on specific actions. It is precisely this task-orientation that enables the stronger bonds that typically define communities: "Having an important aim other than simply being together or meeting new people—finding a job or a place to live… may provide a useful foundation for robust social capital."[201] While one may argue that musical collaboration is of less practical necessity to the well-being of an individual than are the "job or a place to live" that Putnam and Feldstein reference, many musicians would argue that finding a creative outlet is equally essential to one's individual wellbeing and social integration.

In addition, the literature defining community often references a triumph over obstacles or working through communal problems as important elements of community building. The Virtual Choir had, as its basis, a goal to create shared music in the face of substantial technical and artistic obstacles; we can say that the participants worked together to tackle a challenge and felt a sense of unity upon its completion. Moreover, the individual exchanges of support—both technical and emotional—throughout the process served to create a positive and communal atmosphere that strengthened their bonds as a collective. Tim Berners-Lee, credited with having developed the World Wide Web, has spoken of his desire for Internet technology to allow not only interactivity between users but also what he

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[201] Putnam and Feldstein, 237.

terms "intercreativity."[202] This early vision, which focused primarily on enabling

users to create virtual objects collaboratively in a virtual space in real time, would

prove, Berners-Lee believed, to be "much more satisfying and more productive than

any of the current forms of interactivity" offered by the technology of the time.[203] In

creating something cooperatively, users feel more invested in the project and

connected with each other; they unite in working towards a common goal and enjoy

mutual rewards upon its completion. I believe that the type of intercreativity

proposed by the Virtual Choir today aligns with Berners-Lee's ideals and serves as a

primary basis upon which feelings of community and camaraderie may be fostered

among members.

Virtual Choir participants work together to create something collectively and

it is through this work that they are able to build solidarity and a stronger, more

cohesive sense of community. The bonds forged through shared effort, communal

problem solving, and the contributions of each individual's creative energies are

arguably more robust than those forged merely through discussion or information

exchange in regard to a shared hobby or special interest—the activities that define

many virtual communities. While lively online discussion may lay the groundwork

for collective identity or affinity, collaborative effort serves to strengthen and

enhance the bonds initiated by that discussion. Commitment to a collective task

builds a deep level of trust and interpersonal connection.

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[202] "Interview: Tim Berners-Lee on Simplicity, Standards and 'Intercreativity,'" by Rohit
Khare and D.C. Denison, *WWW Journal* 1.3 (1996),
http://web.archive.org/web/19980114070555/w3journal.com/3/s1.interview.html.
[203] Ibid.

Putnam and Feldstein describe the potency of sharing stories of the self and experiences of struggle, in both the individual and collective sense, in creating strong bonds within, and between, social groups:

> Telling and listening to stories creates empathy and helps people find the things they have in common, which then eases the formation of enduring groups and networks…[204]

> Finding commonalities among 'I' stories is a powerful technique. Reframing individual trajectories as a collective tale can create the crosscutting identities that turn bridging distance into bonding ties…[205]

> If 'I' stories are essential to building new connections, 'we' stories are equally valuable in sustaining those connections. Recounting how 'we' overcame past obstacles and achieved unexpected successes reinforces shared identity and frames strategic choices for the future…[206]

Virtual Choir participants shared "I" stories through their Facebook interactions. They affirmed each other's stories and the experiences of struggle they encountered in recording their "micro-performances." Once the project had been completed, they shared 'we' stories of collective accomplishment, honoring what they had gone through together to make the project a success and thus strengthening their feelings of fellowship and solidarity.

Chayko likewise emphasizes the value of story-telling in fostering the sociomental space in which communities may be established and developed. As she states,

> Stories are highly evocative of person and place. They help us create and sustain the cognitive face of the group, envision the sociomental space in

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[204] Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein with Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 283.
[205] Ibid, 284.
[206] Ibid.

which its members reside, and detect cognitive resonance with one another…
Telling one another our stories reveals us as "whole persons"…[207]

The revealing of one's authentic and whole self to other authentic and whole selves is a valuable component of building social capital and community.

Conclusion

Through their individual and collective musicking, participants in the Virtual Choir engage in a powerful collaborative cultural process. As with any instance of musicking, a complex network of relationships are enacted through the Virtual Choir. Per Small's theory, these relationships model ideal relationships as we wish them to be in our modern world. Further, these relationships serve as the basis upon which a "virtual community" may develop, a community in which the contributions of all are welcomed, valued, and necessary. This ethos—a founding principle of this community—afforded participants new perspectives on themselves as well as on the world around them. The powerful message of this project— collaboration that transcends geographic and cultural distance—resonates profoundly with both participants and viewers, reinforcing the value of cross-cultural acceptance, understanding, and solidarity in offline life.

