Finding Our New Normal

School of Music faculty, students, and alumni explore new ways of making music — and staying upbeat — during the COVID-19 pandemic
FINDING OUR NEW NORMAL

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people all over the world to adjust to the challenging new normal of social distancing and self-isolation. For musicians this can be especially tricky.

Without our usual outlets for practicing, performing, earning money, and generally staying sane and safe, how do we do this? How do we establish new ways of being in the world that work for us?

There’s no single answer to these questions. So, while the School of Music has been busy reinventing our courses and concerts to meet this new reality, we have also looked to our students, faculty, and alumni for inspiration. How, we wondered, has the pandemic changed the way they do things as artists, collaborators, neighbours, friends, citizens? What new ideas and experiences have they brought to bear on the challenges we all face?

We’ve been awed — overwhelmed, really — by their altruism, creativity, and optimism during such difficult times. We think you will be, too. Here are some of the many exciting projects that have sprung up over the past few months.

**Connecting with Compassion**

Seniors living in long-term care homes have been hit hardest by the pandemic, both by the COVID virus and the social isolation it has necessitated.

This spring, the Faculty of Medicine launched **Connecting with Compassion**, a new initiative that deploys technology to help seniors stay connected with their loved ones and the outside world. With guidance from Professor of Piano Mark Anderson and technical support from Tom Lee Music, our student musicians helped bring virtual concerts to the elderly through the project.

**Sonic Responses**

Professor of Musicology David Metzer and DMA piano student Judith Valerie Engel collaborated with curator Barbara Cole to create the video series **Sonic Responses**, a joint Belkin Art Gallery and UBC School of Music project that showcases musicians responding to the changed aural conditions of UBC’s outdoor spaces during the pandemic.

**A Tribute to Frontline Healthcare Workers**

Faculty members and VSO musicians Christie Reside, alto flute, and Vern Griffiths, percussion, recorded a beautiful rendition of Arvo Pärt’s *Spiegel im Spiegel* in tribute to frontline healthcare workers battling the COVID-19 crisis.

**Socially Distanced Summer Festival**

Pianist Annie Yim (BMus’02) organized “Concerts on the Farm,” a two-day open-air music festival at Inner City Farms in Vancouver this summer. The festival, which allowed people to experience live music while social distancing, featured performances by School of Music Professor of Piano Mark Anderson and Professor Emeritus Robert Silverman, as well as the Emily Carr String Quartet. The quartet performed works by Iman Habibi (BMus’08, MMus’10).

**Cross-Canada Brass**

The pandemic inspired a group of School of Music alumni spread out across the country to form Cross-Canada Brass, a new, socially distanced large brass ensemble that (so far) rehearses and performs entirely via video conference. In the spring, they began work on an ambitious new recording of Ewazen’s *Symphony in Brass*.

**Rain Before Sunshine**

B.A. in Music student Emily Liang won the 2020 Cantonese Lyrics Competition: Combating COVID-19, co-organized by the UBC Cantonese Language Program and the School of Music’s Dr. Hedy Law.

Emily’s winning song, “Rain Before Sunshine,” is about a nurse who sees her partner for the last time before volunteering to take care of COVID-19 patients.

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog.
Dehcho: A Musical Journey Along the Mackenzie River

Professor of Cello Eric Wilson teams up with Dené leaders and UBC academics on a cross-cultural multimedia project honouring First Nations music and activism

By Tze Liew

From a grassy ring in an outdoor pavilion, the sound of Dené drumming rings out to the mountains and rivers of the Mackenzie Valley: proud and vigorous, the pulse of a galloping heartbeat. Accompanying this is the sonorous voice of Dené leader Angus Ekenale, his eyes closed in fervour as he leads a traditional song while pounding on a hand drum. His voice is filled with colours: sometimes quavering, sometimes a chested cry, and then a low hum, inviting more and more voices from the Liidlii Kue First Nation to join in as one chorus, one spirit.

Perched on a cliff overlooking a torrential river, Professor of Cello Eric Wilson draws out the first notes of a sweeping, majestic melody on his cello. It sounds like the heartstrings of nature — music that sets free the spirit of raging rivers, vast blue skies and sprawling rosy sunsets. A tribute to the Mackenzie River Valley, and the First Nations guardians who have kept it pristine and welcoming.

The interweaving of these two musical cultures is at the heart of the Dehcho project — a multimedia collaboration celebrating the music and history of the Northwest Territories, and a bridge for reconciliation between Indigenous communities from the North and non-Indigenous people from the South.

Spearheaded by Chief Gerald Antoine, leader of the Liidlii Kue First Nation, and a team of artists and educators, including UBC faculty and alumni, the project launched in 2015 with the ancient drum dances of the Dené people and has grown to include Dené hand games, Gwich’in fiddling and Inuvialuit drumming.

Prof. Wilson travelled through the Valley as part of the project team, learning about Dené culture, filming their traditional songs, and sharing cello music with the communities in return. “We were first invited by Chief Antoine to meet drummers from the Liidlii Kue First Nation. When you are in that fortunate situation, you go humbly, you are a guest,” he says.

