

The Furloughed Flute Player

Dear Flute Cocktail!

Furloughed from duties at Exeter Airport since the beginning of April, there has been plenty of time that does not exist in “normal times” to explore music. It seems that isolation has spurred on creativity in many musicians, both as individuals and on the part of some of bigger players in the arena. Whilst it is sad to see concert halls, theatres and opera houses closed, there have been plenty of inspirational offerings too.

The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra has offered its Digital Concert Hall to those of us who cannot make it to Berlin, for some years now. A great offer of 1 months free subscription (which could be made into more if different people signed up at different times), opened the door to an Aladdin’s cave, including not only brilliantly filmed and recorded concerts, but also interviews between members of the orchestra and a long line of conductors and soloists. Short profiles (videos of around 10 minutes) of many of the regular players, documentaries of the Principal Conductors from Furtwangler and Karajan to Petrenko, the Academy for Young Musicians (many of whom now play in the world’s leading orchestras) and a history of the “Philharmonie” itself.

Of course as a flute player, my attention was often focussed on that section. Andreas Blau who retired a Solo-flute in 2015 after a mere 45 years in the post. Emanuel Pahud, Solo-flute since the age of 22 in 1992, joined by Mathieu Dufour following Andreas’ retirement. Thanks to the Digital Concert Hall it feels like they are all our friends now!

Watching socially-spaced chamber music, or chamber versions of works like Mahler’s 4th Symphony, played in an empty auditorium, brings a new approach to the appreciation of music.

As the generous free subscription period came to an end, the only thing getting in the way of signing up for a full year, was the guilt felt neglecting so many other first rate orchestras, so the Vienna Philharmonic was the next stop. Having been to a concert in the Musikverein, it is a magical place with such a vast history, the orchestra creates a very different sound to their colleagues in Berlin. Of course, The Internet makes information-trawling very easy, and soon Principal flute Walter Auer was in the spotlight. Another product of the Berlin Academy! With less material available on their own website, following the VPO requires use of YouTube (If you can stand the advertisements carefully inserted at strategic moments to inflict maximum damage). They also appear on streaming platforms such as Idagio, Primephonic and MediciTV.

One privilege of extra time available means there is time to indulge in mystery tours - a Google search for one piece, conductor or orchestra often leads to somewhere completely different. The 1943 recording of Furtwangler with the Berlin Phil, is a performance like none other.

BBC Music Magazine in addition to its regular articles on musicians and singers, new recordings and events, has followed the creativity of many of players confined to barracks, aided by streaming technology.

From Amsterdam, the Concertgebouworkest (pardon my Dutch) are now offering socially-spaced programmes, (1.75 meters for strings, 2 meters for wind) conducted by Gustavo Gimeno of Luxembourg Philharmonic fame. (No, I hadn't heard of him either). A fabulous performance of Dvorak 8 preceded Beethoven 7 with Tchaikovsky 5 due very soon, all available on Your-Tube!

And then there's the wonderful world of flutes. Many of the top players can be found giving masterclasses to some seriously good students. Emanuel Pahud (Berlin), Emily Beynon (Amsterdam) have proven inspiring. The pause button gives opportunity to experiment with their ideas instantly.



Principal Flute is an on-line Orchestral Excerpts service, aimed at players preparing for orchestral auditions. It's also a fantastic inspiration to use short(ish) extracts to improve tone, technique and expression. Contributors include Michael Cox (BBC SO), Walter Auer (Vienna Phil), Juliette Bausor (London Phil), Dennis Lupachev (Mariinsky Theatre), Gareth Davies (LSO & Flute Cocktail Flute Festival), Lorna McGhee (Pittsburgh) are just some of the stars on parade.

The excerpts are generally those designed to scare the life out of anybody with a pulse. With a copy of the sheet music available, each extract is demonstrated by one of the Principal players, and is then worked on in detail either to camera, or in the form of a masterclass. The extract is then put into context in the form of a recording of the piece.

People say that camera doesn't lie, and the same is true for the iPad with a video recording app! The initial results can be shocking, but seeing and hearing ourselves is one of the best aids to learning there can be.

Michael Cox has been offering on-line masterclasses via Facebook, and at the end of June is running an extracts class, with entry by video for which the 3 different extracts are being prepared by yours truly, including Stravinsky "Jeu de Cartes" - another new discovery.

Keep fluting!

Michael Wood
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