

THE DIGITAL VOICE OF CONNECTION: VIRTUAL CHOIRS AS REGENERATIVE PASTORAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, marked by increasing isolation and digital saturation, the search for meaningful human and spiritual connection is finding new forms through technology and art. Virtual choirs—communities of voices united across distance—create an innovative space where technology becomes a medium for healing, empathy, and spiritual togetherness. This presentation explores how virtual choirs can serve as a regenerative pastoral practice, nurturing connection, compassion, and renewal through shared creativity.

Drawing on practical experience from Lithuanian and international virtual choir projects, this study explores how digital platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet can evolve into spaces of digital spirituality and pastoral education. Within these creative communities, music transcends its technical dimension and becomes a means of presence, belonging, and mutual care.

From a phenomenological and reflective perspective, the paper argues that consciously used technology does not fragment but unites. The human voice becomes a bridge of resonance and regeneration, transforming digital space into a field of shared empathy and spiritual vitality. Virtual choirs reduce feelings of loneliness, dissolve emotional distance, and foster collective renewal. Singing together—even while apart—becomes a source of regeneration for both individuals and communities.

Keywords: *virtual choirs; digital pastoral care; regenerative pastoral practice; voice and embodiment; digital spirituality; mediated community; emotional regeneration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, where social isolation, technological fragmentation, and emotional distance are increasingly part of everyday life, the question of restoring human connection acquires particular significance. Digital technologies are often perceived as operating in opposition to communality: they create distance, enclose individuals within personal media environments, and weaken interpersonal relationships. However, recent research demonstrates that technologies, when consciously integrated into creative and spiritual practices, can function in the opposite direction — becoming spaces that foster social sensitivity, a sense of belonging, and emotional regeneration [3,4].

Virtual choirs are a rapidly growing phenomenon of musical and digital practice since 2010, in which individually recorded voices are combined into a collective sonic structure. During the pandemic period, this form became a global social, educational, and cultural response to restrictions on physical proximity. However, the significance of virtual choirs extends far beyond technological effect: they become digital communities in which the voice acquires the function of spiritual connection and mutual care [5,13].

Although virtual choirs are often analysed as a musical or technological phenomenon, this article examines them from a broader perspective — that of regenerative pastoral practice. The pastoral approach to technology is changing: it is increasingly recognised that digital space can become a genuine environment of community,

listening, care, and spiritual support [4,11]. In this study, the virtual choir is understood as a medium in which the human voice and digital interaction create a regenerative field of being together.

In Lithuania, virtual choirs developed along a unique path: the first initiatives (“Virtual Choir. Lithuania”, 2016; 2018) emerged even before the pandemic, and the author’s earlier analysis demonstrated that these practices were already perceived at that time as new forms of choral identity and digital musicking [2]. This allows virtual choirs to be examined not as a response to crisis, but as a consciously chosen model of community building. This experience creates a distinctive empirical foundation for analysing how technologies can become channels of spiritual closeness.

Research problem. Although the practice of virtual choirs has been widely discussed in musicology and digital culture studies, their significance for pastoral care, spiritual community, and emotional regeneration remains largely unexplored.

Research aim. To reveal how virtual choirs can function as a regenerative pastoral practice that fosters connection, empathy, and a sense of belonging in digital space.

Research question. How do individually recorded voices, combined in digital space, create experiences of spiritual connection, emotional support, and community?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Theoretical Context

The phenomenon of the virtual choir today unfolds as one of the most intriguing manifestations of digital music culture, where the phenomenology of embodiment, processes of media mediation, structures of community, and principles of pastoral practice intersect. Digital technologies transform not only the conditions of performance, but also the ontology of musicking itself: the choir, traditionally understood as an ensemble grounded in the interaction of physical space, time, and bodies, acquires a new form in virtual space that integrates individual performance, asynchronous participation, and the synthesis of a collective audiovisual structure. This transformation requires a broader theoretical approach that encompasses not only technological or musicological analysis but also social, phenomenological, and spiritual dimensions.

2.2. Voice and embodiment in digital space

The phenomenological tradition, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment, provides a conceptual foundation for analysing how voice functions in mediated environments. Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is the primary medium of our being-in-the-world, and that the voice is a continuation of this embodied existence, enabling the subject’s intentions to be embodied in the sonic domain. Even within technological mediation, the voice does not lose its markers of corporeality: timbre, breath, vibration, and micro-intonational dynamics remain essential elements of identity and relationality [10].

