

Reflections on a Year of Making Music Together Apart

Austin Chamber Music Center, Austin Classical Guitar, and Conspirare, with the support and encouragement of the Still Water Foundation, collaborated in the 20-21 season to support one another and share ideas during the COVID pandemic as we transitioned to in-home, streaming performances.

Collectively we are incredibly grateful to have been able to continue to serve, employ our artists and staff, and create music that inspired and connected our communities during this time of great challenge. This year of pivoting and innovating will inform our work as we return to in-person concerts. We'd like to share some of our lessons learned, some of the art itself, and reflect on what we think we might take forward into the future.

Throughout the season, the Executive/Managing Directors of each organization spoke every Friday to share ideas and lessons learned, frequently engaging other team-members and community members in certain discussions.

We are very grateful especially to all those friends near and far who believed in us, took steps with us into online streaming events, supported us, through this most unusual year. Here is a brief report on some of what we learned, and we welcome feedback, comments, and questions.

Technology as Our Newest Collaborator

Each of the organizations in this trio has a unique musical offering with varying musical forces, repertoire, and unique needs for capturing and streaming musical offerings. The tools need to continue to connect with audiences varied based on these elements and each organization took a different approach.

ACG invested in cameras, microphones, and computers to enable high-quality live-stream events with multiple media components. ACG also developed the capacity to ship the technology and ultimately produced about forty major events in five states. The systems architect was ACG's Eric Pearson. A deeper story about Eric and the technology can be found [online here](#) and a behind the scenes look at the tech behind the ACG finale is [online here](#).

ACMC invested in audio/visual contractors, staff training, software, computers, and microphones to produce 8 high quality pre-recorded concerts. The concerts were later broadcast as part of a "watch party" with the artists participating in a live chat with audience members. The additional technological capacity also allowed ACMC to create [short teaser videos](#) to help promote the virtual series and organization as a whole. During the outdoor summer Festival we were able to seamlessly live stream the 5 in-person concerts so that folks that weren't ready yet for in-person events could still participate. All concerts were made available on demand for a limited time after the live broadcast.

Conspirare expanded the boundaries of choral performance through compelling artistic vision realized through investments in microphones, lighting, back drops and related

equipment to capture and create high-quality audio and video content that could then be turned into a choir through skilled video and audio practitioners. Conspirare carefully thought about how to create optimal performance conditions in the spirit of choir knowing that singers would be performing asynchronously rather than collectively. This allowed us to think beyond singers in a square, creating lifelike film plus a few creative takes on the familiar square format. Conspirare utilized YouTube as its streaming platform as it is extremely accessible - many listeners are already familiar with it and it is free to use. Artists joined listeners in the chat for each premiere. Audience information was captured through the Conspirare website.

Bringing Musical Artistry to the Screen and Back to the Stage

Artistry remained at the center of our missions, resulting in varied offerings that kept audiences engaged throughout the year and will forever shape the way we make music as each organization begins to return to stage.

Since September ACG put over 90 artists to work in 22 concerts, featured the creativity of 100s of students and community members from Austin and beyond, made more than 30 micro-commissions, and 10 larger commissions. Behind the scenes, ACG contracted over 600 hours of work from audio and video engineers to help the ACG staff produce these shows. Collaborators included a real-time visual artist, Laguna Gloria, Wildflower Center, KMFA, and many more. A small sampling of the works produced can be found [online here](#).

Since the start of ACMC's 2020-21 fiscal year last September, the team produced:

- Three Chamber Connect: Fall Sessions concerts
- A Charlie Brown Christmas Concert (2 airings)
- Four Chamber Connect: Spring Sessions concerts
- The Coltman Competition (31 middle school-collegiate aged ensembles participated)
- The Blue Bash (live fundraiser at Umlauf featuring the Miro Quartet)
- Five in-person, outdoor and live streamed Festival concerts

All virtual concerts included a pre-concert interview with Artistic Director, Michelle Schumann, the artists, and, when possible, the composers. Two pieces were commissioned during the year. This past season was ACMC's 40th anniversary season. The original theme, "We Are Family" would have brought back ACMC alumni that are now playing professionally across the country. Instead, all were featured virtually and will return in person for the live 41st season that will take place at KMFA's new Draylen Mason Music Studio and the First Unitarian Church. Hearing their perspective on the impact that ACMC had on their career was an excellent component of each program.

The return to outdoor concerts in May was a huge sigh of relief for the organization and its supporters. The opening Festival concert on May 27 was performed in front of a sold-out audience and received a [glowing review in the Statesman](#). Says Michael Barnes: "It would be hard to improve on the performances of each piece. The novel setting made it all the more exceptional after more than a year without in-person chamber music." Regular conversations with ACG and Conspirare along the way helped provide guidance and advice that was crucial in making the decision to move the Festival outdoors and bring our community together for the first time in over a year.

