

COVID-19 Transitioning – Standards for Choirs

The following standards are issued under the Public Health Act Chapter 465 of the Laws of Malta.

Standards to be observed by choirs

All choirs shall:

- a) advise choir members not to attend for rehearsals or performances if they are experiencing any potential COVID-19 symptoms or have been in close contact with any known cases of COVID-19.
- b) keep records of the contact information (name and a phone number) of individuals attending rehearsals/performances for 28 days after the rehearsal/performance.
- c) provide adequate and easily accessible hand sanitisers with an appropriate 70% alcohol hand-rub on entry into the area where the rehearsal/performance is being held and ensure that all persons sanitise their hands on entering.
- d) ensure that choir members maintain social distancing throughout rehearsals and performances, with not more than one (1) choir member per four (4) square metres floor area, a distance of at least **two and a half (2.5) metres from each other**, and a distance of at least **four (4) metres from the audience**, due to the generation and emission of respiratory droplets of various sizes that occurs during singing.
- e) ensure that choir members avoid physical contact with each other, frequently sanitise their hands, practice respiratory etiquette and avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- f) where possible, practise and perform outdoors.
- g) when practising or performing indoors, spaces utilised must be well-ventilated with fresh air.
- h) ensure that singers do not share microphones, song sheets or other documents.
- i) ensure that premises used for rehearsals and performances are regularly and thoroughly cleaned.
- j) ensure that masks or visors are worn by singers, audience and any other persons in the premises, with the understanding that singers are exempt from this requirement while singing (they should still abide by the mask/visor requirement the rest of the time). Where tolerated, masks (or masks together with visors) are preferred to visors.

Background

While the role of coughing and sneezing in the spread of infectious diseases affecting the respiratory system is much discussed, the role of singing is less so. When an individual coughs or sneezes, a large number of particles known as respiratory droplets are emitted into the air. These droplets may even be visible. Vocal activities such as singing similarly result in the generation and emission of respiratory droplets which results in viral particles in the air around the singer, if infected. While not generally visible to the naked eye, droplets generated by singing are therefore capable of transmitting infectious respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. Additionally, it has been shown that the greater the loudness of vocalisation, the greater the generation and emission of respiratory droplets. When an individual is infected with COVID-19, these respiratory droplets contain virus particles. If nearby persons inhale a sufficient amount of these virus particles, they are at significantly increased risk of becoming infected with COVID-19.

There is ongoing debate and press coverage around the role of smaller aerosol particles and their role in spreading the virus further than 2 metres. These aerosols (unlike droplets) can float in the air for a long time and be present in closed spaces, even after the infected person has left the environment. However, other than in specific procedures normally undertaken in hospitals, the advice from WHO remains that aerosol transmission in the community is, at best, rare and only in exceptional situations within poorly ventilated indoor premises.

The most common symptoms of coronavirus include cough, fever, shortness of breath, tiredness, sore throat, runny / blocked nose, headache, muscle pain, loss of smell, loss of taste, diarrhoea or vomiting. Most persons infected with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms and recover. However, some go on to experience more serious illness and may require hospital care. Risk of serious illness rises with age. People with weakened immune systems and people with conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease are also more vulnerable to serious illness.

Persons who develop these symptoms, are to stay at home, contact their doctor and contact the Public Health team on 111 (or +356 21324086 if calling from a foreign number) for further advice and guidance. For more information, seek guidance on www.covid19health.gov.mt

Guidelines for the implementation of standards to be observed by choirs

In view of the above, and in light of documented incidents in various countries where outbreaks of COVID-19 have been linked to choir rehearsals and performances, additional precautions are recommended for choirs who wish to restart their activity in the COVID-19 transition phase.

These guidelines provide considerations that choir organisers must take into account when deciding on control measures such as adaptations of rehearsals and performances to allow for social distancing, use of masks, the adequacy of facilities for proper personal and public hygiene, cleaning arrangements, and other changes that may affect the health and safety of performers.

Enabling contact tracing

Choir organisers are required to collect the contact details (name and a phone number) of those attending rehearsals and performances and keep a record of this information for 28 days (including musicians and crew where applicable), explaining that these will only be divulged to an authorised officer in case contact tracing is required. This will enable contact tracing to be carried out should a positive case result among choir members or other persons involved in rehearsals/performances.

COVID Alert Malta

All singers and crew are encouraged to download the COVID Alert Malta application to help facilitate the contact tracing process in case they develop COVID-19 or have been in close contact with someone known to have COVID-19. The instructions for downloading the application can be found at <https://covidalert.gov.mt>

Social/physical distancing

Social distancing refers to the requirement that people physically distance themselves from others. Choir members and, where involved, musicians and crew are all required to practice social distancing and should avoid physical contact as much as possible. Minimum possible numbers of singers, musicians and crew should participate, with not more than one (1) person for every four (4) square metres floor area during both rehearsals and performances.

Public Health Authorities have determined that everyone should keep at least 2 metres from others not from the same household. This is applicable to most situations, however, in case of groups involving singing, a larger distance between singers is being recommended in view of the greater generation and emission of respiratory droplets generated by this activity (as described in the 'Background' section above).

Consequently, singers are advised to maintain a distance of at least **two and a half (2.5) metres from each other** and a distance of at least **four (4) metres from the audience** whenever practising or performing. Care should be taken to ensure that performers maintain social distancing while taking and leaving their position during rehearsals and performances and at all times before and after rehearsals or performances. In the interest of reducing the duration of activities, particularly activities in closed spaces, the duration of rehearsals should be minimised to the extent possible. The two and a half-metre distance between singers should only be reduced if adequate physical barriers (e.g. clear acrylic or tempered glass screens) are used between singers to prevent droplet spread.

