

21 Music Life During and After Lockdown

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Musicians in China have experienced a unseen situation since ever in the year 2020. In the central part of China-- Wuhan, a mega city with over 10 Mio. people the breakout of a Corona-pandemic which was then officially named Covid-19 changed the life of everyone.

21.1 Lockdown

End December 2019. We heard cases of a unknown pneumonia in Hankou (one of the three major parts of Wuhan) connected with a sea food market close to the railway station. Newspapers did not report much about it. According to the radio news, some patients are under observation, the reason of infection is not clear yet. Media told people that it is not dangerous and a human-to-human transmission is not confirmed.

My daughters and I joined a group of parents and children going to Singapore for a one-week winter camp. I remember very clear, that we got temperature measurement one by one at airport. Those who have critical values have to wait in a separate room "cooling down" before boarding.

When we arrived in Singapore, we saw astonishing TV news in the Hotel lobby, headline was "Wuhan pneumonia outbreak"! It was reported that in Thailand, Japan and South Korea there are some first cases of a very dangerous corona virus infection and people died of it!



Figure 1: Picture taken in the lobby of our Hotel in Singapore on 16.01.2020. Foto: Li Yunzhong

We shortened our trip in Singapore for one day and came back to Wuhan on 20th January 2020. As soon as we arrived Wuhan airport, we noticed that most of the people were wearing masks. 3 Days later the city of Wuhan where at least 8 Mio. people are still living* was locked down, an action that has never taken before in the history of the city. Though the announcement of lockdown was made in the night, but still at least 200,000 to 300,000 "night cats" noticed the news in the first moment and rushed away to other cities in that night, with

every possible means of traffic: private car or public train and plane. By 10:00 o'clock of the 23rd January 2020, all traffic connections to and from the outside world got blocked.

*Wuhan is the city with the largest number of University students. The average digit is about 1.2 Mio and of course due to its traffic position linking east and west, south and north a city with permanently travel workers. This makes about in total some 3 Mio. During the spring festival (January-February) more than 2 Mio. People leave Wuhan for visiting parents in other provinces.

I could have escaped because I got the announcement early in the morning. My 7 seat car would easily carry my whole family for leaving. I need maybe 30 Min to get on the highway and another 2 hours to be in a neighborhood city.

But I did not even turn on the car. Instead, I decided to stay in Wuhan and prepare for a quarantine of a unknown duration, just like the majority of the people in town, we love our city and families. Afterwards, this is proved to be the right choice.

21.2 Survive

No one had any idea how long it would take to be at home. First it was told 14 days quarantine, when the numbers of new infections went under control. But fact was it went higher, we had to stay another 14 days, and extended again and again. In the end, it was 77 days in total when the city reopened on 8th April 2020.

Staying at home means no income for freelancing musicians, because they could not perform. Professional musicians of state-owned ensembles like the city symphony orchestra or the province opera house got a so-called basic salary which is different from case to case, but roughly it would be some 60% of the whole. Privat companies are very different, though there was a governmental guideline, but what it finally matters is the moral standard of the bosses. Tens of thousands of private training and education centers were closed over the country, because there was no teaching any more, no gain for the runners, yet the rent must be paid, and the staff members must be paid too, even when a reduction up to 30% legally accepted.

School Children could not go to school campus, instead they got online class. From middle February 2020. With today's telecommunication technology and home PC, the whole thing was quite easy. There are also enough online meeting software available. In China, the most used class application is the Tencent meeting.

Some musicians began to give online class too, esp. those teachers of music departments or conservatory who have students on regular base. In general, with the Covid-19 approach, online teaching has been a more and more popular and wide spread way throughout China. Countless musicians have opened their own spaces in the social media with now the most active function – live streaming connected with paying system. In that way lots of musicians have even earned money. Another musicians even learnt to sell products in their spaces.

Through the 77 days, none of my family members, that means not only my wife and children, but also my brothers and sister and their families and children as well as my parents and parents in law who we all stayed in Wuhan, was ever infected, thank God! My wife works in the province opera house, she has a basic salary. My company as artist and concert manager made not a single cent money and still paid my staff a 100% salary, for them life must be even harder. During the quarantine, daily life things got very expensive, price of vegetables, meat and food simply got doubled or tripled.



Figure 2: My wife Ma Yaqin taped and recorded several songs at home. Foto: Li Yunzhong

As musician or people from music business, we feel that we have a kind of duty to encourage our fellow Wuhan people who suffered the most during the pandemic where over 3000 people lost their lives. My wife recorded piece by piece seven or eight songs of different composers, dedicated to the people endangered by the pandemic. During the quarantine she recorded everything with cellphone and sent the voice track to studios for post edition. The songs were broadcasted in the mobile cabin hospitals or through public radio. Three or four of them got prizes afterwards.

