IMMUNO-INCLUSIVITY IN OPERA

ARTIST INTERVIEW REPORT

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Content warning:
References to discrimination, including ableism and racism; bullying and harassment; workplace endangerment and retaliation; career loss.

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In 2024, we (Skylar Cameron and Camille Rogers) interviewed **twelve Canada-based music professionals** ranging from student and emerging singers to established artists across the opera, musical theatre, concert, and choral worlds, as well as teachers and agents. The interviewees were primarily cisgender women, transgender people, and non-binary people, 50% of whom are racialized. We asked them to speak about their **experiences as professionals concerned with the state of health and safety protections since 2020 in the classical singing industry**. Several themes emerged from their answers, as outlined in the following sections.

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01 Current lack of health precautions throughout the industry

By 2024, the vast majority of arts organizations had removed most meaningful airborne infectious disease protections, including masking, regular testing, air purification, and enforceable policies requiring symptomatic individuals to stay home. Interviewees consistently described an absence of baseline standards, resulting in fragmented, inconsistent, or nonexistent protections across organizations.

1.1 Absence of industry-wide standard protocol

Artists reported a profound lack of consistent protocols across the sector. There is no shared national or regional model for infectious disease mitigation within the industry, leaving decisions to be made entirely at the discretion of individual organizations. As a result, artists have little recourse if they feel unsafe or disagree with policies, if any exist at all. Policies that do exist are often misaligned with current scientific understanding:

> "The most common issues I see are either an absence of policy, or policies based on outdated information . . . whether because they don't account for the current scientific understanding of COVID-19 as an airborne illness, or because they're using outdated framing around disability and illness overall."
>
> - Stephanie Ko, General Manager of Opera Mariposa, North America's first fully disability-led and -run opera company

1.2 Rollback of accommodations and normalization of risk

Artists widely noted that accommodations implemented early in the COVID-19 pandemic were quickly withdrawn once primarily non-disabled people returned to in-person work and governments relaxed legal requirements to provide COVID-19-specific protections. Remote work

options and layered mitigations were largely abandoned, even though they could have continued to make participation safer and more sustainable for everyone.

Further, several artists remarked that COVID-19 has become a taboo topic, with requests for previously standard precautions now met with resistance or hostility.

> "It was both telling and heartbreaking how quickly these accommodations were provided when non-disabled people needed them—and how quickly they were abandoned once some people erroneously believed that ONLY disabled people would continue to benefit."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

1.3 Inadequate and piecemeal mitigation measures

A small number of organizations maintained limited precautions, e.g., informal "stay home if you feel sick" policies, optional N95 masking, and use of air purifiers. However, these measures were often implemented without sufficient scale, consistency, or enforcement. Artists also raised concerns about whether air purification systems were appropriately sized for the number of people or the dimensions of rehearsal and performance spaces.

> "While each of these measures are important and meaningful, they don't seem to be enough, based on the number of people who are always out sick at meetings and events."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

Several artists noted inconsistencies between masking policies within similar performance contexts. For example, individual masking was sometimes permitted in choral rehearsals or performances, while being discouraged or prohibited in staged opera or theatrical productions, particularly during performances. Additionally, some organizations had rules about the type of mask artists were allowed to wear in performances, for purely aesthetic reasons.

1.4 Lack of transparency and informed consent around exposure

Lack of transparency about illness and exposure was another recurring concern. In the absence of formal illness reporting or notification policies, artists were sometimes informed of potential

exposures long after the fact, limiting their ability to make informed decisions about their own health and safety.

> "[I] know multiple people who've been misled into participating in situations that were framed as far safer than they were. This may have been unintentional, but the result was not only a lack of consent, but unnecessary physical danger and sometimes psychological trauma."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

1.5 Insufficient CAEA guidance and enforcement

Many artists expressed disappointment with the Canadian Actors' Equity Association (CAEA), noting that it has not meaningfully leveraged its position to establish or enforce minimum health and safety standards related to communicable disease.

Artists emphasized that CAEA contracts already contain enforceable language related to harassment and discrimination, and argued that similar provisions could, and should, exist for infectious disease mitigation.