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[207] Chayko, *Portable Communities*, 32.

5. *Concluding Thoughts:* Virtuality and the Augmentation of Reality

What are the broader implications of the Virtual Choir for our experiences with music and community both on- and offline? What does this project teach us about emerging social and cultural expressions of the modern human condition?

Fundamental to an understanding of these questions is the expansion of our conception of how and why community can be constituted through technological means in our modern world. As opportunities for computer-mediated social interaction increase across cultures and traditional boundaries, users around the world will build communities unlike those which have come before. It is this capacity for creating cross-cultural linkages that articulates what I believe to be one of Internet technology's primary social benefits. As Putnam and Feldstein have stated, the

> …use of electronic means to communicate with people we already know offline, however much it permeates our lives, is not likely to produce entirely new forms of community. The more revolutionary potential of Internet technology is the possibility of creating connections among people who don't (or at least didn't) know each other offline.[208]

As mentioned in Chapter Four, this diversity of connections, discussed by Putnam and Feldstein, is a defining factor in the democratic or "e-topian" nature of the technology. The profile of the Virtual Choir's membership is more heterogeneous than some place-based social groups, given that many geographically-bounded localities, often termed communities, are not that culturally and/or ethnically diverse. The Virtual Choristers, while sharing a familiarity with

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[208] Putnam and Feldstein with Cohen, *Better Together*, 227.

the music of Eric Whitacre and/or an interest in choral singing, come from a variety

of circumstances in most other respects. The participants collectively display a

diversity of cultural backgrounds, geographic homelands, belief systems, and levels

of musical ability. As discussed in Chapter Three, many praised the project's

inclusivity and the capacity it had to unite people from various walks of life. They

regarded this as one of the most valuable and remarkable aspects of the project.

Despite surface differences, participants were brought together through their

shared passions for music and singing. For many, the differences that might, in real

life, prevent them from ever meeting seemed inconsequential in this context, as they

shared a communal objective to participate in an innovative experiment that would,

ideally, result in something musical. Many regarded the result as a beautiful

expression of their shared humanity.

Moreover, we saw that some participants were inspired to learn about their

fellow participants, watching their video submissions and acquiring unique

information, through their presentations, of their linguistic and cultural heritages.

Such new cross-cultural linkages, no matter how tenuous, provide rich opportunity

for individual and social growth among Internet users, broadening perspectives and

serving a valuable "bridging" function in building social capital.

While skeptics question the quality of the social interactions and the amount

of tangible social support that may be fostered through online channels, there are

others who believe the Internet plays a valuable role in the modern world by

establishing novel social connections, fostering communion both among like-

minded individuals and between those with disparate political or cultural

viewpoints. These connections can generate an atmosphere of solidarity with and responsibility to the global citizenry. What is more, the rapid expansion of Internet technology and increased means to connect with strangers across the globe suggest that our networks will only continue to broaden as more of our conventional, offline social activities will increasingly have some online dimension.

Robert Putnam, in his seminal work about civic engagement and community in the United States, *Bowling Alone*, said of the Internet's role in the community-building process: "[s]ocial capital is about networks, and the Net is the network to end all networks."[209] Further, Barry Wellman et al have found that, "[d]espite their limited social presences, CSSNs [computer-supported social networks] successfully maintain strong, supportive ties with work and community as well as increase the number and diversity of weak ties."[210] And, it is these weak ties that "may provide better and different kinds of resources than strong, familial ties."[211] The niche connections around which many online affinity groups or communities cohere can provide a source of validation and enrichment for individuals whose geographic location, physical infirmity, or scheduling conflicts preclude such connections in their offline lives.

How can music serve as a catalyst for developing these linkages via the Internet? While many dynamic and robust "virtual communities" cohere around special interests, there is something exceptional about the creative process of

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[209] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 171.

[210] Barry Wellman et al, "Computer Networks as Social Networks: Collaborative Work, Telework, and Virtual Community," *Sociology* 22 (1996): 231.

