

Transcript of Interview with Dr. Arianne Abela by Marie Fagan and Ansley Keane

Interviewee: Dr. Arianne Abela

Interviewer: Marie Fagan, Ansley Keane

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Location (Interviewee): Amherst, Massachusetts

Location (Interviewer):

Abstract: This interview is one in a series of three oral histories that focus on the value of community throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. In this interview we hear from Dr. Arianne Abela, the Director of the Amherst College Choral Society. She describes the challenges of working to maintain a sense of community amongst choral students in a virtual environment, and the strained experience of transitioning back into an in-person choral experience. Lamenting the loss that this period was characterized by, she celebrates the role that choral singing plays today as we transition into a more in-person experience. She highlights how choir music has the power to bring people together in such hard times, as well as providing a voice to underrepresented identities particularly amidst the country's social justice awakening. This interview was conducted by Marie Fagan and Ansley Keane. Marie is a senior member of the choral society under Dr. Arianne Abela's direction.

Marie Fagan 00:00

And we don't need video, that's nice. I was talking about that in class, because I don't even, yeah.

Dr. Arianne Abela 00:06

Yeah, I am not video ready, not video ready.

Marie Fagan 00:12

All right, well, so I guess first of all, we just wanted to ask what really just describing what your role is the college and how you first got here.

Dr. Arianne Abela 00:19

How I first got there. Um, so I'm the choral director, as you know, and it used to be three different ensembles. And now we have the Glee Club and the concert choir. And next year, we'll have a, an intro to singing course offered. And yeah, I just do the all the choral singing and teach, I teach conducting courses and conducting lessons and things like that, as well. So, yeah, and how I got to the college. I was in Michigan before this teaching at Wayne State University and decided to apply for the job opening because I went to Smith, and I wanted to, I thought it would be lovely to be back. And, and Amherst has such a rich singing history, so I thought it would be a wonderful program to take part in. So yeah.

Marie Fagan 01:17

Well, thank you. Well, so our first question is kind of like a bringing picture back into specific moments. So obviously, I was a member of, or I am a member, but in this moment, I was a member of the choir. And on March 9, 2020, Amherst College sends and announces the closure of the college due to COVID. And I was just kind of wondering if you could like recount that experience, because I think it was very powerful.

Dr. Arianne Abela 01:47

That was such a bizarre day. So first of all, that morning, I had a department meeting, and all the music faculties were sitting in a room, and they said something like, “You know, we might be facing a couple changes, you know, distancing.” We were, we had a couple concerts coming up, and they said, “Maybe we’ll just limit it to students only and faculty, and staff.” And, and so we were like, kind of grumpy about, like having to do- having those changes. And then sorry, they’re mowing our lawn, so if you hear that, apologies. So I, you know, I initially thought, Okay, so those are the kinds of changes that are gonna happen. And then we were in rehearsal, as you remember, and Gil approaches me and says, “We just got an email, you might want to check your email.” And actually a couple other students, who should not have been checking their email in rehearsal, said, “Dr. Bell, we got an email.” And it was like, in the middle, we were just rehearsing this piece, and then like, all of a sudden, you know, I looked at this. And so I made the announcement to everybody, that we were immediately going remote. And I remember feeling confused, because at the time we were, it was so early compared to other schools. And it just seemed, to me was like, this is really drastic. It’s so funny to reflect on this two years later, right? Just like when the whole world really shut down. But I, but in that moment, it felt like, wow, that seems absolutely extreme. And then, and then we kind of had a sad moment. So the seniors, that was my last time seeing most of the seniors in that moment, and so I had to say goodbye to them. And people were we- we gathered in the lobby, and we sang “Three Gifts.” And that really stood out to me as this like, pivotal moment because that was the last time I made music with people for a very long time. Normally, and I would say that we’re still not really making music normally, right, because we’re still rehearsing with masks. So but that was the last time we really were able to sing together in that way. And I think the biggest thing that I realized, and I think many students realize is that this community that we have in the choir, is just, it’s very special, but it’s also irreplaceable and is absolutely not something that you can do online. Like it’s just, you cannot recreate live singing with other people. It’s just you have to be with others in that shared space. And last night, Marie, you were bringing up, you know, those moments, those amazing moments on stage where you connect with people, and it’s just, you can’t do that in any other way except for in live performance or in live rehearsal. So I think, I think that that loss was immediately felt in that week, you know, when everyone was packing up, and then we just couldn’t sing together and that the rest of the semester was really hard for everyone in a choir because we really couldn’t do anything. And we didn’t have the skills or technology yet to like sing, we still don’t have the technology to sing together in separate spaces. So yeah, that was a very scary moment. I actually remember the next day going to the grocery store and feeling really teary because I just was so sad about instead of like walking around buying my popcorn, like kind of tearing up [laughs], like, just thinking

like, this is, this is really sad for me, and especially to say goodbye to seniors in that way. It was very, very hard, I think. So yeah. I was just thinking about that last night, and how crazy that was. So...

