

Elena Urioste

Sun, 3/13 1:34PM 55:24

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

practising, people, feel, musicians, playing, classical music, yoga, music, violin, festival, body, injury, concert, sensation, years, call, retreats, life, person, musical

SPEAKERS

Elena Urioste, Hattie Butterworth

H Hattie Butterworth 00:03

Welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk About with me your host, Hattie Butterworth. I'm a cellist and writer in my final year at the Royal College of Music in London. And I think we need a new way of talking. I've spent many, many years feeling in the dark about issues in the classical music profession. So often it can feel like you're the only person struggling with anxiety, depression, career doubts, money, injuries, and so much more. Who do we go to when we feel we've had enough for whatever reason? Join me and guests as we end the stigma with honest conversations about the things musicians don't talk about. Hello, welcome back. I hope you're all doing really well. I'm so excited to share this week's episode with you. I had such an exciting time speaking to Elena Urioste. So Elena is an international violin soloist, chamber musician, yogi and writer. We talked about Elena's journey into yoga, her experience with an injury and ideas on the first steps to take if you are experiencing physical discomfort. We also talked about the importance of rest and the future of classical music in a response to the pandemic. She also tells us about her chamber music festival, Chamber Music by the Sea, and the plans for this year's festival, which is going virtual. Elena has always really inspired me to be authentic and creative in my music making. And I'm sure she'll be such an inspiration to you too. I really, really enjoyed this conversation. Hello, Elena, Welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk About.

E Elena Urioste 01:45

Thank you so much for having me.

H Hattie Butterworth 01:47

Oh, thank you for agreeing to come and talk because I followed you for quite a while, so I'm really excited that we can now talk in this way. So first of all, I just wondered, how have the last few months been for you, sort of navigating a return to live music? And have you started performing again? Or are you still...yeah, doing everything online?

E

Elena Urioste 02:08

Yeah, I, I suppose I would say I'm in a bit of an in between place right now. You know, everything changes so quickly. And one second, it seems like it'll be safe to do something and then you know, that gets reversed. And, and in the opposite scenario, a lot of things seem like they're going to be destined to remain trapped in the virtual world forever. But then, you know, little live opportunities pop up. So I would say I'm really trying to keep a "stay present" attitude to the whole thing.

H

Hattie Butterworth 02:43

Yeah.

E

Elena Urioste 02:43

I would say on the whole, I've been able to remain fairly positive. I've had more good days than bad since the whole lockdown situation started. I am very, very lucky to have a chamber music partnership built into my marriage with Tom Foster, who's a pianist, so we've been very fortunate to be able to make music together. And out of that has... have sprouted many projects, both big and small.

H

Hattie Butterworth 03:16

That's, that's so lovely. For anyone who doesn't know you, and I think a lot of people will, but I do ... I am told that I have some non-musicians that also listen, which is exciting, so I'm wondering if anyone that doesn't know you if you could tell us about your musical background and sort of a bit about how you came to where you are today?

E

Elena Urioste 03:36

Of course. So I am American, as you can probably tell by my accent. I was raised in the Philadelphia area. So I consider myself a Philly native. I might ... I don't come from a musical family. Neither of my parents were musicians. In fact, my dad likes to joke that before me pretty much his only exposure to classical music was through Looney Tunes. So he's come a long way. But my, my mom and my mom's side of the family always really loved classical music, so it would be on in the house, my grandfather love, loved opera, and he lived with us for a while. So I was definitely exposed to classical music, most notably by the show Sesame Street, which apparently I saw an episode of when I was two years old, witnessed Itzhak Perlman playing the violin and it lit up something in my brain and I declared that that's what I wanted to do. My parents thought that was very odd behaviour for a two year old, so they, so they had me wait. I kept pestering them, and so I eventually started playing the violin when I was five years old in my public or I guess here you would call it a state school. So I began with Suzuki lessons, which really only lasted a couple months then I moved to a private teacher. Continued to do my lessons and youth orchestra in the Philadelphia area. I attended the Curtis Institute of Music in Philly for my undergrad, and then did some graduate work at Juilliard in

New York. And yeah, then my, my career was sort of off and running. I did a lot of concerto... I mean, it was always my dream to be a soloist, so I've done a lot of concerto playing my whole life, balanced with chamber music, which I would say is probably my deepest love, just getting to communicate on a more intimate scale with my fellow musicians. And then fast forward now I split my time between London where I'm calling you from and, and Philadelphia, so I bop around the States a lot, and I guess kind of the world but yeah, my life is very nomadic. So to bring it back to lockdown, the the last few months have been the most stationary I've ever been, I would say, in my life. So it's definitely been an adjustment but, but I've learned a lot and like I said, I do ... I have been able to stay mostly positive about things.