[211] James Katz and Ronald Rice, *Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement, and Interaction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 121.

musicking that serves to unite its practitioners and enhance individual involvement and integration into community. As John Blacking stated in regard to the musical activities of the Venda of South Africa, they "may involve people in a powerful shared experience and thereby make them more aware of themselves and of their responsibilities towards one another."[212] Drawing on Blacking's theories that such shared experiences also "affect our inner-sensations," Elizabeth Sager described music's unique ability to orient us simultaneously inward and outward: "[s]ince music can engage the emotions while coordinating interactions between self and others, the power of musical experience is that it may bring about an individual's full emotional development and social integration."[213] The unique nature of the collaborative process in the Virtual Choir prompts us to wonder how applicable this particular statement might be, given that the participants are not required to "coordinate interactions" with others in a real-time setting. However, I would argue that many Virtual Choir participants imagined these "virtual" physical interactions with other participants while recording and strategized how they might best blend with others and stagger their breathing as if there were other participants with them. Tresa, for instance, told me that she had difficulty when she recorded her part because she was "trying to blend with other voices [she] could not hear but only imagine."[214] Fitting with Blacking's theory, she felt a real responsibility to the other participants, although they were not physically there beside her. This sense of

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[212] John Blacking quoted in Small, *Musicking*, 140.

[213] Rebecca Sager, "Creating a Musical Space for Experiencing the Other-Self Within," in *The Musical Human: Rethinking John Blacking's Ethnomusicology in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Suzel Ana Reily (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 146.

[214] Ibid.

responsibility to others is echoed in statements by other participants regarding their attempts to constrain vibrato or otherwise temper their voices to produce a sound that would blend most effectively with others in the final mix. Thus, the imagining of others alongside them—the vision of a possible physical interaction— was a powerfully instructive tool and enabled participants to adopt the outward orientation Sager suggests.

Its unique combination of digital technology and collaborative music-making sets this project apart from both other forms of virtual community and from other choral groups. As stated in Chapter Four, the Virtual Choir differs from other virtual communities in that the process of collaborative creation around which choral groups cohere—the shared responsibility of working towards a performance—adds a unique and meaningful dimension to their gathering in cyberspace. The participants are not merely a collective of like-minded individuals who have found each other through online channels. While these individuals, in aggregate, bear the hallmarks of affinity groups, one of the critical components of their bonding is evidenced in their work as a collaborative unit to create something beautiful, expressive, and emotionally fulfilling. As Chayko suggests, they are "mentally oriented toward and engaged with one another" with musicking as their shared objective. The pride that they take in being part of a project that transcends cultural, political, and geographic boundaries serves to unite them in a unique way. Moreover, while many online communities require a low level of commitment of the self because membership can often be anonymous, the fact that the Virtual Choir participants had to present themselves to each other as living, breathing human

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beings with authentic voices increased their commitment to the community and to the project.

The "virtual" and networked nature of this project enhances the musical experience in ways that cannot be achieved in real-life choral settings. Many would argue that one of the key elements of conventional choral singing—engaging in live feedback with other singers with whom you share a physical rehearsal or performance space—is critically absent in this project. Still, other elements are significantly present and are only possible through online collaboration. For one, the ability to collaborate with individuals from across the globe irrespective of physical or cultural propinquity is perhaps the most remarkable of such elements. The value of uniting disparate individuals in a universally valued act of creative expression like music cannot be understated. While it might be naïve to believe that through music can come peace, we see many instances around the world where music has played a powerful role in overcoming political, ethnic, and religious conflict.[215] It is sometimes easier to appreciate our common humanity and to recognize the ways in which we all relate to each other on a fundamental level when engaged in musical harmony.

Throughout this thesis, I have returned to the question: "How 'real' can the virtual be?" I have tried to demonstrate how a "real" community has developed as a

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[215] For an example, please see Jeffrey A. Summit's work with Ugandan coffee farmers who make music collaboratively despite the religious differences that prove to be divisive in other realms of the local community's life: "Delicious Peace: The Music of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Coffee Farmers of the Mirembe Kawomera Fair Trade Coffee Cooperative, Mbole Uganda," Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (forthcoming, 2012).

result of this musical collaboration. One can also ask if music that was created

through such virtual means might be characterized as "real" music. To the extent

that melodies and harmonies were produced and they sounded sufficiently musical

to my ears, I would assert that it is "real" music.

More importantly, I believe that there is little doubt concerning the

"realness" of the experience for both participants and those who listen to the Virtual

Choir. As René Lysloff has stated, "social and technological interactions (and

processes) that despite taking place in the virtual realm of cyberspace, have

consequences for lived social worlds."[216] The virtual activities of an individual or

group surely impact their "real" lives. This is evidenced in the numerous instances

in which Virtual Choir participants described profound emotional experiences,

connections, and personal fulfillment as a result of their involvement in the project.