I was invited to give an online lecture on the topic “music that heals” in collaboration with the province library, sharing music from east and west that heals the soul which should help people to overcome their fear and sorrow and see the hope of life. The feedback was totally positive. I am asked to do this kind of music sharing even more frequently in the following months. I talked about German music to students of Wuhan University, gave online lecture in cooperation with local theatre. Most significantly, the IMHI web, a new founded platform of classical music promoting broadcasted a series of lectures about very different topics, from Celibidache, over Chinese and western operas to Carmina burana, and right to the season, Chritmas music. Now I have a constant group of followers of 2000-3000 music lovers.



Figure 3: Li Yunzhong talked about Verdi's La Traviata at IMHI, Shanghai, Poster by IMHI Shanghai.

21.3 Melting

When we came out of our living community in April, we immediately think of making concerts for the suffering people. But concert halls and relevant venues were still closed. So we decided to do online.

The very first concert with a quite comprehensive program including singers, pianist, Chinese instrumentalists live streamed on 10th May 2020, the mother's Day, was a complete success, we got over 200,000 online viewers in the first moment, free of charge naturally. But this encouraged us immensely.

Following up, some of the members of the Motropolis orchestra, a Project Orchestra founded by me few years ago asked me to make music for free. I certainly could not refuse. Instead, I persuaded a very high ranking online education platform of China to offer free live streaming for us. We chose the dragon boat's festival (25 June 2020), a fest dedicated to the famous poet Qu Yuan, as our concert day. I paid the technical staff for taping and recording, as well as the beautiful venue – a music bar by the famous east lake of Wuhan – once the Xingyinze where Qu Yuan as Emperor's Officer in charge of rites and sacrifice and education 2000 years ago used to take a walk along the waterside. We presented a chamber concert with works of Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Antonin Dvorak, Sergey Rachmaninoff, Ennio Morricone, Astor Piazzola as well as Chinese and Japanese pieces. It was a wonderful experience for all participants, the concert link is still accessible today.



Figure 4: A dragon boat's festival concert in the motto "Bring love home". F.l.t.r.: Narrator Li Yunzhong, Trumpeter Yue Dan, Pianist Li Sida, Clarinetist Huang Siqi, Soprano Yan Dongkui, Violinist Zhang Yimi, Cellist Xiong Jingxian, Saxophonist and Conductor Qiu Genghua. Foto: Li Yunzhong

With this experience, we then opened a series of six chamber concerts in Wuhan. Luckily, the Tanghu theatre, which is designed for traditional opera gave us the shelter and support. We did not sell tickets, instead, we invite audience: doctors, nurses, firemen, volunteer workers, students, music lovers etc. The program was sponsored by the government. The musician got even paid, not much, but 800 Yuan³⁵ per person every performance is quite reasonable.

we presented Duos, Trios, string Quartet and brass Quintet as well as mixed up, beyond that a evening with film songs and last but not least a Liederabend. The first concert was given on 19th July and the last one on 6th November, I worked as narrator and communicator. The reaction from the audience is so positive, that the Director of the theatre could not wait to ask me for another series of concert in the coming year!

³⁵ 800 Yuan is app.100 Euro.



Figure 5: The stage at Tanghu theatre in a very Chinese style. Foto: Li Yunzhong

21.4 Reborn

The allowed seating rate of concert venues in China was adjusted from 30% as of 13th May to 50% by 10th August 2020 as regulated by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, this means a lot! Most of the state sponsored orchestras and music ensembles restarted their music season. Some music festivals reactivated. The well-known MISA festival in Shanghai invited, as a special gesture the Hubei opera ensemble to perform an opera in concert form in the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall, an overwhelming success!



Figure 6: A press conference announcing the world premiere of the Symphony "Reborn" in Wuhan.F.l.t.r.: Zhang Shouzhong, Intendandt of Wuhan Philharmonic Orchestra, Mme.Tang Yu, Head of Artistic Dept, Wuhan City Culture Bureau, Composer Guan Xia, Composer and Conductor Shao En, Composer Yang Fan, Composer Huang Kairan. Press foto by Wuhan Announces

The Wuhan Philharmonic Orchestra commissioned some elite musicians of China to create a piece dedicated to the suffering and battle of Wuhan people during the pandemic. 15th August 2020, in the golden Quintai concert hall, a symphony in four movements by four composers with the title "Reborn" is world premiered:

- I. Lento triste by Guan Xia, 16 min.
- II. Allegro con Moto, Shao En, 8 Min.
- III. Moderato caldo, Yang Fan, 10 Min.
- IV. Allegro glorioso, Huang Kairan, 8 Min.

The concert was live broadcasted so that 2.8 Mio people watched it. In the concert hall the composers were saluted by a never ending standing ovation!