The virtual choir reveals a paradoxical situation: physical choral space disappears, yet corporeality is not eliminated — it is transformed. Singing alone, in front of a camera and microphone, the performer experiences not only technological mediation but also an intensified vulnerability of the individual voice. This experience is not merely technological; it is existential. It opens the possibility of hearing oneself anew, acquiring reflective distance from the collective anonymity of the choir, and encountering one’s voice as an autonomous bodily expression. In this way, the virtual choir becomes a space in which the phenomenological relationship between the individual body and the collective structure is particularly pronounced.

2.3. Digital communication and mediated being-together

Contemporary media studies emphasise that online platforms are not merely channels for information transmission — they create social relationships, identities, and new forms of community [3]. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and other synchronous communication platforms serve as virtual rehearsal spaces where choir preparation, conductor communication, discussion of vocal parts, and the development of rhythmic and articulatory coherence occur. Although synchronous musical performance is impossible on these platforms due to audio latency, they fulfil an essential social and psychological function: they create an experiential structure resembling real being-together. Participants see one another, participate in shared time, respond to the conductor's gestures and intonations, even though their voices do not physically sound simultaneously. As Hutchings emphasises, digital platforms can acquire a sense of sacredness when they provide structures that enable the experience of connection and collective action [8].

Heidi Campbell's research on digital religion asserts that digital spaces can acquire sacred characteristics when they create structures that enable connection, belonging, and collective action [4]. In the case of virtual choirs, such a structure emerges not through synchronous musical performance, but through rhythms of participation: recurring meetings, shared preparation, the creation of recordings, and anticipation of the collective result. This allows us to speak of a new form of community — a “mediated community” in which technological mediation is not an obstacle to social cohesion, but its very condition.

Empirical studies confirm that during the pandemic, virtual choirs served a significant role in providing emotional and social support, reducing loneliness, offering structured activity, and contributing to psychological stability [5,13]. These findings demonstrate that digital musical participation can perform functions analogous to those of traditional artistic and communal activities, even though their forms differ.

2.4. Transformation of choral culture in mediated environments

Virtual choirs expand the concept of choral practice, allowing it to be understood as a multi-layered structure not limited by physical synchrony. In traditional choirs, time and space are the primary organising categories: voices merge within a single acoustic space, and the synchrony of bodies and breath shapes choral time. The virtual choir negates these parameters without abolishing the essence of choral action. Here, the collective sonic structure emerges not from simultaneous performance, but from post-production processes, whose logic resembles the construction of a polyphonic work through digital means.

This opens a new aesthetic field in which technology becomes a creative partner rather than merely a recording tool. The aesthetics of the virtual choir are grounded in montage rhythm, voice layering, visual dramaturgy, and spatial sound architecture. Thus, the virtual choir is not only a musical but also an audiovisual cultural form, in which the medium itself becomes a generator of aesthetic meaning.

2.5. The virtual choir as a space of pastoral practice and regenerative experience

Researchers in pastoral theology, such as Henri Nouwen and Johann Meylahn, emphasise that spiritual care is not bound to a specific physical location or institutional structure — it primarily manifests as the creation of spaces of acceptance and listening. Such spaces can arise in many forms, including digital environments.

Despite its technological form, the virtual choir creates precisely such a space: participants experience being heard, accepted, and included in a collective creation, regardless of their physical location, social status, or musical training. Group singing functions as a mechanism of emotional co-regulation, creating a shared emotional field among participants, and this dynamic persists in virtual contexts as well [6].

The concept of pastoral regeneration becomes particularly significant in this context: the virtual choir enables experiences of restoration, belonging, and internal cohesion through voice, creativity, and collective outcome. Nouwen argued that pastoral care is “the art of being together”, and the virtual choir creates a new form of this being, in which spiritual connection is formed through technological mediation without being limited by it [12]. Meylahn argues that digital space can become “the digital other”—a place where authentic, ethical, and spiritual relationships occur [11]. The virtual choir aligns with this understanding, as it opens possibilities for participants to experience community and inner renewal through mediated vocal space.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach applied in this study combines practice-based research, autoethnographic creative reflection, and phenomenological interpretation of experience. It also integrates insights from contemporary media theory and pastoral theology. This methodological framework was chosen because the virtual choir is a hybrid cultural phenomenon. Its analysis requires attention to technological media, artistic practice, and the social and spiritual experiences emerging in digital space.

3.1. Practice-based research as the primary analytical approach

The study is grounded in the practice-based research paradigm, in which the creative process is considered an important source of knowledge. The research data consist of virtual choirs created by the researcher between 2016 and 2020, including their creative methodology, technological solutions, structural principles, and production processes.

