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### Article

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The Online Cathedral: A Case Study Analysis of Egalitarian Music Outreach at  
Liverpool Cathedral for Mental Health and Spiritual Wellbeing during the  
COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Liverpool Cathedral holds a special place in the story of English Cathedral music, notably because of the recent role played by choral music for outreach engagement and community participation. This article undertakes an in-depth case study investigation of Liverpool Cathedral's music outreach portfolio, which moved online during the Covid-19 pandemic and was delivered variously via pre-recorded podcasts, zoom, and hybrid means, while examining its impact on mental health and spiritual wellbeing amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The primary emphasis is placed on the participation in online music activities during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the strategies employed for online instruction and performance, and the benefits and challenges of online musicking during the pandemic. By centering on a single religious community, "The Online Cathedral," this article will first establish the context for the study via consideration of Liverpool Cathedral's egalitarian ethos through widening access and inclusivity. The subsequent part will present a discussion of the impact of Liverpool Cathedral's online music outreach program for people's mental health and spiritual wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores research that investigates the health and wellbeing benefits associated with online singing and virtual choirs during the Covid-19 pandemic, and illuminates the positive impact of Liverpool Cathedral's online music program on social connectedness, and emotional resilience and healing. It also considers the challenges and limitations of virtual choir participation and briefly offers insights for future research.

*Keywords:* online singing; virtual choir; egalitarianism; Covid-19 pandemic; wellbeing; Cathedral science

## Introduction

Liverpool Cathedral (LC) occupies a distinctive position within the narrative of English Cathedral music. It stands out as one of the foremost ecclesiastical structures in 20th-century Britain (Brooke 2017:7), a prominence attributed not only to its imposing scale, architectural significance, and the renowned organ it houses, but also to its rich choral traditions. Additionally, LC's unique liturgical practices and, more recently, its engagement in outreach initiatives and community involvement through music have contributed significantly to its standing. The latter aspect assumes particular importance, as active participation in music demonstrably plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' lives. It exerts a positive influence on people's overall wellbeing and elicits a range of physical, psychological, and social advantages for those who are actively engaged in music (Carlson *et al.* 2021; MacDonald *et al.* 2012). Consequently, the act of participating in music is held in high regard, even if individuals may find it challenging to articulate precisely why music matters to them, but they know that music holds a profound significance.

This article undertakes a case study investigation providing an in-depth examination of the music outreach program offered by Liverpool Cathedral (LC) in England, UK, which moved online when the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, and was delivered variously via pre-recorded podcasts, zoom and hybrid means, while exploring its impact on mental health and spiritual wellbeing amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study delves into the nuanced dynamics of LC's music outreach program, offering a comprehensive analysis of its implications within the context of prevailing public health circumstances. The primary emphasis is placed on the participation in online music activities during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the strategies employed for online instruction and performance. The discussions reveal the benefits and challenges of online musicking during the pandemic (Ruddock *et al.* 2021), for example for mood regulation (Hennessey *et al.* 2021), social connectedness (Vandenberg *et al.* 2021) and health and wellbeing (Price *et al.* 2021; Williams *et al.* 2021), asking questions on whether, why, and how online music participation helped people through the Covid-19 pandemic (Levstek *et al.* 2021). The underlying message underscores the significance attributed to online music engagement during a period characterized by limited opportunities for musical expression. By collecting direct viewpoints regarding the transition to digital platforms for delivering music outreach coordinated by LC, the article offers insight into the pandemic's influence on the lives of ordinary music

participants. Consequently, it records a pivotal moment in history where social music making encountered considerable challenges across all its facets.

The article draws upon qualitative and quantitative data, utilizing questionnaires, interviews, and participant observation to identify and evaluate the most beneficial musical activities for individuals of varying ages within the church community.<sup>1</sup> Conversations with church leaders aid in communicating the objectives of LC's music programs and how these objectives evolved over time. The article provides a glimpse into the dynamic nature of LC's music ministry, illustrating participants' willingness to embrace change and, through trial and error, discover methods to enrich their religious community through musical engagement, both in-person and adhering to social distancing measures. This adaptive approach creatively navigated the evolving guidelines and social dynamics prompted by the global pandemic.

Centering its attention on a single religious community, "The Online Cathedral," this article presents insights into both micro- and macro-level musical processes. It showcases how online music making within a local collective can influence and be influenced by global musical landscapes and undertakings. While effectively conveying the motivations and intentions of individual participants—adults and children—within LC, the article also contextualizes their online music participation within a broader historical and global framework. In the opening part, the article will establish the context for the study via consideration of LC's egalitarian ethos through widening access and inclusivity and LC's music outreach program during the pandemic. The subsequent part will present a discussion of the impact of LC's online music outreach program on people's mental health and spiritual wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic, exploring research that investigates the health and wellbeing benefits associated with online singing and virtual choirs during the Covid-19 pandemic, and illuminating the positive impact of LC's online music program on social connectedness, and emotional resilience and healing. Finally, the article also considers the challenges and limitations of virtual choir participation and briefly offers insights for future research.

### **Liverpool Cathedral's egalitarian ethos**

Music and religion share a profound and pervasive connection. The evolution and refinement of music have been intrinsically linked to religious institutions, notably within the church, where it has served as a focal point for social interaction, fostering communal engagement in

musical and vocal expression (Vaughan 2015). Music has played a pivotal role in facilitating collective participation among groups of individuals, manifesting through shared acts of worship, prayer, and song. This shared musical experience not only brings people together but also facilitates the exchange of ideas and meanings, thereby fostering stronger social bonds among participants in these religious practices (Suttie 2015). In this context, music serves as a powerful tool for the church to communicate with and connect to its audience. It achieves this by enabling the sharing of emotions, meanings, and intentions (Miell, MacDonald, and Glennie 2005), and evoking both physical and psychosocial responses and interpretations. Consequently, music becomes a means through which the church cultivates social relations and imparts the tenets and constructs of religion into the consciousness of its followers. This integration of music is deeply ingrained within the traditions and customs of religious institutions and is employed as a mechanism to unite individuals within a single church community (Lukes 1975). Furthermore, music functions as a medium through which spiritual awareness can be heightened and exemplified, allowing individuals to establish a profound connection with the divine. This is evident in religious hymns, worship services, and events like weddings, funerals, and choirs, all of which amalgamate religious concepts with collective engagement and participation in music.