Marie Fagan 05:48

Yeah, I remember [audio cuts out] um-

Dr. Arianne Abela 05:53

I felt lucky, though, that we were together like that we found out together. So it was nice to have, to be able to say, Okay, goodbye [laughs], you know, in that way. So...

Marie Fagan 06:02

Well kind of speaking to what you're talking about, about then transferring over to like, the virtual world. I guess, just wondering like, once we were sent to our homes and had to finish the semester virtually, what were like your expectations or ideas for continuing Choral Society in the virtual format? And what's being like a member of Choral Society, at that point, kind of looked like in the spring of 2020?

Dr. Arianne Abela 06:29

Well, it was funny, because in the parking lot after... so the faculty that week had to get, we had to get a bunch of like, computer training [laughs], which was like, hilarious. So we kept having to go in and like, they were like, "This is what Zoom is; good luck." And, and it was funny. And so I was with a couple other faculty members. And I said to them, "Oh, there's this whole concept of this virtual choir, where you record your own parts, and you sing." And like, everyone was like, "What is that," and, and saying to me, like, "That sounds terrible," or, you know, whatever. But it really became like, our only way of singing together, which is, it doesn't count to sing together. It's not a choir, right? You're just recording by yourself in a room. So that was a weird concept. I remember going home, and Noah was also trying to figure out what to do with choirs. He had, he was teaching at Oberlin, actually, at the time and had to come back, which was good for me. But, but because we were apart, but, but he, you know, immediately had to come home, and he was trying to figure out how to finish teaching remotely, which worked, you know, to his benefit to be home and be able to teach there. But, but he was saying, he was trying to figure out the technology of how to create this virtual, virtual choirs. And it was like, so interesting to see him, you know, trying to dabble in this new tech, and it was expensive tech, it was like, expensive editing, video editing. So yeah, I'm losing my train of thought. So I guess the first thing that I wanted to do was somehow see everybody every week. So we were meeting, and I continue to have guest speakers. But I think a couple times anyway, I said I would share music. But it was very evident that everyone was really tired. And it was exhausting and really emotionally draining. I lost touch with a lot of students, which kind of scared me actually. Like some students just completely disappeared from choir and like, did not reply to my emails. And I just didn't see on any of the Zooms. And that was very disheartening because with being in contact with students so much and you know, teaching's, teaching choir is very different, I think from a classroom setting, because you really connect, I think, in a

different way with students, and I felt, so, it was just very hard to be separated from the students and not be able to check up on them. So I was trying really hard. I was emailing individual students and saying, "Are you okay?" And I know a lot of students were not okay. And I think that it took a really big emotional toll on people. So I remember feeling very helpless and worried about, about people. And, you know, because they didn't really have to show up to choir Zoom. I think that not many people ended up showing up. And so it was a struggle to kind of maintain that community that I was talking about earlier. So that was a hard time. And that was hard time for me to I mean, I felt like I was emotionally finding it difficult. And I was pregnant, and it was a scary time. And, you know, so um, yeah, yeah, I mean, that was, that was hard. And I think I'm sad still, because some of those students who remained on Zoom maybe the next year or something or just didn't come back to choir, I just kind of lost touch with and so there was this big loss for me. The seniors last year, I just didn't really, some of them I didn't even get to see anymore or especially the seniors, of course, who graduated in 2020. So I just had kind of a difficult, it's been a kind of hard trajectory for the choir, I think. Yeah.

Marie Fagan 10:28

I guess. Um, I mean, it's kind of hard, because there were like, as you said, like, a lot of difficulties in that time. But I guess we're just wondering if there's kind of any unexpected positives from trying out this virtual format, and like, maybe things that you learned about virtual course, Choral Society that, you know, kind of informed other aspects of either choir or just like life?

