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Life in lockdown – in discussion with Robert Cohen

By Rowena Taylor

Distinguished cellist Robert Cohen is a professor at Academy, and is often hailed as 'one of the foremost cellists of our time'. At age three, he first heard Tchaikovsky's 'Rococo Variations' on the radio, and knew from that moment on that he wanted to play the cello. Growing up, he was surrounded by music: his father – a violinist – would frequently listen to recordings of all the greatest violinists, something which Cohen recognises as being a great influence on him, even before he began to play the cello. Recalling his father playing string quartets at home, Robert would sit on the floor by the cellist as he was attracted to the low resonance of the instrument. He nagged his parents until they finally gave him a cello at the age of five. "It was the cello from the beginning. Although even now, the musicians that I most often think of immediately - in terms of what is really inspiring to me - are frequently violinists!"

I spoke with Robert via zoom, at his home in Suffolk. We discussed some of the challenges of lockdown and his thoughts for coming through this period positively.



In the context of Covid-19 and the current lockdown, all of us have had to submit recordings of our playing in some way – be it as an audition or exam, or for our one-to-one lessons. Over the first lockdown last summer, Cohen released a series of recorded talks for RAM (all of which are now available on YouTube), including one where he spoke about the necessary preparations before a live performance. I asked him how he had been dealing with performing online, and if he had any different advice for making recordings...

Robert Cohen: Lockdown has brought many challenges, one of which is this online existence, and this new recording experience. I appreciate that it may be quite stressful, but we can look at it in a positive light - it has brought some good new ways of learning and new ways of hearing ourselves from the audience perspective! We even witness our body language and can consider what messages this might be giving to the audience.

I think that filming yourself, recording yourself, and zoom etc. is a very tough thing - it's not something most of us have done frequently before. Each week, I have my students film themselves performing some repertoire which I analyse and which we discuss in our lesson on zoom. I ask that I receive their films by Wednesday evening, and sometimes I get them coming in at midnight, or one o'clock in the morning, because everybody wants to do it one more time, and I totally understand that!

My advice for submitting a recording for your audition or exam (or one-to-

one lesson) is plan to make a first recording about 3 days in advance of the submission deadline. Be sure you are really well prepared for this first recording, and then make the recording as though it were in a LIVE situation - in other words, a single play through without stops or retakes! Afterwards study the recording and see which improvements, if any, you would like to make. Spend a day practicing those changes and preparing yourself to film another performance with that greater knowledge and with greater confidence. If you're happy with the second recording, send it in. Otherwise repeat the process!



As I said before, for many, this is all pretty new. So I think we need to allow ourselves time to get comfortable playing to a microphone and camera. For myself, I like to imagine myself on the platform, communicating to a live audience. I also like to imagine playing to someone I love, or someone I know who would simply like to hear me play! I recommend this focus on the imaginary audience rather than yourself...play to a greater physical distance ahead, not the camera and microphone a meter in front of you. Gradually we learn to ignore the microphone and focus completely on making music.

Rowena Taylor: A lot of the time with commercial recordings, the producers will edit together multiple takes, and the end result is rarely going to be this

one perfect take. I personally find that there's a lot of pressure to send in a 'perfect' recording, because of the sense that by sending it in you're giving it your seal of approval.

RC: I agree with you, many commercial recordings are not the 'one perfect take', rather they're made up of multiple takes and edits. Even so-called commercial 'live' recordings are almost always made from several live performances edited together, or edited using patch sessions recorded after the concert when the audience has gone. So for sure there is a certain obsession with presenting "perfection".

Thinking about the pressure you feel to submit a perfect recording, I really feel for you - we find ourselves in this unusual zoom world, working in quite different ways to pre-12 months ago! So what are my thoughts? My advice? I think it can be destructive to focus on trying to play perfectly, trying to make that perfect recording, as you become ever more aware of the tiniest imperfections and lose sight of your bigger musical picture. If you think about it, when everything is flowing beautifully in your performance, you're not zooming in and criticising every detail as you play. Hopefully, you're more like your audience, listening to what is wonderful in the music. Yes we strive for accuracy, but music is so much more than accuracy. Art, music, beauty, creativity are not perfect. It's all subjective! What is perfection? So let's not get hung up with this. Do your best in the time you have and give all you have towards making the music speak.

You know, just the other day I heard on the radio a recording of Bazzini's Dance of the Elves, for violin and piano. It was the most perfectly accurate performance I have ever heard, it was so 'exact', and yet it left me cold. So I immediately rescued myself listening to a number of other recordings including Heifetz, Menuhin, Francescatti, and Vengerov. They were fabulous. Their performances

were incredible! So emotional, truly charming and brilliant. I was moved!

