



## THE RPS CONVERSATION – MUSIC ON THE HOME FRONT

with

**Catherine Arlidge**

**Ben England**

**Helen Harrison**

**Isata Kanneh-Mason**

and **James Murphy** Chief Executive, Royal Philharmonic Society

transcribed by Lois Heslop

**James:** Welcome to the RPS Conversation. I'm James Murphy, Chief Executive of the Royal Philharmonic Society. This is the third of our conversations that we're presenting especially for classical music lovers, aiming to cut through some of the noise and stress and uncertainty of the pandemic, and give you a candid and human impression of how music makers are faring through all this. Today we're talking about a whole world of music-making that literally nobody saw coming six months ago. Even as lockdown began in mid-March, could any of us have imagined the sheer deluge of music that people instantly started creating at home and sharing both online and on our doorsteps to keep us all bright? It says so much about how musical a nation we are, how much we all need music, and how those who make music – amateur and professional, young and old, individuals and groups, all across the country – cannot help but give of themselves for the enjoyment of others. In many ways, it's the best of Britain. I'm joined today by four people who've each done remarkable musical things in lockdown: pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason, violinist Catherine Arlidge, conductor Helen Harrison and choral director Ben England.

A big hello to you all. I want to kick off asking each of you what you've found yourself doing musically in lockdown that back in January you likely never dreamed.

Helen, Britain is a constellation of amateur choirs, bands and orchestras, and you conduct the Blackpool Symphony Orchestra. When lockdown started it probably ought to have shuttered up, like the Tower and the Pleasure Beach, but oh no... you got busy. Tell us what happened.

**Helen:** We did get busy. I think the first thing was we were meant to do a huge concert about a week into lockdown with another group I work with, a choral society, but unfortunately it just went up in smoke. So we were really desperately missing making music. But also, for a lot of the players in our orchestra, it's really part of their

lives, some of them are in three or four amateur orchestras, it's integral: and we were just all missing it. So the first thing that we did is we wanted to come together, so we thought 'let's have some online coffee breaks', and it happened to be on Thursdays as well, and usually when we take coffee breaks it's me cracking the whip saying 'come on, let's get back and rehearse'. Basically from there, we saw the 'Clap for Carers' and some of our players had just been outside playing *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* for their neighbours and we thought that if we do that, record it in isolation, the usual shebang, and by doing that, we were really fortunate that we managed to raise some money for the food bank in Blackpool. As some of you will know, Blackpool has a lot of social deprivation so it's been really good to turn something so negative into a little bit of brightness for everybody.

**James:** If folks at home haven't seen it, do hunt it down, it's [the most beautiful thing](#). And amazingly high quality. I think you were out of the gate faster than most of the professional orchestras with this, and really set a standard there. There's even a little 'making of' film on your website which is so charming and in it you say that you had to get together and do something like this because 'making music together isn't just something you do, it's a part of who you are'.

**Helen:** It's part of who we are, yes. I think this is the thing whether you're a professional or an amateur. Obviously working in a lot of these groups, I'm often the professional in the room, but here's the thing about our amateurs: they're actually choosing to be in that room, they're not doing it because they have to be there. They really, really love it and it's really a big part of everybody's life, and I have to say that for me as a conductor it's really driven it home that we really do need people like that, because I don't make any sound at all! I can wave my hands to my heart's content but it's all a bit academic. At times I have thought 'who am I?' at the moment but other activities I've been involved in have shown the totality of what music does. If you're a music director or anyone working with any musicians, it's not just about coming in and doing the music. Now more than ever our role as music leaders is to stand up and help communities and provide hope and leadership within these opportunities. So there's been a shift in my job, and it's changed a lot, since January because it used to be rehearsal, conduct, next rehearsal, but actually it's been a lot more of a wider picture about actually what music means for our communities and keeping it going, and I think I've learned a lot from the process. Talking to the orchestra, and I also do an opera company locally, and all the other groups, we don't want to lose this enhanced connection we've got which I think will feed into the music we make when we get back together.

**James:** Thank you so much.

Isata it's no secret what you've been doing in lockdown. I gather that 1.7 million people tuned in to the fabulous BBC One programme charting you and your six sibling's endeavours in lockdown at the family home. And then there's been all your Facebook Live performances. When did you realise you were going to turn your house into a concert hall and let all the public in? And I have to ask, being the eldest sibling, were you in charge...?

**Isata:** Well I'll answer the second question first and the answer is a simple no! It's got to the point where all my siblings are more or less adults, or at least they think

they are, so I'm not really in charge anymore. I think that as soon as we got back home and this lockdown period started, at first we were flooded – as many musicians were – with many cancelled concerts and disappointing news so of course we were all quite down initially, looking at the state of the world and particularly the music world. After that period finished, I think it was probably about a week or so, we thought there has to be some way forward. We can't just sit here for several months watching concerts get cancelled. Several musicians were already doing quite a lot online and posting things on Instagram and Facebook and that's when we came up with the idea of doing these weekly 'Lives', we thought it would be a great way to keep sharing music with people even though we weren't performing. Also for us as well, it's having that weekly pressure: I think all musicians need that otherwise you go into a hole and don't really get anything done. I think as musicians we need to perform and have structure in order for our pieces to get ready. So it was useful for us and hopefully it added something to all the people watching. So yes, online has become the way forward for many musicians at this time. Of course it can never compare to the real thing, but it's definitely added a lot to many people and to us as well.

**James:** Catherine, you're a violinist with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, founder of the fabulous Stringcredibles, and you're the Artistic and Educational Director of the National Children's Orchestra. So you're already busy but lockdown hasn't seemed to slow you down in the slightest. You even seem to corral more and more of your family and neighbours each week to play out on the street for the 'Clap for Carers'...

**Catherine:** We started playing on the street, a little bit like Isata, we had a gloomy patch where we sank in everything and I was furloughed from the CBSO quite early on, as soon as we could be furloughed, so all of that fell off a cliff. My husband is a doctor, a GP, and he got Covid quite early on in the process. We also live quite close to the biggest hospital in Birmingham, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, so we've got a lot of NHS staff and carers living very close to us. So it felt very poignant at that first opportunity to do *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* on the street that we should be doing something, that we had a calling to be out there and be sharing the expertise that we had in a way that might be welcome and helpful.

So it started off with my children, two play the violin and one the clarinet, and then I phoned a family down the road that I know have a violin, a double bass and a trumpet, so they rocked up then we had a slightly more balanced ensemble because we're a bit treble heavy on our end, so we had a bit more on the bottom end which was good. Then the jungle drums got going and two more double basses turned up the next week, and then a saxophone and another clarinet, and basically it just grew and I was getting WhatsApps from all over the place saying 'can we come and join your band?' and it was like 'yeah, kind of!', but the trouble was the line-up was so eclectic with such an unusual group of instruments that you couldn't just say 'play this', we had to arrange everything every week. So we started off with *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* and every week we added new things and by the end we had quite an extensive repertoire for this very unusual ensemble. But it was something that grew and had a life of its own.

Luckily for us there's a police chief constable who lives around the corner who I didn't know, but he rocked up on the first one and tweeted about it – in a positive way. It was that scary time at the beginning when you shouldn't be inciting people to join anything because people were supposed to be locked down, but he came every week which was brilliant so then I knew we were kind of safe. Police cars came to check that everyone was doing what they should be doing, but I think he was very adamant that we should continue, as long as people were being respectful and distancing. We managed it thankfully and we went out on a big high with a big rendition of ABBA's *Thank You For The Music* and that was it! I don't know if we'll ever make a comeback but it was great while it lasted.

**James:** I love this idea that music could cause uprisings, and clearly it magnetises and galvanises people. Catherine, do tell us a bit more about the webinars you've been doing for the National Children's Orchestra. The NCO, by its very nature, gets together for courses then pops up in concert halls but you've really turned it inside out and shared all of this online and we've seen lots of famous musicians taking part and revealing a completely different side to themselves.

**Catherine:** With NCO it went off a cliff as well like CBSO – all the activities were cancelled. First of all our Easter courses were cancelled, then all our regional activity was cancelled, then our summer courses were cancelled, and it became clear that we really wanted to do something to keep the children motivated and engaged. We did a big research survey with the kids about what they were missing and what they wanted, and what they wanted was: friendship, fun, and to learn new things. So we thought okay, let's take those things and distil them into something that we couldn't do at any other time.

The beauty is in lockdown everybody is free. So I could just email anybody that I could find the email address of anywhere and say 'could you give me 45 minutes of your time?' and so we've had Mirga, we've had Jess Gillam, we were in Isata's with her siblings Sheku, Aminata and Mariatu, and we've had Olympic athletes, we had a politician Thangam Debbonaire, we've had players from the Berlin Philharmonic, the London Symphony Orchestra and Royal Opera House: basically anybody that I was cheeky enough to ask, and nearly all of them said yes! Once it was clear that it was fun and we knew what we were doing, people started saying 'sure, why not', and so we've got Tamsin Grieg coming to join us, and Bill Bailey, and some really great people. Hopefully it's just keeping that spark of enthusiasm about performance and energy and motivation in people. And it was always on a Friday afternoon just before the Kanneh-Mason thing: it was perfectly timed, so they went straight on to Sheku and Isata's house, so it was a nice end to the week, I think. People would look forward to it in a happy way.