21.5 Hope

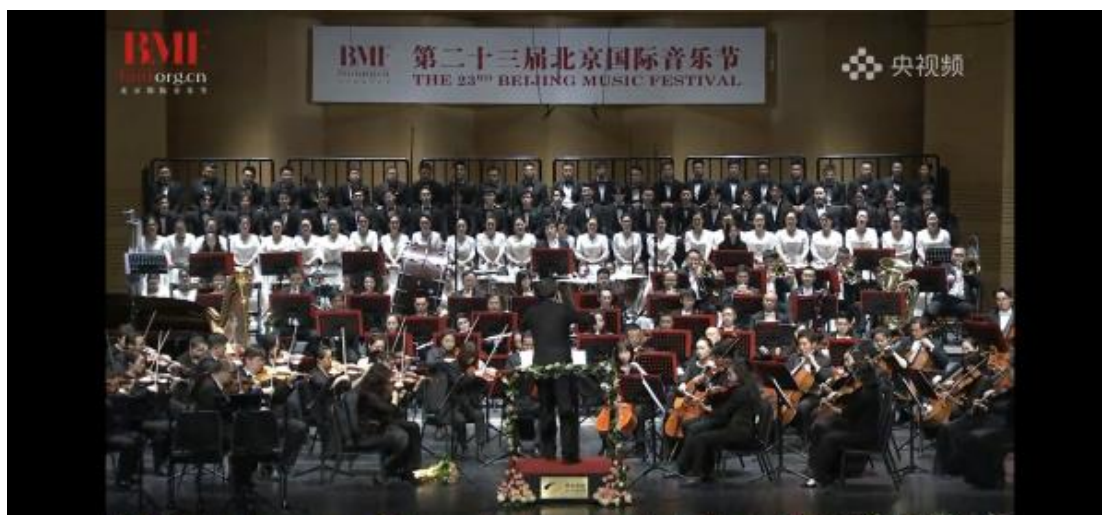


Figure 7: World premiere of Symphony "To 2020" opening XXIII. Beijing International Music Festival on 18.09.2020 at Poly Theatre. Press foto by CNTV.

After the summer, or exactly by 18th September, the concert halls are allowed to be filled up to 75%, this means quite some performances can cover their cost or even be profitable.

Two remarkable works must be mentioned.

As the grand opening concert of the XXIII. Beijing International music Festival, on 10th October 2020, a very special work is played as its world premiere: a symphony with choir in 8 movements titled "To 2020". It is far not an accident, that all major creators are born in Wuhan: Librettist Tang Yuesheng (Shenzhen) , Composers Zou Ye (Beijing) and Fang Shi (Wuhan) have to communicate permanently online because they work in three different cities. The singers are soprano Zhang Li ping (Central Conservatory, Beijing) and bariton He Leiming (Wuhan conservatory). The choir is sent by the Wuhan conservatory, strengthened by the Colleagues of Beijing music association, the Wuhan Philharmonic orchestra is joined by musicians from Beijing symphony orchestra and China Philharmonic orchestra. Composer at residence of China Philharmonic, Zou Ye took the baton himself. Interestingly this work is commissioned by the China Philharmonic and Shanghai Symphony orchestra. The whole piece is about 70 minutes long with the movements:

- I. Awakening
- II. Suddenness
- III. Cradle light in a cold night
- IV. Butterflies' flying
- V. The last happiness
- VI. The falling cherry blossoms
- VII. The dawn
- VIII. Reborn

The concert was live transmitted by the CNTV and live streamed in social media and touched millions of people, just like those at the site of Poly Theatre Beijing, who came to tears during the concert, by reexperiencing the dead and life of Wuhan people.

One week later, another even more gigantic work, a two and half hours opera in two acts – “An Angel’s Diary” is world premiered at Qintai Grand Theatre, Wuhan! An absolute audio and visual impact!



Figure 8: A scene from the world premiere of the opera “An angel's Diary at Qintai grand theatre Wuhan on 17.10.2020, Foto by Hubei opera house.

It is almost a one to one reproduction of the whole process of Wuhan's monumental 77 days lockdown. All the scenes we see and the people at stage are based on actual life. The title role is a chief nurse who lost her husband, a doctor infected in his hospital when treating patients. This is the real story of the Director Liu Zhiming of Wuchang hospital, born 1969 and died at the age of 51 on 18th February 2020. His wife Cai Liping, chief nurse at Wuhan Third Hospital could not even see him a last moment. Through social media, tens of millions of people in China still remember watching a scene where she was running after the vehicle with his husbands body leaving the hospital to the crematory, how she cried and collapsed, one of those unforgettable and heartrending moments of the tragic year.



Figure 9: Ma Yaqin in the title role, Chief nurse Lan Zhilian, Foto by Hubei opera house.

The opera shows first the fear and hopelessness and isolation, but then determined battle and support by the outside world and finally the triumph promising sunshine.

