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A preliminary study of an online training mode for choirs in colleges and universities during an epidemic: an exemplar from the Choir of Capital Normal University

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Abstract

The developmental history of music education in Chinese colleges and universities over the

course of the past 150 years can be said to have been characterized by its unevenness. In recent years, through the introduction of a number of policies, the state has attached greater importance to the cultivation of aesthetic education, a move that has yielded, and continues to yield, positive results within school music tuition. Nevertheless, 2020 witnessed the global COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in severe and sustained alterations to people's lives and the transference of education to online teaching. This situation made it necessary to explore new modes of instruction for the training of a vocal ensemble, which had previously almost always taken the form of on-site rehearsals. In 2022, the Choir of Capital Normal University in Beijing, China, successfully explored an online training mode, in the process achieving positive teaching results. This paper discusses the action research and investigation research involved in the hope of providing a body of reference for the healthy development of other art ensembles in similar future situations.

Key words

online training mode, music education in colleges and universities, choir, epidemic

Background

Music education in Chinese colleges and universities is little more than 150 years old. With the founding of New China, especially since the reform and opening up period, the state has attached greater importance to the development of school music education through the introduction of a number of aesthetic education policies. This has enabled schools of all levels and types to achieve progress in music education, curriculum planning, community activities, scientific research results, and teacher quality, achieving remarkable results in the process.

In 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide severely hindered economic and social development, along with people's daily lives. Within the field of school music education, the lack of face-to-face contact, whether it be rehearsals, performances or lessons, had serious repercussions in terms of adversely affecting students' participation in art activities; some even went so far as to quit their ensembles. The outcome was that in order to maintain enthusiasm and commitment to music education, many schools had to make full and creative use of the Internet.

The Choir of Capital Normal University in Beijing, China, is composed of teachers and students who are naturally drawn to the art of choral singing. Full of youthful vitality, the chorus members not only possess musical ability, but also demonstrate a high degree of unity and cooperation. During the epidemic, the conductor, the voice training teacher, and the

members jointly explored an online training mode in order to maintain the ongoing development of the choir, in the process achieving measurable learning results.

With an eye to sharing the findings, this paper summarizes the online training experiences of the school choir in the spring semester of 2021-2022. It is hoped that this preliminary model can provide a reference for the survival and development of other art ensembles during similar times of duress.

Development of the choir

Founded in 2015, the Choir of Capital Normal University in Beijing is an off-shoot of the Youth League Committee of the University. Under the direction of artistic director and permanent conductor Professor Xiao-Yong Shao, the members consist of non-music major undergraduates from different departments. In addition to winning the gold medal in the choral performance category of Beijing University's Students' Art Festival on numerous occasions and frequently holding special concerts, the artistic director / conductor was invited to cooperate with the National Symphony Orchestra in December 2015 in order to successfully premiere Wang Xilin's *Requiem for the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression* at the National Center for the Performing Arts. In July 2019, the choir won first prize in the National Adult mixed Chorus category at the sixth National Nie Er Music (Chorus) Week Chorus Performance. The ensemble also participated as part of a large-scale

chorus performance in Tiananmen Square in 2019 to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party in 2021.

Before the epidemic, the choir used a traditional training mode whereby each of the four vocal parts trained separately before working together. Collectively forming the teaching assistant team, each vocal section had its own teacher (the author was in charge of the mezzo-sopranos, while each of the other three parts were taught by Professor Shao's graduate students). Each vocal section trained for three hours on Sunday afternoons; this was followed, on Sunday evenings, by a two-hour full rehearsal of the choir by Professor Shao.

As the epidemic grew more severe, the choir switched to online training starting in November 2021. In the following section, the author introduces and explains the exploration process of the online training model.

Online training mode

Due to the limitations of the network technology available, the author only successfully trained one student during the initial online period (November 2021). In the spring semester of 2022, due to the ongoing epidemic, the online training method continued to be adopted. The resultant online singing group often sounded chaotic, and whilst one-on-one training proved workable, efficiency was low. Following a discussion, it was decided to divide the

members of each vocal section into several groups, with about five members per group. One advanced-level student was selected as the leader, with responsibility for the training of each group. Between March and May 2022, the choir went through three stages of self-exploration: preliminary, development, and maturity, followed by the production of a summary document outlining a set of scientific and practical precepts for use as a model for online teaching and development.

