

It's now been well over a year since the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020 when life as we knew it in the UK changed, possibly irrevocably. To say that it's been a challenge for musicians is an understatement, not least for pianists and piano teachers. Live performance and teaching in person which we took for granted as being the normal way of working pre-lockdown, came to a sudden and dramatic halt and online performing and teaching became its replacement, an essential means of continuing a musical life.

With all the cancellations there was an initial wealth of down time, time to catch up on sleep and spend more time with partners and family, a welcome relief for those pianists always on the road. Then for some, came the space for to flex newly rediscovered creative muscles and initiate new projects. Tom Poster admits he was one of the lucky ones with a built-in chamber duo at home with his violinist wife, Elena Urioste. Together they created the UriPosteJukeBox, a daily video they posted for 88 days in 2020. It was a wonderfully eclectic mix of music, songs, sonatas and new compositions where Tom was arranger, composer, recorder and kazoo player, cellist and singer as well as pianist. They performed multi tracks and sometimes even dressed up to give even more colour to their presentation. This delightful and extraordinary creativity inspired the Royal Philharmonic Society to give them their new *Inspiration* award to 'celebrate work which moved and inspired people during lockdown'.

As well as relishing the liberation of such creativity and diversity in his musical life, Tom observed that the lockdown experience had become an equaliser. Every pianist had lost concerts and everyone was grieving the loss of a way of life and being. Along with this something more humane was emerging. Pianists were realising how much pressure some of them had been under, how they felt they needed to have an aura of invincibility, to show they were coping with all the stresses of a challenging performing life. Perhaps in this new world where there is more time to think and to talk, they can be a bit more open, vulnerable, more human. Certainly pianists have been increasingly searching out ways of managing their stress around performance, something many hadn't realised was so necessary or important before.

Piano teaching threw up a number of challenges which some teachers struggled with at the beginning. I remember a series of Zoom meetings with a group of fellow piano teachers, in which we tried desperately to learn the new skills required for online teaching and share our positive and negative experiences. Over a year on and despite doing the best that technology can offer, I for one have had to pick up the pieces with some of my students. Months of out of tune upright pianos with bad internet connections in student's bedrooms at home, has taken its toll. Now we are back teaching in person, those students are rapidly needing to find the richer sounds and colours from better pianos in time for their assessed recitals. As Mark Viner told me, you can do a fair amount of successful teaching online, fingering, structural understanding and such like, but the sympathetic resonances of the piano don't carry across the internet. Teaching a student to find the sounds and colours and the finesse needed for a successful performance is all much harder unless you are with them in person.

Mark admits that having a good amount of teaching was reassuring in lockdown, as it has been for many pianists with empty diaries. He found that his performing focus moved from the cancelled concerts towards the recording studio where he planned to record a CD of Alkan's juvenilia. This, as with so much else, was privy to the chaos that comes with trying to make arrangements in a changing world and he had to navigate cancellations and yet more cancellations. That said, Mark felt a sense of liberation in not having to work towards a string of concerts and loved learning the repertoire he'd always wanted to learn. He found he could do the foundational work and get pieces up to an acceptable level but polishing the pieces

without a live performance to prepare for, was more of a challenge than he'd expected. How it takes living without something to realise all the ways in which we miss it!

Joanna McGregor, as Head of Keyboard at the Royal Academy of Music, turned the restrictions of lockdown into advantages for her students. Once she realised that students were struggling with less than adequate pianos at home, she made sure they could have their online lessons from the Academy so at least they had a better quality of instrument to support them. She gave them full rein to learn any repertoire they wanted, regardless of how huge, gave them films to watch and books to read to keep them inspired and engaged. With the huge scope of her professional musical involvement, Joanna did not have the luxury of time and space that many others have said has been the most valued element of lockdown. Her workload went through the roof. Her own concerts continued, socially distanced or live streamed online. In her role as Musical Director of the Brighton Philharmonic, she was involved with changing all the orchestral concerts to fit the new restrictions. Orchestral principals along with Joanna herself are continuing to give a series of live streamed and socially distanced chamber music concerts from the Brighton Dome.

So what of the future? We're not certain that we're out of the woods yet but already formats are changing for the small amount of live performing that is taking place. Some pianists are now having to consider playing a ninety-minute concert without an interval, a feat of stamina for the most seasoned professional. Will bubbles or social distancing be part of concerts of the future? Will travel abroad be as difficult as it is currently with, say, five tests needed between London and Amsterdam, endless queues at airports along with quarantining at both ends? And will the constant rescheduling of performances stay with us demanding a constant need for patience and flexibility?

Perhaps it's too early to know, but there is much that we have learned from these unique experiences of limitation and restriction. The general consensus among pianists, and many other musicians, is that lockdown has shone a spotlight on a broken system: relentless touring for many, inadequate time to practise or rehearse, substandard funding for the arts leading to substandard fees and artists having to fund their own CDs, are some of the many issues that have arisen. There is a new understanding that everyone has been pushing themselves too hard and this is no longer desirable or healthy. The importance of having time has come up for consideration, time to learn repertoire, time to rehearse, time to rest when touring (or perhaps tour less altogether), time to spend with loved ones and time to take stock of what really matters. There is a desire among many to be more creative in their performing, and perhaps it is this very element of creativity that will be most needed in the months and years to come: the creativity to design a renewed, reinvigorated profession where pianists and musicians in general, are valued in all these multiple ways, a profession where they themselves can give freely and expressively in performances that are needed more than ever before, to touch the soul of both performers and audience alike.

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