H

Hattie Butterworth 06:12

Yeah, so what brought you to London? ... To sort of be based in London? Was there a particular thing in your career that brought you here? Or?

E

Elena Urioste 06:21

Yes, so the first time I came to London was in the autumn of 2009. I was... I received an award from London Music Masters, which is a charity here in London, which now is focused primarily on education, but when it started, it had three award holders so we did ... we had some concert opportunities in the UK, did some festivals, did a lot of outreach. So that was what first brought me here, then a few years after that, I was asked to join the BBC Radio 3 New Generation artists scheme, which was just a huge eye-opening opportunity. It gave me a taste of kind of the international life that I would, I had always hoped for. I did so much recording, so that was a huge learning experience playing with musicians from the UK and elsewhere in Europe, playing with orchestras around this country, etc. It was just such a dream come true. And a very unexpected benefit of that was that I met my now-husband, Tom, though at the time, we were in very different lives. So we were kind of set up on a recording blind date. We had a rehearsal, we made the recording, and then went our separate ways. But then we remet a few years later to play a recital at a festival and things went from there. So I would say it was sort of a string of events. The most personal being remeeting Tom and getting quite close with him. So that is why I spend a lot of my time in the UK now.

H

Hattie Butterworth 08:01

Oh, that's, that's so perfect. Yeah, I think I heard on YouTube, there was a piece by Amy Beach... a recording of you playing that as, as part of the scheme I think it was, the BBC scheme. And I just thought, "Oh, my goodness, this piece is beautiful." And your playing was amazing. So


E


Elena Urioste 08:19


Aw, thank you.


H


Hattie Butterworth 08:20


 Hattie Butterworth 08:20
Yeah, I really.... I love that piece especially.


 Elena Urioste 08:22
It's such a good one. I am kind of obsessed with all of Amy Beach's music. You should check out her piano quintet as well. It's ...


 Hattie Butterworth 08:29
Ooh okay,


 Elena Urioste 08:30
Utterly magical.


 Hattie Butterworth 08:32
So you have two really exciting events coming up at the end of this month. So one is your music festival, Chamber Music by the Sea, which is going virtual.

 Elena Urioste 08:44
Yeah.

 Hattie Butterworth 08:44
And then the other is your yoga retreat with Intermission Sessions.

 Elena Urioste 08:49
Yeah.

 Hattie Butterworth 08:49
And I was wondering if first you could tell us about your journey into yoga and how the Intermission Sessions came about?

 Elena Urioste 08:56
So I began practising yoga regularly during the summer of 2009, actually, just a few months

before I came to London for the first time. Over those couple months, I was in a quickly deteriorating relationship and I was spending a lot of time feeling quite sorry for myself. And it got to such a degree that I was like, "Okay, this is really pitiful. I need to do something about this." So I dragged myself to a hot yoga class, and absolutely fell in love with it from the very first moment. It was the first time that I felt really strong and empowered, and present in my own body. Unexpectedly, I started noticing a lot of benefits to my violin playing. I hadn't come to yoga for any musical reason so this was quite a bonus, I would say. But after just a few weeks of practising yoga regularly, I started noticing that my muscles felt a lot more limber. and relaxed. My, my concentration was a lot more sustainable in the practice room. And even when I would go to perform I, I found myself kind of managing my pre-concert anxiety with some breathing techniques that I had learned in the yoga classes. So immediately I thought, "okay, like, I'm onto something here". I had never felt particularly physical... physically comfortable with the violin. But for the first time, things were kind of making sense, the violin felt like it could fit into my body rather than me having to kind of contort myself in order to play. So yeah, I got addicted real quick. And then, as it so happened, one of my best friends, Melissa White, who is also a violinist, she had come to the hot yoga practice around the same time, even though we were living in two different cities, and we got to chatting, and she was having a similar revelation that the yoga was just helping her with her violin playing and music making in general, just really dramatically. And we would chat about how ... how much we wished that we had had this sort of mindful movement practice during our formative years of training. How nice it would have been to be told to like stretch our arms, and, you know, do counter movements after we'd been practising for hours and to think about our feet, and how we could balance our weight evenly across both sides of the body... stuff like that. And then also, we talked a lot about the emotional component to yoga, how we ... we're learning how to practice self compassion and patience and non-judgement on the yoga mat, and various ways we could apply that to our music making. So it took a few years, but we, we kept brainstorming ways to share these ideas with students and colleagues. And then eventually Intermission was born. There was a time where Melissa and I were actually living together in New York, we were roommates so yeah, we kind of had this idea over our kitchen table. And in 2017, we launched Intermission. At that time, it was only a series of retreats for professionals, kind of like artist colonies meet yoga retreats. But you know, you don't have to be quiet. You could make music! And a series of workshops for students at conservatories, and festivals and, and other musical centres. Since then, we've expanded to include an app, which is now available in a lot of countries around the world. So it's free, and it's for iOS, so we wanted to make some of these ideas, the intersections between yoga and music available for as many people as as possible. So yeah, that's Intermission in a very rambley nutshell.

