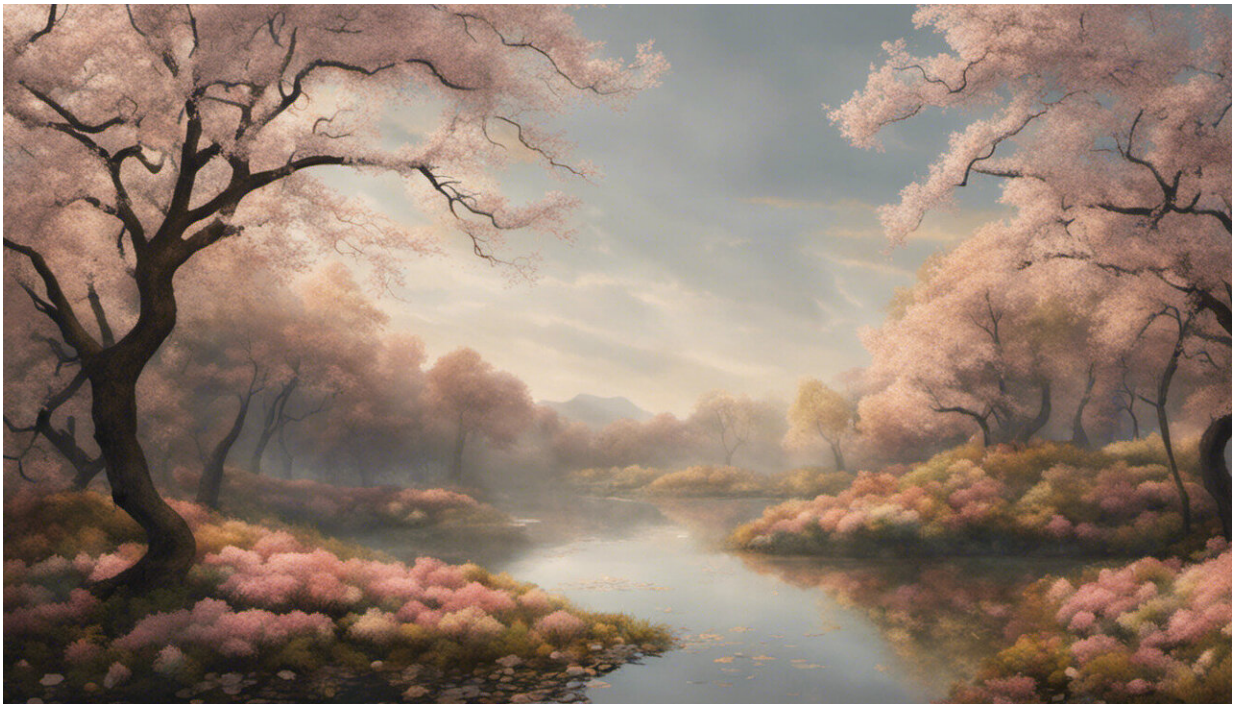


Improving well-being for older adults through virtual music theater

November 23 2022, by Julia Brook and Colleen Renihan



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Digital programming and virtual interactions, initially considered to be stop-gap measures during the first few waves of the pandemic, may now be an important part of supporting many people's health and well-being—including the well-being of older adults.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, group [musical activities](#) moved online, prompting a wave of [virtual choir](#) experiments and [virtual orchestra](#) offerings.

These and other [online communities](#) weren't limited to students. A [Statistics Canada survey](#) found that more than half of Canadians between the ages of 64 and 74 increased their participation in online activities during the pandemic by connecting with family and friends through video conferencing, or accessing entertainment online.

Virtual opportunities in the [performing arts are ripe with potential](#) for older adults to foster skills and creativity, and to improve well-being.

Social connection

Going digital serves many purposes, the most important of which may be social connection.

Since [connecting with others](#) remains important for older adults, this can be achieved through, or in addition to, virtual leisure or entertainment opportunities.

Our research has revealed that [virtual music theater—music theater online—allows for a more accessible and a less exclusive way to engage with this art form](#) with many benefits for participants.