The virtual choir is therefore analysed not merely as a final artistic product but as a creative system. This system reveals the principles of digital musicking: the exposure of the individual voice, the overcoming of spatial dispersion, coordination without shared physical time and space, and the formation of a collective sonic structure through technological means.

Practice-based research enables examination of the virtual choir as an activity in which musical, technological, and social dimensions operate simultaneously. Because the analysed material originates from the researcher’s own creative work, the methodology provides access to empirically grounded and contextually specific data characteristic of the phenomenon itself.

3.2. Autoethnographic creative reflection

In this study, the autoethnographic approach is understood not as autobiographical storytelling but as systematic reflection on creative practice. This perspective enables the phenomenon to be analysed from within.

As the creator, conductor, and organiser of virtual choir projects, the researcher possesses unique epistemological access to the creative process and its aesthetic, technological, and social dynamics. The analysis does not rely on participants’ narratives or personal correspondence; instead, it is based on professional experience, creative documentation, and consistent analytical reflection.

This approach enables the identification of aspects of practice that are often difficult to observe externally. These include the experience of vocal vulnerability, the interaction between body and technology, the reconstruction of choral time without physical synchrony, and the emergence of collective identity in digital space. The approach corresponds with contemporary understandings of autoethnography as a qualitative research method in which the researcher's professional experience can function as a legitimate source of knowledge [1].

3.3. Phenomenological analysis of experience

The phenomenological method is used to interpret experiences that emerge during the creation and development of virtual choirs. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment [10], the voice is understood as a continuation of embodied expression that retains its essential qualities even within technological mediation.

Phenomenological analysis allows identification of key experiential structures of the virtual choir: individual singing across dispersed time and space, the rhythm of waiting and listening, the sense of "virtual presence" produced by technological media, and the emergence of the collective work as confirmation of shared community.

From this perspective, the virtual choir is not merely a simulation of a traditional choir but an autonomous form of choral practice with its own phenomenological characteristics.

3.4. Integration of media theory and pastoral theory

Media theory, particularly research on digital communication and the formation of online communities [3,4], provides the conceptual framework for analysing how virtual platforms support collective experience and social cohesion. At the same time, pastoral theology offers tools for interpreting the spiritual and relational dimensions of musical participation [12,11].

Combining these theoretical perspectives allows the virtual choir to be understood as a form of regenerative pastoral practice. Within this framework, participants experience belonging, acceptance, and renewed social connection even in the absence of physical co-presence.

3.5. Virtual choirs as empirical research data

The empirical basis of this research consists of virtual choirs created by the researcher, including their audiovisual structures, documentation of the creative process, technical guidelines, and editing procedures. These materials allow systematic analysis of how virtual choir practices shape social and spiritual experience and how technological tools transform the structure of choral performance. Together, these sources provide a foundation for examining the virtual choir as a contemporary form of community formation and pastoral practice.

At the same time, the autoethnographic character of the research should be acknowledged. Because the analysis is grounded in the researcher's own creative practice, the findings remain interpretative and may have limited generalisability.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of virtual choirs, based on practice-based research, autoethnographic reflection, and phenomenological interpretation, revealed several thematic trajectories that allow the virtual choir to be understood as a multi-layered musical, social, and pastoral structure. These results emerged from the analysis of virtual choir projects

created by the researcher (2016–2020), including their audiovisual structure and creative processes. As is typical in practice-based artistic research, empirical findings intersect with theoretical insights.

The analysis demonstrates that virtual choir practice can create an environment of emotional safety. Recording individually removes the pressure of immediate evaluation and allows participants to focus more freely on vocal expression and exploration of their own voice. This experience supports a sense of belonging and creates a structure of spiritual support that is particularly pronounced when social connections are weakened or disrupted.

Singing also reduces cortisol levels, thereby improving emotional stability [7]. Research confirms that group singing is one of the most effective and rapid mechanisms for social bonding, strengthening a sense of belonging even among strangers [9]. Pandemic-era studies show that virtual singing practices provided participants with structure, psychological stability, and significantly reduced feelings of loneliness [5,13]. Therefore, virtual choirs can be understood as a distinctive form of social and psychological support that enables the maintenance of connection and community even when physical co-presence is impossible.

