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A New Tune

When Nicole Lamartine agreed to become the inaugural Sorensen Director of Choral Music at UC Santa Barbara, she knew she was in for a challenge. What she didn't expect, maybe: no students on campus.

Choir, as she notes, is about people being together. What do you do when that's not possible? Lamartine, who came to UCSB from the University of Wyoming, says you assess, adjust and find a way to make it work.

"This is an unprecedented time, and to teach courses online that are inherently non-technological, it's a huge challenge," she said. "So I've been speaking a lot with my colleagues across the country and trying to find best practices for teaching a choral ensemble online."

As the first full-time choral director at UCSB since Michel-Marc Gervais retired in 2016, Lamartine sees the program as something of a composition waiting to be written.

"I wasn't necessarily looking to leave Wyoming," she said, "but the opportunities here — the location, the student population — are immense in terms of building the program. And that was just something that really attracted me to UCSB."

Lamartine's wealth of experience as a choir director puts her in a unique position to lead the program to new heights. In addition to her 12 years at Wyoming, where she won the university's highest teaching award, she has been a guest conductor of international honors choirs in Germany, Oman and United Arab Emirates and of nine

all-state choirs. She has headlined music conferences at home and abroad, and her YouTube channel, "The Choral Eye," is a well-regarded resource for choral musicians and educators.

In addition to conducting the flagship UCSB Chamber Choir, Lamartine will oversee the direction of UCSB Choirs, including the women's chorus, the gospel choir and the Middle East chorus. She also plans to bring back the men's tenor-bass chorus.

And she gets to do it all without, possibly, students on campus.

"The technology that we have is limiting because of the sound delays," Lamartine said. "It's impossible to sing together on a Zoom call, for example. And so coming up with creative ways to rehearse and learn music, more on an individual basis and then coming together in small groups for evaluation recordings, or Zoom meetings where one person sings at a time — that's a way to get through a rehearsal process."

If students can't sing together, she said, it can still give them a chance to experience the music on a deeper level.

"It's an opportunity to touch on these neglected areas that we have in a choral rehearsal typically," Lamartine explained. "Usually in rehearsal we're so focused on creating and rehearsing the music that sometimes we neglect the very important components of text analysis, historical perspectives, cultural perspectives. And so this is a great opportunity to really delve into those types of curricula in the choral rehearsal."

If it all seems like a lot of heavy lifting, there is no choir director in America more suited to the challenge. Not quite 5 feet tall, Lamartine is nonetheless one of the premier powerlifters in her class in the country.

She didn't compete last year, but she was in the national top 5 for all age groups in 2016 and 2017, and placed second at the International Powerlifting League Championships in 2018 for all groups in her weight class, and first for her age group. In 2017 she won Best Lifter overall at the National Drug Tested Championships — making her the best female lifter out of all the competitors, regardless of age or weight class. Her personal bests: squat, 292.1 pounds; bench press, 154.9; deadlift, 352.7.

Choral music and powerlifting don’t seem like complementary activities, but according to Lamartine, you’d be surprised. She has said that breathing is key to both.

“In choir, we make our sounds through our voices — it’s powered by our breath — and here in the gym if I’m not breathing well I don’t lift well,” she told Wyoming Public Media in 2016. “So it just corroborated my thought that breath is the driving life force no matter what the context.”

Now, as she looks ahead to a new chapter in her life at UCSB, she’s determined to see her students breathing as one in song.

“It is my absolute commitment that I will find ways for us to sing together,” she said. “And I really feel that singing together is one of the most precious experiences that we have as human beings. Even if we’re singing online, my goal is to make it meaningful and impactful for the students.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.