The project traces its roots back to the Berger Inquiry in 1975 — a key undertaking led by Justice Thomas Berger from the Supreme Court of B.C., that halted the construction of a massive pipeline project running through the Yukon and the Mackenzie River Valley. Justice Berger and UBC Law Professor Michael Jackson, who was acting as Special Counsel, travelled to thirty communities across the north to help Dené and Inuvialuit leaders plan the hearings, where they demanded that their land claims be settled. The testimony and many of the drum dances that celebrated the visit of the Inquiry were recorded on tape.

These tapes resurfaced ten years ago, when Prof. Jackson asked Daniel Séguin, a Gemini and Leo-awards winning composer with a strong interest in social justice projects, to digitize them for a modern audience. “Michael Jackson hoped that, with Séguin’s help, those recordings could be digitized and returned to the northern communities,” says Drew Ann Wake (BA’76, MA’84), a curator and key player in the Dehcho project, and who had attended the Inquiry as a young CBC reporter.

The first digital masters — of drumming recorded 40 years ago — were presented to Chief Antoine in Fort Simpson. “There are messages and stories that go with the songs,” Chief Antoine says. Recognizing the spiritual need for young Dené people to inherit the old songs, he set the terms of partnership for the Dehcho project: Drew Ann Wake would pay to fly Dené elder and drum dance master Angus Ekenale from his home in Wrigley to Fort Simpson, and UBC Studios would send videographer Christopher Aitken to film him performing ancient songs. Both the Dené people and the project team would be able to use the videos for educational and archival purposes.

“De makes reference to the river, and né to the land. The Dené people evolved from the essence of land and river, which are tied to our creation and survival. We celebrate this sacred connection, through songs and drums, in prayers and ceremonies.”

- Chief Gerald Antoine

Around this time, Séguin had the idea to create a musical work that would be a river journey — pairing traditional northern drumming with a companion cello piece that Wilson could perform. It would be a way for the two cultures to speak to each other.

“I thought that maybe after all these centuries we could come together through our music,” says Séguin. “Maybe we could share with the Dené, instead of taking from them.”

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog.
Taking inspiration from Beethoven — and the pandemic
By Tze Liew

This year promised to be an auspicious one for faculty composers Dr. Dorothy Chang and Dr. Jocelyn Morlock. As two of Canada’s most exciting classical contemporary composers, they were commissioned by the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra to write for Beethoven 250, a concert celebration series in which their works would be performed alongside five iconic Beethoven symphonies.

Then the pandemic struck — putting this and many other projects on hold. For now, the completed Beethoven 250 commissions lie waiting on the page. The composer community is adapting to the times, forgoing (for now) large orchestral compositions in favour of solo and small chamber works that have a better chance of being performed.

The world has changed, but the music must go on. High Notes sat down with Dr. Chang and Dr. Morlock to talk about writing music in dialogue with Beethoven, creating art in a pandemic year, and what it means to be a contemporary composer.

As contemporary composers, what were the special challenges/pleasures of working on a commissioned piece in dialogue with Beethoven?

Dorothy Chang: For Skizzen, the piece I wrote as a companion to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, I took inspiration from Beethoven’s famous sketchbooks, which contain notes and ideas for his Fifth Symphony. I sought not to recompose Beethoven’s music but instead to reference his ideas in raw form, when they were still merely flashes of inspiration and not yet developed into a complete work. Skizzen quotes a number of Beethoven fragments, at times distinctly recognizable and elsewhere transformed, spinning off in new directions and interpretations, much as a composer would explore the potentialities of a musical germ during the composition process.

One challenge of using Beethoven’s ideas as source material was to find the intersection with my own voice. In some instances I tried to do this smoothly; in others I intentionally highlighted the contrast between his musical voice and my own. One pleasant surprise I found in working so closely with his material was the new insight I gained on some of his compositional techniques. I was familiar with the symphony, but had never before studied it this closely. It was interesting to find tight motivic connections between the four movements that I hadn’t previously recognized, as well as some curious voicing and orchestration choices he made.

Dr. Jocelyn Morlock

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog.

BEYOND THE GATES

Classical Composer of the Year, virtual festivals, and a UBC début

Dr. Stephen Chatman won Classical Composer of the Year at the 2020 Western Canadian Music Awards — his fourth such award (2005, 2006, 2010, 2020). Dr. Dorothy Chang was nominated for the same award, and David Gillham performed on Marcus Goddard’s album, which also garnered a Classical Composer of the Year nomination.

In November, Assistant Professor of Voice Krisztina Szabó made her Wednesday Noon Hours concert début with pianist Leslie Dala, performing Wagner’s Wesendonck Lieder and Jeffrey Ryan’s Miss Carr in Seven Scenes, a song cycle drawn from the journal entries of Canadian artist Emily Carr. She also appeared on Medici TV as a soloist for Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne (Le NEM), premiering prize-winning new works at the biennial Azrieli Music Prizes Gala Concert by the Azrieli Foundation.

UBC Concert Winds Conductor Christin Reardon MacLellan received the 2020 Canadian Music Educators’ Association Builders’ Award and the BC Music Educators’ Association Distinguished Service Award for her leadership, advocacy and research in the field of music education during the pandemic.

During the summer, Assistant Professor of Viola Marina Thibeault was active performing concerts online: from her UBC office for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra in November and presented five concerts of Schubert’s Trout Piano Quintet, and Canadian composer Chan Ka Nin’s Salmon Piano Quintet with musicians from the Vancouver Island Symphony.

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog.