

# Chorus sets its sights on 'Winter's Cold' virtual concert

Members undaunted by pandemic, hope to expand audience

By BROOKE GLASSBERG  
SPECIAL TO THE MIRROR

It's almost too perfect a parallel: a phoenix emerging reborn from smoldering ashes. Though the trope is eternally resonant, it has taken on an entirely new meaning for a local choral group in the Covid-19 era.

Matthew LaPine, founder and artistic director of the Metuchen-based Rise Up Chorus, has transformed the community-based group more than once to keep the program not only surviving, but thriving.

The culmination of those efforts is "Winter's Cold," a Dec. 19 virtual concert featuring music composed by Gerald Custer, who grew up in Metuchen, with lyrics contributed by chorus members.

"This has been the hardest thing I've ever had to put together," said LaPine. "It's like a living room concert - people are recording themselves at home, expressing themselves in the only way that's safe right now."

LaPine, a music teacher at Bernards High School in Bernardsville, founded Rise Up Chorus in September 2017 as a contemporary, community-focused singing group that prizes the power of people and connection above pitch-perfect performances. Joining him in the venture were his wife Jessica, a middle-school vocal teacher in Plainfield, and Tom DeLessio, director of music at St. Francis Cathedral.

While not affiliated with any church



— DEBORAH NILSON KMETZ

Jessica and Matthew LaPine review selections for the "Winter's Cold" concert.

or organization, the non-profit Rise Up Chorus has a divine mission. The music is diverse, the purpose is to represent the underrepresented and the dues are non-existent.

"We didn't want great musical experiences to be tied into your income. We don't care if you're tone deaf," said LaPine. "If you like to sing, this is a place for you."

Some 60 adults and about a dozen youths used to attend weekly Friday rehearsals at St. Luke's Episcopal Church from as far as an hour's train trip away, or they walked from their homes. Now, thanks to Zoom, LaPine's mother can dial in from Massachusetts. Retired and relocated chorus members

show up from far-off IP addresses.

"Things were going so well for us, but we haven't let Covid stop us. We're actually doing more now than we did before," said LaPine.

The chorus' last performance was a February concert centered around African-American composers. An intended March concert, featuring works by composers who identify as female and pegged to the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage, was canceled.

In addition to "Winter's Cold," the Rise Up Chorus is working on three ensemble pieces as a virtual choir. LaPine has commissioned an audio-visual engineer to turn each individual's

lines into a cohesive track.

He also started offering musicianship classes in topics such as musical theory and ear training led by his wife, DeLessio and himself - something they could never do in person because of time and space constraints.

They also tried an inspirational community singalong, with participants belting out "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and "Lean On Me" from their devices, but LaPine knew that wasn't a long-term solution. "How enjoyable is singing by yourself on mute when you can only hear me?"

Members held fast to their tradition of recipe-sharing and potluck meals, which formerly would have laddered up to a performance. They still cook and consume, even if their efforts are no longer shared communally.

For now, the Rise Up Chorus is

running with the online concert model. Because in-person performances were increasingly well attended, the format has two big advantages - a larger audience can attend and only one performance needs to be staged, as opposed to two seatings.

"We're going to have learned some really important lessons from Covid," LaPine said. "I want to challenge norms, to use technology without relying on it, to take something we've always done and make it better. Maybe we livestream our rehearsals and come back together for performances - I would have never thought of that before."

He added, "I have no idea what we're going to look like when January comes. Rising up is the only thing we can do."

For more information, visit [riseupchorus.org](http://riseupchorus.org).