

Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss

Thursday, June 28, 2018

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Thursday, June 28, 2018, 7:00 pm EST

Wendy Cheng: It's 7 pm. I will get started now. I assume when people come in online, they're going to come in online. Right now, I'll put in two messages for people coming online. The first is to mute their sound. The second one is what I'll say on the chat: Please click on closed captioning at the bottom of the screen if you need to see closed captioning.

OK. The last thing I'll say is at the end of my interview, you'll have a chance to unmute yourself and ask questions.

I think Justin from Washington, D.C. is here and Dawn Mollenkopf from Nebraska is here. Hi, you're welcome to show yourself. Glad you made it, Dawn.

Let me start by welcoming everybody here. We are fortunate to have Lauren Jacobs from the University of California, San Francisco's Sound Lab Here to give us background on how they created their choir. I should record this.

Dawn Mollenkopf: It should be on the bottom bar.

Wendy Cheng: I know what it is. Holly, you have to turn on the recording since you're now the host. If you don't mind, click record.

Dawn Mollenkopf: Do you want me to record?

Wendy Cheng: In order for Holly to broadcast captioning, I had to make her the host. It's good now.

It's recording right now.

Today, we have an opportunity to interview with Lauren Jacobs, who is from the Sound Lab at the University of California San Francisco. She is the one who dreamed up the whole idea of a choir for people with hearing loss. At this point, Lauren, I should back up and ask you to give me some idea of your background. I understand that you have undergraduate degrees in both clinical psychology and music. Take it away.

Lauren Jacobs: OK. Hello. Thank you for having me. I do have a background in music and clinical psychology. I came to the Sound and Music Perception lab looking to work with music cognition. It happened that this lab does all of our research with cochlear implants -- most of our research with cochlear implant users and how they perceive sound and music.

We initially had a project going where we offered free piano lessons to cochlear implant users. That did well and lasted for two years. They were individualized 8 week lessons. We got a lot of feedback saying they wanted more music programs and singing, for example. I can't take credit for the idea to do this. I want to credit the community because their voices said that they

wanted to sing. I thought that the best way to sing is in a choir, especially with others with hearing loss. We applied for a grant. There's the Mount Zion Health Fund in San Francisco.

Wendy Cheng: Lauren, can you slow down and say where you got your grant.

Lauren Jacobs: Yeah. There's a group called the Mount Zion Health Fund. They have grants that you can apply for if you have a project that benefits populations that are underrepresented in some way. And so, individuals with hearing loss, specifically cochlear implant and hearing aid users are a population that qualifies for these kinds of grants.

We apply for the grant. We said that this is something that doesn't really exist yet and we think it would benefit the community that's asking for it. The grant went through. We received funding for this. It's a very fortunate coincidence, I think, that we have this Mount Zion Health Fund that awards community grants and allows us to do things like give piano lessons and create a choir. That's where we got our funding. I know that's not always a possibility for the average person. I think it definitely helps that our lab is an established lab and under the University of California San Francisco land, as well. That's how we knew about the grant. That's how we got our funding.

Wendy Cheng: That's good to know. How were you able to find the teachers to direct the choir?

Lauren Jacobs: Yeah. We have a connection with the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Our head of the lab, Dr. Charles Limb is extremely involved in the hearing loss and music worlds. He has a fantastic connection at the San Francisco Conservatory. Her name is Dr. Indrid Discontis, another brilliant and well-connected doctor of neuroscience and vocal performance. She found some wonderful vocal specialists as well as a wonderful choral director, both of whom are very patient and understanding and willing to work with anyone, really. They're just wonderful people.

So, the way that we conceived of this idea was to have one main Choral director who's kind of in charge of everything that a normal choral conductor is in charge of like running rehearsals, choosing the repertoire, conducting, and those logistical things. We also wanted a vocal specialist who could act as a support, specifically for our cochlear implant participants because we knew that there would be a large difference between someone who just recently is going through smaller amounts of hearing loss versus someone who completely just lost all of their hearing and needed to get implanted. We wanted a vocal specialist who could work one on one with people who felt that they needed it. That's why we always have at least three people in the room: choral director, vocal specialist, or myself or someone from UCSF as a representative to talk about the more technical side of hearing loss, if something comes up during the rehearsals.

Wendy Cheng: Wow. You have all three of vocal specialists at every rehearsal?

Lauren Jacobs: Yes. Also, something that's been developing -- we had about 30 express interest in our program, but because it's the summer, unfortunately, only about 10-15 people have been showing up to rehearsals. That makes it a little more difficult. It also makes it a little

more manageable. So, our vocal specialist has individualized lessons with singers who sign up an hour before the actual choir rehearsal. Then we have two hours of choir rehearsal once a week.

