

## LOCKDOWN, ONE YEAR ON: HOW HAVE MUSICIANS ADAPTED?

**As we approach the one year anniversary of the first national lockdown, Charlotte Tomlinson explores the ways in which musicians have had to adapt and recalibrate to make their careers work.**

Charlotte Tomlinson FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2021 Classical Music Magazine

Covid-19 has had a monumental impact on the world as we know it and not least for performing musicians. Concerts have been cancelled, concert requirements have changed in ways we could have never imagined, incomes have plummeted, and all musicians have suddenly had to become experts in Zoom and other technologies. In short, nothing has remained the same and those changes have thrown up huge challenges and for some, new insights.

When lockdown kicked in March 2020, it was initially a bit of a novelty. Everyone thought it would be short lived – three weeks to flatten the curve - so as diaries emptied and engagements dried up, musicians tested out the vagaries of online performing. Social Media was full of fun, creative experiments that satisfied for a while, but wore thin quite quickly. For some, the first few weeks and months were a welcome relief, to stop travelling and have a bit of down time, but as the months of lockdown continued, the psychological and emotional stress began to kick in. Musicians grieved not performing music with real-life colleagues in front of real-life audiences, they grieved not engaging with that quality in music and performing that feeds the soul, that indistinguishable factor that pulls musicians through a demanding training into an equally demanding career. Add to this the pain of watching your carefully crafted career disappear with the all the financial issues that come with it, and the stress continues to pile up. Many musicians feel they have lost their identity. They feel demoralised, they have lost their motivation, struggling to practice with no concerts to practice for. Some would say they have lost their purpose and meaning in life.

In the summer and early autumn of 2020, concert promoters and managements did their best to gauge the Covid temperature and set up concerts again, with no guarantee that they would materialise or have any form of audience. This brought with it another set of challenges for the professional musician. How can you suddenly whip yourself into shape after not having performed in public for months? Even for experienced professionals with the best practising techniques, a certain degree of skill is lost by not performing for that amount of time. Then you add to that the new requirements of masks and two metre distancing. Sitting on your own when you're used to sitting with a desk partner in an orchestra, being far further away than normal from the conductor so you can barely see their beat whilst having to navigate the new time lag or singing at a distance from a colleague in a choir all require significant practical and musical adjustments. Perhaps also the distancing increases the feeling of human isolation, because after all, when have we ever in our lives been told we have to shy away from people to keep healthy and safe?

On the occasions when it's been possible to have live performances, audiences have been smaller, all masked up and sitting in little huddles around a spaced-out venue resulting in weak applause and a non-existent atmosphere. Or there has been the equally weird sensation of performing in empty churches or halls accompanied by total silence. Some symphony orchestras started filming their performances as a means of keeping the musicians playing and keeping a public presence but dealing with near constant cameras on them was yet

another adjustment for the musician to deal with. Other orchestras focused on ensemble work which placed yet more pressures on musicians. In normal times an orchestral musician might feel supported by colleagues, a sense of ‘herd immunity’ from being part of the bigger group, but now they feel like a soloist in the orchestra, needing to prove themselves, feeling more vulnerable and exposed than many of them would like.

Much of what has characterised the last year has been uncertainty. Free-lance musicians have not known when their diaries would start filling up again and when concerts have been booked, they have then regularly been cancelled. For those freelancers whose work is predominantly abroad, there have been forms to fill out, post-Brexit visa issues to contend with, Covid tests to take, on top of learning new repertoire and preparing psychologically to leave partners and family for a period of time. When this is all cancelled, sometimes just the day before, it requires a certain psychological and emotional resilience for the musician not to spiral downwards.

Younger musicians at the start of their career mostly want to stick this challenging time out and are looking forward to brighter days when concerts start back up again in earnest. For them, the world of touring with new countries to explore is still fresh and exciting, they might relish learning lots of new repertoire on the hoof and working with and being with their colleagues, day in and day out. For other more seasoned musicians, that novelty has worn off and the lockdown has instead brought up many questions: do I really want to spend my Saturday speeding down the motorway, struggling to park, rehearsing badly written music that’s difficult to play and sitting next to someone I don’t like all for a paltry fee? Can I really face leaving home for yet another tour? These are the musicians who are now exploring different ways of earning and perhaps even different career choices. They may still love music and performing, but lockdown has shone a spotlight on just how unattractive the working conditions of the music profession can be.

Then there are those, and there are many, who have risen to the challenge of online music making to keep people’s spirits up during this time. Keen to support children’s mental health and having had their annual tour of twenty-five arenas around the country cancelled and postponed to next year, Craig McLeish, Musical Director of *Young Voices* and the team are instead providing a full year’s content for singing and music making for children at home or in their bubbles at school. On top of this there is also the *Big Sing*, broadcast live from the O2 arena on June 15<sup>th</sup>, an attempt at the Guinness World Record for the largest simultaneous sing, providing a much needed target for children at this time.

As yet, it’s not clear how the music profession is going to fare after such a difficult period of time but what is clear is that lockdown with all its challenges has been a day of reckoning for many musicians. Some will be desperate to get back to performing again but others may want to make big changes. Let’s hope that however it pans out, live music will become something we have renewed appreciation for and that we never take for granted again.

Charlotte Tomlinson, author of *Music from the Inside Out* and *Keep Calm and Pass your Music Exam*