

Notes from FESTIVAL / CONFERENCE CHAIR



Carlene Rusenberg
Event Chair, Festival / Conference

As you know, we have postponed the 2021 Festival / Conference to **June 23-26, 2022**. We are still planning to be in person at the University of Hartford, with Brian Childers and Stephanie Rhoades as our clinicians. Mark your calendars for those dates!

In the meantime, we have talked about offering different things to keep you energized and engaged while having to wait out the days until we can all be together again in person. I have attended a few different virtual events in the past few months, and I'd like to give you my reflections on each, just to give you some perspective on the pros and cons of them.

1. National Seminar (July, 2020)

The annual National Seminar was held online in July, and they followed as much of the regular 4-day schedule that would have been followed had they held it in person. They were fortunate to have had a good relationship with the app company, Pathable, which was able to offer an interface with Zoom that allowed for a seamless transition from in person to virtual. There's a long article about how they did it in the Summer 2020 issue of *Overtones*, so I won't go into it here. From my perspective, I still learned a lot, especially how to get started with playing bell trees, taught by the queen of bell trees herself, Barbara Bocker. She pre-recorded her sessions, but then was available live for Q&A after each session. While the Q&A wasn't live for each of the participants, except through the chat, it was still helpful. In fact, it gave me the confidence to record on bell tree some of the Christmas carols that we'll be doing for my church's online Christmas Eve services.

The downside to National Seminar, I thought, was the fact that they still ran the schedule as if it were an in-person event. That meant that I committed to sitting in front of my computer screen (which happens to be set up in my basement office) for four beautiful New Hampshire summer days. There was so much on offer, though, that the time went by pretty quickly! While they kept the classes online for another week after the Seminar was over, so people could review classes they missed, I found that I didn't take advantage of that as much as I thought I would, mainly because I suffered from Zoom overload at that point. I still got a lot out of it, but I understand that not everybody is willing to spend that much time in front of a computer screen!

2. Sierra Spring Ring – May 9, 2020

This was my first experience with a virtual event, sponsored by the community choir, Tintinnabulations, from Reno, NV. They did a one-day event via YouTube Live, where each of the class offerings were pre-recorded, and lasted about 45 minutes. Each class was scheduled to start every hour on the hour, so the time zone difference wasn't a big deal, as long as I kept track of which class I wanted to attend. They posted the class offerings on their website ahead of time, so I could pick and choose which ones I wanted to go to. Check out this link to see what they offered! (<https://tintabulations.com/spring-ring/>) Their videos are still up on YouTube, so you can see the classes for yourself!

The event was free to attend, and they offered many opportunities to donate to defray costs. From what I understand from the organizers, donations more than covered their expenses, and they had a higher number of attendees than they had ever gotten from a previous Spring Ring.

The downside was that there wasn't a lot of playing going on, and for me, the class offerings were a bit too basic. But that doesn't mean it wasn't worthwhile!

3. Christmas Handbells – a Virtual Massed Ringing Event -- November 21, 2020

This was by far the most fun virtual event that I had done. I decided at the last minute to do it, and I'm really glad that I did. Now, I am grateful to the church where I direct, South Church in

Concord, NH to allow me to have our bells at my house, which I know not everyone has access to bells. Since most of our bells are currently at the church (we're actually social distance-rehearsing), the lowest octaves are still taking up space in my basement. So I figured 'why not'? It's only for four hours on a Saturday, I can play the C3-F3 parts for that long.

The way they did it was to pre-record a rehearsal with a choir (in this case, I believe it was LA Bronze), and the camera was primarily focused on Alex Guebert, who was conducting. All I had to do was go to the YouTube link in my registration confirmation and watch the conductor! From the first downbeat, I honestly felt like I was there. I had set up my computer on a table in front of my bell table and used an external speaker so that I could hear. After about 40 minutes of each rehearsal block, they did a live panel discussion with Alex and two ringers who had been at the recording session. Participants were able to ask questions through the live chat, and the panelists answered them. It was really the closest thing to being there that I have experienced so far.

Here's a photo of my set up, and another one of me actually playing:



The final performance is going to be a virtual choir, which will be shown at a watch party on Sunday, December 6 at 8:00 ET on YouTube. I would highly recommend going to that if you can. Go to area12.handbellmusicians.org for the link. Everyone who participated on the 21st is being encouraged to submit a recording of them playing the two pieces that we rehearsed. We were given detailed instructions on how to do it, and there was a Zoom call with Brian Seemann after the event where he answered a lot of people's questions about how to do it. For many people, this was their first time doing a recording, so there were a lot of questions!

So of course, the downside to an event like this is that not everybody has access to bells. Some of the people were able to get together in small groups, and if your church choir is able to rehearse, this might be an option. One group was rehearsing in a member's open garage (which you can do in November, if you're in Southern California!) If Area 1 were to do something like this, it would definitely be in the summer months, just so groups could get together outside, or in a room with lots of ventilation!

In conclusion, I hope this has given you some food for thought about how virtual events can be done successfully. We all know that it isn't the same, especially since the nature of our instrument requires a group of people to make music. But I'm also impressed by the flexibility and ingenuity that people in our community have demonstrated in order for us to stay connected as best we can. This pandemic has fueled my lazy tendencies, and I have to say that after National Seminar, I really got out of my slump and felt more energized.

I hope that whatever we decide to do in the coming months, you will be able to feel the same way, too! Stay tuned!

Best wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season!

Carlene Ruesenberg

Event Chair, Festival / Conference