H

Hattie Butterworth 12:56

Yeah, I love what you say about feeling in the past, like you had to contort yourself in order to play, and I think that is something that I have felt so frequently, but like, I wished the cello felt more part of me, you know, I always used to be quite jealous of singers who didn't have something in the way, you know, it just sort of seemed to come out of them, and I love how you explain yoga in that way, because it really is something that can bring us into one with whatever we're doing. It doesn't have to be music, it can be any kind of activity, I think and it's ... yeah, it's amazing that you've been able to incorporate the two things in this way.

E

Elena Urioste 13:33

Yeah, it just like practising yoga and, and listening to some really wise teachers, at some point, I was just like, "wow, that same exact sentence that I just heard could so perfectly be applied to playing the violin or making music on any instrument." And sort of the more I showed up to class, the more little gems I would gather and keep in mind and keep in my body when I was in the practice room with the violin. So yeah, the...there are so many parallels. I think, actually, between any art form or any craft, if you're open-minded, you can find a way to apply most things to most other things, so that was sort of the seed of inspiration behind Intermission.

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Hattie Butterworth 14:19

Definitely. These sorts of retreats that you're hosting virtually, what is that going to look like? I mean, do you have ... what kind of a programme is it going to follow? And how can people get involved if they're interested?

E

Elena Urioste 14:32

Yeah, so for the past... I guess this would have been our fourth summer, Melissa and I have run in-person retreats in Vermont, and we did one for the first time in France last September, where up to 20 musicians, professional musicians would gather for a week and we would do two yoga classes a day, have all our meals together, we'd have plenty of time to go off on our own and practise or not practise if we wanted to, we'd have kind of group excursions, hikes and swims and, and every night, we would come together and have Share Time. Melissa and I did initially mean to give a slightly more adult sounding name to Share Time, but we just started saying it and then it kind of stuck! But the idea was to really have a safe space to talk about things that aren't talked about, you know, injury and performance anxiety and vulnerability and just really create a place where, where our friends and colleagues could feel, you know, they could say anything, or, or experiment, play us audition repertoire or a new composition. Unfortunately, we're not able to assemble this year in person, but we thought a virtual retreat would be better than nothing. So we'll still offer two yoga classes a day. Some taught by me and Melissa, who are both certified yoga instructors, and other classes will be taught by some of our very favourite instructors in the world who are just like, so knowledgeable and virtuosos of movement, if you will. So we'll have a wide range of classes, we'll have Share Time of course, every night people can, you know, bring their dinner, bring a cocktail, be in their PJs, and just chat with each other about whatever they need to get off their chests. And we'll also do some group activities like cook alongs, I think at one point, we might do a sew along.

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Hattie Butterworth 16:36

Ah, lovely.

E

Elena Urioste 16:37

Yeah, we'll just have have some time to be together, and hopefully make it feel a little bit, you know, like the community can convene. If you're interested, you can visit intermissionsessions.com and go to the retreat page, and all of their information will be there.

H

Hattie Butterworth 16:57

Thank you so much, that sounds so perfect, you know, to be able... to have something, a course that incorporates both of what I ... I think a lot of musicians are now looking into yoga, and it's lovely that you've created a space where people can do both. And I, I'm really curious about your opinion, on what I think is quite a sort of stigmatised aspect of classical music, which is this idea of an intermission. How do you know when you need a break? And how long maybe do you take a break for? How do you incorporate doing other things, you know, with your yoga training and all of this? How do you see that?

