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Music in a Time of Pandemic: Coping Without Live Performance

By Nancy Plum

This past January, singer Alicia Keys opened the Grammy awards telecast reminding the audience that “music changes the world.” What has changed the world since then is the coronavirus (COVID-19), and music has transformed how people are coping with the pandemic.

Across the board, Princeton area music-makers have canceled the balance of their 2019-20 seasons, and area universities have sent their students home to finish the semester by virtual instruction, canceling musical and theatrical productions. However, musicians are never ones to sit idle, and area performers have found creative ways to get their musical fix in these days of staying home.

Needless to say, area critics now have nothing to review; besides all the great concerts which were scheduled, here’s what this writer has missed this spring: I was scheduled to play in a national tennis tournament in Florida the first week in April, and when that was canceled, I was fortunate to “hop into” a series of performances of Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9* with The Philadelphia Orchestra and Westminster Symphonic Choir in Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center and New York’s Carnegie Hall. These performances were also canceled, as were church choir and a performance of John Rutter’s *Gloria* in South Jersey. My program notes for The Philadelphia Orchestra have gone unread by a non-existent audience, and summer performances remain in doubt throughout the area.

Despite a lack of live performances, musicians and audiences are by no means living music-less lives. People are listening to the radio — WWFM is operating remotely, but still broadcasting classical programming, and Princeton University’s WPRB posts that “the robots are driving the ship with the studio computer.” One thing is also clear — ensembles may not be meeting, but their members are communicating on a regular basis, sending musical videos and links in a “see something, share it” mindset.

Princeton Pro Musica's Music Director Ryan James Brandau notes that the singers are "bereft of their musical communities, unable to express themselves in the manner to which they're accustomed, unable to see their colleagues and friends, and are struggling. The professional musicians are struggling even more, facing months and months of cancellations, and no income."

Brandau has reminded the choristers that "There is no technological substitute for in-person choral music making — bodies breathing, ears wide open, minds telepathically tuned, shaking the air with our beautiful sound," and has encouraged them to vocalize and practice with videos he sends, and has arranged a Zoom lecture on maintaining a healthy voice.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) players are also in a "challenging position right now, balancing family needs with a drastic reduction in income due to canceled concerts, studio lessons, and private gigs," said Carolyn Dwyer, PSO's manager of marketing and communications. Staff and instrumentalists are listening to a wide range of music, and some of the instrumentalists have established daily practice routines, working on technique, looking at new repertoire, or "practicing for practice's sake."

PSO has also launched online activities for the community, including weekly webcasts of ensemble performances and "Cooking with the PSO," in which musicians offer their favorite recipes.

Recently featured was Music Director Rossen Milanov's recipe for Maple Soy Sauce Glazed Tofu, complete with a video on cooking instructions. Milanov himself has discovered the "joy of broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera and long TV serials," and is taking online classes from Harvard and getting his piano "chops" back through practicing.

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (NJSO) Music Director Xian Zhang sent a video message to NJSO constituents that "Sharing music together brings us such joy, and even though we cannot gather in person, music can still connect us." She is currently doing a great deal of meditation, and "listening to music that provides a human connection."

NJSO has created a "NJSO at Home" video series featuring the ensemble's instrumentalists, with the musicians eager to share home performances, known as "NJSO Couch Concerts," and videos about their lives. Principal timpanist Gregory LaRosa has found himself missing the bustling energy and sounds of his neighborhood and has found the works of Judd Greenstein to be "musical comfort food." Cellist Frances Rowell has been "stranded" in her hometown in Vermont and has been preparing for a summer festival focusing on Beethoven while helping refurbish a 1960s manure spreader on the family farm. Concertmaster Eric Wyrick "inherited a stereo system from one side of the family and a

collection of LPs from the other,” and has been playing LPs in random order, ranging from Chopin to Sly and the Family Stone.

At Princeton University, faculty member Martha Elliott has been able to teach a full load of voice students via Zoom and with the help of the Appcompanionist app. Glee Club conductor Gabriel Crouch has been observing every Glee Club rehearsal time by emailing the chorus something related to choral music, in the hope that “it might help students keep that sense of balance in their lives which the Glee Club has always provided.” Crouch has also “transplanted” this spring’s Glee Club’s concert to next fall, inviting graduating seniors to return in October for one last performance with the Glee Club.

Not being able to say final farewells is not limited to graduating seniors. Westminster Choir College Director of Choral Activities Joe Miller, who has accepted a new position as director of choral studies at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, has been preparing for the move to Ohio and trying to find closure with the students and administration at Westminster. Miller writes that “the distance is making this difficult when all I want to do is put my arms around my students. Listening to music by Alexander L’Estrange has been helpful, but also immersing myself in Josquin des Prez allows me time to achieve fellowship with my musical being.”

As social distancing enters its second month, area musicians and ensembles continue to balance their lives, lost income, and found opportunities to work on skills and explore new areas of their craft. As Alicia Keys recently sang in her new “coronavirus-era song”: “You can’t come to my house; we’re not going to freak out; we’ll get through it somehow — we don’t have to go out.”

But we can stay in with great music — stay safe, everyone, and hopefully see you in the concert halls soon!

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