Dr. Arianne Abela 10:55

Well, I think it was, I mean, I think I mentioned this last night, the fact that Zoom is so much better than Skype, and that we have this technology now. I, you know, I've always loved bringing composers and guest speakers in. But now it's a little bit easier to do that. So I'm grateful for that opportunity, I still think that the virtual choral thing is just not, I never want to do that. I hate it because it's just it, there's, you know, when you're sitting in a room recording, that's not the experience. I mean, that, that's not what choral singing is about, or ensemble, make-, you know, music making. I mean, it's just, you're not... It's community art, right. And it's not, but that's not what you're doing when you're doing it by herself and like listening to yourself and critiquing yourself and not with other people and not feeling inspired. So I would be okay if we never had to do virtual choirs again, even though we just did one. And, and that actually makes me think, you know, in the Philippines, the group that we were just collaborating with, I mean, the fact that there's still virtual, my heartbreaks for people who are still virtual, but it's just been, the pandemic's been really bad over there. And they basically didn't get vaccines, I mean, some family members only got vaccinated pret- recently. So it's like, it's hard to think that some people are still going through a lot of what we have already gone through and gotten past, which is, I'm more grateful for these things. And I feel myself in rehearsals, just feeling grateful, more grateful for the things that I definitely took for granted. Because my goodness, like that last night, when everyone was singing out outside, you know, after we got cookies, I mean, I missed that like, that swamped spontaneous music making and the joy and just being together that, that was just, it was so hard. So yeah, I guess I mean, for me, it's like being able to connect with people, bringing guests artists, that's great, or being able to

record ourselves. You know, I think, I think what was really interesting was that when people recorded themselves, they kind of had to learn the piece in a, in a very strong way because you had to hold your own apart. And so that was, that was interesting because I think that was good for people in terms of their individual musicality development. Last year, we did that piece, that was half virtual half-, were you there for that? Were you on campus? I don't even remember. It was the piece where the live choir sang. And then we had, we had everyone else record virtually, separately. And so it was a hybrid. And so that was interesting to do a performance that way of, like half hyb-, half live and half virtual. So, you know, I think the livestream cameras have done better in our hall because we've had to live stream and record things differently. So there are definitely things that are good, but I still would not want to go back to that.

Marie Fagan 14:21

That's super fair. Um, and you were just kind of mentioning this too how then there was kind of this hybrid aspect. So I was wondering if you could just kind of transition into then we have, I guess it was the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. Just what that looks like, again, kind of how people chose into that experience and even your own feelings on how that went?

Dr. Arianne Abela 14:45

Well first of all, I was super lucky, because I was on maternity leave in the fall. And my poor husband was my replacement and had to do all that [laughs] and I think it was just it was so hard. I mean, I think a couple times now I tried to do Jamie Lewis, and he started getting really involved in like the tech stuff because he's a computer person. And God I mean, it just looks exhausting and then we had the face masks, 12 foot distance apart, 30 minute limit indoors. We had all the tents we mostly did rehearsals outside in the tents. And it would be pouring rain, you couldn't hear anyone because the rain was so hard, or it was windy and everyone was cold. And it's just amazing like that we persevered through a lot of those things. But yeah, the 12 foot distance, 25 person limit in a room, 30 minute limit. Oh my gosh, I mean, just all those things were really complicated at some time. At some point. I was like, I don't know if it's, is it worth this energy that we're putting in because it's, you know, I hope people are enjoying it. But I think, ultimately, it was because everyone was just happy to be singing something. And then we didn't really even have enough people to have like different choirs. There's just picking repertoire was very hard for me last year because we had like three tenors and basses in total and then like 20 sopranos and altos. And then I was like, "What in the world can I program? What music?" And so I had to find, right? Were you there for the spring? So I had to find that one piece about stars where everyone was singing oohs and ahhs, right and, and it just, like didn't matter what boys part. And so that was kind of neat to like, have to find repertoire that worked and, and commission repertoire that was for this group. But yeah, that was exhausting. And I think in the fall of this school year, I mean, it just felt like a breath of fresh air. So I don't know. Yeah, it was a lot. I remember also finding it really weird to have to record our concerts, and then stream them and be home, able to watch the content like, I was able to watch the concert. That was weird to just like, say like, "It's concert night." I'm online on my computer watching the concert that we pre recorded. That was weird [laughs]. So, yeah.

Marie Fagan 17:22

Yeah, I remember that was that was bizarre, but it was-

Dr. Arianne Abela 17:26

Totally strange!

Marie Fagan 17:26

Yeah.

Dr. Arianne Abela 17:26

I was like sitting there with a glass of wine in my pajamas, watching our concert. [laughs]

Marie Fagan 17:35

So yeah, I guess, um, this is kind of just asking to examine and look at what Choral Society looks like today in terms of like, how we're practicing? What does the community look like, especially in regards to just coming out of this pandemic? I think you spoke a bit to how there was a lot of loss experienced, but um, how is the you know, from your perspective, the community in choir and the functionality of choir today, posts, post pandemic?

