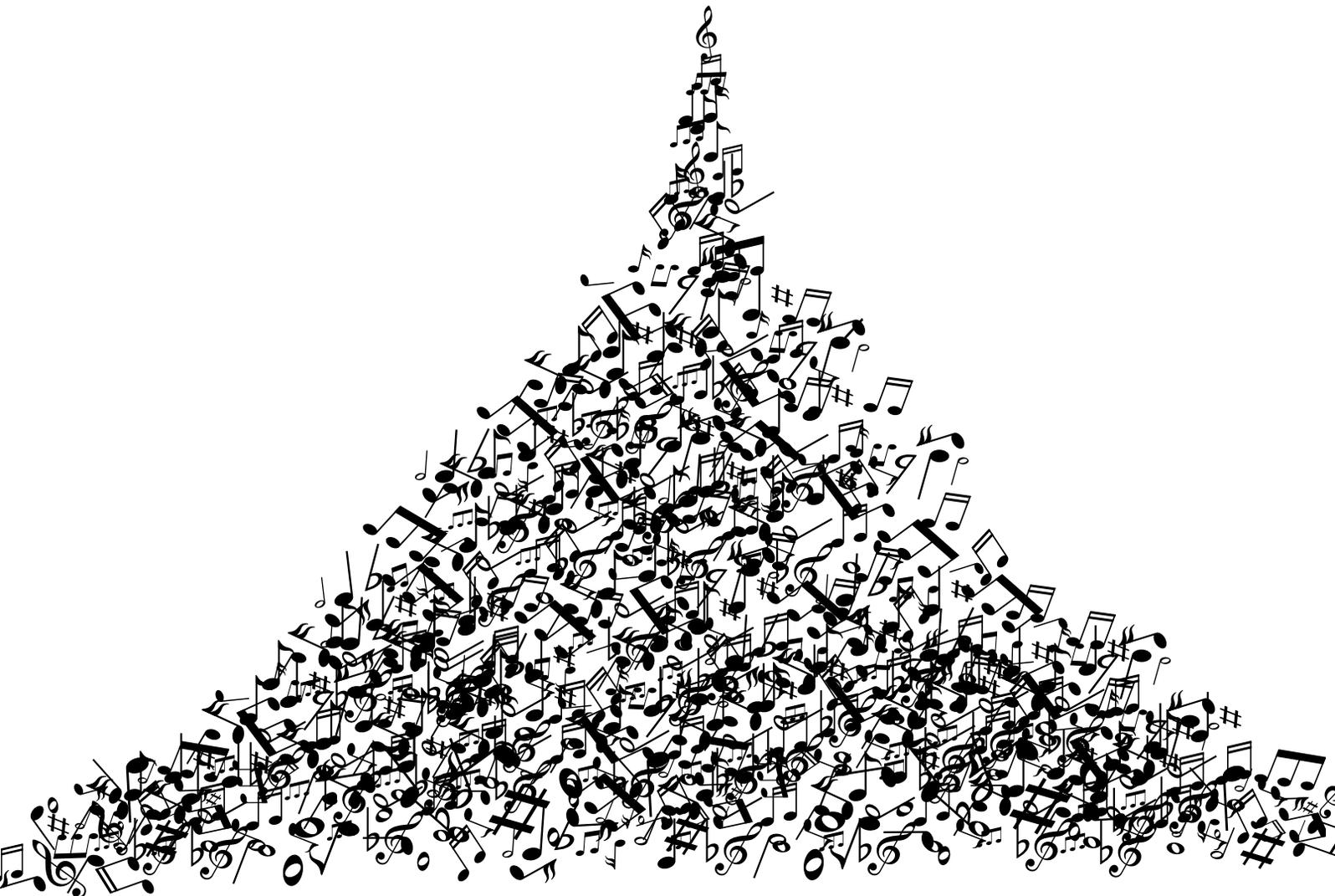
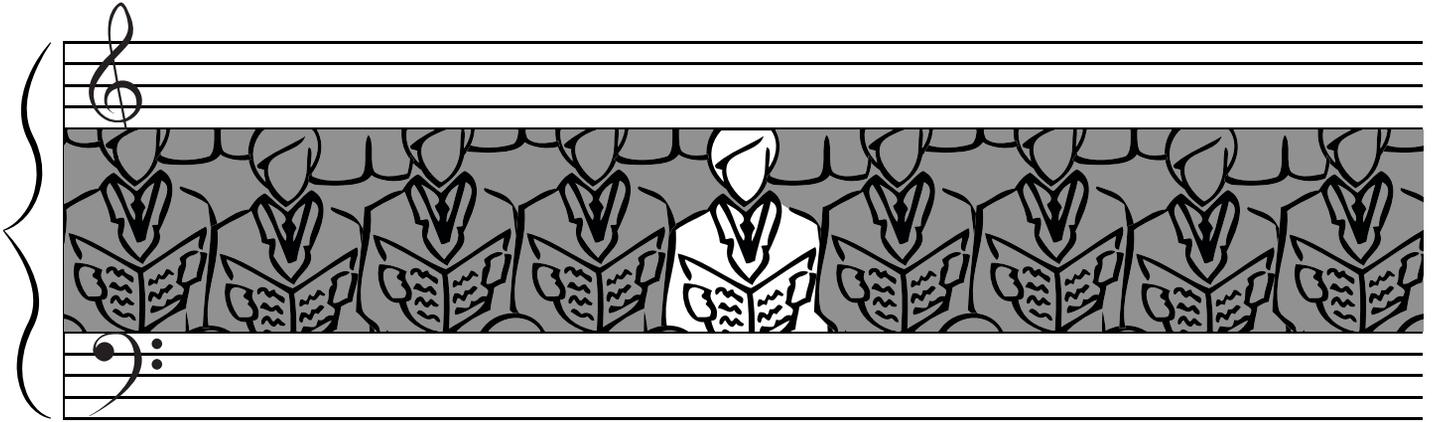


the sound of



This month, when they would typically be performing a holiday concert, members of the Sacramento Choral Society & Orchestra stay home and grapple with what the pandemic has stolen from them—and their audience.

silence

BY CATHERINE WARMERDAM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN FISCUS

On March 13, 2020, the Sacramento Choral Society & Orchestra was one week away from its performance of Giuseppe Verdi's Requiem when the pandemic shuttered theaters, darkened stages and quieted music halls around the world. The production, which was to have been dedicated to the late restaurateur Biba Caggiano, was abruptly canceled, leaving performers and audiences alike in a state of stunned silence.

"This promised to be an unforgettable performance," laments Donald Kendrick, SCSO's music director. "We had more than 200 singers who were in impeccable condition. We had an unbelievable orchestra standing by. We had four soloists from the Metropolitan Opera in New York arriving in Sacramento that next week."

What the members of SCSO could not have known at the time was that just three days before the California shutdown was ordered, a choir in Washington State held a rehearsal at which more than 50 people were infected with COVID-19. Two singers later died. Because COVID-19 is airborne, singing—it was later discovered—is a major risk from a transmission standpoint.

For Kendrick and the choir members, the pandemic has robbed them of a fundamentally human expression.

"Singing in a choir is an experience unlike anything else in the world. It's not like playing in an orchestra or playing in a band; it's a completely unique situation. We are bonded together, not only by great music, but also the friendships that blossom," explains Kendrick. "It's very difficult sometimes to explain it to nonchoral people, but there is a deep spiritual connection as well as a musical connection. We make art out of thin air. With the very first breath that we take come beautiful things."

Perhaps it's fitting that Verdi's Requiem—a dramatic piece with themes of mortality and profound grief—was the last thing the choir had rehearsed together before the pandemic brought the world to a standstill. But Kendrick, ever an optimist, vows that the choir will come back, and that the voices will be stronger than ever. "We have resilience, we have resolve, and we will return," he says. The choir hopes to perform the Verdi piece in the spring at its SAFE Credit Union Performing Arts Center debut.

We asked four members of the Sacramento Choral Society & Orchestra what it has meant to lose the ability to sing together during the pandemic. Here are their stories.





