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At the Intersection of the Artistic and the Practical

Lukas Pearse

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Article abstract

Artistic Director Lukas Pearse describes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Upstream Music Association in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

At the Intersection of the Artistic and the Practical

Lukas Pearse

Upstream Music Association has been presenting new and improvised music in Halifax, Nova Scotia since 1990. We have run large and small ensembles; presented and collaborated with visiting musicians from across Canada and internationally; co-produced events with the Halifax Jazz Festival (HJF); collaborated more recently with the Excentrés network (including Québec's CEM, Tour de Bras, and E27 new music presenters); and have hosted the Open Waters Festival featuring co-productions with Symphony Nova Scotia, the Scotia Festival of Music, the Canadian New Music Network, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, and other new music organizations and educators. Our seasons have started for the past three years in a collaboration with the Halifax Jazz Festival, which includes the presentation of a five-day series of Open Company events where we pair two Halifax improvisors [*sic*] with a visiting artist already engaged with the festival. This is followed by a curated free improvisation session which incorporates significant local and visitor participation. The place of Upstream in Atlantic Canada's new music ecology is significant.

Early on in the pandemic, we learned that the remainder of our 2019-2020 season had been cancelled. We were forced to cancel our Upstream Quartet tour through the Maritimes and Québec; cancel our Excentrés co-creation presentations in Québec City and Rimouski; cancel our nine-piece Upstream Ensemble's collaboration with Mi'kmaw band Alan Syliboy & The Thundermakers; and cancel our long-planned thirtieth anniversary concert event featuring seven of the nine original Upstream Founder musician/composers (all men) paired with seven musician/composers recognised as "Flourishers" (all women), a title chosen to describe those who've grown their practices in the new music scene subsequent to the founding of Upstream. We are now (summer 2020) faced with challenges regarding how to proceed, even as restrictions within this region have become somewhat relaxed since June. The pandemic has not affected our jurisdiction as significantly as others, although regulations around gatherings remain quite restrictive and continued vigilance is required. Upstream does not operate a dedicated venue, and many of the performance spaces that we use regularly remain shuttered, especially those associated with public institutions such as the Fountain School of Performing Arts at Dalhousie University, the ArtBar+Projects at NSCAD University, and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery.

Upon considering the requirements of health protocols as outlined by Nova Scotia Public Health, we decided that it would be preferable to work with venues who are prepared to oversee best practices in their own spaces, rather than add to Upstream's additional responsibilities. In order to present their "Scotial Distancing" classical chamber music festival in May 2020, the Scotia Festival of Music adapted their venue, the Peggy Corkum Music Room, into a space suitable to host small audiences and coordinate live video streaming and recording. We are therefore planning to build upon our own history of positive co-production experience for the upcoming Upstream 2020-2021 season by presenting physically distanced and short-duration concerts with small groups of performers. These will be presented to small, in-person audiences, as well as online audiences through livestreams of the events.

Conversely, our ongoing collaborations with Symphony Nova Scotia are at a standstill. This collaboration pairs improvisors with an orchestra led by an improvising conductor and a repertoire that explores approaches to improvisation through various aspects of indeterminacy and chance-based compositions. As part of this event, we intended to present a newly commissioned work by the first recipient of the inaugural Paul Cram Creation Award, Andrew

Mackelvie. This award celebrates the co-founder of Upstream, as well as encouraging musicians creating at the intersection of jazz, improvised, and orchestral musics. Exactly how this might be achieved is still to be determined. Another significant aspect of the Open Waters Festival has always been the inclusion of emerging Atlantic musicians who engage with improvisation (across various traditions) as a key aspect of their artistry. Our Artistic Director has, in the past, attended many different types of performances in order to stay attentive to these community developments, but maintaining awareness has now become difficult. Artists who are technologically savvy with self-promotion are now easier to discover, but part of Upstream's mission has always been to encourage those who are "upstream from the mainstream"—now, that has become more difficult than ever.

As permitted by public health regulations, there are bars in Halifax that are currently offering live music, consisting mainly of solo artists but also some non-singing jazz trios. The fact that audiences are willing to attend these events even with physical distancing measures in place gives us hope that our plans to offer restricted-format events might be met with some enthusiasm. We hope that, by offering online versions of our events, Upstream will be able to reach a wider audience. But the challenge remains: how do we encourage people to attend our events when we are also trying to reduce in-person numbers? Upstream's concerts have never been large affairs, and each event has usually consisted of between fifty and seventy-five audience members. Will these numbers remain similar, or will they be proportionately reduced? Even though these audience sizes are permitted, are they advisable?

Even as we consider wading into the world of online concert streaming, the issues that surround streaming platforms seem to multiply. Sound and video quality are now an extra layer added to the technological requirements of any venue, and the skill and equipment of the AV operator is paramount to the audience experience. It has become clear that the medium is pretty far from transparent, and that the audience experience is more akin to watching a video than that of attending a performance—because that's what they are doing. Their attention span is limited by the pre-focused nature of the video, as well as limitations to the recording and playback equipment that audience members must now use when audio-viewing a performance. The seemingly unlimited vagaries of online streaming platforms become additional technical hurdles for both the presenter and the audience, with few of them actually in control. And of course, an aspect that is central to the experience of live music—especially improvised music—is the shared temporal experience. This becomes almost entirely or entirely lost in mediated performances, which render all streaming events into recordings with varied degrees of separation.

Some of the most significant challenges that COVID-19 has presented are at the intersection of the artistic and the practical. With our history of large ensemble projects and our currently shelved plans, how do we honour this aspect of our practice? How do we collaborate with orchestral musicians? With travel restrictions in place, how do we honour our commitments to present artists from other regions? Will any of the online collaboration tools be acceptable for our musicians as a simulacrum of performing together? All of these approaches may have some aspects that are amenable to online presentations, but they are far from ideal. The ultimate question seems to be whether or not this online format is viable for audiences, and that remains to be seen. Upstream is fortunate (at least for now) that we continue to acquire the stable funding needed for the commissioning of new works and performances, and to hire artists. However, the ways in which we present to our audiences is in a period of radical rethinking. We are committed to trying multiple approaches and to listening to ideas from our colleagues, but we ultimately know that we are going to need to make alterations to our plans and must try and remain flexible.