

Tech Talk

Hello inspiration!

A playful approach keeps this seniors' choir in harmony—virtually

By Hilary Hattenbach

When Covid-19 shut down the globe, Beth Wilmurt took on the tricky task of transitioning 100 older adult singers from a live choir to a virtual choir. To gauge comfort levels, Wilmurt—a performer and choir director in San Francisco—emailed her singers and asked, “Have you ever heard of Zoom? Do you have a computer? What kind?” Soon her inbox was flooded with funny and touching email messages, which provided comfort during a stressful time. Wilmurt decided to turn them into songs.

“Their messages were keeping me going, things like, ‘Thank you, Beth,’ ‘We can do it!’ and ‘How about an inappropriate song like [Kiss] Want to Rock and Roll All Nite,” Wilmurt explains. “So I grabbed my ukulele and wrote 20 songs in one night. I had the best time singing their words and thinking about them in a deeper way, musically.”

Once the songs were completed, Wilmurt partnered with *For You*—a project that pairs an older adult with a performer to create a custom piece of art. *For You* email subscribers received one of Wilmurt’s songs in their inbox every weekday for a month.

Wilmurt, age 53, a self-described “theater animal,” has performed in over 60 productions, composed music for multiple theater/dance companies, and been recognized by *San Francisco Magazine* as one of the *Top 100 Artists in the Bay Area*. For the

past 20 years, she’s led children’s choirs at The San Francisco Community Music Center—a non-profit offering low-cost/tuition-free music classes. Then, about five years ago, she started leading choirs for older adults, ranging in age from mid-50s to mid-90s. At first, she worried that older adults might not appreciate her playful approach as much as the kids. She’s found the opposite to be true.

“I’m surprised by how easy going and upbeat they are,” she says. “They’re very forgiving and if I’m a

little scattered, they’re very patient with me.”

Adopting a nimble attitude proved crucial when the pandemic put the kibosh on group singing—especially for tech-shy Wilmurt, who didn’t even have internet access in her apartment.

“I was skeptical that we could retain members that were 20 years my senior. If I didn’t have internet, what was their situation? Mostly, I worried about leaving people behind,” she says.

While she feared she might not be “plugged-in” enough to shepherd her singers onto Zoom, Wilmurt was encouraged by her singers’ willingness to give it a try. So, with the help of a kind neighbor’s wi-fi password, she set up the first Zoom session.

To her delight, 65 members logged on that first day. In spite of synchronization issues that prevented members from singing in time together, connecting face-to-face provided the perfect salve for the soul.



Heartened and moved by that experience, Wilmurt grew emboldened to teach herself how to use **iMovie**, and post videos to **YouTube**—digital tools that helped transform her singers' emails into songs.

"I got really inspired by each of my students and their stories," Wilmurt says.

The resulting song collection beautifully captured the emotional highs and lows of the choir's journey to stay in harmony by whatever means necessary.

As for the choir members, they were tickled to learn that their emails had been immortalized in song.

"I definitely liked my words turned into a sentimental song, but I thought the truly candid ending of [choir member] Ellen's song sums up my feelings and thoughts regarding those special compositions: These songs feel like a powerful soothing antidote to the daily deluge of news about our 'poor sorry world,'" says choir-member Mary Polo, age 75.

"It was an absolute delight the first time I heard 'Best, Donna'. I sent it to many friends. It felt nice to be heard, and to be memorialized in song!" says choir member, Donna Ingenito, age 73.

A year later, with the coronavirus variants raging, Wilmurt and about 25 of her singers still meet for virtual sessions each week. They're grateful that Zoom has allowed them to stay connected and, as an added bonus, their online sessions gave rise to their choir's name.

"When we finally got on Zoom, the first magical thing that happened was every choir member said 'hello' to each other and it went on for a very long time," recalls Wilmurt. "After saying goodbye to so many things like going outside and seeing our friends and families, the word 'hello' started to sound kind of radical. So we became the Hello Chorus."

The Hello Chorus waving on a Zoom call.



Beth Wilmurt directing the older adults' choir in San Francisco prior to moving rehearsals online.

>> When borrowing a neighbor's wi-fi password, Wilmurt says it helps to leave a bottle of wine or whisky outside their door each week.

>> Wilmurt's choir members were part of a study on aging and singing, conducted by the San Francisco Center for Aging and the University of California, San Francisco. The main take away? The choir reduced loneliness and increased "interest in life."

>> Learn more about the Hello Chorus project & listen to Wilmurt's songs at www.foryouproductions/hellochorus