E

Elena Urioste 17:34

One of the greatest benefits to having cultivated a regular yoga practice, it's not even, you know, increased flexibility, or I can make ... I can shove my body into this weird shape. It's a sense, an increased sense of awareness of how my body feels at any given time. And I think a lot of that is knowing or just reminding myself to take those moments to just pause and check in. Actually one of my, one of my yoga teaching instruct... my teacher training instructors had a beautiful thing he would say to us every time he would centre the class, he would always say, "dear heart, what is it that you need in this moment?" And it was always so beautiful, it always made me quite emotional, just this idea of just taking you know, 10 seconds. Ask your heart or your hands or your head or your toes, "What, what do you need in this moment?" And that is something that we practise a lot in yoga, that pausing and noticing how we feel. I think that when you practise that enough on the mat, it definitely starts to trickle into real life or into music making. So I would say that I have a much more heightened sense of how more of my body feels. And equally, if not more important, how my mind feels, how my emotional state feels. And sometimes the best thing you can possibly do is just pause, either to counter-stretch or do something else, or, or to do nothing at all, just kind of sit there or lie there or stand there for a moment and just be, which I think is something that's quite overlooked in instrumental training, you know, we're always encouraged to do it again, do it better. But sometimes, the best thing you can possibly do is just stop for however long you need.

H

Hattie Butterworth 19:45

Yeah, and this whole thing of doing all of your practice within a specific timeframe and having to be as productive as possible within that time frame and, you know, you can become incredibly frazzled by that mindset, and yeah, it's very easy to overlook a moment of tension or even desensitise yourself completely to any pain.

E

Elena Urioste 20:08

Oh, yeah!

H

Hattie Butterworth 20:08

Which kind of leads me on to my next question where, because on your blog, you were ... have been quite open about struggling with an injury when you were a student at Curtis. And I know

a lot of us go through injury. I mean, I've been through a period of injury when I was quite a lot younger, and I know a lot of my friends are either currently or have gone through it or are worried it's going to happen again, and ... you said on your blog, which I really loved, that musicians are not better, tougher, or more employable for playing through pain. And so what impact did the injury have on you at the time? And why do you think we have this sort of playing through the pain mentality?

E

Elena Urioste 20:50

Do you know what's funny is I, looking back, I wasn't even brave enough to call it an injury. Although now, now I look back and I'm like, "Duh, I was injured." But I, I didn't even call it that. I would, I would say, "oh, you know, my arm feels kind of funny. Can I please sit out of orchestra?" or like, "I need I, you know, I can't do this. My arm ... I am having a weird sensation." You know, I didn't, I didn't even know to say "I'm injured. This is an injury, it is inhibiting my playing." At the time I, I ... because I'd never experienced anything like that in terms of sensation, and it's still like a weird thing to try to describe the, the exact feeling of that injury, because it wasn't necessarily pain, but it was definitely discomfort, and it was like my arm didn't quite belong to me. It just felt very foreign and alien and like it ... I mean, it definitely wasn't working properly. So yeah, it was an injury. So at the time, it, it definitely like put a wrench in my playing, I would say. I had to sit out a lot of, a lot of playing that involved being seated actually, because for whatever reason, the way my bones and muscles were aligned when I was sitting, exacerbated this sensation, which, which if you haven't read my little blog piece, basically, from my elbow to my fingertips on my right hand was going numb whenever I would play. And I didn't know why, no one could tell me why. Eventually, by chance, I went to someone called a rolfer. And rolfing is a sort of bodywork that deals with the connective tissue. And I kind of just went because a friend that I trusted thought it might be a good idea, and really, no one was offering me any favourable solution. So I just kind of went and the rolfer kind of fixed it, but never was really able to tell me what was wrong or what she was doing. So I just mostly felt confused and like I was walking around with a body part that didn't quite belong to me. And eventually, the problem went away, as I said, but I didn't have a sense of ownership over my body. And as it happened, the sensation came back a couple years later, but after I had started doing a lot of yoga, I had a much keener sense of what was going on internally, and actually had a, by chance, a conversation at a pre-concert party. There was a physician in the room, and he noticed that I was kind of stretching my arm in an odd way. And he came over and he, he without introducing myself ... without introducing himself, he just said, "are your ring and pinky fingers numb?" And I was like, "Wh...how do you know? How are you inside my brain and body? Urgh!" And I was kind of like "no!" because again that like this, the stigma thing kicked in. I was like, "no, no, I'm fine. I'm fine." And then after a few minutes, I was like, "yeah, actually, that's that's exactly what I'm doing." And he was like, "let me tell you what that is." And he explained this, this affliction called Thoracic Outlet Syndrome, which is basically when a nerve in your neck gets compressed. And I started kind of moving that area of my neck and poking around, and I felt this zinging sensation. And all of a sudden, I was like, "Whoa, that's exactly what this is." And it turns out all it was was I probably fell asleep on the plane in a weird way. Back in school, I probably fell asleep in like, let's be honest, a drunken stupor and like, put a kink in my neck which then radiated out through my whole arm, playing made it worse, not taking breaks made it extra worse. So sometimes, you know, it's it's the simplest things we just, as musicians, so many of us don't really know how to care, or counter the effects of our, our physical actions. But more importantly, we don't even have the awareness to say ... to like, route around and explore what the source of the sensation is. I don't know if this ... I'm again, like rambling so much, I'm really sorry, I just kind of like reliving these moments of

