

What is the plan going forward?

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The question of what will never be the same again is fundamental and not only rhetorical and can be posed in a wide variety of contexts. So the, what is the new reality?

After the last two years of dramatic intensity and many unanswered questions we are all asking - "What do I do now?" "What are the opportunities of the present situation?" "What have I learned about the musical world, the institution which is my employer, the government?" As anyone can see we have not entered a period of stability. How have we changed? What is a feasible short term plan, what about mid-term plan?

I will try to avoid generalities and grand predictions and only speak about my own work as pianist, teacher, and artist.

The school (Ecole)

I am a teacher at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris "Alfred Cortot" which is arguably one of the most famous and indeed finest music schools in the world. In 2019 the school celebrated with appropriate pomp its centenary and thanks to impressive results in many international competitions the logical direction of the school seemed to be to specialize in preparation of high level music competitions. This in stark contrast to the original role of Cortot which was to form fine classical musicians of high general culture who would also be competent and dedicated teachers with a special dedication to French music.

The reality is that the Ecole Normale, rightly jealous of its independence has always desired official recognition and independence. Easier said than done. The aftermath of lockdown, inflation, general insecurity and high tuition fees had the result of slashing the enrolment by 50%. The time for a change and swiftly needed change had arrived. The "Master " which is the official diploma of the EU was and is being pursued and hopefully by the end of the school year will have been acquired.

The draconian system of exams of the Ecole Normale will have to go in favour of a kind of report card evaluation with exams and evaluations of far less intensity and severity and try to keep the level as intact as possible. I think that the lowering of the level of the school is inevitable but I will try with all my strength to abate this outcome.

The teaching

During the lockdown we taught on Zoom and Skype. The medium presents inconveniences and advantages. The most obvious downside is the quality of the student's instruments which were almost all subpar. The situation fostered an opportunity for in-depth analysis of structure and also pianistic gestures and so I exploited that with I am happy to say good progress. I always thought that I was quite astute in analyzing the rapport between the quality of movement and the quality of the sonority. The lockdown pushed me to develop this capacity to a far higher degree.

Several students were not permitted to play in their Paris apartments without headphones so I listened to them without sound. This of course presupposes an intimate acquaintance with

the work performed. The other positive aspect of working online was the organization of group meetings online where students could play for each other, with or without my presence. This has proven to be a major addition to the organization of my class. I have always encouraged students to play for each other with unfortunately little success. The students are very reticent to invite each other to their homes and if I myself don't organize their meeting personally it doesn't happen. On the other hand they are far more likely to meet online.

The school has become really confronted with the reality of the students practice possibilities. The lack of practice rooms in the school and the prohibitive cost of piano rentals has incited the school to very actively pursue the acquisition of a practice facility with a large number of practice rooms and eventually a larger room for organizing student recitals which are essential for the students preparing for exams and international competitions.

I have found also that I can communicate very effectively with group emails and the students feel less under my radar! For example, I have long been aware of the serious lack of knowledge of classical repertoire. Instead of incriminating remarks such as - you have to know more repertoire' I decided to compose a list of 100 essential works. This covers a wide variety of genres such as string quartets, operas, symphonies etc. This has had such success that I am elaborating a second list. An unintended plus was that my students are communicating to each other their favourite interpretations of various works.

I am open to other possibilities of the use of Internet for my class and the students know that I am open to suggestions. The group dynamic five years ago was fantastic and the years of one student at a time was a heavy blow to my students and my teaching style. The students also are quite desperate to earn money and even if they have scholarships they are quite involved in teaching, at various times during the day, plus babysitting and serving in restaurants.

The biggest change of all

Perhaps the biggest change that was caused by the situation which we lived through has been a change in my relation to travel. I have decided to abandon my incessant traveling but not my artistic activity. My new project is a series of video programs on two major but relatively lesser known composers - Albert Roussel and Karol Szymanowski. These two great masters and geniuses were both teachers of my own composition teacher in Warsaw, Piotr Perkowski.

I know so much about these great artists personally and I have played their music throughout my entire, now 50 year, career that I have decided to prepare videos playing, analyzing both musically and aesthetically and pianistically each and every piano solo piece of Roussel and Szymanowski.

I am writing the notes now and I am happy to say that the Ecole Normale is very keen in fostering this project. Roussel bequeathed the rights of his entire output to the Ecole Normale and this would be a kind of homage. Szymanowski is particularly close to my heart and I believe that this project can expose these composers to a large audience. My plan is to do Roussel in French and English and Szymanowski in Polish and English. I of course hope that these programs will incite students to make the effort to come to Paris and study at the Ecole Normale.

Positive and creative outcomes

I am pleased to say that the situation which we all endured has provoked a very positive and creative attitude on the part of the administration of the Ecole Normale. Despite the serious wounds which we have all endured I am confident that with courage, fortitude and love for music - and the students - we can create a new and better future.

Professor Michael Wladkowski is a Professor of Music in Paris. He is a world class teacher, performer and artist.