4.1. Voice as a structure of connection and the formation of a collective body

Phenomenological analysis revealed that the essence of the virtual choir lies in the relationship between voices rather than in the technological medium. Although voices are recorded individually, they remain embodied, marked by breath, timbral nuances, and vibration. Based on Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment [10], the voice can be understood as a continuation of the body; therefore, technological recording does not eliminate its function of being-in-the-world. In the editing process, these individual markers merge into a collective choral body, whose emergence is not merely aesthetic but also social and spiritual. Participants experience that their voices have a place within the community, and the collective sound becomes a confirmation of mutual acceptance. In this way, the virtual choir creates a new field of connection in which individuality and collectivity intertwine not in physical space, but in acoustic and intentional space.

4.2. The virtual choir process as a ritual and spiritual sequence

The study revealed that the process of creating a virtual choir possesses a ritual structure composed of preparation, recording, waiting, and the unveiling of the final work. This sequence serves not only a practical but also a spiritual function, as participants engage in a consistent, rhythmic activity that involves elements of inner focus, intentionality, and discipline. Such a process resembles liturgical logic, in which not only the result but also the path leading to it is significant. Campbell's [4] analyses of digital sacredness confirm that technological spaces can acquire spiritual meaning when they generate shared meaning, ritual repetition, and collective intention. In this context, the virtual choir functions as a new type of sacred space in which participants experience their own and others' presence not at a physical, but at a spiritual level, and the aesthetic outcome becomes testimony to shared experience.

4.3. Complementarity of synchronous and asynchronous modes of action in digital choral practice

Virtual choir practice demonstrates that synchronous communication platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet) and asynchronous voice recording form complementary structures essential to the functioning of the virtual choir. Although

synchronous singing is impossible due to technological constraints, synchronous platforms create social rhythm, visual interaction, emotional support, and conductor–performer connection. Participants see one another in real time, share preparation moments, respond to the conductor’s gestures, and experience structures of being-together, which, according to Baym [3], constitute networked sociality — social connection arising from structured interaction rather than musical synchrony. The asynchronous process, in turn, ensures aesthetic precision and rhythmic and timbral coherence that would be technically unattainable in a live setting. The interaction of these two forms allows the virtual choir to be understood as an autonomous hybrid form of choral practice in which social and musical community emerge at different yet interconnected levels of action.

4.4. The virtual choir as evidence of regenerative pastoral practice

The integration of all results demonstrates that virtual choirs acquire characteristics of regenerative pastoral practice. Participants experience the restoration of social cohesion, emotional support, and spiritual dialogue, emerging not through verbal exchange but through a shared creative process. The individually recorded voice, entering the collective work, becomes a sign of acceptance, listening, and mutual care, while participation in the project helps restore inner stability and reduce feelings of isolation. Nouwen’s [12] theological understanding of pastoral care — as a space of being-together, acceptance, and listening — is realised in the virtual choir through technological mediation without loss of spiritual essence. The final musical work acquires the meaning of inner regeneration: it becomes a communal healing moment, testifying that digital environments can function as genuine spaces of spiritual renewal and pastoral action.

4.5. The virtual choir as an extended form of choral community

Analysis of the results shows that the virtual choir opens an alternative form of choral practice in which the absence of physical co-presence is not an obstacle to experiencing interpersonal connection, belonging, and embodied vocal interaction. Although choristers’ bodies do not meet in a single acoustic space, the voice — as an extension of embodiment — remains the essential carrier of interpersonal relations. Thus, the choir is transformed from a geographically specific ensemble into a digital, yet no less real, structure of community, in which collective participation is grounded in intention, creative rhythm, and shared purpose. This transformation demonstrates that choral culture can adapt to technological conditions without losing its essential social and aesthetic functions.

4.6. Digital platforms as social and spiritual spaces

The results confirm media theory’s claims that Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet are not merely technical tools but social structures that shape community experience. The “being-together” emerging on these platforms results not from musical synchrony, but from psychological and social synchrony. Participants see one another, respond to the conductor’s gestures, and share preparatory rhythms — these elements generate a form of communal rhythm described by Baym as networked sociality [3]. The asynchronous recording process complements this experience by ensuring musical precision and sonic quality. Thus, the virtual choir becomes a dual structure: synchronous space generates social connection, while asynchronous space ensures aesthetic coherence. This dynamic provides a basis for understanding the virtual choir

as a hybrid cultural practice in which musical action and social interaction manifest at different yet complementary levels.