feeling out of place in my own body, and it's just such a disorienting feeling. Then to answer your question about why there's such a stigma...I suspect, like, some residual old school musical training techniques are maybe to blame? You know, I think even 20, 30 years ago, the majority of teaching was very, very much 'play through the pain', 10,000 hours of practice and nothing less, you know, drill this 100 times, if, if you mess up, you have to start over... you know, just these very, like, insensitive, macho...

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Hattie Butterworth 26:21

It's kind of glamorised it, didn't as well?

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Elena Urioste 26:24

Yeah. Yeah! And people like, kind of even my, my fellow classmates would take pride and say, I mean I did it too, being like, "oh yeah, I've practised seven hours." Like what a stupid thing to do, and what an even stupider thing to brag about. First of all, no one needs to be practising seven hours, unless you're practising in such a way that means you'll only get accomplished what you need to in seven hours... I mean, I can't think of a bigger waste of time, frankly.

H

Hattie Butterworth 26:49

Yeah.

E

Elena Urioste 26:49

Like if you're, if you're practising beyond ... and of course, you know, like, sometimes we have huge workloads, and it just takes that amount of time to get through it all. But like, break it up over a few days. Yeah, we put on blinders and we sacrifice the health of our bodies and emotional states and like, my God, if you go for that long without sunlight, you're gonna wither up like a sad house plant. You just have to like, remember that we're human, human beings. And, and, yeah, you're not supposed to practise the violin for seven hours in a row. It's like, I think pretty categorically a bad idea. But, like you said, all of these, these sorts of practices have been glamorised over the years. And, and then when I think, I think when someone gets hurt, I think it's the the lack of a safe space, you know, mentors and administrators, and an industry that forgets that playing music while you know, very emotionally fulfilling and mentally stimulating, it's, it's a really athletic thing that we do, and we we need to be caring for our bodies in the way that athletes would nurture their own. We need to rest, we need to eat well, we need to get bodywork and we need to stop when it hurts.

H

Hattie Butterworth 28:08

Yeah, taking pain seriously is ... it's difficult. I mean it's, even whether it's mental or physical, you know, people think they have to wait until the problem is so detrimental. That

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Elena Urioste 28:20

Exactly.

H

Hattie Butterworth 28:21

You know what I mean? So it's like, "Aw I'm only a little bit sad, I'm only a little bit in pain, or it only hurts a bit here" or whatever. But you know, goodness me if ... it is that that moment, isn't it where we could completely heal or take it in a different way altogether?

E

Elena Urioste 28:39

Yeah, so injury management is one thing like that already hasn't been in a great state up until maybe the last couple years where schools have physical therapists and hand specialists readily available for students. But even more important, there's, there has been almost no in, again until the last couple years, no attention placed on injury prevention, and just basically, maintenance and, and wellness training. Yeah, who knows if I had, if I had been doing yoga or some other sort of mindful movement practice while I was in school, I wouldn't have allowed my arm to get to the point where it felt like you know, a weird like plastic appendage glued onto my body. I would have been like much sooner, I would have, I would have said "something doesn't feel right. What can I do to to help myself?"

H

Hattie Butterworth 29:38

If someone is feeling quite sort of desensitised to their body, and I think a lot of people do, feeling in a bubble or feeling like their arm is numb and they're not quite sure why, how would you recommend ...What's the first step of trying to help yourself realise what could be going wrong?