On the premiere night, over 2000 visitors filled the Qintai grand theatre. With the hyperreal sound effect, the one to one ICU station at stage, the panoramic city skyline projection as well

as the dramatic actions of doctors and nurses, but especially the very common man and woman like among us – student, businessman, farmer, professor or a dump girl, the audience got touched to tears again and again. Yet a smile appears by the ending scene, “the song of angels” a waltz by the choir, joined by some of the audience who already learned to sing during watching:³⁶

Where is the angel ‘s place?天使在何方?
 Who has ever seen its face?谁曾见过天使的模样。
 That you took my hands 只因你拉住我的手,
 Like the spring’ s wings 像春风的翅膀,
 The withered dreams 让凋零的梦想,
 Rebuild flying streams 从此重新飞翔。
 Through the sorrow in our minds 穿越心的忧伤,
 To the spring warmth and flowers of its kind.去往春暖花开的远方。



Figure 10: A closing scene from the world premiere of the opera “An angel’s Diary at Qintai grand theatre Wuhan on 17.10.2020. Foto: Li Yunzhong

In Autumn 2020, all schools were re-opened!

In collaboration with the International Chopin Society Vienna (ICG) , Poly Hele education organized upon my initiative a music contest – The Federation Cup China International Chopin Music Competition (FCICMC). We started the preliminary round already in May, where we collected videos of participants all over the country. Poly group has a large network of customers in China through its real estate and culture companies, so that we could easily get interested children to take part in the competition. By the end, it was over 2000 contestants. The jury finally chose 30 finalists.

We want to have a real finale where the children can play at stage in front of a jury. We carefully waited till the time when inner-China travel became quite liberal. We then declared the finale to December 26. Due to the travel ban between Europe and China, the invited jury members from ICG, including Mme. Clara Biermasz and some other pianists could not come to China. Mme.Biermasz was appointed the honorary chairwoman of the jury, she addressed the participants per video. Also the main patron, Prof. Dr. Theodor Kanitzer, Chairman of IFCS (International Federation of Chopin Societies) and ICG sent his salute in video.

³⁶ a translation of Li Yunzhong



Figure 11: The jury board of FCICMC. F,l,t,r.:Li Sida, pianist and supervisor; Fang Jun, Anhui Piano society; Prof. Igor Demchenkov, Academy of arts Novosibirsk; Prof. Misha Namirovsky, chairman of the Jury; Yan Lan, associate Prof. at Central conservatory, Beijing; Wei Lin, Prof. at Hebei Normal University; Chen Lin, Doctor of Hannover conservatory; Zhao Ying, pianist and Chopin prize winner in Russia. Foto by Poly Hele Education Wuhan

The grand Finale took place in the beautiful city Tangshan, once famous by a tragic earthquake on 28th July 1976 where more than 240,000 people died and over 160,000 injured.³⁷ A highly professional jury of seven members, consists of free pianists or professors at conservatory or experienced piano educators, headed by Prof. Misha Namirovsky, a Russian-Israel-American pianist, listened to the young players aged from 6-18 and awarded gold, silver and bronze medals to three age groups. For Poly Hele education, the competition is on the one hand a measure of spreading the music essentials of Chopin, on the other a promotion of young talents in China. After the competition, the prize-winners not only had chance to play a concert together with their jury, but also got a masterclass from them where those long years teachers shared their experiences in learning and performing. The competition is supposed to follow up. At the same time to the competition, the string quartet of Metropolis Orchestra toured Taizhou and Shanghai, playing four concerts with a classic-romantic program. The highlight marks a concert at Shanghai Technological University organized by the German Culture Centre, its over 100 years old concert hall, with only 150 seats provided an authentic and pure acoustic. Both Audience and the musicians enjoyed the concert.



Figure 12: Architecta Quartet at Shanghai Technology University on 24.12.2020. F.l.t.r.: 1st Violin Chen Shi, 2nd Violin Yu Tianle; Viola Zheng Ye, Cello Jiang Junhao. Foto by Shanghai Technological University

³⁷ a detailed report is published at „Wiener Chopin Blaetter 2020“

Upon a prompt invitation of the city Nanyang, I organized almost over the night 35 musicians playing a New year's concert there, which is also the grand opening of the new built Concert hall and theatre, parts of a complex with Museum and Library, in top modern architecture.

Musicians are grateful that they can play again, especially in front of audience. Music is never just a show, music is simply our life.

2020 has been a year extraordinary tough and difficult for the musicians in Wuhan, in China and all over the world. Hopefully, the corona pandemic will find soonest an end, or at least get controlled so, that people from different continents can exchange and visit each other again, because the world is smaller and closer with today's technology, we need to be connected and work together more than ever, just like in a single village.

I am sure, this will not last long.

The Hope is there, the good day is to come, and very soon, I am sure!