

A cappella group is driven to sing

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CAM YOU HEAR ME NOW?—The Ahhh Capella women’s singing group keeps the fun alive during the pandemic by singing from individual vehicles and feeding voices through the car radio. Courtesy photo

Whether you call it “car-cappella” or “carbershop quartet,” the Agoura Hills Harmony Chorus hasn’t let the pandemic stop them from congregating to sing their favorite tunes. The all-female a cappella singing group is one organization that has found a Zoom-free method of rehearsing together,

and the singers are having a lot of fun doing it.

Each Tuesday, about two dozen singers from Ahh Cappella drive to the parking lot of the Newbury Park First Christian Church and use a transmitter and other equipment that allow them to sing together from the safety and comfort of their cars.

According to Monica Tautkus, who has led the group since its inception in 1991, the technology they are using was tested for a church choir in Massachusetts and the Somerset Hills Harmony chorus in New Jersey.

Just before the pandemic, the Agoura Hills choir had 65 members, but the numbers reduced to around 32.

"We used to meet in St. Patrick's Episcopal Church and rehearse on risers with everybody standing right next to each other," said Barbara Schultz, president of the group's board of directors. "Then when the pandemic hit, we switched over to Zoom, which weeded out some people right away who were not comfortable with the technology. Even with our new car technology, a couple left who were not able to drive at night. But doing it this way gives us a chance to hear each other, which we couldn't do on Zoom."

In order to direct a choir so that everyone could see her, Tautkus got an idea from Jim Henry, director of choral studies at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, who flipped a set of risers around and conducted from the top row, using the rail on the top for support.

"I thought that was interesting," Tautkus said, "so we found the church in Newbury Park, which has a flat parking lot, so we were able to spread out, two rows deep, in a U-shape so everybody could see me. I have to use larger arm movements than I normally would, which is opposite of everything they teach you, but I'm getting used to it."

For the rehearsals, the choir bought a 24-channel mixing board, an FM transmitter and microphones for every singer.

“Some groups tried using wireless mics but found that there was a lot of interference, so we use wired hand mics, which have much stronger signals. We run the cables out the car window and plug them into the mixer board, so no one has to get out of their car, and everyone listens through their car radio. Our singers have come up with creative ways of mounting the mics so they can sing hands-free.”

From her perch in front of the group, Tautkus is able to direct specific singers as she would in a normal rehearsal space, monitoring the voices through a set of headphones.

“We don’t have someone to work the mixing board, but because we normally sing on risers, we usually are able to monitor our own volume as we sing, so I’d rather our singers do it that way.”

Rehearsals begin with each person singing a line from “You Are My Sunshine” so Tautkus can make adjustments for each person’s mic placement and volume.

Ahh Cappella’s repertoire consists of a variety of styles, including barbershop, contemporary songs and show tunes.

“We’re learning ‘A Million Dreams’ from ‘The Greatest Showman’ and ‘Sing’ by Pentatonix,” Tautkus said, “which is kind of a challenge because it has scat and rap, which we’re not used to singing, but it’s been a lot of fun. You can feel the energy, even though it’s in a parking lot.”