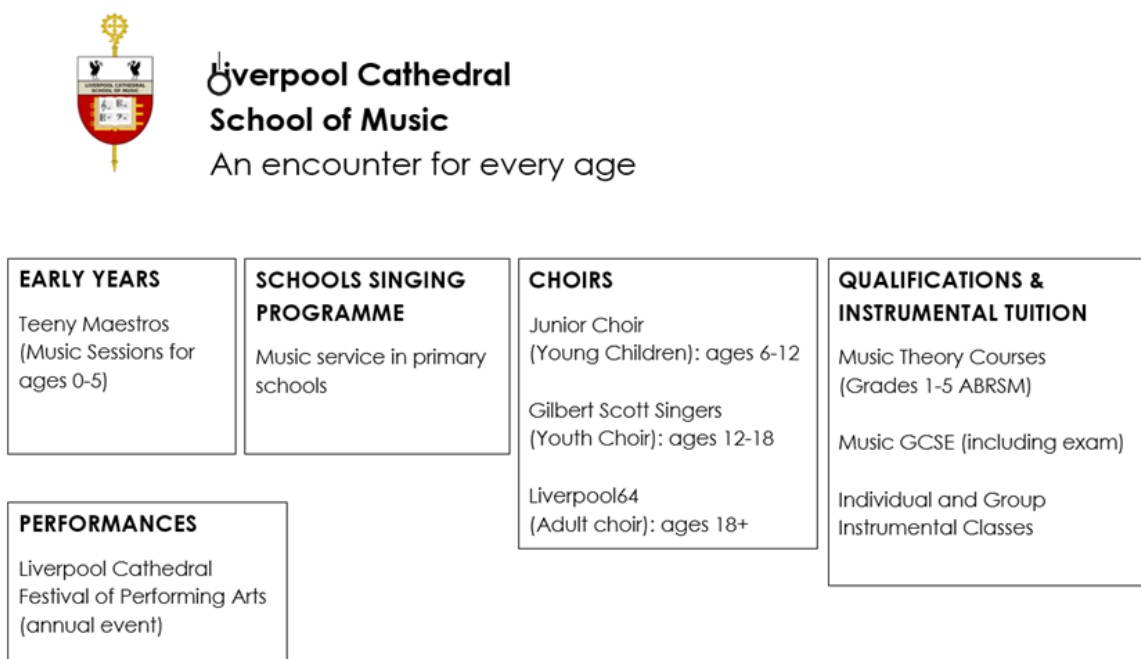
Even so, it is irrefutable that over the preceding century, the practice of religion has undergone a rapid decline within the Western world, primarily attributed to the profound influence of secularization, modernization, and the global spread of capitalism (Evans 2006; Franck and Iannaccone 2014). In response to this challenge, religious institutions have endeavored to address this issue by crafting a distinctive brand identity and expanding their cultural offerings to cultivate and sustain the perceived value and appeal of the church. Confronted with the pervasive trend of global secularization, particularly evident in the diminishing religious affiliations among young individuals, many churches have proactively adjusted their services and devised innovative strategies to engage a broader audience (Arnold 2016). This postmodern restructuring of the church places a greater emphasis on inclusivity while still being underpinned by prevailing ideologies. Notably, music has (re-)emerged as a pivotal tool within churches to foster a communal identity that strengthens social bonds within the congregation and welcome newcomers (Tepera 2017). The incorporation of contemporary music and language within the church environment serves to deconstruct traditional barriers (Evans 2006) and reinforces the newly cultivated brand, with heightened emphasis on physical and emotional experiences (Wagner 2019).

LC's distinctive brand is strengthened through the utilization of the double-cross symbol, which symbolizes its distinctive double-cross floor layout. Moreover, the Cathedral's website provides information about a wide array of events and activities it hosts, ranging from yoga sessions and interactive art exhibitions to concerts, performances, men's groups, charity events, and fundraising concerts for local organizations. This comprehensive array of offerings is aimed at encouraging and extending a warm welcome to both visitors and existing members of the congregation in the foreseeable future (Liverpool Cathedral Annual Review 2019). Collective participation in Church events is seen as purposeful, with importance being placed on "inclusivity of all" in these activities. Indeed, and as observed by Milja, a L64 choir member, "some people associate cathedrals with classical music, which I didn't realize until I arrived in the UK, but classical music was considered as a middle upper-class thing." LC's music outreach program clearly embodies a shift toward religious inclusivity and musical omnivorousness, and at the same time the breaking down of socioeconomic barriers to classical music participation, which Music Director Stephen Mannings justifies as follows:

My focus and my interest are two-fold, one is involving every age group and bring them together and the second is breaking down the snobbery of classical music. So, as you say, there is a huge stigma, upper class stigma attached to it in many ways, and it is [about] breaking it down and bringing people, who prefer different [music] genres, together and learn what classical music has to offer, and doing it through a lot of different ways. (Interview, 22 January 2021)

In the context of the Cathedral's offering, Stephen Mannings refers to "classical music" to music that is rooted in the traditions of Western liturgical and religious music, encompassing compositions—choral works, organ pieces, and orchestral compositions—that are suited to performances in religious settings, such as Cathedrals, and that have a rich history but also include contemporary works. Participation in classical music thereby acts as a medium through which identity and meaning making are formed, such as taking part in raising money for a wider cause or listening to music to connect with the cause, ultimately connecting the inside of the church to outside society. It enhances a sense of "belonging without believing" (Davie 1990, 1993), as the modern churchgoers can participate without religiosity (Bullock 2017). This emphasis on the collective and active role of the community in LC's musical activities shows how the church bonds with people through culture and music for wider societal meaning. LC's commitment to an egalitarian ethos mirrors the church's desire to ensure equitable access and opportunities for individuals to engage with music, irrespective of their background,

socioeconomic status, or abilities. This dedication to inclusivity and diversity fosters an environment of inclusiveness in musical involvement, extending an invitation to people of all backgrounds, age groups, and abilities, which in turn led to increased participation and engagement among marginalized segments of society, including individuals with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those from low-income communities (Bowman 2007; Hess 2017). LC's commitment to widening access and inclusivity<sup>2</sup> is achieved through one of the widest music outreach portfolios of any cathedral in the UK. Under the strapline "An encounter for every age," LC's music outreach program encompasses interactive music sessions for babies and toddlers, a choice of choirs, music theory and instrumental tuition, a music program for schools, and opportunities for music performance. Its participants range from children from birth to age ten; young people up to 18; and adults, including a community choir, Liverpool64, which attracts more than 100 singers of varying abilities (Figure 1).



