

Chris Parsons

### Music and the internet in the age of COVID-19

The lives of classical musicians over the last few months have been rather turbulent with diaries being wiped clean and uncertainty remaining on when live music as we know it might be able to return. It has been wonderful to see the innovative and engaging steps that many ensembles have made to keep elements of performance going, thereby both keeping audiences entertained and providing musicians with much needed work in these unprecedented times. These have come in a variety of approaches, from YouTube and Facebook premieres of pre-recorded concerts through to virtual concerts given by solo musicians in isolation. There has also been the creation of multi-tracked, virtual performances from early music ensembles and choirs that have no doubt pushed musicians' technological skills to the limit!

This is of course a situation we would all prefer not to be in. With the summer here and many festivals cancelled it is greatly saddening to see so many wonderful projects put on hold—postponed until 2021, when live music can hopefully begin to return to normal. Musicians have risen to the challenge and it has forced performers to think further outside the box about reaching audiences through the use of digital technology.

I write as someone in two worlds—in one I am a freelance trumpeter and in the other I am the director of the ensemble Eboracum Baroque. My diary as a trumpeter is now completely empty but, in contrast, the running of the ensemble is busier than ever. We began our series of **'Virtual Coffee Concerts'** at the end of March, broadcast on Friday lunchtimes via Zoom and streamed to YouTube. These featured Bach's Café Zimmermann programmes from Leipzig, Baroque dance (including encouraging the audience to dance a minuet from the comfort of their own homes), solo repertory for instrumentalists and unaccompanied folk songs for voice. We encouraged lots of audience interaction, trying not to lose the key connection between performer and audience by endorsing the use of virtual reaction buttons, greeting each other at the end of the concert and encouraging people to send messages and

write comments during the performance. Our Spotlight concerts have also been a great way to showcase different instruments of the ensemble, again offering a different experience for our audience in really getting to see the instruments up close and learning a bit about how they work.

Our next step was for a major project, **'Heroic Handel'**, which featured a 40-minute programme of Handel's music spanning choruses from his oratorios, chamber work and opera arias, with musicians having recorded their parts individually before we layered it all together. This concert premiered in July and we encouraged our audience to dress up as if they were attending the performance in person. (The musicians recorded their parts in concert dress to evoke the usual concert experience.) We are also working on virtual education projects. Our year would usually take us on many visits to schools across the UK, delivering our interactive and engaging workshops including working with the NCEM on a week-long project in East Riding, Yorkshire. We have just finished a virtual project with the Horrible Histories author Terry Deary, entitled 'The Glorious Georgians' in three short episodes on Facebook, featuring the music of Handel and some fun historical tales from the period.

This unprecedented global situation has opened our eyes to a whole new range of ideas that we will be able to use in the years to come, running alongside more traditional ways of performing and delivering workshops. There are limitations to performing virtually, of course. Zoom is not built for music performance; putting together multi-tracked performances is time-consuming; some audiences may be reluctant to go online. However, I think there are overriding positives. These online performances are so much more than concerts: they are a chance for people to see and hear the outside world from their own living rooms, particularly those people who are classed as vulnerable and therefore unable to leave their homes. Our virtual concerts have included musicians living in Cambridge, London and Edinburgh. Whilst we would usually only perform in the UK, our online audiences have included people from America and continental Europe. It has helped to broaden our audience base; distance is now no boundary. As an ensemble we have discussed the possibility that, once this is all over, we will continue to offer some kind of live online streaming concert, even if just once or twice a

year. I think of it almost like an 18th-century subscription concert, but online. There isn't the atmosphere of a beautiful venue and the immediacy of being in the same room, but in the modern age the medium still has great value for promoting early music far and wide.

The early music world is made up of a rich tapestry of ensembles, from orchestras such as the Academy of Ancient Music (AAM) and Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) to many smaller chamber groups who are utilizing the power of social media to spread the word about their projects.

The AAM has a regular series, **StreamingSundays**, which sees past concerts from Mozart operas through to lute recitals being shared as premieres on its YouTube channel, attracting thousands of views. The OAE has led from the front with a 'behind the scenes' series called **'Musicians on Call'**—a twelve-week run of new episodes released every Wednesday at 4pm. These are led by different players from the orchestra at home, giving tours of their instrument rooms, leading singing sessions and hosepipe playing in the garden! A relaxed and entertaining way into the lives of freelance musicians at this strange time. The OAE has a well-oiled social media machine and releases regular videos for its followers to enjoy in normal times as well. The group's fantastic education work also continues with virtual episodes of **OAE Tots** available on YouTube.

