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A Virtual Melody

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A Kansas State University music professor is creating an international tune by using the digital world to reach flutists around the globe.

Karen McLaughlin Large, assistant professor of music, is the creator of the Virtual Flute Choir, an ensemble of flutists who use YouTube to participate in large-scale digital performances. The choir and the research behind it offer flutists of all ages the opportunity to perform together while improving musical skills.

The Virtual Flute Choir is based on the concepts behind the YouTube Symphony Orchestra and other virtual singing choirs. Participants submit videos of themselves playing a musical selection, and Large compiles these videos to create a single video ensemble performance. Large's virtual choir is the first of its kind for flutes.

The choir is open to flutists of all ages and all skill levels — from beginner to professional — and is important for developing a variety of skills, Large said. It teaches participants how to play in an ensemble, how to play with good tuning and how to watch a conductor.

“The virtual choir helps participants understand the fundamentals of music,” Large said. “Each person is an individual and experiences it in a different way.”

Large created the first Virtual Flute Choir in October 2012 with support from a Kansas State University Small Research Grant. The 2012 video featured the piece “Russian Sailors’ Dance” by Reinhold Gliere and included 82 participants ranging from high school age to 70 years old.

Large received the university grant again to continue the project this year and wants to have 200 participants. She will debut the 2013 video in October and currently is collecting participant videos.

The 2012 video — which included five university undergraduate flutists — featured 11 parts and a variety of instruments from the flute family: piccolos, flutes, alto flutes and bass flutes. Several of Large’s colleagues across the country contributed videos of different levels of contraflutes, which are a rare group of flutes with a lower, bass sound similar to a tuba.

“I want the Virtual Flute Choir to be inclusive to a variety of people,” Large said. “Kansas State University is a land-grant university and part of our mission is to serve the people of Kansas. Some folks may never see a contrabass flute and I want them to be able to participate in an ensemble like this. By using this technology, they can do that.”

The Virtual Flute Choir also gives participants the opportunity to perform with internationally recognized flutists and conductors. For each virtual choir, Large produces a conducting video to the chosen song. The 2012 conductor and arranger was Shaul Ben-Meir, a former flutist in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and renowned music arranger. The 2013 conductor is Paige Dashner Long, an internationally recognized flute choir director and contrabass flutist. She was a guest artist on campus in the spring to work with students and perform in the university flute ensemble spring concert.

After creating the conducting video, Large uploads it to YouTube. Interested participants choose their song part and practice individually. When participants are ready, they watch the conducting video and use a webcam to record themselves playing their parts.

Participants upload their videos to YouTube and submit the links to Large, who compiles all of the audio and creates the final song for the video performance. Skyler Butler, a Kansas State University senior in mechanical engineering from Great Bend, Kan., was the digital media engineer for the 2012 project and created the video clip for the final performance.

In addition to the Virtual Flute Choir, Large teaches courses on flute, music theory, flute methods and world music. She also directs the university flute ensemble and researches emotional responses to music, the role of musical analysis in performance and baroque flute performance practice.

“Flutists are known for being social creatures. I thought that creating a virtual ensemble would really help connect us globally.”

Karen McLaughlin Large

To watch the 2012 Virtual Flute Choir video and to find information about submitting videos for the 2013 choir, go to virtualflutecoir.com