> "The [CAEA] COVID-19 policy only requires that organizations HAVE a policy, without recommending any minimum standard beyond 'up to date on vaccinations'. . . . I feel we've been abandoned by CAEA in hopes that individual producers and venues would step up, but . . . they haven't done so."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

1.6 Workplace health risk and performance sustainability

Several artists linked the lack of precautions directly to long-term health risks, diminished performance capacity, and shortened careers. Despite growing evidence that COVID-19 can affect stamina, respiratory and cognitive function, and physical resilience, these risks are rarely addressed proactively by organizations.

> "It is disappointing and inadequate to not protect performers from preventable illnesses and setbacks to the performance."
>
> - Wesley Hui, performer and arts worker

02 Pressure to work while ill



In the absence of meaningful protections, responsibility for risk management is shifted onto individual artists. Interviewees consistently described an industry environment in which frequent sickness has become normalized and where performers feel implicit and explicit pressure to continue working while ill, even when doing so jeopardizes their own health and that of others.

2.1 Post-2020 normalization of illness

Many artists have noticed a general increase in illness since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and some have personally experienced longer or more severe bouts of illness, resulting in missed work. Interviewees also pointed out a new normalization of frequent sickness since 2020. For example, they don't see as much emphasis on traditional singers' remedies as before 2020 (e.g., lozenges, scarves, raw garlic, oil of oregano). Yet professional classical singers as a whole are not embracing masking as an evidence-supported method of avoiding respiratory illness.

2.2 Cultural expectations of endurance

Even before 2020, the classical music industry long had a culture of working through sickness. In fact, artists noted they were more likely to be praised for their toughness for refusing to call out sick, rather than encouraged to take time to rest and recover properly.

> "Pre-pandemic, it was common to be in a rehearsal space hearing/seeing/knowing that your colleague is sick, then watching that person spread their germs into the space or into someone's face. Then, everyone would be shocked when a sickness would run through the whole cast with people needing to be replaced last-minute or people giving substandard performances."
>
> - Maureen Batt, performer, recording artist, educator, Co-Artistic Director of Essential Opera, Founder of Crossing Borders

2.3 Individualization of illness and fear of sick leave repercussions

The lack of organizational policy when it comes to illness puts all the onus on the individual to choose whether or not they will come into work sick. In the absence of clear guidelines, and sometimes under direct pressure from leadership, artists may fear repercussions if they take time off (e.g., being labelled weak, or not being hired back).

> "I feel like there's such a culture of pushing through and dealing, that sometimes just asking is the problem, let alone having the actual issue addressed."
>
> - Midori Marsh, performer

2.4 Economic and contractual pressures

Further exacerbating these cultural problems, professional classical singers face immense economic pressure due to the precarious nature of gig work. Without regular income, many singers simply cannot afford to miss a performance due to illness. One artist manager mentioned singers' fear of judgment, penalization, and loss of fees if they disclose an illness. The widespread practice of forgoing understudies or covers due to financial constraints also puts pressure on performers, who may feel they are letting their colleagues down if they call out sick.

> "I have to admit that before the pandemic started, I didn't fully realize how harmful the 'show must go on' mindset can be. This is an area where I've had to do my own learning and unlearning, and it's something I continue to work on—both for my own health, and in order to act responsibly towards others."
>
> - Stephanie Ko, General Manager of Opera Mariposa

2.5 Health and professional impacts

Cumulatively, these pressures result in significant consequences for both individual artists and the industry as a whole. Working with an infectious illness can contribute to longer recovery times, recurrent sickness, vocal and physical injury, and burnout. It also increases the likelihood of widespread illness within casts and ensembles, resulting in disrupted productions and diminished artistic quality.

Interviewees emphasized that these outcomes are not inevitable, but rather the result of systemic choices that prioritize short-term continuity over long-term sustainability. Without clear protections and supportive policies, artists are left to navigate risks alone, often at the expense of their health, careers, and the stability of the broader artistic ecosystem.

03 Loss of safe work and career opportunities

Interviewees faced a variety of barriers to obtaining work safely, including physical, logistical, and social barriers.