1. Preliminary stage (March 6, 13; two training sessions)

(a) Main modes

In the preliminary stage, the members submitted the recording homework, after which the group leaders made comments to each of the groups. In the first instance, the training teacher assigned several works to the group leaders and members. After self-learning, the group leaders submitted singing recordings to the training teacher, who listened to them and gave feedback in the form of suggestions. The group members submitted their recordings to the group leaders, who similarly listened before giving suggestions according to the requirements of the training teacher.

Given that there were 11 choral works to be studied in the space of two weeks, the group leaders needed to ensure that a balance was struck between the amount of homework that was allocated and the quality of responses received in return. The training teacher selected and

sent everyone high quality reference models of the chosen works, additionally collecting, sorting and sharing the lyrics (together with their translations), and providing the participants with background information of difficult works such as Orff's *O Fortuna*.

(b) Teacher training

In order to improve efficiency, Professor Shao suggested that the focus should be on teacher training by enabling the group leaders to become 'qualified' music teachers. The logic behind this was that it would result in a higher degree of accuracy in terms of the comments given, in the process serving to convince the members of the leader's efficacy. The training teacher taught the group leaders simple music theory and effective teaching methods in a bid to gradually improve the quality of the group leaders as music teachers. Their comments were to be targeted, specific and in-depth, as well as being explanatory in terms of the reasons provided in relation to the correct performance of the work. Far from being afraid of offending team members, it was stressed that the group leaders should make bold and accurate suggestions for improvement in a non-accusatory way.

(c) Establish a strict evaluation system

Although the choir takes part in competitions every year, there is a limit to the number of participants that can be accommodated at any one time. Given that sopranos and mezzo-sopranos are the voices in greatest demand, it was decided that in order to promote fair competition and enable participants to succeed based on their own efforts, the

establishment of a strict evaluation system was necessary. This would require the group leaders to provide scores or language evaluations as a basis for selection based on certain criteria, such as singing quality, attendance rate, and homework completion.

(d) Problem summary and new findings

After listening to the recordings, the group leaders collected and discussed the group members' questions and attempted to find solutions to the singing problems being encountered, as shown in Table 1. These suggestions were then relayed by the group leaders to the members.

Table 1 *Group members' identified singing problems and proposed solutions*

Identified problems	Proposed solutions
1. Some group leaders are not good at singing and do not give detailed comments to group members.	Conduct professional training for the group leaders, improve the level of the group leaders, and require the group leaders to give more strict and detailed comments to the group members.
2. Some group members cannot submit the recording homework on time.	The group leaders should be required to pay attention to the daily performance of the group members as a basis for evaluation.

<p>3. Some group members had more problems with their recording homework than others.</p>	<p>Group leaders should give suggestions for improvement and ask the group members to submit their recordings again.</p>
<p>4. Most of the singing problems are due to a lack of music theory knowledge.</p>	<p>Share theoretical knowledge of music expression, the accuracy of music style, the use of breathing, beating time, reading music, etc.</p>
<p>5. There is a lack of aesthetic feeling in singing. First, the members appreciate the quality works less; second, the singing standard stays at the basic stage of intonation and rhythm.</p>	<p>Members are advised to listen to the singing of first-class choirs in order to improve their appreciation levels. After completion of the study of intonation and rhythm, the requirements of the pursuit of musical beauty should be put forward with a view to improving the beauty of singing through online training.</p>
<p>6. Singing generally lacks emotional expression.</p>	<p>Training members to fully understand the expression marks, while recitation should be used to promote singing emotions and the bold expression of emotions.</p>

At the same time, it was discovered that individuals brought their own unique skills, such as comprehensive musical accomplishments, outstanding singing ability, or strong teaching and management styles, to the table, all of which could be drawn upon as supportive

forces for training purposes.

2. Development stage (March 20, 27; two training sessions)

During the development stage, the members submitted their recording homework and then trained in groups, each group member being instructed one-on-one by the training teacher.

Over the course of the previous two weeks, the members had learned 11 pieces by themselves. However, the lack of an established training process meant that singing problems could not be fully solved. It was therefore decided to add some online group training to the process, whereby the team members could choose the problematic passages to sing. Three group sessions took place on the first week (20 March) and two on the second week (27 March), with each group being allocated 40-45 minutes. The details are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 *Results of the online group training sessions*

Identified problems	Proposed solutions
1. Most group members sing at a low volume.	Group members are required to warm up their voices before rehearsing and breathe before singing.

