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A Symphony of Complication and Tenacity

Online classical-music performances are increasing, but piecing together an orchestra digitally has many difficulties.

By [Edward Rothstein](#)

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A screenshot of Quarantine Opera's recording of the Habanera from Bizet's 'Carmen,' one of a growing number of coordinated performances

PHOTO: QUARANTINE OPERA

A choral singer is beaming, nodding, holding a cup of coffee before joining in. A trombonist reads a book until he has to play his brief part. One of the five Carmens sings while mixing a recipe; another serenades two balloons with cartoon faces representing her lovers. These musicians perform alone in their homes in Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Italy, Norway, New York and other far-flung locations, their parts and presences stitched into a performance of the Habanera from Bizet's "Carmen" that is as alluring, playful and exuberant as any staged version. The group calls itself Quarantine Opera.

In the past month or so, online video mosaics of isolated players united in happy ensemble have evolved into a new musical genre, honoring social distancing while overcoming musical distancing. Figuratively speaking, the genre has gone viral. A spirited segment of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony by the Rotterdam Philharmonic has had 2.7 million views since it was put online on March 20. The New York Philharmonic performs a quarantined Ravel's "Boléro." A church choir from Formigine, Italy, offers a similar

setting of “O Crux Ave.” And the National Orchestra of France invited aspiring musicians to join them in an online “quarantine concert” performing Shostakovich’s Waltz No. 2 from his second Jazz Suite. New offerings appear in varied forms of pop as well, as in the recent broadcast “One World: Together At Home.”

The genre is self-consciously playful, alluding to the bizarre new conditions of life while asserting transcendence of its isolation through music. But the phenomenon is also a lot more complicated than it seems.

At first, world-wide social distancing made ensemble music-making seem almost absurd. In a mordant Facebook video, a Turkish pianist, Umut Vicdan, plays a spritely Brahms Hungarian Dance No. 5 for four hands with an unidentified partner. Each is distantly seated at the far ends of an upright piano, wearing surgical gloves and shooting deadpan looks at the camera, as if declaring: Look what things have come to.

You might think that an orchestral or operatic performance in quarantine would just be a heightened version of this duet with players’ images and playing beamed in from different locations, interacting using something like Zoom conference software. But generally with software like Zoom, the lag between a sound made and a sound heard on the other side makes coordinated performance almost impossible. The method used in these performances is much more remarkable: None of the players hears the others.

Here is the method used by Quarantine Opera. Each performer downloads a video showing the music director (Fergus McAlpine) seeming to lead an orchestra. Through headphones or earbuds, each musician also hears a piano playing the score and enters at the proper moment, as if in concert; their solo performances are recorded on video by a smartphone or other device. These recordings are then sent to editors, who join them together in a single ensemble, preserving distinct images while combining sounds. If this sounds complicated and difficult, it can be. This is one reason why so much classical quarantine music involves repeated patterns and rhythms, like the Habenera or “Boléro”: the repeated patterns help keep playing and editing in order.

The final performance, then, is created within a home studio, with mixing and editing. This is not that different from the way many recordings of art music have been created in recent decades. There are few recordings of real performances. Tracks are added or subtracted, pitches and tempi are modified, errors are corrected.

So the quarantine genre is a strange hybrid. This technological enterprise

gathers together distinctive individuals, intriguing because of their personalities, or the trappings of private life we see—the plantings, artwork, bedposts, books. These players can seem throwbacks to an era before recordings when music was primarily made and heard within the home (in the 19th century, operas and orchestral works were widely heard in piano transcriptions played by amateurs). Quarantine musicians, in their solitude, also hark back to origins of their profession, because it is through solitary and obsessive training that players become musicians.

At the same time, they are playing in an ensemble that is pure artifice. It is as if each actor in a Chekhov play had been recorded separately and their performances were stitched together so it looked like they were hearing and reacting to one another. So music's triumph over solitude here is partly illusion. Moreover, if this technique were used with any more elaborate pieces or with pieces without a steady beat and repeated motifs, the failings would become more evident. Powerful ensemble music is rarely made without players reacting to one another, or bending time, or exploring sounds made together. You can hear some of what is at stake here in recordings beginning a century ago, as very different improvisatory styles of late 19th century musicians gradually began to disappear in favor of note-perfect, infinitely repeatable performances. If quarantine ends up becoming a long-term way of life, we might expect another wave of transformations.

But right now, when quarantine has not yet become normal, and everything may yet change again, there is something inspiring about many of these examples and the immense energies expended on them. I'm particularly looking forward to what Quarantine Opera does as it turns to the Brindisi drinking song of "La Traviata." It has already solicited public contributions that are now being edited.

In most of these offerings, too, the results should sound much more awkward than they do. Instead, they are exhilarating—perhaps, in part, because each player, locked in a private world, can still imagine what lies beyond those walls, and what will one day come after they are no longer needed.

—Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.