All dressed up and nowhere to perform: Emily Ford engages in one of her favorite household chores.

Emily Ford

Second Soprano

Music has long been at the center of Emily Ford's life. "I have performed in some type of musical group since I was in grade school," says the pediatrician, who joined SCSO shortly after completing her medical training. "I graduated residency, and it was one of the first things I did. I got a job first, and then I looked for a choir."

Ford, like many of her choir mates, finds singing with others to be a profoundly moving experience. "There is some sort of unspoken magic when we're all together and we're making the music in the way that we intended to and we connect with the audience—that whole thing is spiritual."

For that reason, the shutdown remains a painful memory. "I remember the exact moment I read that memo from Don that said we're rescheduling the March concert. I was in New York City, trying to figure out how my husband and I were going to get home from a medical conference the week of the shutdown," she recalls. "We weren't sure how frightened to be of COVID. We were figuring out if we had to drive across the country to get back home to our kids. And then I got this email and it was literally the last straw. And then all the schools shut down. Everything just came to a screeching halt."

The absence of the choir left a hole in Ford's life. "I think people who have never been in a choir before would say, 'You can sing at home or sing with your children.' But it's different when you come together, you rehearse for so many days and nights. And for many of us, this choir is the culmination of decades of singing and practicing in other groups and growing up with music," Ford explains.

She tried singing with a virtual choir, but the experience left her wanting more. "It was fine, but it just wasn't the same," Ford says. "It kept me exercising my vocal cords. But it didn't fulfill me in the same way. To be surrounded by your fellow choir mates and to feel their presence around you and feel their sound and their voices reverberate—that togetherness, that magic, it has to be in person. There's nothing that can replace that."



Patti Bell

Alto

Nebraska native Patti Bell grew up in a musical family. “My dad was a clarinetist; my mom was a cellist. I was an oboist and always sang in high school and college,” she says. So it was only natural that she would be part of a choir as an adult.

Bell still remembers the goose bumps she felt hearing the warmups at her first SCSO rehearsal. “It was like, oh my gosh, this is amazing, listen to this group. It’s not even so much the individual singing, which of course is fulfilling in itself, but being in a group that has this powerful sound. I thought, look what I get to be a part of.”

With rehearsals canceled just days before their big performance, Bell couldn’t help but feel a sense of regret for what was left undone. “I thought at least we’ll be able to get together that Monday night and have some closure, and Don can say some good words. No, it was just over. There was no closure. We were left hanging,” says Bell. “I don’t know, maybe you have to be part of the choir

to understand that that Verdi was just left hanging out there. Everything was just left hanging. And nobody understood how long this was going to last.”

Nevertheless, Bell felt confident about the decision to halt rehearsals and cancel the March performance. “If Don and Jim [McCormick, SCSO’s president and CEO] had made the decision to continue with the rehearsal, it would be because they got very good information from smart, trusted people,” she says. “So when they said no, we aren’t coming back, we have to go home, I trusted that it was the right thing to do.”

In the meantime, Bell sorely misses the routines she’d created around rehearsing, and she looks forward to finally performing the Verdi piece for audiences. “I’m trying to just be prepared for all the various scenarios,” she says. “I’m afraid to let myself get too excited about it, but I can’t wait until we can all get back together safely.”

“It’s not even so much the individual singing, but being in a group that has this powerful sound.”



Patti Bell dress-rehearses with her horse, Koda, in the barn behind her Orangevale home.



Bob Aldrich tackles his kitchen instead of live-performing this season.

Bob Aldrich

Bass

It was Bob Aldrich's wife of 36 years who urged him to pursue singing in a choir. "She always told me that I had such a beautiful singing voice because I often sang with friends when we got together," says Aldrich. "After she passed away, I thought, well, it's a good time for me to go out and meet new people and also to enjoy singing."

Aldrich, who possesses the deep, soothing voice of a late-night radio host, has sung for more than six decades—at church, in high school musicals, in bands, wherever he could. But his experience at SCSO was different.