Guidance on the use of medical or cloth masks or visors for choirs

As per the provisions of Legal Notice 402 of 2020, 'any person shall, outside his residence, both when going to an indoor place and outdoors, wear a medical or cloth mask or visor in a proper manner covering the nose, mouth and chin of the person', unless exempted as per the exemptions described within said legal notice.

The mandatory use of medical or cloth masks or visors applies to choirs and all forms of vocal performances. Where tolerated, a medical or cloth mask (or a mask together with a visor) is preferred to a visor alone. The use of visors alone is discouraged. In the case of choirs, the temporary removal of medical or cloth masks or visors shall be permissible while singing, provided that the other recommended mitigation measures (including appropriate distancing as described above) are maintained. Singers, audience and any other persons in the premises should still abide by the mask/visor requirement the rest of the time.

While ideally choir directors should wear a mask, if this is impairing interaction with the choir, the choir director can wear a visor and in addition deploy one of the following alternatives:

- The choir director maintains a distance of at least two and a half (2.5) metres from all other choir members, and a distance of at least four (4) metres from the audience.
- The choir director stands behind a clear acrylic or tempered glass cubicle (three sides of clear acrylic or tempered glass between the conductor and musicians that are higher than the height of the choir director and his/her dais combined).

At all other times except when directing the choir, choir directors should abide by mask requirements.

Choir members with severe cognitive, physical, mental or respiratory impairments who have difficulties tolerating a mask as certified by a licensed medical practitioner are exempt from the requirement to wear a medical or cloth mask or visor. They should carry their exemption certificate on their person at all times in case of enforcement checks.

Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette

Choir members, musicians and crew (where relevant) should sanitise their hands with soap and water or a 70% alcohol hand-rub on arriving at the rehearsal/performance space and frequently thereafter, including:

- After blowing their nose, coughing or sneezing.
- After touching surfaces within the rehearsal/performance space.
- After using the toilet.

Choir members, musicians and crew should avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands and follow the principles of respiratory etiquette, namely:

- Covering their nose and mouth with a tissue or inner side of flexed elbow when coughing or sneezing.
- Making sure NOT to sneeze or cough into their hands to avoid contaminating objects or people that they touch; if this cannot be avoided hands should be washed immediately afterwards.
- Disposing of used tissues immediately in lined and closed bins and washing their hands afterwards - tissues should not be left running around.
- Not attending rehearsals/performances if experiencing any respiratory symptoms or other potential symptoms of coronavirus infection.

Those present at rehearsals/performances should avoid hugs, handshakes and other forms of physical contact. Non-contact greetings such as waving, bowing and nodding can be used instead.

Hygiene facilities and ventilation

Organisers must ensure adequate and accessible facilities to achieve good hygiene in the locations used by the choir for practice or performances. Facilities should be adequate, accessible, equipped with disposable hand wipes, soap and sanitizers, in good working order, clean and safe.

They should be thoroughly and regularly cleaned (see further details in section on 'Cleaning and Disinfection' below). Bathroom doors and windows should be kept open to allow for better ventilation. Hand dryers should not be used as these can potentially disperse viral particles into the air.

Where feasible, outdoor locations are preferred for rehearsals and performances as outdoor spaces have better ventilation, reducing COVID-19 transmission risk. If rehearsals/ performances are being carried out indoors, premises must be kept well-ventilated with fresh air, such as by keeping windows and doors open. Air conditioning and ventilation systems shall comply with guidance on air conditioning and ventilation systems as applicable to the particular venue. Guidance is available on [covid19health.gov.mt](https://www.covid19health.gov.mt). In cases where the choir rents/uses a space for rehearsals/performances which is not under their ownership, they should liaise with operators of the space to see that these requirements are being met.

Considerations for singers, musicians and crew

Choir members should set up their own microphones and dress themselves for performances. Microphones should not be shared. Wardrobe hygiene must also be considered when costumes are in storage. If outfits cannot be cleaned, they must be kept in storage for 72 hours before being reused by a different person. If performers will not be applying their own make-up and hair styling, the makeup designer and hairdresser doing so should have the necessary protective wear, and the singers and presenters as well as anyone else requiring make-up for the performance should bring their own make up kits, brushes and hair styling products to reduce the risk of contamination. The processes should be kept as short as possible and less than 15 minutes. Make-up equipment should not be shared between performers. Each performer should have a dedicated space for their personal belongings (pens, glasses, clothing etc), which should not be kept 'floating around' the backstage area/rehearsal space. Digital copies of song sheets and other documents should be used whenever

possible. If paper copies must be used, singers and musicians should have their own copies and copies should not be shared between users. Items such as water bottles and glasses should not be shared.

Workstations and equipment used by more than one person need to be cleaned between users. Backstage and 'back of house' areas should be kept well-ventilated.

Cleaning and disinfecting measures

Choir organisers should ensure that any premises used for rehearsing or performances are regularly and thoroughly cleaned. Any surfaces that are frequently touched should be prioritised for cleaning, e.g. music stands, door handles, seating, bathroom and other sanitary facilities, including bathroom fixtures like taps and flushing handles (if available at the rehearsal/performance space). Further guidance regarding cleaning and disinfecting is available in the relevant section of the guidelines for Indoor Theatres and Cinemas which can be found on <https://deputyprimeminister.gov.mt/en/health-promotion/covid-19/Pages/mitigation-conditions-and-guidances.aspx>.

How to stay informed: www.covid19health.gov.mt