We're also trying to utilize different technologies. We had everybody download an app that can kind of -- that shows your voice and where it is -- let me try and find it. I don't have it on my phone. It's an iPhone app. I have something similar. I can show you what it does.

Here it is.

[Singing note C4]

Do you see that line? That's what I'm singing. It tells me that I was singing around a C4.

The app that we use in choir has different colors for each note. We're trying to associate notes with colors and get people to understand what it feels like in their throats as a physical thing versus an aural thing. Rather than singing a note which isn't helpful for someone with a cochlear implant who might not even hear that pitch, we have them look into their phone and try and get them to that starting pitch

That's kind of one of the ways that we're working with technology.

Another way that we're trying to work with different ranges of musicality here with the singers is to have all of the songs be in the key of C, at least to begin with, because that's easy to see on the app, for one. Also, it's easier to feel for muscle memory if you can always get close to a C and move your voice up or down to hit that C. From there, you can remember what it feels like to hit "do, me, do," etc.

That's basically the gist of the choir.

In terms of the actual rehearsal, we run it pretty much like a regular choir. We go a lot slower, I think, but people tend to pick up pretty quickly, especially those who have musical experience. If they feel like they're off then they can look at their app and try and sing into their app to ensure that they're on key. We definitely try and do songs that have a more restricted range. The higher you get for cochlear implant users, it cuts off whereas it sounds like the same note over and over. If you can contain it to more of the frequencies of where speech is perceived, you will have a higher success in terms of pitch matching.

Wendy Cheng: Lauren, I have a question. Are all the singers in the choir -- do they all have cochlear implants or do you also have hearing aid users or a combination?

Lauren Jacobs: Yeah. We have like 30% CI users, 30% hearing aid users, and like, I think, 1% who does not have any hearing aid or cochlear implants, but she's deaf in one ear. We have bimodal people, bilateral, unilateral users. We also have all ages, which is nice.

Wendy Cheng: How many of the people in the choir have not sung before?

Lauren Jacobs: I would say the majority. I think we only have three or four people who have sung before, at least in a choir capacity, maybe even fewer.

Wendy Cheng: OK. Cool. That is so cool. Do you rehearse once a week?

Lauren Jacobs: Once a week for two hours.

Wendy Cheng: Do you plan to do a final concert?

Lauren Jacobs: We do. That's actually something that's in the works now. We're pushing our singers. A performance is a very rewarding thing, but we want to make sure that it's not intimidating. A lot of them have never sung in a choir before. We're trying to decide on what kind of performance we want to put on, whether it's open to the public and telling people about it or whether we want it to be more friends and family or even if we just want it to be an open rehearsal so there's not this big pressure.

Wendy Cheng: I understand. Some people don't want to sing in public. Others have no problem showcasing their talent in public. I understand your problem. I asked one or two people from our group to look into participating. One of our members, Rachel Katz, lives in San Francisco. I don't know if she signed up, but I told her to. She has previous singing experience. So, your grant money and covering the rental space and paying the coaches, right?

Lauren Jacobs: [Confirming]

Wendy Cheng: How many for each part-- soprano, alto, tenor, or bass? Are you singing SATB music?

Lauren Jacobs: No. At this point, we're only singing everyone on the same part. This is the first time that we've ever done this. We're really trying to keep it as basic as possible and make it as easy and accessible as possible. We tried, for the first few weeks of rehearsal, different levels of things and try and meet them where we thought that they could succeed, essentially. I think harmonies were -- we're actually just starting to do harmonies. Just last week, someone did a harmony. It's almost halfway through the summer. We've been trying to get everyone singing together.

Wendy Cheng: That's good. How many male and female singers do you have?

Lauren Jacobs: Actually, surprisingly, I think it's about 40/60 male/female.

Wendy Cheng: Cool.

Lauren Jacobs: I don't know. I'm not good at remembering.

Wendy Cheng: 40% male, 60% female? It sounds like a good mix. I would think that even if you're singing in unison, the males has to learn to sing an octave below the females?

Lauren Jacobs: Yes.

Wendy Cheng: Very cool. You know what? After I send you our brochures about fliers, you can tell your choir members that we would really love it if you could broadcast or do a performance just for my association for them to enjoy their concert in real time and support them.

Lauren Jacobs: Yeah. I'll see what they say. I won't be around for the final performance. It's so sad!

