

MUSIC INTERRUPTED

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There were many interruptions during this pandemic, and music was one of them.

Last year, 2019, was good for music – monthly house jams with music friends, monthly concerts I produced for the Pacific Northwest Folklore Society at the Couth Buzzard, and also, weekly practice sessions on Wednesday mornings, playing violin with my friend Ken on guitar. At those sessions, we not only practiced fiddle tunes but talked about music, philosophy, and the many things going on in our lives. Sometimes we talked more than we played, but that was good.

Then we were interrupted in November by my wife's progressing dementia, moving her into memory care at Aegis Living, emptying our large house, getting it ready to sell, buying a condo for myself in Ballard, and finally, getting used to living alone. No more house jams or practice sessions. By late January 2020, Ken and I began our music sessions again, adding a new fiddle-playing friend from Ballard. And then COVID-19 came along. We decided that our Wednesday sessions were too dangerous with the spreading virus, and quit. In the meantime, there was a medical crisis with my wife involving a fractured hip. I then had to cancel a concert in April due to the virus, but naively thought things might get better by June and kept a scheduled concert with Claudia Schmidt. By May I canceled that one also.

During this time I quit playing music. There was no motivation. With no one to play with or for, it was just playing the same tunes and songs over and over again. Music has to be played with and for other people, it is not a solitary endeavor. Oh, at rare times I picked up my violin or banjo-uke, played some tunes, and sang some songs, but there was no joy without people to share it with. Living alone under COVID rules was hard to get used to. I started long walks on days that it didn't rain, and that helped to raise my spirits.

Then the end of July. Another crisis, another fall by my wife, a broken hip, moving her into an adult family home, and then into a better home. More interruptions. In late September my daughter drove up from California to help. Then I started picking up my instruments and playing music. I vowed to continue that, and mostly I have. It was a sort of turning point.

During the time I wasn't playing, other musicians were exploring ways to play together without being together. The internet became a tool for this. Zoom was developed long before the pandemic as a way for people to see each other and talk over the internet. Why can't we do this with music? The simple answer is *latency*, the time it takes for sound to travel across the internet. That is ultimately determined by the speed of light, but more importantly by bandwidth, network congestion, and computer hardware considerations.

Latency is measured in terms of milliseconds (ms). Musicians playing close to each other may experience a latency of 5-10 ms – most people can barely discern a latency of 5 ms, so there is no problem. If musicians are spread out over a distance, such as a wide stage or, in a marching band, over the length of a football

field, the latency becomes noticeable. I might hear a distant player anywhere from 10 to 100 ms late – I would then play just a little out of sync (behind the beat) with that player. Musicians in large ensembles unconsciously learn to compensate by watching a conductor. Over the internet, latencies may vary widely by hundreds of ms or more, depending on the distance over which the signal is traveling, the bandwidth, internet traffic, and other electro-mechanical limitations. Everyone sounds out of sync by various amounts of time, and the result is cacophony.

There are complicated ways to overcome this, but the players are not playing in real-time – their sounds are put together in sync at a later time. The simple solution involves the "mute" and "unmute" buttons on Zoom. A single player plays unmuted while the others listen with their microphones muted so they can play along but everyone hears only the one unmuted player. It's not like playing in a jam or ensemble, but it's the next best thing, a compromise.

During the time I was not playing, other musicians were organizing Zoom sessions. I was not motivated to join because it was not like a real jam, and maybe I was a little intimidated playing solo to others at a distance – playing this way gives you no feedback from your audience or other musicians.

After I started playing again, I took a plunge and joined a Zoom group. This was a sing-along with other people from the Greenwood Senior Center in Seattle. Their musical abilities and choices of music varied widely, but I respected their desire to participate. And it allowed me to perform for the group. It also served a social function after I became acquainted with others in the group. It was mostly a group of seniors in north Seattle.

After a while, I learned about a Zoom group put together by our sing-along moderator with her musical friends from other parts of the country, not just Seattle. It involved mostly accomplished musicians and covered many genres of music, singing and instrumental. Again, I was a little intimidated to jump right in but found it was a friendly group from different parts of the country – Boston, Colorado, Wisconsin, California, Oregon, etcetera, in addition to Seattle. I enjoy their music and also the opportunity to perform for a more musically sophisticated group. Again there is the social aspect.

I also contacted friends from our monthly house jams and asked one of them to organize a Zoom jam. It was fun seeing them again and listening to their music in a virtual way – also talking and catching up with each other's lives during these pandemic times.

I find that these Zoom sessions lift my spirits and encourage me to play more music. It's not the best alternative to live music, but it works. Will we be Zooming after the pandemic is over and we return to a more normal life? Probably not to the same extent, but it's a good way to connect with other musicians in widely different places. In the meantime, I will continue to Zoom, learn new tunes and songs, and practice for the next Zoom.