Other groups have also been extremely active in keeping audiences engaged. For example, the **Dunedin Consort** has featured some interesting Facebook live events with their dynamic artistic director John Butt and key members, including Nicholas Mulroy, taking live questions in real time from Facebook followers—certainly an inspired way of keeping the live element of audience interaction going through lockdown.

The National Centre for Early Music (NCEM) in York has been providing some excellent online content, including **'Bach Bites'** performed by the harpsichordist Steven Devine. It has also released pre-recorded concerts from previous York Early Music Festivals, such as one given by the trailblazing recorder quartet Palisander. Releasing these concerts as Facebook and YouTube premieres allows the audience to comment and react in real time, creating the live feeling that so many people crave. It is a great format for music at this time and ideal for attracting new early music audiences through social media.

The rise of the multi-track project has also been championed by many ensembles. Oxford Bach Soloists have embarked on a remarkable project to record Bach's *St John Passion* from isolation and are close to raising £20,000 for

Help Musicians UK. They have had a star-studded line-up for each of the episodes released on a Sunday afternoon, including Roderick Williams in the role of Jesus and soloists including soprano Mary Bevan and baritone Matthew Brook. The chorales have been sung by The Sixteen and The King's Singers; pulling off such a high-quality performance is certainly a feat of technology.

Another impressive technological endeavour was the recording by Stile Antico of Tallis's glorious 40-part motet, *Spem in alium*. To produce the video, the twelve members of the group each recorded multiple parts using smartphones in their own homes, and tenor Benedict Hymas painstakingly wove them together to create the final thrilling performance which is available to watch on YouTube. The Sixteen have also been extremely active and their daily **#HarrysTrackoftheDay** features a chosen track from their extensive back catalogue by Sir Harry Christophers. They have also produced a weekly video diary with contributions from different members outlining what they have been doing to keep themselves busy in lockdown—even including some culinary content.

Perhaps the most live concert experience has come from a group of musicians isolating together in their terraced house in North London. Willingdon House Music features early musicians who perform with many of the major period ensembles, but here they present a rich array of music, still focusing on early repertory but branching out to include folk Sundays and even a Star Wars-themed concert on 4 May (AKA Star Wars Day). It is an enterprising setup from a newly formed ensemble of flute, oboe, violin, the full range of clarinets and the occasional appearance of a harpsichord or accordion that leads to an eclectic mix of music to enjoy live.

Other highlights include Monteverdi madrigals performed by Ceruleo, instrumental chamber music from Ensemble Molière, podcasts from the Brook Street Band, as well as performances from Manchester Baroque, a newly founded professional Baroque ensemble based in the north west of England that has released recordings of some music that it would have performed in concerts that were cancelled because of the pandemic.

The aforementioned projects, whilst certainly not forming an exhaustive list, highlight the ingenuity and dedication of many musicians to their art and their determination to keep audiences engaged throughout quarantine. Many of the composers featured in these projects would have experienced similar times of musical silence, with Bach acquainted with plague outbreaks and composers in 17th-century London with the Great Plague of 1665. They did not have the benefit of social media to share their

work as we do now, but music returned to flourish then and will again now.

On a scholarly front, the **Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics** has initiated a global and interdisciplinary network of researchers and musicians to support and facilitate research on the role of music during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will provide opportunities for knowledge sharing, collaboration and grant funding. It is hoped that this network, which has already held online discussions with participants from across the world, can provide guidance and support if such a situation were to occur again and offer insights into tackling loneliness and social isolation. It is working to build a shared archive of videos, hashtags and media coverage and is inviting contributions for workshops and conferences.

All these virtual projects will be a lasting reminder of this time of lockdown and self-isolation and may well continue to be a part of our lives as we move to a 'new normal', before concerts can return in the format we know and love. This diverse mix of performances remains available to watch online as a permanent memento of this time of social distancing. They are overwhelmingly a positive addition, pushing ensembles to broaden their audience by new means and keeping current audiences engaged with interesting material. It will be a joyous occasion when musicians are able to meet again to make music together in person and when audiences can join us in the same place; for certain, that time will come.

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