<p>2. Most of the singing problems are due to a lack of understanding regarding what constitutes a high standard, and they do not know how to solve the problems.</p>	<p>Strengthen the popularization of vocal music theory, enhance group members' cognition of the theoretical issues such as the relationship between music style, speed and singing, and give corresponding sound training.</p>
<p>3. Too much attention to intonation and rhythm, singing standards are not high, and the music lacks beauty.</p>	<p>Strengthen emotional expression training, require group members to sing on the basis of good intonation and rhythm, encourage a bold performance of the music, and pursue beautiful singing.</p>

One of the advantages of online one-on-one training, compared to group singing training, was that an individual's specific problems could be addressed in a targeted way. It was found that many of the members' problems were cognitive in nature. For example, one of the students thought that their singing was flat because of an inability to modulate the sound properly, whereas it was actually a fault of her singing technique. After advice-based adjustment, the right approach was found and there was a marked improvement in intonation after the two weeks of online training. On the negative side, the limited amount of training time available meant that each person could only sing for about ten minutes. In order to

improve efficiency and try and solve everyone's individual problems, it was decided that the group leader should train his / her group simultaneously, while the author attended each group session for spot check training.

3. Mature stage (April 10 - May 29; six training sessions)

During the mature stage, in addition to the spot check training that was carried out by the author while delivery of the group instruction took place, some high-quality learning materials were selected in April in order to help the members study by themselves.

Having previously asked a music major student to collate the playing and singing recordings of the new works as the exemplar material, the author firstly recorded an analysis and explanation of the difficult works for the students in order to better help them learn by themselves. For example, each of the paragraphs in 'Give Everything To The Party' encompass three key changes and contrasts in the paragraph styles, while the intonation in the middle of 'Bless The Motherland' needs careful practice. The group leader then listened to the recorded homework before the third, group training stage, the aim being to ensure that each member received sufficient training and significantly improve learning efficiency. Finally, after weekly training, organized internal meetings and discussions of each voice part took place; the training teachers and group leaders also all met for discussions following the monthly training sessions.

In May, consolidation of the difficult works began, the members learned to sing a new song, and all the works studied in the semester were reviewed. During the course of the last training session, a spot check on each member was carried out in order to ascertain the effect of the learning model.

Consequently, after three months' exploratory work, a set of relatively perfect online training models had been created and a group of "little music teachers" with enhanced musical abilities duly cultivated. With the help of the (online) learning materials, the members were able to study new works independently after class, seeking out the author only when difficult problems arose.

Three summary meetings

The exploration process of online training mode during the semester in question cannot be separated from the guidance of Professor Shao, whose valuable suggestions ensured the direction and quality of the online training.

After the rehearsals in March, the four voice training teachers reported their progress to Professor Shao, who responded with the following suggestions:

- The training teachers should strengthen the promotion of students with weak majors. In doing so, care should be taken to ensure that the students gained something while simultaneously ensuring that their interest in music did not diminish.
- Strengthen the professional training of the group leaders.
- Keep the momentum going by regularly taking part in competitions.
- Pay attention during the rehearsals to the identification of potential members who could serve as the next choir leaders. (Leadership elections take place every year.)

The author organized two meetings of the group leaders on April 4th and 24th in order to convey the suggestions of Professor Shao, to exchange the experiences of the online training sessions among the various voice parts, and to provide answers to the questions raised by the choir leaders, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 *Author's replies to the questions raised by the group leaders*

Questions raised by the group leaders	Author's replies
1. The recording homework of some group members was completed by splicing, and the singing was not complete, so one-to-one training was necessary.	Strengthen the professional evaluation of the recording work, and insist on high standards and requirements; at present, a combination of recording and online rehearsals is the best way.

<p>2. A special time could be set aside every week to popularize music theory knowledge.</p>	<p>The popularization of music theory knowledge can be added in the training process, but theoretical learning cannot be isolated, nor can it replace training, which is essential.</p>
<p>3. A group leader is responsible for 4 group members, which can fully realize one-to-one training. If there are too many group members, it may affect the quality of training.</p>	<p>Each group leader should improve his / her own levels and strictly require the same of the members. If online time is limited, the individual concerned can make an appointment in private to communicate with each other instead of making comments.</p>
<p>4. Sometimes the group leader's comments are not professional or deep enough, or for fear of offending people, dare not speak boldly.</p>	<p>In order to guide group members as effectively as possible, teacher training for group leaders should be strengthened with the aim of improving their level of music theory, singing and teaching, and to teach them how best to use their professional knowledge and appropriate language.</p>
<p>5. If training is always carried out online without the experience of singing with the other members, it may affect the enthusiasm of the choir.</p>	<p>Members should be actively guided to understand the advantages of online rehearsals, solve the specific problems of each member in a one-to-one</p>

