

Karen Donnelly — Covid-19: Music and the Community

Sam Sloan — Could you tell me what you think Covid-19's effects, generally, will be and have been on the arts? And you can answer that however way you think about it.

Karen Donnelly — It's a big question, and I think my answer over the last seven months would have been different depending on where we were. I think, I mean, I think now—and I have always thought—after a few months, after four months, after six months, that people are clamoring for nourishment. People are struggling without having access to music, to art to, you know, theater, to entertainment—to fill up their hearts, their brains, their souls, their bodies. And I think we're going to see a negative impact on the regular population, because people aren't having—there are lots of studies being done right now, like the impact on what it's doing to our culture, without culture, to our communities without culture, so yeah. But for the arts, specifically, I think it's a very, very delicate time. People have had to learn to be creative, to create, to find new ways to maintain contact with their audience, with their public, with their—you know, collaborators, with their sponsors. I think the smaller—I mean, the Canadian government, I know has been really supportive to the smaller people—you know, small businesses and individuals, with the Covid relief financial benefits. But I think, yeah, I think there's a lot of artistic institutions—I think are actually at risk.

The number of concerts that I've done in the last seven months that are outside of the NAC and actually outside, it's a very big number, and the number of concerts that I've done in South Hall is a very little number, right—A total of four. So, I've done, I don't know, 20 [outdoors]. We did—we were really active doing concerts in our neighborhood. We got a little bunch of musicians—we did with the brass and the quintet and trio. And we did a mixed ensemble group, you know, with friends who live in this area and we played on driveways—we call them porch concerts, or something like that.

Sam Sloan — I did see that one of them, not that porch concert, but one of your brass ensembles was on the canal—on a boat.

Karen Donnelly — Oh, yeah! That's right. Yeah, that was an NAC initiative. Yeah, they partnered with that company, they got us on the Rideau Canal. That was really fun.

Sam Sloan — Yeah, I never, I never would have. I was about to say, never [thought of] making music while moving, but marching bands do that. But you're still sitting down while moving. So that's kind of...

Karen Donnelly — Yeah. I have actually played on a boat before. It's funny to say. But I have played a gig on a boat—on the Rideau Canal. But no, that particular project was the brainchild of our new General Manager of the orchestra, no, Executive Director of the music department—Arna Einarsdottir—the new boss of the orchestra. And she was like, yes, we have

to get out there, and we have to see the people—and it was a big hit. It was a great. We got a lot of good feedback about it. Yeah. You know, but I could say these outdoor concerts, and they were very intimate. You know, you call up a neighbor, you call up a friend of a friend or somebody or you know, like—who knows and say: hey, can we come and play in your driveway. And they gathered their neighbors together That was like an unbelievably beautiful way for them to sort of connect with their community, for us to reach—a albeit, a small part of the public, like very small numbers. We were only allowed to have 20 people or 25 gathering at the time or something. So, it was always very limited numbers—but oh, the joy and talk about like, you could feel you could feel the—I don't know, like, what's the word, they were just so uplifted by having live music on their driveway. You know, the smiles, people left, and they were like, you know—some of them were absolutely beautiful summer evenings, you know. So, it was just absolutely perfect conditions, right, where people would bring their lawn chair and they'd have their glass of wine and it was like, this is—you can't beat that. But there were a few times where Mother Nature wasn't as kind, and so we had to cancel and reschedule, and then reschedule and it was getting like into October and it's getting cold—so playing with gloves on and a tuque, you know, three coats. You're doing a nice 45-minute concert outside and people are still very, very—they seem very grateful. And we received very generous applause, very kind—it was really beautiful, actually really wonderful. Definitely silver lining to the pandemic as those experiences where you felt like this was a very special experience for them, you know. And me to, you're like finally, we got some—finally playing not in my basement here and the terrible acoustic at my basement. But also getting that—there's a relationship between the artists and on the public. And if you feel they're connected, and you're there, you're risking everything, and they're there listening, and you want to do well for them, and they want to enjoy it. It's really a—you know, at the end and when there's that applause it's like really powerful, you know.