**James:** And it's all still on [YouTube](#) so people can enjoy it.

Ben, what haven't you done in quarantine? You conducted the [Self-Isolation Choir](#) which united over 3000 people to sing *Messiah* from home, and created the [Quarantine Choir](#), QC Kids, and your YouTube platform [homechoir.co.uk](#) where you're sharing sessions to keep people singing every day. Where did this all come from?

**Ben:** I hate to use the word but it has been quite a journey. It all came from a dark patch. I think everyone's had the same experience: all my choir rehearsals, all my orchestra rehearsals were all cancelled pretty much at the same time on the same day. I was due to go to a choir rehearsal and I had the phone call saying 'nope we're shutting down' and I sat in my front room with the curtains drawn in the dark thinking 'well that's that then, it's all gone'. I had a little bit of a sad moment and then I thought to myself, 'well that's great, I can get on and catch up with all the boxsets I haven't watched' so I started making plans to do some really serious Netflixing, and then I honestly had a real moment...

I work with a lot of choirs, some professional and some amateur, and in all of those choirs there are those people who rely on the choir rehearsal – as they say – as a lifeline. I visualised very clearly one of my choristers who had the week before come up to me at the end of the rehearsal and grabbed my arm in the way that some ladies of a certain age do, and said to me her husband had just died, I think two weeks before. She said 'I didn't want to come back to choir but I thought I should and I'm so glad I did because this is my lifeline.'

That's the last thing she said to me before lockdown, and I sat down and thought 'what are we going to do? how are we going to help this lady?' I got my phone out and I recorded a video, and thought I'd teach a song the way I would normally teach a choir. I won't be able to hear them but I'll look into the camera and imagine this particular lady and I'll do it for her. I put that up online and I got two subscribers: me and my wife. I did another one the next day and told a few people about it, and it built from there, and after a week we had 600 subscribers, and then a thousand, then two thousand.

It began as just having fun with it, trying to be light-hearted and trying to take people's minds off the fact we were all stuck in together, and I was making these recorded videos and putting a lot of time into editing them and trying to include shout-outs to people. At one point we had almost a mourning period when people would send in posters for concerts that never happened. I would say 'so here's the Bristol Choral Society's concert that isn't going to happen but will happen one day.' From there I was put in touch with this chap called Mark who had just set up the Self-Isolation Choir, and he was looking for a musical director because the chap he had asked to take it on was stuck in Greece on a little island with only a Vodaphone 3G connection and he couldn't stream.

I found myself three days later in front of the Self-Isolation Choir. We thought there were going to be a few hundred people but there were 2000 by the end of the first week, singing Handel's *Messiah*. It grew from there, and we ended up with 3500 in the choir. As Catherine was saying, we reached out to some amazing musicians, having intended to just use a few choristers from Wells Cathedral and maybe a few instrumentalists to put together an orchestra. We ended up with Laurence Cummings who is a phenomenal practitioner of Handel, a Baroque orchestra, some of the best vocal soloists in the world singing with us, and people from every continent, every country, coming along and singing live and saying what it meant to them to be singing again.

After a while it became really clear that what we had here could be a model for the future, not to replace singing in person but to augment it, and certainly to give us something to do while in lockdown. Since then, you're right, we're on every day now, and I do a daily broadcast with the Quarantine Choir, which is light-hearted singing. With the Self-Isolation Choir we're about to have a summer school and next week we're going to learn Handel's *Zadok the Priest*, and Parry's *I Was Glad*, and yes... it's been busy!

**James:** It sounds like you're going to enjoy the break when things go back to normal!

So lockdown has for now made our homes into performance venues of a kind. I think people have surprised themselves how easy this was and the tech was at our fingertips all along. As lockdown eases, do you think this will last? That it maybe represents something of a revolution?

**Isata:** I think it will be a mixture of both because I think people really do crave real-life social interaction and nothing will be able to beat a live concert. I actually think in being deprived of live rehearsals and live everything, people will have a renewed love for it, so I'm hoping we'll see more people wanting to go out and watch concerts once that's possible. I do think however now that we've done so much online, people are more aware of it. I definitely wasn't much of a tech person before this and I wasn't really that big on social media either, but that has definitely changed over the last few months so I think that kind of online presence will also continue.

**Helen:** I totally agree with all that. I've really enjoyed watching lots of little things on social media, from all kinds of creative people doing funky things, there's been bassoons, [the 'Knight Rider' cello](#), and even I have just sat there and said 'wow that's amazing'. And so many of my friends have done their own little TikToks, so I hope people have more confidence in what they're able to do and think to themselves 'right, well I'll give that a go.' I think you're right there might be a blend of it all, as we are all craving live performance, let's be honest, aren't we.