Online performing arts

The performing arts allow performers and audiences to feel, be creative in community, express themselves and communicate or play through song, movement or storytelling.

Benefits associated with participation in the arts include [improved mood and well-being](#) and sense of [belonging](#).

Research has also documented associations between seniors' participation in the arts and improved [mobility](#) and [vocal health](#).

Before the pandemic erupted, we had started leading a program, [Rise, Shine, Sing!](#), that created opportunities for local citizens typically excluded from the creation of [music](#) theater due to age, ability and access. The program was mostly attended by older adults, some with Parkinson's Disease or other chronic conditions.

We held three weekly face-to-face sessions from the end of February 2020, until mid-March, and then moved the program online (via Zoom) for 12 sessions from April until June 2020. The program continues to be offered, with many participants indicating a preference to continue virtually.

Somewhat to our surprise, when the program moved online, the fact that participants could only hear the facilitator and themselves singing was not a deterrent to participating. Participants enjoyed singing, dancing and creating characters using costumes and props based on cues and feedback from facilitators.

Paradigm shift for music theater

Virtual music theater presents a serious paradigm shift for the genre. Most of the time when people think of music theater, they think of live bodies moving in perfect synchrony [to choreographed movement](#), and voices singing in perfect harmony while performers are physically present together.

Researchers have examined how group singing and movement fosters

togetherness, [community](#) and [social bonding](#).

Music theater has made strides to become more inclusive over the course of the 21st century. [Los-Angeles based Deaf West Theater](#), for example, creates works of music theater that can be experienced and performed by members of the Deaf and hearing communities.

A multitude of new works, stagings and casting practices are highlighting and supporting the experiences of marginalized groups, by [diversifying](#) and [queering](#) the field, for example.

Such works offer resistance and new stories to an industry that has traditionally been ableist, white and ageist.

But despite a healthy [community music theater scene](#) in North America, most opportunities still leave out many people due to issues related to social anxiety, experience, mobility, family life and/or finances.

Music theater meets universal design

We drew on the intersection of [music theater performance](#) and [universal design for learning](#) to develop a model where success could look different from person to person.

In terms of the movement, participants could synchronize with the facilitator and/or other members of the group. They were equally welcome and encouraged to customize or adapt their movements to suit their own needs and interests.

We embraced dancing from both a seated and standing position, to explore different levels and to accommodate different mobility capabilities. Participants controlled how much they shared by deciding how visible they wanted to be on camera.

Classics and newer numbers

We drew on musical classics or standards from "[Singin' in the Rain](#)," "The Sound of Music," "[Joseph and The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat](#)"—as well as newer numbers from Wicked and other popular songs.

We also [co-created our own songs](#) by combining our shared memories or inspirations through image, lyrics and movements to explore themes of joy and resilience in difficult times.

While the program was led virtually, before sessions, leaders dropped off or mailed prop boxes to all participants. These were filled with costumes including small scarves and ribbons that could be used for choreography.

Promise of virtual musical theater

Virtual music theater has shown incredible promise, even in the short time we have been exploring it. Digital connections reframe being together at the same time and in the same space. This adds new unexpected dimensions to [making music in a group](#).

First, goals and expectations of uniformity are replaced with goals of individual empowerment and creative exploration.

Second, participants remain committed to the community and group endeavor, but are also free to tailor and adapt the ways they engage with the material and with one another. If group members invite friends or family in other cities to participate virtually, as some in our group did, the virtual community also expands in meaningful ways.

Finally, participants can also adjust their personal comfort by sharing as much or little of themselves with the group without feeling like they are letting the group down.

Our hybrid future

The pandemic catalyzed the need for virtual interaction. While we know that [Zoom fatigue](#) is pervasive, virtual opportunities for music theater participation and creation offer a new paradigm of artistic experience.

These opportunities also offer striking promise for bringing performers some of the [same benefits](#) as in-person music [theater](#) experiences.

In some cases, they also facilitate new access to music in community, and allow participants to engage with the art form and one another in ways that support personal agency and independence, while also maintaining social connection and interactivity. [Who could ask for anything more?](#)

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