Dr. Arianne Abela 18:07

I mean, I think we're as normal as possible, right? I think it's great. I think everyone's just really grateful to be, to be there. And I'm finding that the younger students are coming out of a difficult time where, you know, they transitioned from high school, right, to college, and didn't get to sing in those last couple years of high school. And so I think a lot of them are excited to be able to be a part of the singing community. So that's nice. And yeah, I think, I mean, it feels to me, like the community is, is strong. And I think, you know, it's exciting, first of all, that we get to go on tour, because that's always that's a, that's a chance for us to, you know, to become a stronger community. And that's, that was a loss as well, right? To not be able to go on any trips or do anything as, as a whole, actually, right before the pandemic, the Glee Club went and sang at Lincoln Center, right, like a couple of weeks before the pandemic. So I feel really lucky that we got that. But that's, it's just yeah, like these community things like having dinner together or things like that. I mean, you just take those for granted. So the, so the fact that we can do a lot of that now is, is really great. I'm happy. So...

Marie Fagan 19:31

Um, well, in the spirit of some of our research that's kind of focusing on activism, um, I was like, I guess we're kind of wondering what ways, especially in the pandemic and the kind of awakening that the country was going through in the time, um, how has that influenced choir in your experience of choir and you know, what has- yeah, what does that influence look like?

Dr. Arianne Abela 19:59

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I think right now is such an important time for us to be singing music from, from all over the world, because I think that music and singing is, is opening doors and eyes to other communities that we may not understand. And I think that helps us to become stronger people and just, you know, it helps humanity grow. So I mean, I just think it's, I think it's wonderful that we can do that. And I've always tried to, to have music from different places. I mean, that's always been something that I've been passionate about. And, you know, like diversity and thinking about equity, that's always been in my mind. But I think when, you know, our country was facing a lot, and just the Black Lives Matter movement. I mean, I think, to me, you know, commissioning Brandon Waddles, who was a black composer, I mean, I've always commissioned him, he's a great friend of mine. But to me, it is even more important now to do music by him and by other composers from marginalized communities because they are offering a voice and, and being able to sing, that music is just, you know, diving into this like, human connection. And something that he said recently on our Zoom, you know, it was wonderful, he said, "You know, we've, we've all, you know, in humanity, we've all gone through loss and different experiences. And so we can relate to each other, you know, we really should be able to connect" And sometimes it's so easy for us to forget that, that kind of connection with our fellow humans, because we just, were so divided, and the internet's you know, magnifies everything. And just, so I think singing, being able to be in a space with people who are, who are from different places and different walks of life and different opinions, to sing a piece, like [says Arabic phrase] which is about if, when my voice goes, your voice will remain. I mean, that sentiment is, you know, it's in Arabic, but like, we all can relate to that, you know, and we all can think about that as humans. So I mean, I think art and music, now more than ever is important to create, because it just helps us to get outside of ourselves and be better human beings. And I just, you know, that's my goal as a teacher is just to, to open our eyes and open our ears and, and share in that experience because, you know, it's so easy to sit at your computer and be alone. And that's what we had to do for so long during the pandemic. And so now, you know, that now that we have this opportunity, I want to encourage people to sort of say, "Okay, like, let's listen to each other better, let's learn from the things that have happened." We're not a perfect society, and we need to, we need to use art and, and human expression to really connect with one another again. So yeah, I think it's important. And I think that, you know, the way our program has shifted, it's always, like I said, I've always kind of had it in mind, but I think now it's, it's nice to sort of weave it into the music that we do even more. So, yeah.

Marie Fagan 23:40

Well, that was all the questions that I put together. Um, and thank you so much for, for answering them and really like going in depth with it. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Arianne Abela 23:52

And if you have anything else that comes up, just email me. That's fine. So, so cool. And I got your email, I'll sign the consent form and everything, and I'll get that to you. And-

Marie Fagan 24:04

Awesome.

Dr. Arianne Abela 24:05

Yeah, this is awesome. And yes, I'm fine with this being kind of a part of whatever you need it to be a part of. So...very cool

Marie Fagan 24:11

Awesome. Thank you so much.

Dr. Arianne Abela 24:13

Thank you.

Marie Fagan 24:14

Well, I don't know if you need anything else. But-

Ansley Keane 24:17

Yeah, I don't think so. Thank you so much. It was really interesting to learn from you and to learn, especially about like, the importance of community as a thing that comes out of choir.

Dr. Arianne Abela 24:32

Yeah, thank you. Yeah, it's, it's been really nice to be able to be back together. So hopefully everyone stays healthy and that things are just up from here. So yeah. All right. Well, have a good rest of your day.

Marie Fagan 24:44

Thank you. Have a good one.