**Ben:** Particularly at the moment, if you look at the apparent risks in professional music, from what I understand, string players and pianists aren't at more risk performing than just being in the same room, and then it goes up the spectrum from there and at the top you have singing perceived as the ultimate 'super-spreading' activity. So I think we'll be in the situation until there's a treatment or a vaccine that we won't be able to meet face-to-face and sing safely.

But when we do, I think there will be an element of this online singing and rehearsing that does go forwards. I was talking with a colleague who said that in all seriousness choral singing and rehearsals haven't changed much in 200 years. We still go to a church in the evening after work and we get these musty old scores and we sit there, and you only sing for about a quarter of the rehearsal because you're waiting for the conductor to go round and do the sopranos, the altos, the tenors and then you get to sing. A friend of mine said it's like an American football match: fifteen minutes of action squeezed into two hours.

What this model gives you... with Self-Isolation Choir, everyone rehearses on the Monday, sopranos rehearse on Tuesday, altos rehearse on Wednesday and so on,

so you get a really focussed rehearsal. When did you last hear a choir do an hour's tenor rehearsal? It just doesn't happen. It's all recorded, so at any point if you miss something and the conductor goes too quickly, you can pause it, you can rewind it, you can pause in the middle and go and have a cup of tea, the conductor will never glare at you if you sing something wrong... there's all sorts of benefits to it that I keep getting told are really good.

When we come out of lockdown, obviously we will have face-to-face rehearsals, but I know for a fact I will still be using the online component to act as a revision aid, as a teaching aid, and really for those people who can't get to rehearsal. That's why I came up with the idea of Homechoir in the first place: it's for those who can't actually physically get out of the house or if they're in care or in hospital, it means they can be involved as well. There are advantages to it. It's not going to replace it but it is going to augment it, I think.

**Helen:** What's been so interesting, we've been talking about technology and in some of the groups we work with, we may have people a bit fearful of technology and let's face it: we've probably all learned masses even if we thought we knew a little bit. I'm really excited about the fact that we've had to change so much. It's going to open up possibilities for what we do and, in some of the areas we work, in the way we want to continue to attract new members to our groups. Hopefully it's going to help with the whole confidence issue around technology and make people a bit less fearful of things changing. For me things always need to be moving forwards otherwise we will go backwards, so yes there are real benefits.

**James:** I wanted to ask what music-making at home permits that perhaps it doesn't so readily do elsewhere. A friend told me that their child had been more inclined to put their hand up in lessons conducted virtually at home than in the classroom. Catherine, in your webinars we've seen such joy and freedom from even venerable artists like RPS Award-winning conductor Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. Has lockdown somehow cracked open classical music's sense of propriety, and might this be a good thing going forward?

**Catherine:** I think there's definitely a side to this whole lockdown that when people see you in your home, you're more of a person, less of a celebrity or a hero, so we're more equal in that respect. I think people feel comfortable, because this just feels like we're talking to each other when eventually probably thousands of people will have watched it. It feels quite intimate and fairly safe, in a lovely way. And even if it's live, it still feels just a bit less scary, I guess. I think it's humanised classical music in a way. Also we're able to talk about things in our webinars like 'Do you ever get nervous?' or things that are quite personal sometimes to people that they might not want to share, but they seem very open to share even some of the most difficult things. It's very useful for a young child to hear that Mirga was very nervous when she first conducted at the BBC Proms for example, because she's human, she's like all of us, and it is a leveller in that respect.

**Isata:** I completely agree. As you say, I think it levels everyone out. To see all these great musicians that we all look up to... to see that they're all in exactly the same place. At the end of the day we all have to deal with the cancellation of concerts and we all have to broadcast from our homes. I think it just makes everyone feel closer



and more connected. Also with these 'Live' streams we've been doing, you can reach people from all over the world. When we were doing our 'Lives' you would have people saying 'I'm tuning in from Australia, America,' all these kind of places. Normally you have to tour to get to meet these people so I think in that sense everyone is a lot closer and connected, even though we're far distances apart.

**Helen:** I can remember seeing some amazing, in-the-gods pianist and he was at his home with his slippers on, playing. It's those moments that really bring home, wow, the music was beautiful, but it really brought home what we've been saying: we are classical musicians and we are so lucky to do what we do, but we are just normal human beings, and there isn't this special... well, it is special but in a positive way. The slippers, to me, said it all.

**Ben:** I think you're right: the ability to reach out across the world and really humanise classical music is perhaps something that we weren't able to do a few months ago but now, half of you have got bookshelves in the background and it makes us feel a bit more human. When we look in the comments and see, as you said, someone from Australia is talking to somebody from Berlin is talking to somebody from Hull, and they're having a really nice conversation. They're all saying 'shall we meet and have a Zoom coffee later on?' and it's all these conversations and relationships that have sprung up that would never ever would have happened if we hadn't been in lockdown. It's almost as if when we came indoors we started looking more globally.

**Catherine:** There's an irony isn't there that the one thing technology can't let you do is play together remotely because of the latency and the time lag, but if you park that one thing, there are 89 other things that it can do, do you know what I mean? So although that's at the heart of what we do all the time, actually thinking okay, let's look beyond that, let's not get morose about the fact that we can't do that. There's so much we can do. At NCO it's certainly going to be part of our future forever now, and it's given us an opportunity to invest the time in understanding the technology, understanding what can work, translating that into how it might work for children, how it might increase our reach, how it might increase our accessibility to children whom we might not be able to reach otherwise.

I think it's going to be a super-powerful tool and I'm very excited really to have had this time to understand it better and make it work well for us. We're just about to launch a three-week digital residency for all our little people that they can dip in and out of, and we're working out what it is that will work really well for them. We'll see what does and what doesn't work, I'm sure not all of it will. But until you try, you don't know and I think that's another thing: that it's brought risk to us in a good way. As a performer, as a musician, you crave that in a funny sort of way as well. Performing is about taking that risk and seeing what happens and living in that space, and I think that's a kind of unusual and exciting tension we've found in having had this time.

**Helen:** And you said you're going to keep elements of what you've been doing with NCO? I think that's going to be the challenge because once you're in rehearsal mode, often for a lot of the groups I'm with, always rehearsal time is the enemy, isn't it? It would be really good to retain these other elements which are enhancing and which we never had time to do, or we said we'd get to them someday – 'digital's coming!' – well it's right here now, isn't it.



**James:** Ben and Catherine, share with us what have amateur musicians been telling you they have valued from the things that you've been able to offer through all of this?

**Catherine:** We did a big survey of the children at NCO to find out what they were missing, essentially, and what they valued. As I said earlier, it was friendship, seeing and meeting up with people; it was having fun, simple as that; and it was learning things. That was the feedback we've had from the webinars, that people have just kept coming back and back because that's what they're getting, they're getting the fun and the learning and the joy and the sense of community and belonging to something when you're feeling a little bit isolated.

**Ben:** I completely echo that. It is the feeling of community. Those people who come along to choir each week or to orchestra, it's the thing they look forward to most, and if that's taken away then for a lot of people that's a very dark thing for them to have to deal with. For a lot of people, the music is a big part of why they come along and there's an element of retaining good vocal health and maintaining vocal expertise, still being able to sing the high notes when we come out of lockdown. But for most people, it's about retaining those links or even forging new links and being part of something bigger than yourself. *Messiah* was genuinely moving and actually quite a spiritual experience – and I don't mean that in a religious sense but in a sense of, as I was standing up and conducting, I knew there were thousands of people all round the world standing and singing in that moment. Maybe not exactly at that moment, maybe 20 seconds after I give the downbeat they start singing, but it's all happening and to watch hundreds, thousands of comments streaming up saying 'I'm crying, this is one of the best things I've done... I can't believe how much this makes me feel better... I can't believe how happy this makes me' ...at the end of the day, it's needing to be connected to everybody. That's what we lost, and that's what this technology has allowed us to rebuild in a new way. As we've said, it's not going to replace face-to-face music, but it is going to be another way of forming those bonds.

**Catherine:** There's a great quotation from C.S. Lewis which lives with me which says 'I read to know that I am not alone'. And I think music is even more that, in an extreme version. I think that's what this kind of work now has done: it's reassured people that even if you are physically on your own, you are not emotionally or spiritually or society-wise on your own.

**Helen:** In a sense, everything that music has been achieving with people playing in the neighbourhood, online, any concerts that have happened at all during lockdown, it's underlined what we know – how powerful music is and what it gives, apart from just the cultural aspects, all those things that we all as musicians know about and spend our lives telling how great it is – this has underlined that. Obviously we know, whether we like it or not, things are going to be difficult for the next year or so, especially economically, but the need of music, especially I would say for young people, is going to be even more critical. I've worked with the youth orchestra in Lancashire and we had our first Zoom once we'd got things in place – we hadn't had a chance to interact meaningfully until we got the safeguarding in place, quite rightly – and literally every single person from the orchestra was on that Zoom which shows how important the orchestra is to them as a young person, but it will be even more

important as we move out of this, especially with what we've all been through. I think we're going to have to work hard to make our case, to look after the musicians we work with and make music with.

**James:** Isata, on World Piano Day, you were actively encouraging pianists everywhere to share clips of them playing, like you've done yourself. You touched on this yourself: there's been a remarkable sense of levelling, almost a remarkable democratisation of music, even Lang Lang stuck at home somewhere. Have you felt this change your sense of connection with your audience and how you interact with them?