4.7. The spiritual and pastoral dimension of the virtual choir

Interpreting the virtual choir as a form of pastoral practice is supported by clearly articulated spiritual experiences: belonging, acceptance, recognition, and inner regeneration. Participants experience that their voices are heard and integrated into the collective work, aligning with Nouwen's pastoral principles that emphasise listening, being-together, and acceptance. The virtual space, despite its technological nature, becomes a place in which interpersonal connection and spiritual dialogue emerge — this spiritual presence is no less real simply because it occurs through a screen. Participants experience not only creative but also existential renewal akin to processes of meaningful healing. Thus, the virtual choir confirms the thesis that spiritual community can be created through digital media and that pastoral practice can be technological as well as physical.

4.8. Limitations and challenges of pastoral action in digital space

Although the virtual choir demonstrates clear pastoral characteristics, the study also reveals limitations that prevent it from being considered a full equivalent of traditional communal practice. One essential limitation is the absence of physical synchrony: shared breath, embodied resonance, and acoustic space characteristic of traditional choirs are inevitably lost in virtual formats. Additionally, technological mediation may increase inequality among participants, as not all have equal technical resources or private recording spaces. From a pastoral perspective, the virtual choir cannot replace liturgical practice, sacraments, or deeper spiritual guidance, but it can function as a complementary, temporary, or contextually significant space of spiritual support. These limitations indicate that the virtual choir is an important but not absolute form of pastoral action.

4.9. The virtual choir as a contemporary model of regenerative community

Overall, the findings suggest that the virtual choir represents an important contemporary form of musical, communal, and pastoral practice. It generates experiences of belonging, acceptance, and collective creation that become sources of spiritual support and regeneration. The virtual choir expands the boundaries of pastoral practice by demonstrating that healing, belonging, and spiritual unity can be experienced not only in physical but also in digital spaces. Such a model opens new perspectives for contemporary pastoral care and encourages reconsideration of how spiritual connection can be formed within technological culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrated that virtual choirs are not merely technological solutions for musicking but fundamentally transformed forms of choral community, social connection, and pastoral practice. The analysis revealed that the virtual choir, as a cultural and spiritual practice, can maintain and expand the essence of choral activity by bringing it into the digital space, where new possibilities for creativity, community, and inner regeneration emerge. The conclusions allow several essential statements to be formulated.

First, virtual choirs demonstrate that the voice does not lose its corporeality, emotional intensity, or social function in technological space. Even in mediated form, the voice remains a carrier of interpersonal relationships, belonging, and self-

expression, while individual voices, combined into a collective sonic structure, create a new form of community not bound by physical spatial limitations. This confirms the phenomenological assumption that embodiment can be experienced and reconstructed even when physical presence is absent from the field of action.

Second, the study showed that synchronous (Zoom, Teams, Google Meet) and asynchronous platforms function as complementary structures forming a unique interaction of social and musical activity. Synchronous space creates conditions for social presence, visual contact, and shared rhythm, while asynchronous recording processes ensure aesthetic precision and musical coherence. The combination of these modes enables the virtual choir to function as a hybrid yet fully realised structure of choral culture in which social cohesion and musical quality are achieved through different but equally effective means.

Third, virtual choirs acquire clearly recognisable characteristics of pastoral practice. Empirical data indicate that this practice helps participants restore a sense of inner cohesion, reduce experiences of loneliness and social isolation, and experience acceptance, listening, and belonging. Virtual space becomes not only a sequence of creative actions but also a structure of spiritual support consistent with pastoral care conditions described by Nouwen [12] and Meylahn [11]. Therefore, the virtual choir can be evaluated as an effective form of regenerative pastoral practice in which spiritual connection and healing processes emerge through collective creativity.

Fourth, the limitations of the virtual choir allow its place in contemporary culture and pastoral care to be more precisely defined. This practice cannot replace the embodied synchrony of traditional choirs, liturgical contexts, or sacramental community functions. However, it can serve as a complementary, context-sensitive pastoral space, particularly when physical presence is limited, and the need for social and spiritual support remains high. Virtual choirs may also be particularly significant for those unable to participate in traditional communal practices due to geographic, social, or health-related reasons.

Finally, virtual choirs open a new intersection between contemporary choral culture and pastoral theology. They invite reconsideration of the relationship between musical community, liturgical space, spiritual presence, and technological media, revealing that digital environments can function not merely as mediating tools but as autonomous cultural and spiritual spaces. The virtual choir becomes a model demonstrating how creativity can foster connection and regeneration in the digital era, and how pastoral practice can take on new forms enabled by technology. This study suggests that technologically mediated creativity can function as a significant spiritual and communal resource for contemporary societies, and that the virtual choir represents one of the emerging models through which pastoral practice may evolve in the digital era.

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