Revised January 2021

Figure 1: LC's School of Music Outreach Program Structure, provided by Stephen Mannings, Director of Music, LC, 25 Jan 2021.

### *Choral music outreach*



The inception of the Junior Choir in 2012 marked the establishment of the first outreach choir, a tangible outcome of LC's strategic dedication to expanding participation and fostering inclusiveness. Stephen Mannings explains,

and the rationale behind that was to offer a choir for children with one day-a-week commitment where there was no audition, because the process of auditioning is quite a scary process, so I take that away and give children a more gentle and more well-rounded approach to music at that age and allow them to sing in a famous building, but also to get to know different schools and, essentially, recruit for the chorister choir. (Interview, Stephen Mannings, 22 January 2021)

The Schools Singing Program, presently encompassing sixteen primary schools in the Liverpool City region, similarly exemplifies the church's commitment to egalitarian principles. This initiative encompasses engagement with music from various cultures and traditions (Campbell 2016), while nurturing educational environments that have the potential to mitigate disparities and provide an equitable platform for students from diverse backgrounds. Again, according to Stephen Mannings:

It is basically about bringing choir singing into the classroom, allowing children to sing in the Cathedral, in a fantastic space, but across a variety of genres... and the full span... classical music to rock and roll, to pop, to soul.... We have Brazilian samba singing and traditional choir singing, gospel singing and pop singing, and that's what... the model of the school program has become.... And those are reasons for increasing the Cathedral's engagement in the community.... One of the things we tried to do is to branch out to Knowsley [where] there is... a very impoverish part [which] I think is the second poorest area in the country, and schools there couldn't really afford to be involved with us. And so we were able to give a chance to schools to be involved. And that's... how we've operated since 2012. (Interview, Stephen Mannings, 22 January 2021)

Meanwhile, the establishment of the L64 adult choir offered a platform for adults with varied musical backgrounds to converge in a shared enjoyment of singing. Once again, Stephen Mannings explains:

We wanted a choir with more of a community feel to it. There is no audition; we scrapped that because it put people off. The choir is well-rounded with a nice balance and ages, so literally the L64 has got people who are 18 up to the 90s... Adults too have the chance to sing in a traditional way a wide range of music. (Interview, Stephen Mannings, 22 January 2021)

As a result of its music outreach program, LC has facilitated the inclusion of a significantly broader spectrum of individuals, encompassing various age groups and diverse musical proficiencies among participants, who may not typically partake in the church's services, choirs, or musical events. Furthermore, this inclusive approach extends to the recognition and respect for different religious affiliations and ethnic identities (see also Bradley 2006). According to another member of the music ministry, Dr Christopher Newton, Choir Guardian, and Music and Liturgy Administrator:

We don't stop it, in fact... we do have a boy Muslim who is part of the choir. I think that's great; I think is good to keep that open... Also, in the cathedral, we have a Muslim group; they worship here every Sunday at 1 o'clock in the Lady Chapel. So, we are, you know, showing an appreciation for all the cultures and religions. I think musically speaking, we do our best to not just make it one thing. (Interview, Dr Chris Newton, 31 July 2021).

LC's Director of Music, Stephen Mannings, proudly emphasizes the inclusive ethos of LC's egalitarian approach, evident in LC's religious inclusivity and the breaking down of socioeconomic barriers, while making classical music accessible to people who may traditionally not engage with it:

In this cathedral, we accept everyone, including non-Christian, so when we go out into schools, we do so with a sort of a Christian ethos, but we are going to all sort of schools, you know, religious schools, both Catholic and Anglican, and non-religious schools as well.... One of my jobs is to bring classical music to children who would normally not have access to it.... Ours is one of the few cathedral choirs where the children all come from different schools.... All have come from a variety... of demographics... and different socioeconomic backgrounds, different cultures as well, different religions.... Yeah, we have tried to take down the wall, this sort of elitist barrier to the Cathedral Choir. (Interview, Stephen Mannings, 22 January 2021)

LC's strategic commitment to broadening access and promoting inclusivity extends to challenging gender norms and historical traditions. In 1910, the Cathedral established its first chorister choir, comprising solely boys and men, reflecting the prevailing historical ideologies and norms in Europe that predominantly favored male voices, particularly within religious contexts (Wright and Finney 2010: 241). However, in September 2003, to commemorate the centenary of Scott's Cathedral in 2004, the girls' chorister choir was inaugurated, marking a departure from longstanding gendered conventions. This pioneering step underscored LC's music outreach program as an integral facet of fostering a just and inclusive society. Its benefits

extend beyond the realm of music, contributing to the creation of more equitable and culturally enriched communities.

### **Liverpool Cathedral during the pandemic**

In March 2020, the United Kingdom government implemented a nationwide lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, on March 16, 2020, LC's School of Music announced the immediate suspension of several of its initiatives, in alignment with the government's guidance to mitigate social interaction. Shortly thereafter, commencing on March 25 and spanning approximately one year, LC's music outreach endeavors, including the choirs, music theory, instrumental instruction, and the Teeny Maestros baby program, transitioned to online delivery formats. Stephen Mannings explained the key motive for switching music sessions online being

just to give hope... It was more [about] the social thing rather than a musical thing.... and to keep the spirit of what we do alive.... It was awful, I mean... the first time I remember a Zoom with a whole group of people, it was such an emotional time because we were in this frightening period when we didn't know what was going to happen next, but then we were able to communicate.... I think it gives hope and it gives people meaning. (Interview, Dr Chris Newton, 31 July 2021)

LC's Junior Choir adapted to the new circumstances by delivering their rehearsals through weekly pre-recorded podcasts. These podcasts were disseminated to parents via email on a weekly basis for download, allowing children to participate by singing along. Each podcast rehearsal maintained a structure akin to "normal" rehearsals, commencing with warm-up exercises and vocal drills before proceeding to the instruction of various music genres, encompassing both sacred and popular compositions. An email communication addressed to Junior Choir parents outlined the intent behind this approach, stating, "We hope that this rehearsal aid will be a fun educational resource for your child to look forward to and use each week. We will send a digital lyrics pack to you by email. The podcast will be designed so that, if you wish, the parent (or indeed whole household) can sing along with your child." (Stephen Mannings, email announcement, 22 March 2020). ✓+ Yes, I think the way this statement is contextualized is great – you warn us that you are going to quote someone and you give us a hint of who that is!