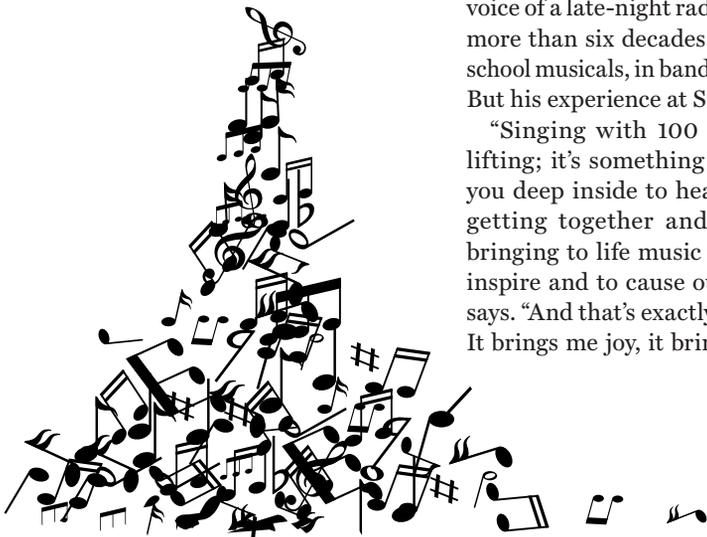
"Singing with 100 people is just soul lifting; it's something that really touches you deep inside to hear that many voices getting together and harmonizing and bringing to life music that was written to inspire and to cause our souls to soar," he says. "And that's exactly what it does to me: It brings me joy, it brings me a lot of good

camaraderie, and it's been so missed over these many months."

The cancellation of the Verdi concert left him "dumbstruck," he says. "I was sorely disappointed because we had been rehearsing for weeks and weeks to get ready for that concert. We were so, so ready to be out there to perform for people."

Instead, Aldrich has had to settle for singing with friends over the internet. "I have been able to make that connection with them and play music together with them from home, but it's not like getting together in person, in a large, large group, and sharing voices together."

Like everyone else, Aldrich craves a return to normalcy. "Certainly, taking the step of getting the choral society back together is just one more step down that path," he says. "Even if I feel a sense of trepidation right now, I'm hopeful we will be together again."



Mark Slaughter

First Tenor

Mark Slaughter first became acquainted with SCSO through his husband's colleague. "She would always try to get me to join, and I would think, I don't have time; I'm too busy," says Slaughter, a supervising attorney with the Sacramento County Public Defender's Office. "Eventually I said, you know what? I'm missing music so much. So I went, and from day one it was fabulous."

A singer his entire life (he toured the Soviet Union with his college choir), Slaughter had mixed feelings when rehearsals were halted. "I was relieved that the leadership of SCSO was mindful enough to take into consideration the health of our members, the community, the public and our families," he says. "However, I was very disappointed that we weren't going to do the Verdi. That was something I looked forward to and was very much excited about. I know it was a very tough decision, but I was relieved that that call was made."

Even so, it didn't take the sting out of the loss Slaughter felt. "The choral rehearsals and performances have not only the beauty of creating music, which is an incredible feeling, but there is also the friendships and the fellowship," he explains. "I've been on some of the European tours with SCSO, and you get to know folks at a different level when you tour another country with them."

He also misses the personal satisfaction of tackling a difficult piece of music. "It was so cathartic at the end of the day on Mondays, after a very tough and exhausting day at work, to still have a little bit more left to give for an evening rehearsal and come out even more invigorated. I miss that. I would come home from rehearsals and I couldn't settle down and go right to bed because I was still energized. I would want to tell my husband, 'Oh, there was this one particular part that had all of these difficult notes, but we managed to get it and it was so wonderful.'"

Slaughter sometimes thinks of the choir in Washington that lost members to COVID early in the pandemic. "It wasn't done with any malice or bad heart or any recklessness. It was done with genuine love for music, and the consequences were devastating," he says. "If you have an empathetic thought about that and put yourself in the shoes of those choir members, you can see how it's just devastating." ❧

"I would come home from rehearsal and I couldn't settle down because I was still energized."



Missing his choral rehearsals and performances this year, Mark Slaughter plays the ukulele and sings in his dining room.