Wendy Cheng: That's awful. This program -- is it a 12-week program?

Lauren Jacobs: Um, we just -- I didn't count the number of weeks. We started in May and end in September.

Wendy Cheng: OK. End in September?

Lauren Jacobs: Beginning of September.

Wendy Cheng: OK. OK. I'm going to allow people to unmute themselves. If they have questions for Lauren, now is the time to ask. Figure out how you can unmute yourselves. Dawn, do you have a question?

Dawn Mollenkopf: You're unmuted now. Go for it. Did you have something to say? I guess I can say something.

Wendy Cheng: Dawn, do you sing in a choir now? I wasn't sure if you did.

Dawn Mollenkopf: I have no option to sing in a choir. So, I just solo. I haven't had anyone to sing with, and I don't have that access. But it's just hard to hear in a choir. I do have the ability to hear myself with the type of loss that I have. I just can't hear anyone else.

Wendy Cheng: Christine Seymour, do you have a question?

Christine Seymour: I want to ask a question exactly about what Dawn just said. I'm curious if anyone's using any assistive technology to try to hear the singers around them while trying to match pitch?

Lauren Jacobs: Yeah, in terms of assistive technology, we have one singer who has one of the clip-on microphones to our choral director. Other than that, I'm not sure.

Wendy Cheng: There's one thing I'd love to try at our October meetup, to put a loop system in a choral room and have all singers who are there -- whatever microphone we have. We'll probably put a microphone between every two singers. I constantly wonder how to use induction technology to work in a choral environment. That's something I'm curious about.

Lauren Jacobs: One thing I think that we have heard feedback from is that hearing other singers can actually be distracting in many ways, especially for cochlear implant users. There might be just too much information coming at them. Sometimes we have them stand off to the side. We've done rounds, not harmonies, before. We have half the room doing "ding dong . . ." and the other group singing over it. We want to separate them so we don't have too much fatigue for our singers.

Wendy Cheng: OK. That sounds interesting. Really cool.

Dawn Mollenkopf: I think Christine had a question or comment.

Justin Swain: I'm hearing impaired, which is to say deaf without hearing aids. I have a Zoom brand digital recorder a Zoom 4n pro. With that, I use a One Roads directional microphone (also known as a shotgun mic). It goes with a headset. It's a cumbersome, but functional combination. It's cheaper than a \$2000-3000 hearing aid.

Most people are accepting of it. At times, it may get in the way. Our choral director tells everybody to move up close. I'm seated next to the piano. With the unwieldy combination of all the technology, yes, the boom mic managed to strike the music on the piano. Consequently, the choir director's music on the piano fell down. That's the long and short of it. Thanks.

Wendy Cheng: Thank you, Justin. Christine Seymour, do you have a comment?

Christine Seymour: Yeah. I'm trying to figure out how to frame it. In my effort to try to learn to sing, I'm finding it very difficult to match pitch with a piano because I tend to hear all the overtones and undertones. But I'm able to match pitch quite well with my voice teacher's voice. That was why I was asking about if any of the people in your chorus actually are using their other members' voices to help guide them to the right pitch. Anyway, that's kind of what I'm trying to ask and I don't know how.

Lauren Jacobs: Yeah. Umm... I don't know the answer to that question. I'm not sure what our singers are thinking or how they're finding a matching pitch. We often have the piano playing in the lower register for our men and we have our choral director singing the line in her octave. That seems to work most of the time.

Christine Seymour: OK. So, they're likely following the choral teacher's singing more than the piano? My other question is what is the name of that iPhone app? Is that available publicly?

Lauren Jacobs: Yeah. I can email it to Wendy. I'm not in charge of the app. Actually, Heidi Moss, it was her idea and implementation of it. She's a better resource for that. I can send the name of it through Wendy.

Wendy Cheng: OK. If you can email the name of the app, I'll send the information out. That would be great. Alright, does anyone else have questions for Lauren? I know she's

starving. Do you know what the plans are after September for the program?

Lauren Jacobs: I don't. We're hoping that it will be a success enough that we can find funding again for round 2. But, unfortunately, I'm not sure what's happening after this.

Wendy Cheng: OK. I understand. You are leaving for audiology school in the fall, so I understand. Alright, does anyone else have questions for Lauren? If not, I'm just going to thank everybody for coming. Thank you for showing up.

I'll make the recording available for anybody who's interested in looking at the recording later. Thank you. Have a great evening, everybody. Bye.

Dawn Mollenkopf: Thank you.

Wendy Cheng: Thank you.

Justin: Bye, all. [End of meeting]