**Isata:** Yes, as I was saying, what's incredible is that we're now able to connect with people all over the world, and also the sheer number of people you're able to connect with. When you do a livestream you're able to connect with thousands and thousands of people. What concert hall can fit hundreds of thousands of people inside? That's been really amazing and I've definitely felt closer to people all over the world, audience members and also other musicians. Yes, pianists such as Lang Lang, and [Tom Poster with the violinist Elena Urioste](#), they've been releasing a piece of music every single day; just to see all these musicians, to get to hear them more than you normally would, and to see them in their natural environment, it definitely makes you feel closer to everyone and that's what's been really amazing about this time. What's also been particularly inspiring for me is seeing the sheer creativity of musicians. We were all hit quite hard by this lockdown experience and we had to adapt quickly and drastically, and it's been amazing to see all the creative projects that everyone's come up with, and the ways in which we've used technology to make things better for people who are stuck at home.

**James:** You're right, it really has been a time for discovery, and an artist who you might have not had time before to go out of your way to hear a whole evening's recital by, you can suddenly get a glimmer of. There are now lots of people whose recitals I am really eager to get to who I didn't know about in the past.

**Isata:** Yes I think at first there were people who were worried, saying if artists are putting all this free stuff online, does that mean essentially there won't be any more concerts that people will want to come to? But I think it has the opposite effect. Seeing and hearing all of this music online for free and being able to access it makes you more hungry to get out to a concert and hear them live.

**Ben:** I think it also allows us to build a relationship with our audience that is more personal, that is more about us looking after them and providing a service, almost. With the Quarantine Choir, I am there every day at 2pm and there are people who set their watch by it – 'there I am, doing my ironing, and you're on in the background, and I really enjoy.' They send me wonderful messages, photographs of their baking and gardens and all sorts, and it's become much more of a two-way process. I run a choir on a Thursday night (or I did) in Chepstow and we've started doing our rehearsals online and I've got fifty new members of this choir who have joined from all over the world. The plan is that once we get back to face-to-face rehearsals, I'll stream the rehearsals. There will be a choir there live and a camera at the back streaming the rehearsals, so people will be singing along. A couple of people have

actually said, somebody in Germany, somebody in America, that when we perform they will come over and perform with us because they know the music.

I think what we have done by putting out a lot of free music is to build a lot of goodwill, a lot of gratitude, and a feeling of support. We're trying to support people in the way that we can. I think Catherine was saying that your husband's medical, my wife's a medic too, and I always felt that I'm not a frontline worker, I can't be on the frontline and help in that way, as perhaps I would want to. But I can help in this way. I can put out choir rehearsals and I can put out singing to give people that sense of community and that sense of belonging, so that when lockdown is lifted perhaps it's helped them, and maybe they'll come to one of my concerts or come and join a choir so there is that reciprocal relationship that we've built.

**Catherine:** There's something in that about being more relevant, or finding a new relevance with people. We've got this technology to help us do that, and to help us understand what people are needing and feeling, and we felt that playing out on the street too. Every week we had to try and judge the mood of the nation almost in what we picked to play. If you pick the wrong thing you could get it so wrong. In the beginning we stuck with a lot of slow, contemplative stuff, because that's what the mood felt like, but from quite early on we had the *Can-can* in our repertoire and I thought, 'we can't put *Can-can* out, I don't think we'll ever be able to put *Can-can* out,' but then there came a moment when we could, when people wanted to have a bit more fun, be a little bit silly, and then we had them all Can-canning out here and that felt relevant and right, and I think it's exactly what you say: it's about understanding what the need is and building that connection.

**Helen:** And because everything has happened so quickly, in a way the function of music – I don't mean to entertain in a shallow way – it's become more real. I've been playing the piano literally for pleasure, then you hear the neighbours say 'ooh we love it, when we hear you practising, we come out with a glass of wine.' I've been lucky they've liked it! But then there is the pressure that oh gosh, I really have to practice this. Fundamentally that actual very close connection with an audience where they're people you really know, it's back to how it probably all started out, people singing very basically and connecting. Our concert halls are fantastic, but the nature of the space has leant itself to distance, in a way that sometimes is unhelpful.

**Isata:** I completely agree with that and I've definitely been noticing more of a willingness to experience music in a more fun way. I've always passionately believed that music should be fun, and fun doesn't mean silly or not played well, but fun in the sense that everyone should feel relaxed. When the NHS claps were happening weekly, my siblings started going out to the street and playing a bit of Jewish Klezmer music for the neighbours, and they really loved it and it really brought a sense of community in the area, and these kind of things wouldn't have happened normally. It's been really lovely to see it happening now.