	<p>way, try to eliminate the negative emotions of the members, and give clear learning objectives and enough guidance so that the members can really improve.</p>
<p>6. The learning effect of submitting recorded works is not as good as that of online training.</p>	<p>Since recording and online training have their own advantages, it is suggested to combine them. Each voice situation is different, so members should be allowed to decide for themselves what works best.</p>

On the evening of May 8th, after the rehearsal, the third meeting was held online and Professor Shao, along with 21 important members of the choir, were invited to attend. Among other things, a series of specific requirements relating to the next online training session were put forward.

Over the course of the three sessions, details of experiences were actively exchanged, problems and countermeasures proposed and summarized, and specific requirements tabled, all of which were intended to improve the efficiency and quality of the online training sessions.

4. The effects of online training

Once the online training for the semester had ended, a questionnaire was conducted on the effects of the training model among the participants (N = 50). Twelve questions, as shown in Table 4, were based on a 5-point Likert scale and related to the improvement of singing ability.

Table 4 *Questionnaire on the effects of the training model*

Investigation on the effect of online choral training

in the spring semester of the 2021-2022 academic year

(Four voice parts of a female high school, female middle school, a male high school and a male middle school were investigated, respectively.)

Please give your own answer to the effect and feeling of the online training of the choir in the spring semester of 2021-2022 academic year. (The degree is represented by numbers: 1 is low; 5 is high)

1. I have a more solid grasp of basic music knowledge: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. The music feels more delicate and smooth: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
3. I have a more accurate grasp of the relationship between melody and lyrics: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
4. I have a deeper understanding of the relationship between solo and choral singing: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
5. My self-learning ability in terms of music has been significantly enhanced: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

6. I am more sensitive to the quality of music: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

7. I am capable of leading group training tasks: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

8. I prefer singing Chinese choral works: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

9. My singing skills have improved: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

10. Recording the homework can improve my singing ability: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

11. Online training can improve my singing ability: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

12. I am satisfied with the effect of online choral training: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

13. Other suggestions or feelings:

The results, which were presented to the members as percentages, were as follows:

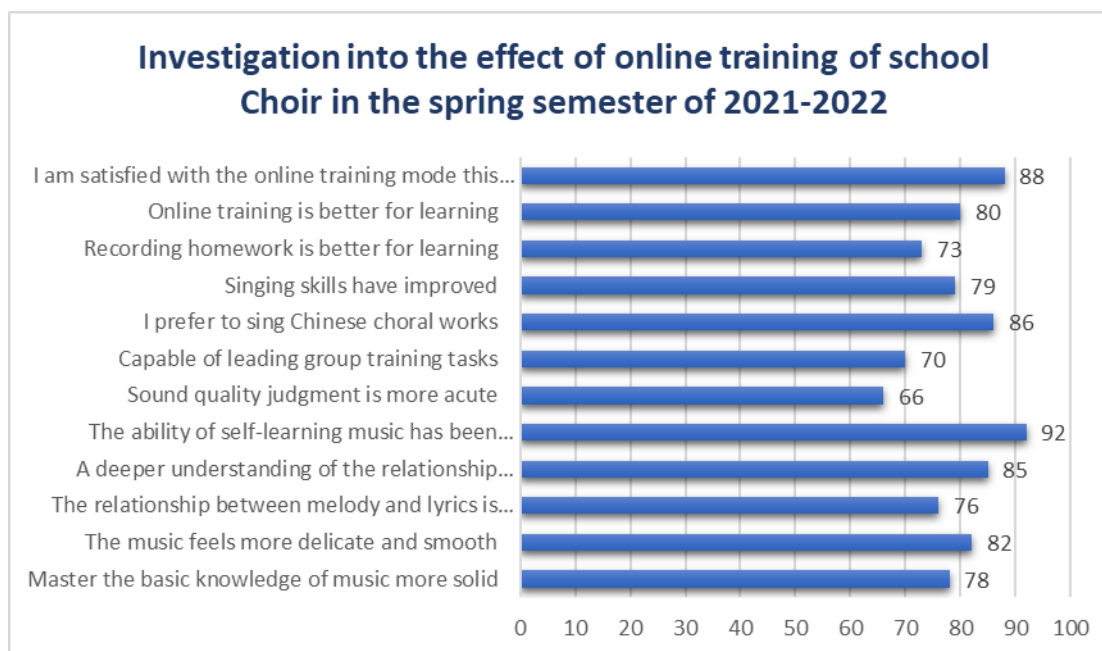


Figure 1 *The effects of the online choral training model in the 2021-22 spring semester*

Analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey reveals that the members generally recognized the positive effects of online training, and that their musical abilities had improved in all aspects. At the same time, it emerged that the more actively the students participated in the training, the higher the recognition of the benefits of the process, and vice versa. Among the four voice parts of the choir, the mezzo-sopranos, of whom the author was in charge, demonstrated a relatively high attendance rate, learning effect and recognition of online training.

5. Results of online training

Teaching practice results

(a) An efficient online training mode

After three months of online training, the choir undertook the preliminary, development and mature stages of exploration, discovering in the process that working with recordings had the ability to accurately detect problems. Online training could then be targeted to solve those issues as part of an efficient choral tuition model.

(b) Music learning harvest

Nineteen pieces of music were studied during the course of the semester, including seventeen Chinese pieces and two foreign pieces. The members' intonation, rhythm, musical feeling, musical style, and singing skills significantly improved as a result, with a number of singing-related problems being solved online.

(c) Good communication helps music teaching

Through timely communication with the group leader, the author developed a better understanding of the mentality and ability of the members and was able to undertake a reasonable analysis of the learning situation. This increased the accuracy of the teaching plans and methodologies, leading in turn to greater teaching efficiency.

(d) Popularize musical knowledge and expertise

Consistent adherence to high standards is the successful key to any arts education program. (Gardner, 2012) Sometimes, however, over-specialized requirements are not suitable for non-music majors. Combining the suggestions of teachers and students, the author summed

up the most suitable teaching methods for them as: passing on professional knowledge of music in the most concise and popular language within a limited time, along with accurately revealing the laws which relate to music as an art, and; combining the training of vocal music training with an explanation of music theory, so that members can understand the relationship between theory and practice and improve in both aspects.

(e) Cultivate an independent learning ability

The survey revealed that after three months' study, the members had developed the ability to independently learn new works, make full use of the learning materials provided, and significantly improve their ability to read music, analyze and process music, and judge the quality of music.

Management and teacher training

(a) Establish a strict evaluation method

Based on scores and written records, a comprehensive evaluation was made of the singing ability and attendance of each member involved in the online training. Process and evaluation, based on the test results of the stage concerned, were combined to form the basis of selecting personnel to participate in the choral competition. However, this evaluation mechanism was not fully implemented, meaning that a high-quality evaluation mechanism needs to be explored further.

(b) Train groups of qualified “music teachers”

As the individuals responsible for undertaking the training tasks for each group, the aim of the group leaders’ work was to improve the level of music theory and teaching, a process collectively termed “teaching and learning”. Different members took turns as group leaders, so that their music teaching abilities could be exercised. By the end of the semester, a large number of members had duly “qualified” for the task of leading group rehearsals.

Theoretical research**(a) Clarify the relationship between solo and choral singing**

In order that the members could better understand the relationship between the parts and the whole, in terms of the value of individuals to the sound of the overall choir, online, one-on-one training was delivered to the same high standard as it would have been for solo training. At the same time, it was hoped that this approach would better prepare them for completing the choral task.

(b) Clarify the relationship between learning music theory and singing practice

Many of the problems to do with members’ singing skills were caused by a lack of understanding of the relevant theoretical issues. It was felt that timely explanations, aimed at resolving these misunderstandings, could help guide the students towards a better unification of theory and practice.

6. The rationale behind the online training mode

Improve the musical instruction of the teaching assistant team

Although the survey results showed that the teaching had been quite effective overall, a number of shortcomings on the part of the teaching assistant team were nevertheless identified. For example, the standard of members had a tendency to stay at the basic level, and an inordinate amount of energy was spent on improving the accuracy of intonation and rhythm, all of which indicated that their reserves of musical knowledge were limited, that their musical skills were insufficient, and that their pursuit or understanding of music learning was still relatively rudimentary. Regardless of the identity of the individual directing the proceedings (offline rehearsals, consisting of mixed choral training under the guidance of Professor Shao, took place for two hours a week), the ultimate aim for the choir is to feel a spiritual connotation to the work. Professor Ciz-Zao Wang, a famous music aesthetician and former President of the Central Conservatory of Music, talks about “spiritual connotation being the deep content of musical beauty”, further stating that “There are indeed heroic, tragic, civic, ordinary, noble and other factors embedded in music. These factors are neither external emotional types, nor internal meanings that reflect the formal characteristics of music, but a deeper spiritual connotation than those basic emotional and stylistic characteristics mentioned above. The spiritual connotation of music is a reflection of the

