

Special times call for special music

Lunenburg 2020

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I don't think I've really cried during performance.

A while back I wrote about an experience last summer bursting into tears while practicing Rach 2 Sonata - because practicing is intensely intimate, personal, private; my own safe space and time, my own vulnerabilities. I've gotten close to it at certain times during performances where I almost dared to lose myself in the music - the recap of Chopin's Funeral March, the coda of Rach 3 ... but I've always tried to be aware that to public performance requires a certain distance and composure so that the audience will experience the passionate, sincere authenticity of the performer while the latter maintains mental clarity and physical control.

Well, I surprised myself this past week at the magical Lunenburg Academy. At the end of our Song of Praise concert, I let myself shed a few quick, minor, cathartic teardrops that may or may not have blurred my vision and sabotaged some notes. Perhaps the notes were a fair sacrifice, for some kind of emotional freedom.

Now that I'm back home in my cozy room, the experiences and journeys and emotions and beauty of everyday and moment in Nova Scotia really does seem like a dream, another world.

I've always been an enthusiastic advocate for the unique power of Lunenburg. The family at LAMP, including the passionate administration, the caring hosts, generous patrons, distinguished artists, and warmly receptive audience all contribute to creating an intimate, supportive, heartfelt environment, which fosters an artistic growth that is deep and lasting in impact.

And somehow, while COVID has stripped LAMP of some of its most endearing offerings - the warmth of being welcomed home every day by loving host parents, the rowdy sight-reading parties and delicious dinner gatherings, all the markets and distilleries and sailing excursions and festivities - even so, or perhaps even more so because of these COVID challenges, LAMP 2020 has proven itself to be one of the most moving, personal, and powerful experiences that could not be recreated anywhere else.

2020 is a particularly significant year for the classical music world, with organizations around the globe planning celebrations for the beloved, pivotal Ludwig van Beethoven. The cancellation of so many concerts, the amount of passion and hard work that have been suddenly thrown into a state of limbo has been shocking and disheartening. So, it was an immensely touching privilege to work alongside these inspiring colleagues and continue pursuing our mission to bring live music to the community.

Speaking with all the talented, beautiful souls who have also become close friends, we've often discussed the overwhelming emotions and gratitude we feel every day at LAMP. There is so much music, yet not nearly enough. Every day we are playing our hearts out, for the 20 to 50 audiences who've taken the risk to come out and support us in their masks - which all the while cannot cover their smiling, gleaming eyes - as well as in place of all the deserving artists who do not have the resources or conditions to be able to come here to play to this live audience. The beauty was immense, the pressure was immense. Because we must try our absolute best to be anywhere near worthy of representing the potential and power this art form still holds. We get to be here. We must take it so seriously, so tenderly, so sincerely.

After 2 weeks of quarantine, I played 6 different programs in just over 2 weeks - 4 trios, 3 violin sonatas, 1 solo piano sonata, and 1 passion recital project with my dear partner in crime of the TAG Duo. Every day, we were contentedly working our hardest, living in this ideal bubble of celebration, live music, and trying to find relevance to what is going on outside of this dreamy world.

This is where the challenge of Song of Praise came in. It was our chance to explore the difficult questions. What are we doing? What can we possibly do from here on? This is where the tears snuck in during the final piece. Somehow after Teresa's speech, and then hearing that nostalgic Inner Mongolian melody - I was hit by all these raw, mixed emotions - frustration, tenderness, longing, homesickness, loneliness, warmth, joy, empowerment, hope.

I think we did something, I said afterwards. I think we were able to reach someone. Speak to someone. Realize some aspect of what we set out to do.

At first the whole project seemed confusing to us, how to relate the celebration of our culture to more serious and current issues, how we can use our art to call the community to action. We dug and dug and explored the ways to present our concert in a deep yet simple enough way for listeners to relate to and understand. And so, we narrowed our ambitions down to a three-pronged approach: gratitude, awareness, and action.

What privileges are we thankful for during these difficult times? What injustices do we see or avoid seeing around us? What can we promise ourselves and each other in terms of changing our choices and behaviours to be more responsible and involved? We hope this gesture can hold us accountable to taking action and help us find new or reignited meaning in our identities and responsibilities, and thus contribute to building a better world together through our gratitude, awareness, and action.

We distributed coloured slips of paper for audiences to write a wish or goal they could realize within the next month, and we were swept away by the enthusiasm everyone showed in responding to this gesture. We received 21 uniquely handwritten notes ranging from bold statements - 'eating green' / 'end to anxiety' (!) to eloquent poems and personal promises.

We discovered so many new aspects of ourselves as people and artists through exploring this program. We grew so much from this experience at LAMP. We were perhaps able to make some tiny impact, and perhaps continue on believing we can still strive to do more, do better.

This month in Lunenburg, the memories, the music, the friendships - I will all hold so close to my heart. There's nothing quite like the feeling of working your hardest, the feeling of building up endurance (and firm glutes!) hiking up and down that scenic hill twice a day, early at 6am to make breakfast and start practicing, late at night at 10pm after rehearsing, never failing to pause and be awed by the sparkling stars of the milky way engulfing us from above ... the countless times we tried going out to celebrate after each concert and instead had an even better party at the Academy with our strange feast of instant noodles and burnt leftover rice, the high-end loonies/toonies decor hunting and paper cranes folding, the greetings exchanged with locals on the streets and every Thursday morning at the market, saying thank you, thank you for showing up, thank you for listening.

We can't say enough times, thank you, thank you, for your belief, your time, your attention. Please let there be more music, more connection, more stories and emotions and love being shared.