**James:** Do you think this might rouse more people to find their own inner music, maybe to join a choir for the first time or to dust off a childhood instrument in the attic, and what might you say to encourage such people?

**Isata:** I personally really hope so. I think that music is something that even if you haven't been studying it or you may have never played an instrument in your life or may have not played one for years, it's never too late. Even if it's just for your own pleasure and you don't intend to play to anyone else, music can bring you so much joy and fulfilment and this time has really highlighted that for many people. I really hope now people are at home more, they are starting to play music more when they perhaps may not have otherwise done so.

**Catherine:** I've got a little anecdote there: I don't teach very much because I haven't got time but I do teach one student who started playing the violin when she was 50 and she's passed her Grade 8 exam now. She's now in her mid-60s and I'm totally loyal to her because of that amazing remarkable journey. She's done an Open University music degree in that time and it's become a huge part of her life. Absolutely it's never too late and it's very easy to think it's a talent thing and 'oh I haven't got talent.' I want to try and bust that whole myth out of the water because so much of it is about wanting to have a go, trying, and having some fun like Isata says. Fun is definitely underrated.

**Helen:** There's been so much success in online teaching as well, so the issue of being busy and working, there are going to be so many teachers out there who can now teach you online if you've got an instrument, so just do it!

**Ben:** I think there's this model now of watching somebody teaching you through a camera, and being on the other side and being safe because they can't see you and they can't hear you. I hear a lot from my choristers saying 'I never would have sung this if there was any chance anyone could actually hear me! I'm getting it all wrong but you're still smiling and saying well done and I really appreciate that.' I've got people who sing in my Thursday night choir who sing pop songs and folk songs who have come along and sung Handel's *Messiah* for the very first time. They had heard the Hallelujah chorus, and even then only the first eight bars, and they actually learned the whole thing. For some of these people it was like learning to run the marathon, we worked on it for nine weeks and throughout I had choristers texting me on WhatsApp saying 'I'm exhausted, I've just sung the first part of *Messiah*, how on earth am I going to sing the rest?' And by the end there were streams of emojis, crying emojis, saying 'I can't believe how much this piece has changed my life, I can't wait to come and sing it in real life in the Royal Albert Hall.'

In addition to everything you folks have said, I think the thing this has given people is a feeling of permission: that it's okay. We're all in our houses, we're doing our best. The number of times I've been doing an online rehearsal and I've made a complete hash of something, live in front of thousands of people, and I've had to say 'sorry everyone, can we just do that again?' I've had messages from people saying 'I really appreciate that, it really humanises the whole process, you're human, we're human.' A couple of times I've been taking rehearsal, dressed up properly, like a newsreader, but underneath I'm wearing brightly-coloured shorts, and people get a glimpse...

**Helen:** What colour are your shorts today, Ben?

**Ben:** They're blue. I'm wearing blue shorts!

**James:** I really hope that people listening do go and seek out all the wonderful things you've been doing musically online during lockdown. I wanted to ask each of you personally, what has musically inspired you in lockdown? Whose endeavours have you loved and recommend our listeners seek out?

**Ben:** Present company excepted of course, you guys have all been amazing. From my point of view, it's been all the little messages popping up on WhatsApp. There have been some amazing professional musicians putting out music, but it has been the families. There was an incredible family from near where I am in Bristol who put out a [Les Miserables medley](#) of them singing about lockdown, and it's things like that, people taking an existing work and putting a humorous spin on it to make us all laugh, songs about tins of spam and toilet rolls and all the rest of it. I just love the ingenuity, the feeling that actually this is a challenge that we as a species are having to rise to, and we're doing it through music, through laughter. All the people who found a way to make us laugh through music, I think that was just inspirational.

**Isata:** As I mentioned earlier, I've been listening to a lot of the [pianist Tom Poster and violinist Elena Urioste](#). They've been quarantining together and they've been putting out videos every day of arrangements and pieces of music and funny things. Not only was I impressed by their sheer commitment to doing something every day when we found it a lot doing something twice or once a week, but it was also lovely to see the creativity of their arrangements. That's definitely something I'd recommend.

**Helen:** I quite enjoyed listening to lots of podcasts on various things. Opera podcasts, so many conductors talking about their journeys, and listening to different people and musicians talking about their experiences. It's been nice to hear about other people's journeys to where they've got, and I've loved a lot of the inspiring content to watch, some amazing masterclasses, concerts. One really random thing, I came across the jazz pianist and vocalist Blossom Dearie and this one song [Saving My Feeling For You](#), and you know when you've got a song that just stays in your mind? Obviously there's lots of other classical music swimming around that I'm dealing with daily but that was it: it's got some really exquisite drumkit playing as well.

**Catherine:** I've really enjoyed all those things that you've all really enjoyed, but also the big collage concerts that people have been putting together that have obviously been really sophisticated and time-consuming, but how that has evolved as a genre when it started with some videos in landscape format and some videos in portrait, and some people a bit out of sync. It's evolved into something very classy, there's been some incredible videography and it's almost a new mini art form in itself. Actually being imaginative about that possibility, it's been exciting to see that journey.

**Helen:** Maybe that's another change we're seeing that we're still going to work through? Maybe when we do get back to live music, the visual element of what we do is going to be increasingly important. I know when we do get back we'll probably have socially-distanced audiences but again I think we can do some cool things with that. Rather than it be a penance or a punishment, thinking about the choirs, we can assume different shapes, because we have to.

**James:** This has been and remains a tough time for the arts and music. Nonetheless I wanted to ask each of you finally what have you usefully learned through all of this and, hand in hand with that, what good do you hope comes of it in the future?

**Isata:** The biggest thing that I've learned is that no matter what's going on externally, in the world or in people's lives, there's always a need for music. There's been a lot of fear recently, before lockdown too, that music is dying in certain places or given less relevance in schools, and I think even if that's true in some cases, it's also never really true because people will always need music and want to have music in their lives in some shape or form. I think we can all take confidence and joy in that fact and always keep finding ways to be creative and playing music, because there's always going to be a need for it.

**Catherine:** You can't lock it down, can you?

**Isata:** Exactly!

**Catherine:** For me, what the concept of quality is – that's been a really interesting question. For a classical musician playing in big halls, you have an image of what quality is and what this perfection is that you're trying to achieve. This has shifted that more towards a quality about connection and a quality about meaning and relevance and about saying something that people need and value now. When we had our street band, I had my own inner tussle about the quality of what we were sharing, because of the way we were doing it. We had no rehearsal, sometimes it was really freezing and the intonation was crazy, and some people rush and some people drag, and all that stuff. But actually it wasn't about that. I had a little word with myself to say that's not important anymore. What's more important is that we are doing something that is valuable and it is good enough. Striving for that sort of esoteric perfection, of course it's valuable, but there are other values as well.

**Helen:** I think the points you make are brilliantly put and I couldn't agree more. What it's reinforced to us is the fundamental intrinsic value of music and how we re-gauge what that means to us. Sometimes we do get hung up about the quality and maybe it's not the quality of things we're 'supposed' to be looking at: articulation, intonation and all those details. Maybe we need to be more focused and come back to the fact that music is relevant if it's the intent that is behind it that makes it real or authentic or important or valuable. Yes, quality is important, and we need that, right through from the profession to the amateur world to youth and schools: as we know, it's a complex ecosystem. But if it's being led from the right heart, and we value what we're doing, that's what music's about, that connection. If it's connecting to people, it does matter. It's reinforced to me that what we do is of value.

**Ben:** I am completely with all of you and you have all nicked my answers, but in all seriousness, what you said about perfectionism: in the first two weeks of my online stuff I was recording and editing and creating these 20-minute broadcasts, I was spending eight to ten hours a day getting them absolutely right, and if I made a single mistake I'd go back and film it all again. I had to let that go, I had to just think no, it's not about getting it all perfect, it's about building the relationship with my audience, with my choir, with the people I'm trying to help.

That's the thing I've learned most: really understanding that music is about relationships, whether it's my relationship with the music, my relationship with the instrument, with the choir, their relationships with each other, the relationships of the choir with the audience – what does that look like? Is that a static thing or is it constantly evolving? I think it's very much the latter. What we've actually had here is a huge opportunity to test this technology, how far can we push it. People were saying right at the start with Zoom, can we rehearse at the same time? Why can't we? Well it's this pesky speed of light business, but we'll work round it and, in the end, everything that we've come up with, all of these immense musicians and technological whizzes have created a new ecosystem that actually is valuable and is building new relationships.

So when we come out of lockdown, if we have a treatment or a vaccine or whatever it looks like, it won't be the same, it will be something new, it will be something 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I guess in a way that's what I've learned: that it's about relationships and it's about this opportunity we've got to build a new relationship with music.

**James:** Well, my goodness, I regret we're out of time today but I hope you at home have drawn some inspiration from our guests and a glimmer of the remarkable, resilient musical spirit running through this nation's veins. You may even be tempted to find out about fabulous and very welcoming amateur music groups in your own neighbourhood, in which case do visit the website of 'Making Music', a veritable haven for choirs, bands and orchestras that you can join.

You might also like to consider becoming an RPS Member and join us as we set out to explore and to celebrate more of what makes Britain 'philharmonic'.

For now, many thanks and much admiration to our guests today, Isata Kanneh-Mason, Catherine Arlidge, Helen Harrison and Ben England.