



IMAGE: Video still from August 24, 2021 Omaha Symphonic Chorus masked rehearsal.
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UNMC Gets COVID-19 Research Help from Omaha's Largest and Longest-Standing Vocal Chorus

Omaha Symphonic Chorus Helps University of Nebraska Medical Center with Cutting-Edge Study of Aerosol Particle Spread in Music Performance and Education Setting

Working to Understand the Risk of Singing

OMAHA - University of Nebraska Medical Center's internationally acclaimed virologists are getting an assist from the Omaha Symphonic Chorus.

In July, Omaha Symphonic Chorus members, Robert Hutcherson, Tom Wheeler, Rose Glock, and Kalli Johnson met with members of the Omaha Symphony and the UNMC Pathology and Microbiology Department to sing while wearing three different face masks at three different times, while a team of scientists studied the

air in the room to detect whether a hypothetical aerosol-transmitted virus, such as COVID-19, could linger for a duration and quantity that would suggest contagion. Data was collected as part of a larger study and is currently being analyzed for the benefit of instructing policy of choral groups worldwide.

As vocal choruses have been some of the last organizations to come back to live performance, the opportunity to help chart the course for a safe future of group singing has been a way of helping during a moment where the risk of singing is still not fully understood.

This study (which took place in the July of 2021) presented an opportunity to participate in history and assist in gaining a new, cutting edge understanding of viral spread in singing situations. It is important to note: No singers or study participants were exposed to active virus in this study.

The principal investigator of the study was Dr. Joshua Santarpia, Associate Professor in the UNMC College of Medicine Department of Pathology and Microbiology.

Kyra Hansen, Director of Operations and Production of the Omaha Symphony was also present for the experiment this past summer. “We learned that the average surgical mask is not designed for singing,” Hansen shared, “and the seal of the mask is very important in preventing the spread of particles.”

Looking Forward to Singing in The New Normal

Tom Wheeler, an Omaha Symphonic Chorus board member and longtime singer, said of the experience:

“I think I sang the Star-Spangled Banner about four times in front of a black box (approximately ten inches tall by about 18 inches wide by about 18 inches deep) that was transmitting readings of aerosol rates to a monitor being read by a research assistant.” Wheeler says participating in this study was important for him because it informs the research that can help guide rehearsals and performances of the future.

The 100+ member Omaha Symphonic Chorus is celebrating its 75th anniversary season. The singers of the Omaha Symphonic Chorus sing to bring joy to the community, but the pandemic has offered another opportunity for service – contributing to science!

As the pandemic began, Omaha Symphonic chorus has had to forgo performing the 8 concerts that normally would have occurred between March of 2020 and the Summer of 2021. The Chorus usually performs a concert in October, two in December, and two in the Spring of each year.

“We know we all love singing,” says Wheeler of his cohort in the Chorus, “and we know we are bringing enjoyment to audiences. We are paying attention to the research and community guidance — and we are doing what we can for the common good.”

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The mission of the Omaha Symphonic Chorus' is to enrich the community with the highest quality of live choral music, to promote fellowship and artistic growth among its singers, and to inspire a broad audience with performances spanning the diverse spectrum of music for large chorus. The 2021-22 season is the 75th anniversary of the organization's founding.
