

In our last Gecko, we interviewed Anna Stegmann (Germany), who we last saw at our annual recorder workshop in January 2020. We wanted to check in and see how she's feeling during this upheaval in the arts. Below is our interview with her.

Firstly, how have you been?

"It's been a challenging and frightening time, but this will be true for most of us. I'm in a phase of my career where I want to move forward, develop, explore, and challenge myself. Well, the challenging part worked quite well I think? Luckily, I've been healthy and felt supported by my family and friends. I shouldn't forget that this is a huge luxury."

How has Covid-19 affected your year? Your musical output?

"Nothing went according to plan. After a wonderful time in Australia in January at the Orpheus Recorder Boutique and a busy few weeks back home in Europe, starting from March all my projects were cancelled. Besides that I wasn't able to travel to my teaching in the UK, where I teach a recorder class at the Royal Academy of Music and go for regular visits to the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester to teach at Junior's Department. My usual routine of traveling from Amsterdam to the UK stopped entirely and isn't quite back to what it used to be. Neither have I seen my colleagues or friends from Ensemble Odyssee and The Royal Wind Music.

If you are usually active performing and teaching as a freelancer, an empty calendar isn't quite a reason to rejoice. So I tried to stay distracted by practicing and anticipating on the chances and possibilities of this new situation."

What projects have you been doing over isolation? Have you been able to play the recorder?

"I started off practicing pieces I always wanted to polish and kept myself busy preparing for concerts which, at the time, I thought still might happen later in 2020. Despite being quite good at just practicing for the sake of it, at some point I needed a real motivation in the form of a project. Many of my colleagues have worked on live-streams or online concerts from their living rooms, often without charging fees through their YouTube Channels. That format didn't quite feel like my medium and while I had lots of time to observe the do's and don'ts during the first few weeks of lockdown, I eventually came up with my own digital recital series 'Fantasy & Design'.

It is, in fact, another online concert, but suited to an all-online audience which consumes from home and therefore might have other needs than the typical live-audience: Sitting in a concert hall, listening to a recital scheduled at a fixed time, has become a sanctuary in times where we are otherwise constantly available. Watching performances from home doesn't necessarily find us listening with the same mindset.

I felt my own recitals needed to be shorter, filmed in a special way that brings me, the performer, closer to the audience, and I wanted to charge a small financial contribution for making it accessible to listeners that take the time to really watch and listen to my work. I had to investigate about a suitable online platform, ways of charging for it (you would be surprised, this wasn't very straight forward!), thinking about the aesthetics and choice of repertoire, and finally recording and producing both the audio and video material together with a colleague.

It's been a real journey in which I learned about different ways to promote these recitals, how to bring my the ideas in my head to a tangible result, and last but not least what it takes to put myself out there in an all-Anna-solo project. I would have never considered embarking on such a solo project if it wasn't for the pandemic. Looking back now, I'm very happy to have presented myself in this format after all. And since this pandemic isn't quite over yet, I have decided to

record a second season with two friends and colleagues playing dulcian and organ featuring seventeenth-century music from Italy for this setting."

The premier is on October 15 on my website: www.anna-stegmann.com

What are you looking forward to in a post Covid-19 world?

"Despite the success and artistic fulfilment my online recitals have given me in the past five months, I feel I don't want to play for a video camera and microphone for a while. Real concerts with my colleagues and friends, performing for an audience in the same room, seeing my students, meeting new recorder players and catching up with the ones I know already during masterclasses and workshops... those are some of the activities I cannot wait to return to. We surely can implement some of the positive side effects of this time in our practices, too. Despite longing for some on-site teaching again, I was surprised how well online teaching can work. However, for me it is only a supplement for a short period of time."

How have you found teaching online?

"I was surprised how well it works, even for the younger pupils I teach. They all have become really independent and responsible. Online teaching also opened new possibilities for me: I do have two private online students in Australia now and hugely enjoy teaching them.

I must add that I was very lucky only teaching small numbers of students online and non of them had the pressure of needing to take exams this year. This has been, and still is, quite different for some of my colleagues.

Any musicians/artists you feel need to be heard at the moment?

I'd rather put it this way: It feels we all need the support of our audience right now. If you see or hear someone you like and appreciate, do write to them! I have received lovely messages from strangers that listened to my recitals and voiced their appreciation. Whereas one can't pay rent from that, knowing to be connected and bringing joy through music has given me a reason to continue being creative."

Have there been any positives from this current climate for you musically?

"I'd love to say yes... but it's hard to see the silver lining beyond what I have already described about my online recitals and some positive experiences teaching online. For me, music is happening through the interaction with my colleagues and the audience while performing on stage. The lesson learned is, that this cannot be replaced."

Interview by Alexandra Bailliet-Joly for Orpheus Music, Armidale, Australia
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