3.1 Inequitable access to auditions and gigs

Some artists chose to not take risky work, but some also lost or were denied work because of taking or discussing health precautions. One even reported losing work just for bringing up the question of precautions, without requesting anything specific. For others, the barriers began before even being considered for a role:

> "I've also skipped applying because it was too difficult to find out what accommodations were available or what the COVID safety policy was."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

Inequitable audition practices were also a factor. Organizations may offer a virtual audition option for financial, geographical, and physical accessibility, but often the unspoken understanding is "if you choose the virtual option you won't actually get cast."

3.2 Professional isolation and loss of industry networks

Some artists felt they lost out on valuable networking time due to prioritizing their health. Especially in an opera cast, there is career pressure to connect socially with other artists outside of formal rehearsal time, and a culture of "going out" (e.g., getting drinks on closing night).

3.3 Career pivots and forced exits from performance

Some artists, especially those who are now immunocompromised or facing new health challenges

following COVID-19 infections, have pivoted away from performing almost entirely and have had to find work in other areas of the music industry.

> "I currently focus on providing support for digital events, and for immuno-inclusive hybrid and in-person events. . . . These days, I'm constantly asked to help with projects that don't have a scrap of COVID safety, which I could never safely attend. I don't think people realize how painful it is to be shown over and over that my labour is welcome, but I am not."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

3.4 Structural exclusion rather than individual choice

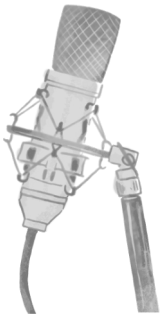
Especially for disabled and chronically ill artists and professionals, individual career choices have been shaped primarily by lack of consideration, structural barriers, and stigma rather than desire or capacity.

> "The ongoing lack of widespread safety precautions means I've been excluded from more projects and events in the past few years, than I was for the entirety of my career before then."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

> "I would absolutely love to be performing more, but I'm not auditioning for much because the few times I have performed in a mask (the only safe option for me when everyone else in the room is unmasked and untested), I've gotten weird looks and invasive questions. I highly doubt I would be considered for anything if I showed up to an audition in a mask—especially not in an opera. It's been absolutely heartbreaking for me to be pushed out of this art form I love not by choice, but because there are so few spaces who will let me do it safely."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee



04 Stigma about accommodations and fear of self-advocacy



Many artists described a pervasive stigma associated with advocating for health protections or requesting accommodations related to illness and disability. Rather than being treated as reasonable workplace safety concerns, such requests were often framed as disruptive, excessive, or unprofessional.

Artists reported being perceived as “killjoys,” “the COVID police,” overreactive, or mentally unwell when taking individual precautions, even without asking for organizational changes. Several described being mocked or reprimanded for wearing masks, including being told to “take that ridiculous thing off” or hearing comments such as “You have such a beautiful voice, but there’s no point in singing while wearing a mask.”

This stigma discourages both individual precautions and collective safety measures, reinforcing silence and compliance rather than open dialogue about health risks.

4.1 Compounded stigma for racialized and marginalized artists

For racialized artists, advocacy for health and safety was often experienced as an added burden on top of existing inequities. One artist described feeling like they were “the one who’s constantly advocating and complaining,” not only about COVID-19 precautions and access to testing, but also about racial insensitivity. This accumulation of advocacy work frequently led to exhaustion and fears of being labeled “difficult.”

Several artists also noted experiences of tokenization and performative diversity within

predominantly white institutions, where public-facing commitments to inclusion were not matched by meaningful support for health, safety, or accessibility.

4.2 Pressure to disclose health information

Artists reported feeling pressured to disclose specific medical details in order to have their concerns taken seriously or accommodations respected. Many emphasized that this expectation is inappropriate and harmful, particularly given that health statuses can change and are not always visible. They stressed that organizations "can't know if someone is immunocompromised" and that no one should need an "excuse" to care for and protect their body and vocal instrument.

4.3 Power imbalance and fear of retaliation

A significant power imbalance between artists and organizations underlies many of these experiences. Artists described fear that advocating for accommodations, even modest or previously standard ones, could jeopardize current or future employment.

