

Silver Linings: Purpose and Service

By Lulu Mwangi Mupfumbu



2020 was destined to be one of the best years for our music department yet. We busied ourselves with preparations for performances at the ACDA Eastern Region Conference, Carnegie Hall, and a summer tour to France/Belgium for the World Choir Games! However, COVID-19 happened and we went into a lockdown. Our spirits were crushed . . . and we were suddenly thrown into a world of virtual learning. How could there possibly be a silver lining in this?

In search of meaning and coping mechanisms for the sudden loss that came with our new reality, the students turned to what they know and do often. Service. The music department accepted the call to start a campaign to raise funds for an impoverished community in Diepsloot, South Africa, that we had formed bonds with when we visited in 2018. The funds raised enabled several individuals to receive a month's worth of groceries at a time when their community was a COVID hotspot.

Another service opportunity came in the fall when we were able to participate in a virtual choir collaboration with bass-baritone Wintley Phipps and his foundation, the U.S. Dream Academy, an entity that provides enrichment programs for at risk youth. For the last five years we have held a music mentorship program at Takoma Academy for the Dream Academy students, in which our students have served as music mentors to the Dream Academy students and ultimately perform side by side at their annual gala. The students of both institutions were pleased to be able to collaborate even in a virtual space. These activities gave our music students a sense of purpose and relevance in the absence of live experiences.

Despite being fully virtual, we have 63 of our 200 students enrolled in choir. This is significant win because initially there was a very real fear of students not enrolling in virtual music classes. With the pressure of preparing two to three performances a month off the table this year, we have taken time to dig deeper into aspects like sight reading, proper singing/playing technique, and collaborations with other institutions. Virtual performance has provided an opportunity for students to be able to better self-assess, work for individual mastery of technique and repertoire, and build confidence. The students have taken a more intentional approach to practicing and learning music. This has been true of both new and experienced singers alike and will certainly be a benefit to hang on to when we are able to perform together again.

The strength, resilience, and adaptability of the human spirit is evident in how our students have taken on this new normal. Not every day is perfect, but we press on, one day at a time.

We are choosing progress over perfection, process over product. We are focused on grace, kindness, and the other virtues that will help to preserve a genuine love for music and hope for a better tomorrow.

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