composer's innermost ideology, and often reflects the characteristics of the composer's time.” (Wang, 2021) Bearing these words in mind, since the process of learning music is the aspiration of taking part in a dialog with the composer, the purpose of joining any choir is not simply to exercise cooperation, or else to relax for a few hours, but to engage musically at a deep and fundamental level. In order to more fully reflect the rationale of the choir as a whole, with the help of a systemic plan participants can be provided with basic music theory courses and the strengthening of solfeggio ear training in order to improve their musical performance / actualize the spiritual aspect of the music as effectively as possible.

Create an atmosphere for choral learning

Through this study, the author attempted to guide the members to pay more attention to the advantages of online training, together with reminding them to keep in mind their reasons for originally joining the ensemble. Although the aforementioned set of preliminary online training methods were successfully explored, the limitations of network technology meant that the model was unable to achieve online group singing training. Nor did it prove possible to conduct four-part choral singing online, with the result that the members were unable to experience the effects of choral harmonies. More regrettably still, some members chose to quit, undoubtedly a brutal test for any choir.

To assist in counteracting these issues, the epidemic needs to be viewed as a temporary

setback, after which face-to-face rehearsals can resume. In the meantime, organizers should strive to create a united, mutually helpful, positive, and enterprising atmosphere for choral learning, as well as providing sufficient learning resources and psychological care so that members can eliminate negative emotions, enjoy learning, and gain pleasure from the choral experience. Fortunately, in this instance, most of the members were engaged and persistent in their pursuit of the art of choral singing. They actively cooperated with the leaders and completed the online semester training, demonstrating a high level of competence, good teamwork and a collective spirit. Similarly, the online training results indicated that the students had reached a level of artistry, pointing as evidence to the success of the adopted model.

Develop an online training mode

The mode outlined above has since been updated and developed. In the case of those music majors taking the choral class within the School of Music, the combined video homework and online training model has been adopted, the video serving to more intuitively visualize the level of students' singing. At the same time, the evaluation mechanism has been better implemented: every week, the leaders of each group give detailed evaluations of students' singing performances in the form of scores and written notes. Together, these constitute the process evaluation element of the choral online training course, which can be combined with

the final result evaluation to form a more reasonable assessment mechanism. This mechanism can serve to stimulate students' enthusiasm, allowing them to pay more attention to the learning process, and giving rise to higher quality work.

Concluding Remarks

After a semester of exploration, the school choir's online training mode has now become normal practice. Members now generally recognize this mode, have abandoned whatever negative emotions they may have harbored, and regularly participate in the weekly online training sessions.

The successful introduction of this mode cannot be separated from the strict requirements, close attention to detail, and the ardent expectations of the participants on the part of the conductor. Success is also due, in no small part, to the responsibility shown by the voice training teachers and the league leaders, and the persistence and adherence of the members who love choral singing. Training quality and an efficient management system are likewise inseparable. Only with each member and league leaders' full cooperation in completing the training tasks can progress emerge. In this instance, every member of the league has seen their singing skills, teamwork ability, and other aspects of communal music-making, improve, while every leader has been trained in music learning, teaching, management, communication, and other choral requirements.

When these students graduate and find their places in the workforce of the future, it is hoped that they will have opportunities to make use of their musical talents. Music not only serves to relieve the pressures of heavy work, but can also create a good artistic atmosphere in collective activities and lead to more people living creative lives. In addition to contributing to the development of music education in society, some of the non-music majors, as a result of their choral exposure, may even choose to embark on a professional music development path themselves, become professional musicians or music educators, or alternatively assist in the development of another individual's music career.

Likewise, it is to be hoped that the achievements of exploring online training modes as reported in this study will provide some ideas for emulation that can lead to the development and survival of other art ensembles or school art educational areas in the current era of epidemics. The authors strive to maintain their persistent pursuit of art with the greatest passion, stay true to their original intentions, and strive to overcome whatever difficulties they may encounter. In the spirit of jointly embracing a bright future for arts education, they look forward to more offline exchanges and cooperation with art colleagues in the future, both within China and further afield.

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