> "I don't think many companies are aware how difficult it can be to voice your needs in the face of an unbalanced power dynamic—and what message it sends to vulnerable people when we put ourselves out there, only for our needs to be ignored or denied."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

Several artists noted that they have witnessed or experienced backlash after making reasonable accommodation requests or disclosing illness or disability.

> "I know many artists who don't feel they have enough power to ask for anything, even something as basic as a chair to sit in. Often, they fear that they'll be labeled as a 'problem', or lose access to future work opportunities. . . . I've repeatedly seen opera artists face backlash for making extremely reasonable accommodation requests—or for disclosing illness or disability at all."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

As a result, many artists choose not to advocate for themselves, even when doing so places their health at risk.

4.4 Inconsistent accessibility and the role of leadership

While many artists reported systemic barriers to accommodation, some noted that conditions varied significantly by organization. A small number of institutions remained open to discussion or continued to support precautions, though follow-through was often inconsistent.

Several artists observed that being in leadership or decision-making positions made a significant difference, allowing them to implement or normalize precautions such as masking and testing. This further highlights how access to safety is often contingent on power and status, rather than being guaranteed as a baseline workplace standard and considering feedback from those most impacted.



05 Reflections and recommendations



Despite the many challenges facing the opera and classical music industries, many of the artists we interviewed maintained that better practices were not only possible, but easily achievable with a minimum of effort and care. One interviewee noted that implementing precautions might not be as much work as organizations think: for example, they have often noticed air purifiers sitting unused in spaces where they could easily be making the environment safer for everyone.

5.1 Interviewee recommendations for arts organizations

> "They definitely need to take COVID and other communicable diseases more seriously. I really wish companies still provided free testing and that they would invest in air filtration systems for rehearsal rooms at the very least. There should also be a zero tolerance policy for symptoms in the work environment."
>
> - Midori Marsh, performer

> "Air filtration and appropriate ventilation are key to mitigating when unmasking can't be avoided."
>
> - Wesley Hui, performer and arts worker

> "More transparency. More protection. More communication. Be proactive vs. reactive."
>
> - Morgan Reid, artist manager

> "My first recommendation is to focus on systemic and structural improvements before individual accommodations. . . . I'm a big believer in 'nothing about us without us,' and listening to those most impacted by a particular issue. For risk management frameworks, I'm a fan of the 'Swiss cheese model,' which basically means using multiple layers of protection, on the understanding that no one layer is perfect. I also think it's important to recognize that when it comes to best practices, sometimes current regulatory requirements may represent the 'floor' rather than the 'ceiling.' If I had to pick

> a couple safety measures for communicable disease that give the best bang for our buck—the data and risk modelling I've seen demonstrate that two-way masking and clean air measures are particularly effective (and cost-effective). But every layer and access measure we can add is meaningful, and may be the difference between including or excluding people."
>
> - Stephanie Ko, General Manager of Opera Mariposa

> "Producing organizations and venues need to recognize that they have the ability to make spaces safer and support everyone, rather than just the temporarily abled. I have been told many times 'we can't make rules' by festival organizers—when festivals have syllabi full of rules that are usually longer than the festival programme itself. There are already rules all over the place—apply by this date, be under this age, have this vocal range, show up at this time, wear a shirt and shoes. Producers or venues can absolutely say 'This performance requires masks.' Bringing in air purifiers is inexpensive and benefits everybody. Requiring tests benefits and protects everybody. Organizations need to put a little bit of their hard-won budget into ensuring performances aren't cancelled, performers aren't sickened, audience members are safe—or our industry is going to collapse pretty soon."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

5.2 Interviewee reflections

Interviewees expressed hope that in the future, the opera and classical music industries could be safer and more welcoming to all.

> "[With more standardized precautions] I would be able to perform with my disabled colleagues again and be able to create art safely."
>
> - Sarah Walsh, performer and arts worker

> "The show doesn't have to go on. We can find alternatives and keep each other safe."
>
> - Anonymous interviewee

> "We don't need a few people doing everything perfectly. We need a ton of people doing this imperfectly."
>
> - Emily Steers, performer and teacher