***Romeo and Juliet:* socially distanced**

Borisovky's arrangements of Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet* are a violist's dream come true: the luscious melodies that take advantage of the richest register of the instrument, the famous 'Dance of the Knights' theme (or The Apprentice music, whichever you prefer) that lets loose the full power of the viola, even the mischievously fiddly movements that require not only technical mastery but a light-hearted and comical approach. "These pieces have got it all" I thought to myself back in February when I decided to play them for my end of year recital at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. Then, of course, our "new normal" imposed itself upon us, and we had to learn to navigate the now-too-familiar scenario of virtual recitals. We were given the option of changing our repertoire to something unaccompanied so that we could record at home during lockdown, but by this point I had completely immersed myself in the Shakespearean world of all-consuming love and heartbreak and could not bring myself to let go (and still can't). These are some reflections on my experience of recording *Romeo and Juliet* during the Covid-19 pandemic.

How do you do justice to the greatest love story of all time when your accompanist, who is telling half the story, is half a country away? Perhaps this was a taste of how Romeo and Juliet felt in their desperation to be together; yet this cruelly ironic parallel did not make the recording process any easier. There were myriad setbacks… technical, personal and musical. Amongst the never-ending technical issues, the memory stick with the recorded piano parts getting lost in the post for over a week due to Covid related delays was definitely the most stressful. The biggest emotional challenge: how could I convincingly play the raw joy of true love in the 'Balcony Scene' when my heart had just been broken? Musically… is it possible to play with a backing track that can't react to you without turning into a viola robot? A memory of my eccentric siblings dancing ballet around me whilst I attempted to play as freely as I could with the recorded piano stands out particularly vividly, and was one of the more helpful exercises to overcome this problem. Furthermore, despite the fact that I had given my accompanist clear instructions on interpretation which he had (mainly) followed very well, I had sent these scores to him about a month before the video recital submission date, and during this time my ideas developed considerably, but it was too late to change the accompaniment part.

Performing to the camera was an interesting experience, but required some practice. I found it extremely frustrating that as soon as I pressed the record button I couldn't play as well as with no one watching. Why was I getting nervous and tense for the camera, when it was just me in the room and I knew that I could delete the take if I wasn't happy? The extra pressure of being recorded had a very similar effect on me as having an audience in the room. Although frustrating at first, this is actually a very helpful tool, which I still use now. It allows you to practise performing under a little bit of pressure, and then watch it back and experience your performance from the perspective of the audience. Once you get over the initial agony of watching and listening to yourself, it is a very informative process. You notice things that you might have missed whilst playing, being usually too focused on the mechanics of making your instrument sound. The hard bit is allowing yourself to enjoy your own performance, but this is crucial. Of course it is important to be critical and to find things to improve on, but if you can't enjoy your own playing, how can you expect your audience to? "You are your own worst critic" is a phrase one hears quite a lot, but I had never understood the full weight of it until I began the process of filming for my recital video. When you listen back to yourself, flaws that you hadn't even considered become apparent. Those double stops in 'Dance of the Knights' that you thought you had just about managed to play sound like a car crash, and you realise that when you thought you were playing

pianissimo it sounds more like a *mezzo forte*. Worse still, you watch with horror when you see in the video that during that ethereal melody in 'Young Juliet' your body is flailing around like a confused jellyfish, and that your unconscious foot-tapping in 'Dance of the Knights' is very visible and distracting. However, I would add to that phrase: "You are your own worst critic, and also your own best teacher". I've never been as self-aware of every aspect of my playing as when I was watching videos of myself daily performing to the camera.

I recently re-recorded some of the movements of *Romeo and Juliet*, along with two other students from Birmingham Conservatoire, for a video that is going to be sent to schools around Birmingham for the Cecil Aronowitz viola competition. Once again, my pianist could not be present for the recordings due to social distancing, so we had to make do with a recording of the piano parts. This time, we weren't required to record each movement in a single take, a fact that I had thought would take the pressure of the recording situation. However, playing to the camera still had a strange freezing effect on my two companions and me. We had a producer, who was keeping a note of whether each take was usable or not and although this took some of the pressure off the decision making process, we also had to put an incredible amount of faith in his aesthetic judgement, as there was not enough time for us to listen back to each take and decide whether we were happy with it. I found relinquishing this control over the output particularly challenging. I always felt that there was a better take in me, but due to time constraints I had to learn to trust the producer if he said a take was good enough. I thoroughly enjoyed making these videos as they were aimed at showcasing the viola to school children, which gave us license to be overly theatrical in our performances. In order to make the videos as attractive and entertaining as possible, we tried to highlight the multitude of "effects" that Borisovksy employs to mimic the sound of the orchestra, such as the cheeky *pizzicatos* in 'The Street Awakens'. 'Dance of the Knights' was a particularly good one for acting: the menacing opening theme, the spooky *sul pont* section, and the dreamy harmonics gave me full license to over-exaggerate my natural tendency to physically express music through movement.

Although playing with pre-recorded piano parts was immensely frustrating, the whole process of recording ended up being informative and enjoyable, if at times hugely stressful. The biggest advantage of recording is it allows you to find what is truly your best version of your performance. This was sometimes disheartening when my best version was not as good as I had imagined, but it required me to be completely honest to myself about my playing, and helped me to find areas that most need improving. An extra bonus: I now have lots of videos of myself performing that I am very proud of. My personal love affair with *Romeo and Juliet* did not end with the last recording I did. I am about to embark on a new journey investigating the process of transcribing orchestral works for the viola, focusing on new movements, including 'Death of Mercutio' and 'Death of Juliet', and, if I'm feeling brave, I will try and transcribe myself some of the movements that Borisovksy didn't arrange.

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