As Steven Jones noted, "[t]here should be no mistake about the apperceived

'realness' of the reality encountered on-line—Internet users have strong emotional

attachments to their on-line activities."[217] Anne Markham's research into online

experience likewise revealed that users do not see "virtual" experiences as "unreal":

> For these participants, every experience is as real as another. This makes
> sense intuitively. For most of us, every experience is an experience, to the
> extent that it is lived. If it makes sense to us and feels like it is happening,
> how could it not be real?[218]

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[216] René T. A. Lysloff, "Musical Community on the Internet: An On-Line Ethnography,"
Cultural Anthropology 18.2 (2003): 234.
[217] Steven G. Jones, "Information, Internet, and Community: Notes Toward an
Understanding of Community in the Information Age," in *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting
Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications,
1998), 5.
[218] Annette N. Markham, Markham, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*
(Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 116.

A conceptual binary of "real" vs. "virtual" does not exist; the two are not mutually exclusive, neither in practice nor in theory, and there is always overlap between the two. The "virtual" augments and impacts the "real" and vice versa. An embodied Internet user experiences "real" interactions online, even if they are mediated through a computer screen and a vast network of data cables. As Simon Gottschalk noted with regard to his sociological inquiry into Second Life, "[w]e inevitably manifest our offline self when we interact online, and our online interactions inevitably follow and transform us when we are offline."[219]

Just as the "virtual" and the "real" cannot be easily abstracted from each other in the interwoven online/offline fabric of our modern digital age, likewise we understand that one experience cannot replace nor substitute for the other. In fact, evidence has shown that, far from simply replacing "real" offline activity, online activity often reinforces and enhances offline experience. This theme came up often in my research: a number of participants experienced a renewal of interest in pursuing offline musical activities following their positive and affirming experience with the Virtual Choir. Steve Woolgar and the contributors to his volume on "virtual society" demonstrated this to be the case: "[n]ot only do new virtual activities sit alongside existing 'real' activities, but the introduction and use of new 'virtual' technologies can actually stimulate more of the corresponding 'real' activity."[220] And, as we saw in Chapter Three, one of Eric Whitacre's ultimate goals was for this

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[219] Simon Gottschalk, "The Presentation of Avatars in Second Life: Self and Interaction in Social Virtual Spaces," Symbolic Interaction 33.4 (Fall 2010): 505.

[220] Steve Woolgar, "Five Rules of Virtuality," in *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*, ed. Steve Woolgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17.

project to inspire more people to engage with music and to appreciate it as a

valuable expression of human life:

> If we can do a single thing that helps people see choirs as being a little bit hip,
> or cool, then bring it on. That can't be bad.[221]

A renewal of participation in offline life may seem like an unexpected consequence

of this project, but this consequence gives the Virtual Choir rich meaning. Far from

replacing lived experience, this project complements and enhances such experience

so that we feel more actively engaged with the world around us. Claims that the

Internet has a dehumanizing effect lose some of their potency in light of projects like

the Virtual Choir.

Pierre Lévy has illuminated this potential of cyberspace to enable new

opportunities for interaction and thus a renewed participation in our worlds:

> A new media ecology has taken shape along with the growth of cyberspace…
> the more universal (larger, interconnected, interactive) it is, the less
> totalizable it becomes. Each additional connection adds heterogeneity, new
> information sources, new perspectives, so that global meaning becomes
> increasingly difficult to read, or circumscribe, or enclose, or control. This
> universal provides access to a joyous participation in the global, to the actual
> collective intelligence of the species. Through it we participate more
> intensely in our living humanity.[222]

These multiplying nodes of connection among and between Internet users expand

the possibilities for interaction and enable new social and cultural forms that, in

turn, enhance the human experience. Further, Lévy believes that the widely-held

perspective that Internet technologies seek to offer substitutions for lived

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[221] Eric Whitacre, "Virtual Choir Project Brings Together Distant Strangers in Performance: An Interview with Eric Whitacre," by Cory Davis, Singer Network: A Service of Chorus America, http://www.singernetwork.org/choruscommunity/detail.aspx?cid=64f27eaa-4863-473b-93f4-e9cf85ea445c (accessed August 18, 2011).
[222] Lévy, *Cyberculture*, 100-101.

experience arises from "the difficulty in grasping, imagining, or conceptualizing the appearance of new cultural forms, whose dimensions are far beyond what the human world is accustomed to."[223] He relates the emergence of these new cultural forms via technological means to biological evolution in their ability to help us live our lives better and understand ourselves in new ways:

> As with the appearance of new organs, the major technological inventions not only enable us to do 'the same things' more quickly, better, or on a greater scale but also allow us to do, feel, or organize ourselves differently. They lead to the development of new functions while requiring that we readjust the overall system incorporating the previous functions. The problematic of substitution prevents us from conceiving, accepting, or promoting that which is qualitatively new, that is, new planes of existence that are virtually supported by technical innovation.[224]

The Virtual Choir, as an example of a new cultural form borne out of technological innovation, enables "new planes of existence" through which we are able to view ourselves and the world around us in new ways. We are encouraged to participate more fully—although perhaps in an altered way—with our offline lives.

Small's theories regarding musicking allow for and advocate the new understandings proposed by Lévy. Small acknowledges that "[m]ost performances… merely confirm our feelings about the pattern [which connects] and of our place in it…" but that "we also need performances that expand our concepts of relationships, that present relationships in new and unfamiliar light, bring us to see our place in the world from a slightly different point of view."[225] The Virtual Choir fulfills both criteria at once: the relationships that are enacted through our collective musicking confirm the "pattern which connects" and our place within that pattern,

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[223] Ibid, 199.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Small, *Musicking*, 215-216.

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while also enabling new understandings of ourselves, of our world, and of our fellow

citizens around the globe.

Katz and Rice have argued that the early predictions of the impact of the

Internet on society were too polarized on either the dystopian or utopian ends of

the spectrum. Instead, they employ the term "syntopian realities" and suggest that

the Internet's "primary use by Americans is as an extension and enhancement of

their daily routines."[226] They have, however, found through their research "some

surprising twists and unanticipated uses" which "focus on self-expression and the

search for social interaction" and "result in new forms of social cooperation and

integration."[227] The Virtual Choir is an example of such unanticipated uses. They

have also found that "the Internet allows us to become ever more ourselves while

also creating social capital for the benefit of individuals and communities."[228] This

finding, coupled with the theories of Small and Lévy, encapsulates the essence of the

Virtual Choir's significance. I believe that the added element of music making in the

Virtual Choir community enhances these individual and social benefits, as

participants focus upon the shared objective of creating a "product" collaboratively

through the valued medium of music.

Many Virtual Choir participants initially became involved with the project

because they wanted to collaborate with a composer they revered and saw the

project as an innovative experiment. Yet, through their involvement, they came to

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[226] Katz and Rice, *Social Consequences of Internet Use,* 13.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid.

understand unexpected things about themselves, about the world, and about music. Indeed, as Small points out, "the act of musicking can articulate and reveal to us some of our deepest values,"[229] whether or not we are aware it is doing so. The values articulated through this project are those embodied within the promise of cyberspace: global solidarity, acceptance of the Other, democratic access to opportunity, and a renewal of social interaction.

In speaking about the Virtual Choir, Eric Whitacre often commented that we all share a "basic human need to connect with each other, using whatever technology available."[230] He likened the individual participant's experience to sending a message in a bottle: "[s]omeone stranded on an island somewhere leaving a message in a bottle with really no hope ever of connecting with anybody, but you still need to do it."[231] In fact, singers *did* find connections in the process, despite the seemingly isolated nature of their participation. In describing the Virtual Choir's collaborative process, Whitacre often employed (possibly unknowingly) Sherry Turkle's phrase "alone together." Turkle's understanding of the concept is pessimistic. She laments that we, as a society, spend a great deal of time in physical co-presence with one another, yet our constant attention to technology and reliance on it to mediate our interactions isolates us from those around us: by her formulation, we are "together," yet existentially alone.[232] In contrast, I regard the Virtual Choir as an example of how the "alone together" concept might be inverted.

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[229] Small, *Musicking*, 221.
[230] Eric Whitacre, "An Interview with Eric Whitacre," by Cory Davis.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

We may all be alone in front of our computer screens, "stranded" on our own islands, yet we can find togetherness through our online connections. By this formulation, we are "alone," yet existentially together. In our socially and culturally fragmented modern world, technology should not be characterized as a force that is merely exacerbating that fragmentation. Rather, it should be recast and understood as a catalyst for unity and understanding.

The Virtual Choir contributes to our understanding of the ways in which collaborative cultural production through this unique medium can and does have rich social and cultural meaning for participants. Musicking in cyberspace offers a channel through which the ideal relationships of our modern world—with ourselves, with others, with the world around us—may be articulated, defined, and understood. Through this understanding, we are able to perceive ourselves anew and see the larger "pattern which connects." With enhanced perception, we are better able to live "*alone* together" in the online realm and "*together* together" when offline.

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