E

Elena Urioste 29:57

I mean, I can only tell you what I would do now with my own experience because I think, you know, I'm not a doctor, I'm not any sort of medical professional, so obviously, I think every person should seek professional help in one way or another, whether it's through body work or talking to their doctor or seeing a physical therapist, but for myself, first, I would take at least two or three, three days off from the instrument, I would just put it down and see if the problem corrected itself, because a lot of times, it's just over... being overworked, exhaustion, maybe being dehydrated. And just, you know, playing an instrument is a really weird thing that we do with our bodies, it's very asymmetrical, it brings us out of our optimal alignment. So, so just like trying to spend two or three days, standing well, sitting well, lying down, well resting, and just seeing...noticing whether anything relaxes back into place...that's probably what I would do first. It sounds very indulgent, but I would probably get a massage. Because a lot of times, you know, a really good one with, with someone who knows what they're doing. Because a lot of time, it's it's simply that our muscles have knotted up around a problem area and are making what starts off as a slight sense of discomfort, so much worse just because the body is trying to compensate. So you know, things get tight, things get achey, we have knots, our fascia gets

bunched in weird areas in the body. So that would be my next step. And then if something still really wasn't right, I would, well, I would also probably be doing a lot of yoga, really gentle, moving slowly, avoiding any any sensations that exacerbated the problem area, but just trying to move some energy, I don't mean like airy fairy energy, but like move tension or sensation around the body just to try and break it up or dispel it a little bit. And more often than not, when I do those things, any kind of built up yuckiness that's going on in the body tends to resolve itself. Just because I'm, I'm looking at things with a clear head, a different perspective, more relaxed muscles. However, if there's a serious problem, if you have a pinched nerve, or, you know, God forbid, a bone fracture, or something related to the spine, then definitely call upon a professional, you know, a physical therapist or something more along those lines. But I would say just like being gentle, often helps us resolve our physical issues. And it shouldn't be underestimated how much the mind is tied into this. Like, so often I'll feel a physical sensation coming on. And then you know, my brain kicks into gear, it starts spiralling, "oh my gosh, what if I have to take three months off, and the pain gets worse than my brain gets worse." And the cycle can start in the opposite direction also, you know, you can be in a bad place mentally, and then you're so worried that you start doing weird things with your body and it kicks off the cycle in that direction. So yeah, I know, like, musicians are such an ambitious bunch. And it's hard for us to rest and like, convince ourselves that we are worth resting for. But it is just such an important part of the equation. I can't say it enough. And it doesn't mean that you're lazy or that you're wasting time. It's as ... at it's as, you know, fundamental a part of our success. But more importantly, our well being as being active is.

H

Hattie Butterworth 34:07

I just want to say thank you for saying, you know, the 'two or three days off' whole thing. You know, I think just that is enough to make some people very anxious. The idea, you know, two or three days like, "goodness, what's gonna happen in that time?" You know,

E

Elena Urioste 34:22

Probably something magical.

H

Hattie Butterworth 34:24

Exactly. Probably some perspective that you didn't know was there or, yeah, there's a lot to be said in slowing down

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Elena Urioste 34:33

Definitely.

H

Hattie Butterworth 34:33

And seeing what you can learn musically.

E

Elena Urioste 34:37

Yeah, I mean, if it makes anyone feel better, I will now routinely take like two or three weeks off and not even notice anymore. So..

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Hattie Butterworth 34:44

Ah that's so good to hear.

E

Elena Urioste 34:46

Yeah! I love ... and I always feel better when I come back. You know, it takes like a day or two to get the fingers feeling less mushy. But playing your instrument is like ... the fingers are the the tippy tippiest of the iceberg.

H

Hattie Butterworth 35:02

So now I was wondering if we could talk a bit about chamber music, and your festival Chamber Music by the Sea. So how did this start? And what are the plans for this year's festival?

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Elena Urioste 35:16

So Chamber Music by the Sea, hmm. I, I had always kind of, well, I always dreamed of starting a chamber music festival. No, probably for the wrong reasons. Well, no, if you can call it the wrong reasons. Basically, I always just wanted to assemble a bunch of my friends, have a beach vacation and like play some concerts for local people.

H

Hattie Butterworth 35:43

Yeah.

E

Elena Urioste 35:43

And then, and then a few years ago, a friend of mine was like, "but your parents live like really close to the beach. Why don't you just do it there?" And I was like, "oh, yeah, I should do that." My parents have retired to a town that's, well, they live like a five minute drive from a gorgeous beach. I guess I'd always imagined that I would start my festival in like the Caribbean, so I'd overlooked Maryland as a suitable place. But it turned out to just be the most ideal place to start something. The town that they live in, it's called Berlin funnily enough, and it's a very artistically open-minded place. There's a big emphasis on visual arts, so many talented painters and sculptors in the area. And a lot of music lovers but more in like the Bluegrass fiddling genre. So the first year it started in 2016, kind of just took a chance. We put on two concerts, one in a house and one at the church, and a whole lot of people showed up and, and really