In June 2020, the weekly rehearsals for both the Junior and L64 Choirs transitioned to live synchronous sessions conducted via Zoom. In this format, each choir member was required to remain muted during the rehearsal and sing individually within Zoom breakout rooms situated in their respective homes, synchronizing their vocals with the choral leader's guidance and accompanying music. In addition to these regular online rehearsals for the Junior and L64 choirs, LC's School of Music organized various interactive activities on the internet, including age-appropriate quizzes tailored for choir participants. For instance, the Junior Choir children and their parents were encouraged to submit brief videos featuring their household pets, which were subsequently compiled into four videos showcasing the pets of Junior Choir children and shared with parents via email. Furthermore, LC's School of Music established a Facebook group titled "LC Music Outreach" to disseminate news, information, and instructional videos, fostering a sense of community and continuity among participants.

Yet, perhaps not surprisingly, some music participants were less enthusiastic about the online choral practices, which was particularly the case for the young people in the Gilbert Scott Junior Choir:

We quickly found that that group or that age group weren't really keen on regular Zoom as the Junior Choir are. This lasted to the Christmas term after we relaunched the choir just with twelve or thirteen-year-olds. We run a full term of weekly Zoom and it just didn't work. I mean, we had a fun time, we did some virtual recordings... but when the lockdown started, we decided, you know, what people want. We don't really think they were that enthusiastic about the Zooms, so we've agreed we will stop the Zooms then until at least the February half term. (Interview, Stephen Mannings, 22 January 2021)

With the partial relaxation of lockdown measures during the summer of 2020, the choral autumn term at LC adopted a hybrid format, combining small in-person group sessions with online audiences via a concurrent live stream. The repertoire for this term encompassed evensong music, contemporary compositions, Christmas pieces, and Christmas carols, provided in a comprehensive music pack. However, the live streaming of choral rehearsals was found to be somewhat unengaging for remote viewers. Consequently, in October 2020, the format of remote rehearsals underwent a transformation, with the introduction of a separate online-only rehearsal on a different weekday, running in parallel with small-group in-person rehearsals. Nevertheless, in December, as restrictions were tightened once again, all rehearsals reverted to online Zoom delivery, a mode of operation that persisted well into the spring term

of 2021. Stephen Mannings noted the fluctuating attendance patterns during this uncertain period:

What we found across both junior and L64 is that the enthusiasm for Zoom was right at the start, but it sort of dropped a little bit by the summer and in autumn term [2020]. But we found now, I think, maybe because there has been a bit of a [lockdown] break, or because there is a vaccine, enthusiasm increased again... I mean, for instance, at the end of the Christmas term, the average attendance of the L64 Zooms is up to 30, and then on Monday was 68... And the same with the Junior Choir... by Christmas you get about 20, and there was about 35 or something in last session. So, it increased as well. (Interview, Stephen Mannings, 22 January 2021)

Due to the pandemic-induced cancellation of selected services and public performances, the School of Music at LC took the initiative to substitute the scheduled April and June 2020 live performances with an online recording of John Rutter's composition, 'Look At The World.' This recording involved joint rehearsals by both the Junior Choir (JC) and the adult choir, Liverpool64 (L64), with the aim of creating a collaborative and joint musical performance.<sup>3</sup> To accomplish this, members of the Junior and L64 choirs were instructed in April 2020 to create audio recordings using their smartphones, wherein they sang along to the song's lyrics and/or the musical score. They followed either the pre-recorded orchestral backing track or the conducting video, both of which were provided in advance. During this process, participants wore headphones to listen to the track and recorded only their own voices. Likewise, LC's L64 choir also created an audio recording for a virtual rendition of Rob Howard's 'Alleluia' during Holy Week in April 2020.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent virtual choral performances involved the recording of individual videos of the singers in their respective home settings. This approach was employed, for instance, in the virtual rendition of the song 'Sing' written by British singer-songwriter Gary Barlow, of Take That, and British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, which was recorded instead of singing live at the annual joint concert traditionally held for eight years by the Junior Choirs of both cathedrals (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Virtual Performance of 'Sing' by children of the Junior Choirs at LC and Metropolitan Cathedral. Available at <https://youtu.be/2UcqEQjwgGA>, accessed 15 March 2022.

During the Christmas season of 2020, LC's Junior Choir collaborated with the Junior Choir from the Metropolitan Cathedral to create a festive virtual recording of 'Do You Hear What I Hear.' This joint performance was intended for what would have been LC's well-known annual Action for Children Christmas concert. Typically, this concert showcased the participation of over ten choirs, a concert band, and even a visit from Santa himself. The event was hosted by Channel 4's Jon Snow and also featured virtual performances from LC's Schools Singing Program schools, as well as its customary Action for Children school choirs.