Conspirare's in-home performances and singles are captured in the [Music for an Emerging World Playlist](#). A variety of visual approaches were used. We are proud of our musicians—who recorded their own audio and video in their homes all around the country. We are grateful to the audio and video collaborators who transformed hours of footage into exquisite in-home music experiences. We are grateful to our listeners, ambassadors, and donors whose resilience, openness, and co-creative spirits helped us all discover new ways of experiencing music together. Our ambassadors became online chat moderators (aka ushers) and we provided live discussions to keep the live component of the concert experience. These unique approaches received press coverage including Michael Barnes [review](#) in the *Austin-American Statesman*:

“On screen, Johnson begins his own performance on the Long Center stage, as special-effects snow swirls around him. The other singers appear remotely in crisply rendered fragments of the screen. I have no idea how this visual and audio harmony was produced, but it is one of the most satisfying video translations of live performing arts that I’ve experienced during the pandemic era.”

Robert Faires featured the Quarantine Madrigals in a [preview](#), capturing the sentiment of so many singers: “ If the reason you sing is to blend your voice with others, who are you without those other voices?”

Conspirare continued to commission new works, creating music of this time and that will remain relevant as we move into live performances again.

Behind the Music: Finances, Legal, and Business

The three partners took a variety of approaches to ticketing, licensing, and other operations.

ACG took a “free, donations welcome” RSVP-based approach to ticketing. Unlike a lot of live-streaming concerts that placed features on multiple platforms for direct-viewing, ACG felt that this opt-in approach would: most deeply reach audience members, create moments of significant connection, and give explicit opportunities to support without creating financial barriers. This was a highly successful approach in that live attendance was steady, about 85% of RSVP attended, close to 100% of those in attendance stayed for the whole show, and about 15% chose to donate. Most donations occurred during the RSVP process, relatively few occurred during and after the concert. While we had no ticket revenue, we saw significant donated revenue, and our number of overall donors soared to beyond 1,200, which is an all-time high. ACG adjusted contracts to include rights-related issues for streaming and derivative works. More detail on any of these approaches is available upon request.

All of ACMC's virtual concerts were made available through an RSVP form, at first for free with an option to donate and then on a sliding scale from \$0-\$40 with an option to donate as well. On average, the financial results were relatively similar under each approach. We felt that it was important to demonstrate a value to our virtual programs through the sliding scale and generate earned income, especially as we looked forward to in-person concerts. The number of individual donors increased by about 25% from pre-pandemic 410 to 525 in the current fiscal year. Finally, ACMC modified artist contracts and licensing agreements in

order to obtain the rights necessary for virtual broadcast and ensure that royalties were properly distributed.

Conspirare decided to offer all performances for free, encouraging donations. 1,084 unique donors contributed during or after the concerts, nearly half were new donors. Conspirare was also able to secure sponsors from previous presenters, engaging audiences from around the country. Livestreaming comes with significant additional licensing requirements as explores in [The Voice Cover Story: Navigating New Rights Challenges with Online Concerts](#).

Bringing it all Together in a Time of Need

Even as each organization worked to present its own season and learn from each other along the way, there came an opportunity where we knew we had to come together in support of our community with Texas suffered an unprecedented winter storm in February that affected all Texans in significant emotional and physical ways. Some communities were affected more than others, and so the partners (ACG, ACMC, Conspirare) elected to work together for a concert that could support our fellow Texans with the healing power of music and serve as fundraiser to provide for immediate needs. *The Power of Friendship* raised over \$22,000 that was divided equally among the Central Texas Food Bank, Black Leaders Collective, and Impact Now Dove Springs.

You can view *The Power of Friendship* [online here](#), or [read a review](#) by Michael Barnes of the Austin American Statesman. One listener reflected, "I just spent my morning watching and listening to this gorgeous concert. I have the challenge to be recovering from facial shingles and the pain has been bad. This concert was so soothing and lifted me right out of what I'm trying to cope with."

Looking Forward

This year continued to reveal the power of relationships as a foundation for creating powerful musical experiences. We are grateful for our relationship with the Still Water Foundation and the support that allowed us to create music with the largest possible vision for artistic excellence and audience engagement. We got more intimate with our music and become more connected to our audiences as we navigated to means of production. We are looking forward to continuing to build powerful relationships and create transformative music.

Please feel free to contact ACG's Matt Hinsley (matt@austinclassicalguitar.org), ACMC's Peter Helf (peter@austinchambermusic.org) or Conspirare's Ann McNair (amcnair@conspirare.org) if you would like further information.