seemed to like it. A lot of people who had never been to a classical music concert before, but were really surprised by how fun and like unstuffy it was, which was one of my top priorities, just kind of not making it boring and serious. And so it just kind of took off from there. So this would have been our fifth summer of presenting an in-person festival. And for a long time, I, I, I was convinced that we would be able to make some sort of in-person festival work. But COVID numbers are sadly rising in that area, because it is so near to various popular beach towns, so we just determined it wouldn't be safe, we're going to try and figure something out for online. So this year, we will have a total of four concerts, three of them will be ticketed over Zoom. Those events will consist of pre-recorded performances submitted by all the musicians who were initially planning to come to Maryland in person, but in different formations than we had originally hoped for, but still like incredible musical submissions from some of my very favourite artists. And then in between all of those performances, we'll have some chat, the, the, the musicians will all be on Zoom with the audience talking about what they're going to play. I'll ask them, you know, some questions about themselves. So it will hopefully be quite interactive and as close to an in-person concert experience as we can manage, you know, the audience will be able to see each other and say hi, and chat. There will be like a bar before, before each concert. So I'm hoping it'll be really fun and bring a sense of community. And we'll have a... what else? A live family concert broadcast over YouTube and Facebook. I'll be leading a yoga for musicians workshop on Zoom, also free and anyone can join. So hopefully it'll be a fun week, if not exactly what we'd pictured when we started planning for this year.

H

Hattie Butterworth 39:19

It sounds really exciting. So in a normal festival, would you also lead a yoga class? Is that something that you do as part of that as well or?

E

Elena Urioste 39:29

Yes. So there's been, there's been an educational element to each year of the festival where I've worked with some young violinists in the area. They'll play for me, I'll lead a yoga class for all of them, and sometimes really little kids show up and it's so cute. So we've had, we've had kids from five years old all the way through high school come, and I'm hoping, hoping that they'll show up again this year over Zoom. And usually we, we perform something with these young musicians. We feature them on one concert all playing something together that's been arranged for the festival. And we're doing that also in video form this year. So we're trying our hand at our own compilation video, which will be broadcast on the final night of the festival on August 22nd. So there's just going to be so many cool musical treasures. So I... even though it, you know, doesn't look like what I was expecting a couple months ago, I think it'll be really special.

H

Hattie Butterworth 40:38

So I have a couple of questions, kind of to finish, and I'm really intrigued to hear what you think about them. One of the first is how do you think classical music needs to grow sort of both as a response to the pandemic and in general?



E

Elena Urioste 40:57

Personally, while I've been hearing a lot of like, moaning about how tragic the fate of classical music is, and will be after this pandemic, I, I just couldn't disagree more, I have actually felt that this time, while you know, not ideal, of course, all, all musicians, or most musicians wish they could be playing to live audiences, I felt that it's kind of the perfect time to do exactly what many classical music organisations have been complaining about for years, which is, "oh, our audiences are dying out, and how do we reach more people? And how do we get more diverse crowds?" And I just want to like, shake everyone and be like, "you do it through your computers. Like, it's the perfect time do it right now." So I, I actually, I have felt rather optimistic. You know, who knows whether people who may have come to a specific genre of music or specific artists during lockdown will go hear them in person afterwards? Of course, that's the hope. We can't guarantee it, but at least give them the chance to, to hear you and get excited about classical music. So in my... from my perspective, I feel like it's, it's been a really good exercise in creative thinking, in, in adapting, in coming up with new ways to share and consume art. So I actually think it's been quite exciting, and I guess we'll learn more in the years to come whether, whether we really did make an impact on audiences. But yeah, I have, I have felt perhaps, like naively positive about it all.

H

Hattie Butterworth 42:55

No I think it's... yeah. It's really important, though because what I think what you've done, which is so important, is to bring together things that you're passionate about in your own life, and show that to your audience as well with your yoga and all of the other kind of elements, because I think a lot of people compartmentalise their life into like, "Oh, this is a side thing I do. And then I go, and I just have this structured concert." But yeah, I love how yeah incorporate everything and it's a whole thing.

E

Elena Urioste 43:27

That, sorry, that, that's such an interesting conversation to have in and of itself, because we're at a funny time in classical music I feel, because it's sort of like the industry... they really like asking musicians, or recent college graduates, "what's your brand? What makes you special?" So there is this sort of emphasis on finding things that make you unique or more marketable or whatever. But then when you tell them, they're still kind of like, "Eh no, we just want someone who plays Beethoven really well." So it does feel like we're in a funny sticky spot, but what I have come to recognise is that if you allow your passions, whatever they are, music, yoga, food, nature, to simmer organically, spend some time thinking about how you can thoughtfully combine them or present both or multiple things, either in a blended way, or as a pairing, if it, if it is authentic, I think it's really cool. And if it's done in an organic way, I think it can really result in some pretty magical stuff. So it is a, it is a good time to be a classical musician. I think people are quite intrigued by the intersections between various crafts or art forms.

