



CMC Aquatic Park. PHOTO: Courtesy of CMC

**“A space where we could bond, easing the stress of the pandemic”**



Founded early in 1921 to “be a provider of music that is not for art’s sake, but art for life’s sake,” San Francisco’s Community Music Center (CMC) offers instrument and voice lessons to San Franciscans of all ages, from infants to centenarians. In 2018-2019, the last, full pre-pandemic year, over 3,100 students studied at CMC and thousands attended CMC performances.

The focus of this report is on the Community Music Center Older Adult Choir Program, which grew significantly through a partnership with Principal Investigator Julene Johnson from the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) and the San Francisco Department of

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CMC I.T. Bookman Choir: Taught in English. Sings gospel, jazz, and popular songs.

PHOTO: Courtesy of CMC



CMC Bernal Heights Choir: Taught in English. Sings show tunes and oldies.

PHOTO: Courtesy of CMC



CMC Bayanihan Equity Center Choir: Taught and sung in Tagalog and other languages. PHOTO: Courtesy of CMC

housed in a senior center and CMC worked closely with the host center, recruiting members from the host site and neighborhood and regularly performing at the host center and other community events.

During the five years of the study, 2012–2017, 380 seniors and adults with disabilities participated in 12 Community of Voices (CoV) choirs. The choirs were led by choir directors and accompanists from CMC with music culturally tailored for each choir, appropriate for older adults with various singing abilities, and challenging enough to facilitate growth and mastery over time.

Observers quickly noted that along with teaching singing skills, the choirs were creating community as members chatted together during breaks and exchanged phone numbers and email addresses. Research from the UCSF study confirmed this observation: singing in a choir reduced loneliness and increased interest in life. As a choir member from the Richmond Senior Center Choir said, “The choir has provided the right mix of learning to sing, socializing, and having fun.”

As each of the CoV choirs cycled out of its one year participation in the study, CMC welcomed them into CMC’s Older Adult Choir Program. Now a CMC-funded activity, the choirs continue to partner with neighborhood senior centers and remain tuition-free and open to people 55 and older.

Aging and Adult Services (now the Department of Disability and Aging Services, SF DAS) in a five-year, National Institute of Health-funded study investigating whether singing in a community choir is a cost-effective way to promote health and well-being among culturally diverse older adults. Each choir was

# THE PANDEMIC PIVOT



CMC Bayanihan Equity Center and Mission District Choirs 2020 holiday performance.

IMAGE: Courtesy of CMC

The pandemic shuttered senior centers and banned in-person events. During the early phase of the pandemic, when we hoped life might “return to normal” in a few months, each choir director developed a unique series of warm-up vocal exercises and songs for members to practice at home, accessible on CMC’s YouTube channel. Choir directors in partnership with the senior centers called and emailed all choir members to let them know how to access YouTube (and later, choir sessions on Zoom). Out of the 400 choir members who were active pre-pandemic, about half accessed the choirs online.

But while practicing at home might have been adequate initially, it could not substitute for the joy of singing together. Nearly six weeks after launching the YouTube videos, “CMC decided that real-time

connection between members needed to be implemented,” said Martha Rodriguez-Salazar, director of Coro Solero, one of the choirs in the Older Adults Program. As with so many programs, the answer was found in Zoom. Seeing each other on Zoom sparked

random acts of kindness. Each session started with a check-in, where participants shared how they were doing. When one member mentioned they were eating poorly because they could not go out to the store, another responded by offering to shop for her. “This reminded us of the great friendships, solidarity and community that

have been forged through our weekly rehearsals,” said CMC Program Director Sylvia Sherman.

But while the transition to Zoom was simple for choir members who were more at ease with technology, others needed training and tech sup-

port. Fortunately, many of the neighborhood centers were already offering tech training, and choir members were encouraged to take advantage of their center’s training programs. Utilizing the peer-to-peer relationships and CMC’s training teams, these additional supports were provided:

- CMC staff and choir

directors provided one-on-one meetings with choir members to help them learn how to use the platform.

- Choir members were invited to attend CMC’s school-wide Zoom training sessions and to use the skills gained to train their peers.

- CMC partnered with the Community Tech Network’s HomeConnect program for computers and training for the six to eight choir members who desired but did not have access to equipment.

- Within each choir, faculty supported peer-to-peer mentoring, where more experienced choir members helped those who faced challenges navigating Zoom and digital collaborations.

- CMC, along with its partners, made every effort to let all choir members know of

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Natee Galinato

(continued)

opportunities to participate and how they could receive support. Peer-to-peer outreach was particularly important with community members who had less access to technology. CMC's Choir Program found some good success with engaging folks into technology for the first time with its Mission District and South of Market choirs serving primarily Latino and Filipino community members.

Robin Estrada, director of the CMC choir at the Bayanihan Equity Center (BEC), mastered the Acapella app which allowed performers to record their section at home and send them to Estrada to create a performance. The process is not easy, as Estrada and several members of the CMC BEC Choir noted. "Members would call with problems late at night and early in the morning. I worked with all of them individually." But it had its benefits, and the digital performances were widely celebrated.

Birthdays are always an occasion to celebrate at CMC. On her day, Natee Galinato thanked the group and reflected, "I've always loved singing and now as a senior it relieves depression because of the pandemic. Without this choir, I don't know what I would do. We made it in spite of the pandemic." Fellow choir member Marilen Bonifacio spoke of the choir as "creating a space where we could bond," and "easing the stress of the pandemic."

In Fall 2020, although the delta variant aroused renewed caution, the City's high vaccination rate and new guidelines inspire cautious hope. CMC responded



CMC Solera Singers of Mission Neighborhood Center.

PHOTO: Hasain Rasheed

by polling choir members' interest in meeting in person, following the appropriate safety measures. Indeed, some choirs chose to remain on Zoom while others decided

to return to in-person (with an online option). CMC will continue to be sensitive to in-person and online options as conditions evolve.

"After 18 Months of 'Singing to Yourself,' Adult Choirs Embrace In-person Practice" appeared in Mission Local, an independent news site. Read the story: [bit.ly/3qsJBWZ](https://bit.ly/3qsJBWZ)