And for my interest, I listened again, but this time with my ear trumpet poised over every note!! And you know what, dare I say it, they weren't 100% accurate all the time. But who cares, because those musical experiences were supreme. And don't forget, those players have already played that piece hundreds of times, and then recorded it. You can't compare that to your own situation where you've not had that experience...yet! So give yourself some slack here, in a few years you'll have notched up many more performances.

RT: Having recently submitted a recording of my orchestral excerpts audition, what advice would you give on how to prepare for things like that?

RC: So for your excerpts preparation, I would get very familiar with the score, listen to a variety of recordings, have a clear understanding of the context of your part within the orchestration. Then play your part with real confidence. Of course someone listening to your orchestral excerpts is expecting to hear you play reliably in tune, rhythmically and with all markings defined by the composer. You also need to play with ease, showing you are stable and confident and play the music as though it means something to you. That speaks to the listener's human instincts.

I believe it's fundamentally important that you make high quality sound from the first note, because the quality of your sound demonstrates your care and your control. It demonstrates your musicality and your sensitivity. If working in a professional orchestra is part of your musical career plan, then you need to put as much energy and focus into preparing your excerpts as you would your concertos and your recital repertoire! Some students have been fortunate to play lots of

symphonic repertoire in youth orchestras, but for many, the excerpts are unfamiliar. I know it can be a daunting prospect learning so many, but this is a perfect moment to binge on recordings and get immersed in the repertoire you need to understand. The RAM orchestral excerpts audition is an excellent preparation for professional auditions later. I'd recommend thinking of them in the same way you would if you were going to audition for the Berlin Philharmonic!

Give yourself plenty of time for all this preparation, and as I discussed earlier, prepare your schedule so you can make a recording, evaluate it, and if necessary make another recording a day later. All the effort you put into working on this will never be wasted, it will impact your music making in many ways. So I believe you should give it your all, and then your confidence can shine through and make an excellent impression on the listener!



Robert Cohen with jazz saxophonist Jukka Perko.

RT: When we talk in the context of music and practice about how much we're losing out on, it's easy to forget that it's not just the music that we're missing in this isolation, but it's life in its entirety. Social interactions are essentially solely through screens, and sitting on zoom calls for hours on end as your only means of social interaction is exhausting. We're not just missing out on work things and music things, but that we're missing out on all of the things that would usually give our playing meaning and excitement.

RC: I couldn't agree with you more. This whole thing is certainly an experience we'll never forget. I find that conversations are dominated by the Covid-19 topic and that's depressing compared to our usual interactions. All I can say is, let's look forward to appreciating the pleasure and inspiration of relationships and life's surprises more deeply when they're available to us again.

RT: We've had advice from many corners telling us to use this time well, learn lots of music, do loads of projects etc. and this is all very well if you can manage it, but I think for a lot of people, having no idea what's going to happen in the future makes this all quite difficult to cope with.

RC: Trying to take advantage of this time – that's a nice idea! As you say Rowena, it's all very well if you can manage it! But how to cope if you're feeling overwhelmed by the lockdown, the uncertainty of your future, the seemingly endless possibilities of how to use your time well...

First of all, I try to remember that as a creative person I need to continue creating, whatever. And we can do this in many ways, not necessarily connected with cello or even music!

I find it a big help to get involved in tangible, creative processes that keep my brain active in a positive way and give me a feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction. As an example, my family nicknamed me 'Bob the Builder' – I'm Bob, because I love to fix and make things, and renovate things in the house. I love doing things with electronics or carpentry etc. To do these very tangible things gives me the satisfaction of creativity; the idea of achievement helps me feel more fulfilled. and while that process of hands and head are busy, I find the creative state triggers positive ideas for my endeavours in music. I also find I'm generally in a better frame of mind when I'm practicing.

Perhaps it's worth trying to set yourself a small goal each day, and it doesn't have to be a musical one; it could be rearranging your room, or sorting out photos, or even cleaning the kitchen. It doesn't matter, as long as you can complete it reasonably easily and you can feel pleased by the result.

You've raised your dopamine, lowered your cortisol and the positive feeling may inspire you with your music!

RT: On a final note, what are your thoughts with regards to the future of the industry after Covid-19?

RC: One of the really powerful things missing from our lives at the moment is experiencing life in a communal way. There is a growing thirst for shared experiences, including live music, and I believe this thirst will drive forward the recovery of our profession. This is a reason to stay positive and optimistic! The more creative we and the industry can be, the sooner we'll give concerts again. And I know there is an enormous will to make this happen, so be ready!

When it comes down to it, what really counts is how well you play. Your opportunities will come when you totally blow away your listener!



Life before lockdown...Robert with his sons – when hugs were still possible!