H

Hattie Butterworth 45:01

Yeah, I really agree. And I also have another question, which is, if there was one thing you wish we talked about more, what would it be? And this can be classical music or just general life. If there was one thing you wish we talked about more?

E Elena Urioste 45:17
Like you and I, or just we... like a general 'we'?

H Hattie Butterworth 45:20
Just a general 'we', yeah, in any in any sense. What do you think needs to be talked about?

E Elena Urioste 45:27
I think on a personal level, I know I, I've just really come to appreciate musicians who are not afraid to be vulnerable, both onstage and off. I think that the classical music profession, in general has become quite glossy. People are expected to, you know, do these crazy tours and practise seven hours and never miss a note, because what people are actually getting used to hearing is perfectly engineered recordings, so there's the expectation that they'll walk up on stage and play a live performance exactly like that. And then on top of it, they have to be like really hot in their photos. So it's just all gotten very, very shiny. And making music is hard and it, it requires so much physical, mental, emotional, familial sacrifice. And it doesn't always go down well when people express that, you know, from...I think people still think like, "oh, playing music, how cute. How charming. Like, how lucky you are to do something you love." And like, yeah, we are very lucky to do something we love, but it's really fucking hard. Sorry, if I'm allowed to say that. And I, I personally really appreciate it when people share that, that side of themselves. It's like quite a bizarre thing to commit your life to going on stage in front of hundreds of people and like, pouring your heart out, while not missing a note, and, you know, wearing really nice shoes. It's it's just it's very bizarre. And any chance we have to kind of let people know actually, this is, this is all that goes into it, I really appreciate.

H Hattie Butterworth 47:46
Yeah. Is the glossiness, do you think because we're scared to be authentic and we're scared of what the audience might think? Or is it a different reason? Why has it become a bit like that?

E Elena Urioste 47:59
I mean, I think we live in an age where people like things to look pretty. And I think social media plays a big part in it. You know, most people spend a lot of time curating the happiest, shiniest facets of themselves or versions of themselves. You know, and this isn't to say that we should all go around complaining all the time. I think there are graceful ways of being truthful.

H Hattie Butterworth 48:26
Yeah, I really agree.

E Elena Urioste 48:28
But I hope we're moving into an era where people are getting a bit fed up with the totally airbrushed industries ...

H Hattie Butterworth 48:38
Yeah

E Elena Urioste 48:40
...That are always popping up on our, on our social media feeds on just in our lives.

H Hattie Butterworth 48:48
It also kind of portrays a false vision to our audience as well.


E Elena Urioste 48:53
Yeah.


H Hattie Butterworth 48:56
I mean, every person has their own story and has their own vulnerability. And, you know, the, our fear of being vulnerable, I suppose almost like, it means that we diminish them as well. Like we don't maybe we don't see them on on equal terms as sort of suffering humans or whatever. Maybe I'm going too spiritual.


E Elena Urioste 49:18
No, no, I like that a lot. I mean, I...when I think about the performers who who touched me the most, both in music and elsewhere, it's never, you know, it's never the people who like, make a lot of flamboyant gestures or like, are the loudest or the most seemingly perfect or unblemished. It's always the people who ... where you can like really feel their heart. Yeah.


H Hattie Butterworth 49:51
Yeah. Well, that's just a lovely place to end I think. Well, thank you so much for talking to us. It's been ...


E Elena Urioste 49:59


 Elena Urioste 49:50
You're welcome.

 Hattie Butterworth 49:59
...amazing to talk to you. I feel incredibly starstruck.

 Elena Urioste 50:04
Oh, no!

 Hattie Butterworth 50:07
No, honestly! But I think everyone is going to be really excited to hear what you have to say. And yeah, thank you for opening up. And...

 Elena Urioste 50:15
Aw, thank you so much. I, I apologise if I've had this, I've had this fear recently... I fear that my sentences are getting, well less and less like actual sentences and more just sort of like streams of consciousness. And I have these panics every now and then that I'm like, "I just sounded like Sarah Palin." So if that indeed has been the case, I apologise.

 Hattie Butterworth 50:41
I don't think so.