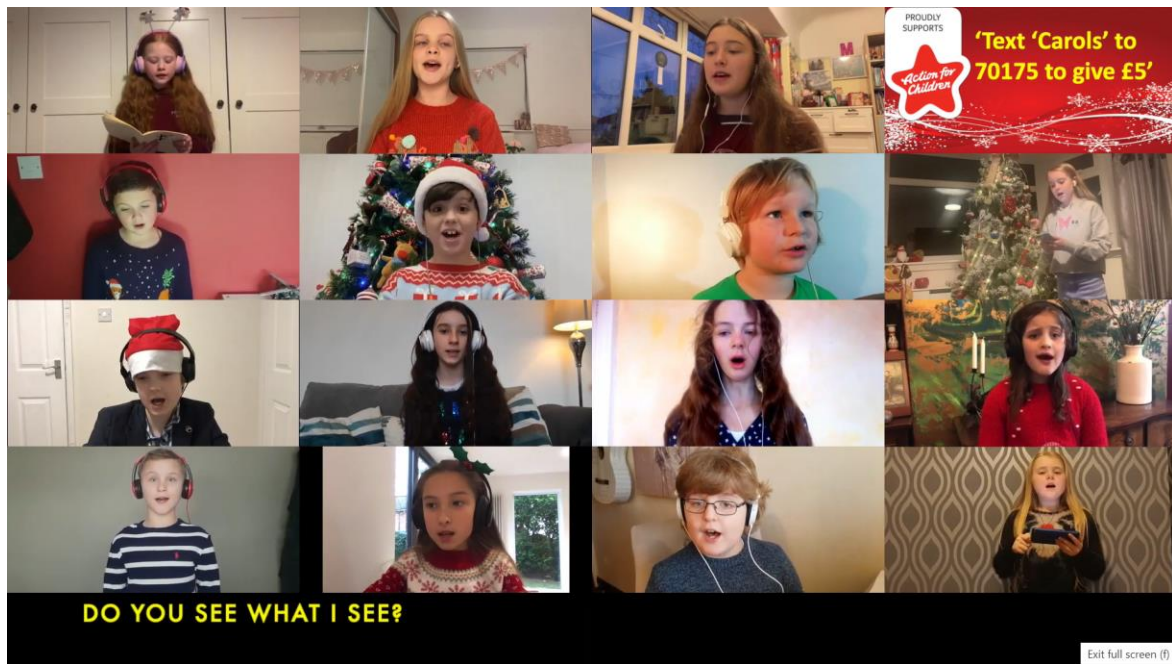


Figure 3: Screenshot of both Cathedrals' Junior Choirs performing a virtual recording of 'Do You See What I See'. With the support of Annamarie Newton (Metropolitan Cathedral), and Gabriel Thomas Newton and Chris J Newton (LC; videography). Available at <https://youtu.be/BjLiqmdG5Dg>, accessed 15 March 2022.

To mark the Christmas season in a “stay-at-home” fashion, the Gilbert Scott Youth Choir presented a virtual rendition of ‘Calypso Lullaby,’ while L64 premiered a virtual performance of ‘Walking in the Air’ (Figure 4). These performances showcased the singers in their individual home environments. In doing so, LC's virtual presentations introduced innovative and intricate means for participants to interact with one another, leveraging the spatial convergence made possible through video streaming technologies and digital interfaces (Rendell 2020).



Figure 4: Virtual performance of LC's L64 adult choir singing 'Walking in the Air'. Available at <https://youtu.be/1YpuFr1BbY4>, accessed 15 March 2022.

In addition to its virtual choral performances, LC's School of Music also conducted its annual LC Festival of Music online through a live stream on YouTube (Figure 5). The Festival of Music 2021 was divided into two segments, with the FoM Grades 1-4 Category premiering on March 18, 2021, and the Grades 5-8 Category making its online debut on March 25, 2021. The 2021 edition was a non-competitive music performance festival designed for participants aged 6-18, accommodating any instrument, including vocal performances. These presentations were pre-recorded and made accessible online.



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Any instrument (including voice) and  
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To enter please contact  
[christopher.newton@liverpoolcathedral.org.uk](mailto:christopher.newton@liverpoolcathedral.org.uk)

Figure 5: Announcement of LC's first ever Virtual Festival of Music 2021. FoM Grades 1-4 Category was premiered via social media on 18 March 2021 (see <https://youtu.be/v0KUTqPSKO8>), and the Grades 5-8 Category premiered online on 25 March 2021 (see <https://youtu.be/F1E2DF6puxo>), accessed 25 March 2022

### **Online singing in virtual choirs for health and wellbeing**

The Covid-19 pandemic forced people around the world to adapt to new ways of living and connecting and introduced unprecedented challenges to people's physical and mental health,

as social isolation and lockdown measures became the new norm. One significant adaptation was the shift towards online singing in virtual choirs as a means of maintaining social connections, promoting mental health, and enhancing overall wellbeing during a period of physical isolation. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, research conducted on the wellbeing benefits of group singing overwhelmingly occurred in an offline setting (Cliff *et al.* 2010; Cohen *et al.* 2006; Kirsh *et al.* 2013; Linneman *et al.* 2017; Moss *et al.* 2018; Theorell 2018; Robens *et al.* 2022). One strand of research showed that the act of singing has numerous physical benefits and engenders soothing bodily effects: breathing and heart rate variability synchronize, and high levels of oxytocin dampens feelings of anxiety (Theorell 2018). Singing requires controlled breathing and breath support, which can improve respiratory health and lung capacity. Choir participation often involves paying attention to posture, body alignment, and vocal technique additional aspects that can contribute to enhanced body awareness and physical self-care (Welch *et al.* 2014). This was particularly relevant during a respiratory pandemic like Covid-19, where maintaining healthy lung function was crucial.

In response to the challenges around opportunities for social interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic, online singing and virtual choirs arose as a low-cost, accessible, and creative avenue for self-expression and community engagement (Chiu 2020; Daffern *et al.* 2021; Foulkes 2021; Morgan-Ellis 2021; Dowson *et al.* 2023; Schäfer 2023; Tamplin and Thompson 2023), to the point that even medical professionals socially prescribed the likes of “singing in a choir” to people experiencing the psychological effects of social isolation during the pandemic (Razai 2020; Foulkes 2021). When conducted online through video conferencing software, singing can perform a highly beneficial function, but with variable success. In a cross-sectional survey of 3,948 choir members and facilitators across the UK, Daffern *et al.* (2021) investigated a range of online singing modalities to shed light on the limitations and opportunities of virtual choir solutions. Their findings varied from perceiving the virtual choir as a “lifeline” to highlighting a chasm of lost social connection, in any case, they encountered unanimous frustration at not being able to sing together in person (see also Morgan-Ellis 2021; Dowson *et al.* 2023). Meanwhile, not all individuals had access to the necessary technology or a stable internet connection to participate in virtual choirs. Technical limitations also led to sound quality issues (e.g., choppy audio, and inconsistent audio quality) and latency problems (i.e., audio lag, whereby singers hear each other with a delay) during virtual choir rehearsals, impacting the overall musical experience (Galván and Clauhs 2022; Morgan-Ellis 2022). This digital divide limited music participation and created inequalities (Tsugawa 2023). Online

singing may also lack the non-verbal cues and interpersonal dynamics present in face-to-face choir rehearsals, potentially affecting the depth of social connections usually formed in offline music interactions.

In spite of technological barriers, which can dampen involvement (Dowson and Schneider 2021), it has been found that the digital dimension of online singing overwhelmingly widens participation for those with additional needs (Tamplin and Thompson 2023), whether that be people with anxiety and/or depression (Carlson *et al.* 2021; Foulkes 2021), dementia (Lee *et al.* 2021; Dowson *et al.* 2023), or stroke survivors (Seckam and Hallingberg 2021). Being able to access a group setting from home reduces travel times, transcends geographical barriers and provides opportunities for digital literacy growth and immediate visual feedback when using video conferencing software such as Zoom. Despite technological literacy and lack of interest in online activities being the biggest barriers to virtual choir participation (Dowson *et al.* 2023) engaging with digital software thus widened access for people with disabilities and facilitated greater connection to family members and society (Foulkes 2021; Tamplin and Thompson 2023). Therefore, it seems the negatives or shortcomings of online singing are seemingly overridden by the benefits, specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic, given that social isolation has come at high cost to social and emotional wellbeing and mental health due to heightened rates of anxiety and depression (Carlson *et al.* 2021).

More generally, in a time of physical isolation and social prescribing (Razai 2020), choirs (trans-)formed into online singing groups that offered rare opportunities for interaction. The Sacred Harp community, for example, a well-established, highly ritualized singing group, was reshaped by online singing through its innovative use of Zoom (“zinging”), Jamulus (“jamzinging”), and Facebook Live (“stringing”), enabling participants to perform rituals, celebrate memories, and grow (Morgan-Ellis 2021). As a participant-observer, Morgan-Ellis uncovered a range of innovative modalities enabling singers’ many ways to sing together. This allowed participants to meaningfully self-direct their engagement and maintain a sense of social identity through virtual community. Similarly, Daffern *et al.* (2021) investigate the experience of virtual choir solutions, and note how online singing was incapable of recreating complex sonic nuance and flow states, even though online choirs were perceived by participants as “a lifeline” (Keeler *et al.* 2015). These findings highlight the integral social function of virtual choir membership, facilitating connections and providing a sense of purpose (Daffern *et al.* 2021). COVID-19 lockdown conditions left people feeling disconnected to

time's passing, thus participating in a virtual choir offered a tool for shaping routine and giving meaning to each week (Chiu 2020; Daffern *et al.* 2021; Morgan-Ellis 2021; Thompson and O'Brien 2022; Leiper 2023; Tamplin and Thompson 2023). These findings all contribute toward a deeper understanding of participants' sense of spiritual and mental health and wellbeing as virtual choirs promote unity and solidarity (Chiu 2020) and mitigate feelings of loneliness (Clift *et al.* 2010).

### **Liverpool Cathedral's online music outreach for mental health and spiritual wellbeing**

The unique intersection of music, technology, and spirituality, albeit rarely the focus of academic attention (Fernandez-Borsot 2023), highlights how online singing in virtual choirs can provide a platform for enhancing religious experiences and a sense of spirituality (Campbell 2005, 2012; Campbell and Evolvi 2020; Lynch 2006; O'Leary 1996; Thaut 2008). During the pandemic, LC's online music outreach program played a similarly vital role for enhancing not only mental health, but also a sense of spiritual wellbeing, meaning, and inner peace through social connectedness to a group of like-minded individuals, transcendence and meaning and emotional resilience and healing. The act of creating harmonious music together, even virtually, evoked feelings and memories of awe, wonder, and a connection to something beyond the mundane, a contributing to a greater good by sharing music and joy with others. Many participants felt that they were part of something greater than themselves, a larger shared purpose, fostering a sense of unity and spiritual bond. Engaging in collective singing, even virtually, induced moments of transcendence and spiritual significance, and provided a sense of meaning and purpose that align with the spiritual dimension of wellbeing (Daykin *et al.* 2018). Singing in an online choir also allowed participants to express their emotions, including grief, hope, and joy, which contributed to emotional healing and overall spiritual wellbeing (Clift and Hancox 2010). For many participants, virtual choir participation served as a coping mechanism during times of stress and uncertainty, helping individuals find solace and strength in their spiritual beliefs and practices for comfort and resilience. Sharing these emotions with others who share their passion for music in a supportive virtual environment contributed to emotional resilience and healing and fostered a sense of belonging and community (Daykin *et al.* 2018). Virtual choir rehearsals and performances offer participants a unique way to maintain social connections and combat the loneliness associated with physical distancing. Virtual choirs also bring together participants of diverse ages and backgrounds, promoting

intergenerational interactions and the exchange of knowledge and experiences, further contributing to a sense of unity and mutual support among participants.

### *Social Connectedness*

At LC, the social benefits of online music participation were important to both adults and children. One L64 choir member reflected, “I really appreciated that Stephen and Chris, in particular, put so much effort in the Zoom rehearsals.... Initially, we had some kind of quizzes and some random games.... I think it was really important... that Stephen and Chris maintained that routine, as every other hobby and opportunity got cancelled. Everything else stopped, and it was really good that L64 continued (Interview, Milja, 30 July 2021).” Similarly, a parent agreed that “It was particularly good for my child to have contact with other children during lockdown.”

It was wonderful during the time of lockdown to have at least that connection with others. If not [being] able to see them in person, I felt it was a good way to keep it going, yeah, keep the connection going and to learn the music, definitely. (Interview, Janet, 30 July 2021)

As well as providing focus and learning the new music pieces participating in the choir practice gave a sense of normality and feeling of continuity that we were all hoping to get back together again soon. (Questionnaire response, 11 May 2021)

During the peak of the pandemic, when social restrictions were in place, a significant portion of the participants experienced a sense of reduced control, heightened anxiety, and increased loneliness due to the government’s enforced social isolation measures. Consequently, one hugely important reason for online music participation during the Covid-19 pandemic was “keeping in touch”, “social contact”, which to many participants also meant that “they were fun”, “a highlight of the week” and “a highlight to see people, talk & sing - a bit of normality”. To children, too, “the weekly Junior Choir was the highlight of our week during lockdown”. One participant simply said that “you will not hear other voices, but you can see them and see and hear the other choir members.” Brenda, a L64 choir member, agreed that:

It is nice to see people and it was nice to know what their names were because they appeared on the screen.... I was shielding. I was one of these clinically extra vulnerable people. So, the only person that I saw was the girl who did my shopping for me, and she used to bring my shopping every week, and that was the only person I saw. So, well, it is good to see other people

because we have time to have a little chat beforehand and afterwards, so... it is nice.... It gave you structure of the week; it is Monday when we rehearsed, well, and we had other days sometimes as well; we had Wednesday or Thursdays, it did move around a bit, so... it was something to look forward to. (Interview, Brenda, 30 July 2021)

As previously emphasized, the primary rationale for transitioning to online music activities was driven by social considerations. This shift to virtual platforms presented valuable opportunities, including the organization of online quiz evenings, which, notably, facilitated additional social interactions at a time when most individuals were grappling with the effects of social isolation. Anna, a widowed L64 choir member, who joined the choir prior to the pandemic, explained:

We had choir practices... sometimes split with different people for the parts, and at the end every week we had a quiz, so it turned to be a really nice social event, It was great, I enjoyed it. Every week... you got to know the choir members a bit more, you got to know their interest.... I mean and it was a social event too, it was something to look forward to. It was just nice. It was really, really helpful.... Definitely, it was something to look forward to; it was a focus; it was something to give your mind to; it was social interaction. It filled a big need. (Interview, Anna, 30 July 2021)

The consistent online activities served as a vital source of structure, diversion, and pleasure during exceedingly trying periods for both adults and children. Additionally, they contributed to a feeling of normalcy and established routines, which were particularly important given the challenging circumstances: “During the first lockdown the course was a way to keep focused and something else to do, and also a way of keeping in contact with others.” This meant that many participants “enjoyed the activities and social aspect”, including parents of child participants, who valued the continued routine, social contact and socialization:

It was better than having no rehearsals at all. Being stuck at home all the time during the various lockdowns meant that the online activities kept him/us connected to the outside world. We were literally house-bound for many months, and this broke up the week, gave something to look forward to, and the music was very enjoyable. Mr Mannings always ensured to have chat time too with news by the children. He was just super lovely with the kids and we really valued this continuation of normality. (Questionnaire response, 8 May 2021)

Even babies and toddlers appeared to derive advantages from their consistent interactions with their choral leader, with one parent explaining that “my toddler especially enjoyed the connection to a familiar face through the course leader”. For parents of newborn babies, these

sessions served as an immensely valuable respite from the difficulties posed by the pandemic and the unique challenges associated with first-time parenting:

As a new mum, it was really difficult being stuck at home with nobody else to compare baby related things with! These classes meant we saw somebody, and had some fun, and were able to chat to other mums of similar aged babies. (Questionnaire response, 12 Jul 2021)

It is therefore not surprising that the majority of questionnaire participants enjoyed the activity (77%) and appreciated the choral leader and/or teacher (77%), while it maintained some normality (71%), they felt connected to other people (64%), it felt good (69%), they had fun (52%) and appreciated seeing their friends (41%) as a result of their online music participation.

### *Emotional Resilience and Healing*

Participation in LC's online music outreach had numerous mental health benefits, including the reduction of stress and anxiety, and mood enhancement. Singing triggers the release of endorphins and oxytocin, which contribute to feelings of relaxation and happiness (Clift *et al.* 2010). As highlighted thus far, the ability to sing online in virtual choirs provided a valuable stress-relief outlet for individuals facing heightened stress and uncertainty during the pandemic, alongside improved mood and emotional wellbeing (Williamson *et al.* 2021). Singing allowed individuals to express themselves creatively and emotionally, providing an avenue for catharsis and emotional release. For example, Schäfer (2023) investigated the positive effects of online group singing on psycho-social variables such as life satisfaction and self-efficacy. The most salient singing-specific finding captures the extent to which singing can supplement a stable personality and one's ability to realize their goals (Schäfer 2023), a vital reserve to replenish during uncertain times. Particularly when conducted in a group setting, singing is found to be capable of banishing negativity and creating or maintaining positive affect (Linneman *et al.* 2017; Chiu 2020; Dowson and Schneider 2021; Robens *et al.* 2022; Thompson and O'Brien 2022). For people with dementia, online singing during the pandemic was often tiring but reportedly created lasting improvements in mood and longevity that shaped individuals' everyday wellbeing (Dowson *et al.* 2023). More broadly, participants musical development and milestones translated into feelings of self-fulfillment and overall improved self-worth (Clift *et al.* 2016). This heightened sense of self-esteem furthers psychological resilience and participants ability to cope with adversity (Schäfer 2023; Chiu 2020),

fundamental to enduring the COVID-19 pandemic. Such emotional impacts are acutely related to the social connections and physical processes that support the act of online singing.

At LC, most participants suggested that they “felt happy after zooms” and “feeling part of something that was still going on whilst everything else was on pause helped wellbeing.” One L64 adult choir member said that she “really enjoyed online lessons in lockdown; it was a good distraction, enhanced mood, positive activity (Questionnaire response, 11 May 2021)”. The online choir “gave me something to look forward to, to have a few hours of singing and to briefly catch up with friends”. Most significant to people experiencing social isolation was that participating in LC’s online music activities made them feel good (87%), particularly “singing [which] is always a good vent for anxiety”, since “singing has a positive impact - makes you feel good” and “singing is good for my mental health, and I always feel good after”. One L64 participant explained the importance of singing as follows:

Even the simulation of singing together brings some of the considerable benefits associated with choir membership. My knowledge of the music improved & my confidence, which would have been hard to maintain without any online practice. There is still a boost to motivation & mood & it was often easier to attend online so my participation was greater than it otherwise could have been. (Questionnaire response, 7 June 2021)

This positive perception could also be explained by the fact that the regular online music sessions gave some structure to the week (83%), with participants saying that “having the class to look forward to gave some much needed structure to our weeks”, and also enhanced many participants’ perceptions of social connectedness (70%), notably for those participants who were shielding during the lockdowns. Several L64 choir members reflected on their shielding experiences as follows:

Due to having to shield for health reasons it helped with all the above, as it was a release from being indoors. (Questionnaire response, 11 May 2021)

Felt like life was being lived in a cage [and] the lockdown... made it worse. [The online activity] helped with the frustration, boredom and loneliness. (Questionnaire response, 11 May 2021)

L64 played major part in staying sensible and in good spirits through 1st & 2nd lockdowns specifically. (Questionnaire response, 7 July 2021)



As I live alone and was also sheltering during the pandemic the choir zoom on Monday night's gave focus to my week and also enabled me to keep in touch with my friends and choir members. It also gave the opportunity to get to know more members of the choir especially when we had a chat before practice started. (Questionnaire response, 11 May 2021)

Many participants were thus looking forward to the online musical activity (70%) and regarded it as the “highlight of the week”. To children, the benefits of continued music participation were similarly important, with parents commenting that “This activity is positive for my daughter”. For instance, one parent explained that “she [daughter] enjoyed the lessons [which] gave her routine and she was happier after the lessons.” Another parent agreed that:

The sessions with the choir and also the theory courses definitely helped my son, it gave some structure to the week rather than the days blending into one, they gave him ways to interact with others and all the while, getting the buzz from learning something new. (Questionnaire response, 11 May 2021)

More than half of participants felt that their online music participation helped them to get through the lockdown (54%): “I DID feel good. I did feel connected etc.” Many also agreed that LC’s activities provided important distraction from the pandemic (44%), saying that “It definitely gave me a chance to forget about other worries of the week”. And, as indicated throughout, to many respondents, their online music participation helped to relieve stress and anxiety (35%), which meant that “I always feel on a high after rehearsing and performing” and that the online music activities were “something positive to relieve the isolation & boredom”. One participant even exclaimed, “I thrived in lockdown!”

Undoubtedly, numerous individuals endured significant hardship during these unparalleled times characterized by enforced social isolation. Therefore, their engagement in online music activities not only provided them with a source of relief, joy, and hope but also conferred important social benefits that helped mitigate the challenges they faced. One participant explained that “being at home was not a good experience. To have a social contact and a very good learning together session helped enormously”. Another participant agreed that “it feels as though our group is still together despite the separation”. There were clear consensus regards the benefit of having “some normality”, “some form or routine” and “stay in touch”. Those participants who were shielding emphasized even more the critical importance of maintaining social contact: “Having to isolate through health reasons; it really helped maintain some normality socially and was fun.” While engagement with the creative arts can have a positive

impact on people's wellbeing (Levstek et al. 2021), the positive impacts of LC's switch to online music participation cannot be overstated.

### **Conclusions**

With the onset of the global pandemic brought about by the spread of Covid-19, initially declared by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, a unique situation emerged due to the combination of social isolation and the widespread availability of the internet and other technological resources. In response, LC adapted by shifting its services and cultural and musical programs to digital and online platforms, reflecting its ongoing efforts to extend its reach to broader audiences. For instance, the virtual message "from one Cathedral to the Other" addressed to Liverpool Football Club by LC's Dean Sue Jones on the musical theme of "You'll Never Walk Alone," the football club supporters' anthem, was significant as it represented how the church is opening in acceptance, encapsulating football and church culture, two important identities in Liverpool (see also Coles 1975).<sup>5</sup> Through such initiatives, LC represents an egalitarian vision of overcoming classism and acceptance of new concepts, ideas, and meanings, while also bringing in younger audiences through new, innovative communication, and technologies.

The research outlined in this article underscores the significance of egalitarian online music participation in periods of spatial distancing. It illuminates the advantages of Liverpool Cathedral's inclusive online music outreach program, emphasizing its role in fostering social connectedness and a sense of belonging, mitigating negative emotions, addressing participants' sense of purpose, and acting as a determinant of health and wellbeing. Although virtual choirs may not provide the same level of social support and feedback as in-person choirs, given that participants are muted during rehearsals, they still hold substantial value in cultivating a sense of social belonging and enhancing wellbeing during remote singing activities. While individual experiences in the online realm may vary, with some individuals potentially not finding the same degree of fulfillment in virtual choirs, and challenges such as technical issues or limitations in online interactions potentially affecting overall satisfaction, for many participants, engaging in online singing through virtual choirs offered a meaningful and spiritually enriching means of navigating the difficulties posed by the pandemic and forging profound connections with others. Consequently, Liverpool Cathedral's inclusive online music outreach program played a vital role in assisting participants in managing their emotions,

enhancing their moods, experiencing pleasure, finding a sense of purpose, and alleviating stress and anxiety.

Overall, the research presented in this study delved into the real-life experiences of participants engaged in online music activities at Liverpool Cathedral's School of Music during the UK's national lockdowns when traditional in-person group music sessions were not feasible. Although there are inherent methodological limitations associated with this research, such as the relatively small number of adult participants and interviewees, the study furnishes concrete evidence, based on both quantitative and qualitative empirical data, of the positive impact that online music engagement had on participants' experiences and their strategies for coping with social distancing measures. Liverpool Cathedral provided a holistic musical participation experience that encompassed social, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions, serving as a means for individuals to connect with themselves and with others. Equally significant, the School of Music at Liverpool Cathedral played a pivotal role in extending essential social support and contact to individuals of all ages who shared a common interest in music. This support enhanced their sense of belonging to a larger community and assisted them in navigating the uncertainties and anxieties arising from the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is therefore of significant concern that the recent return to in-person music participation may enhance people's abilities to cope with and recover from this pandemic, and be conducive to long-term consequences for education, belonging, and wellbeing (Spanner 2022). Indeed, many participants of LC's online music activities who "kept going" during the pandemic "came back to our first rehearsal to the cathedral because of what Zoom had done.... They came back with full energy and confident. There was nobody lacking confidence. And I think that is because what we did with Zoom (Interview, Chris Newton, 31 July 2021)." This sense of positivity and confidence among many of LC's music participants shows in powerful ways the benefits of online music participation in the transition to post-Covid-19 society. Future research should continue to explore the nuanced effects of online singing on diverse populations and delve into the long-term impact of virtual choir participation on mental health and spiritual wellbeing. As we move beyond the pandemic, virtual choirs may continue to be an integral part of fostering human connection and promoting individual wellbeing through the joy of music.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For further insights into the research fields in which the research is located, the research questions arising from within this context, and the research methods for data collection and analysis, see Krüger Bridge 2022, 2023. The full questionnaire, including questions and results, are publicly available under the following link: <https://trackimpact.org/project/eu-west-1/9745/evidence>. The discussions make frequent reference to the voices of participants, which are quoted throughout the text, including quotations from questionnaire responses, email comments, and interview responses. The questionnaire responses, which are anonymous, were collected between April – July 2021 and are not explicitly referenced in the article. For longer quotes from questionnaire, interviews and email comments, references are provided in detail, with the consenting participants named.

<sup>2</sup> Liverpool Cathedral's Values. Source: Strategic Plan 2014-2024. Available at [https://issuu.com/liverpoolcathedral/docs/strategic\\_plan\\_nov\\_2013\\_spreads\\_web](https://issuu.com/liverpoolcathedral/docs/strategic_plan_nov_2013_spreads_web), accessed 23 June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Virtual performance of 'Look at the World' sung by LC's Junior and L64 choirs directed by Stephen Mannings. Video by Chris J Newton. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/stephen.mannings/videos/10163667016855531/>, accessed 15 March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Virtual performance of 'Alleluia' sung by LC's Liverpool64 Choir for Easter 2020 and directed by Stephen Mannings. Video by Chris J Newton. Available at <https://youtu.be/EyoIPiKDeww>, accessed 15 March 2022.

<sup>5</sup> The recorded message "You'll Never Walk Alone" from LC to Liverpool Football Club is available at <https://youtu.be/OpgzEfKtqgU>, accessed 15 March 2022.