

Rocky River Chamber Music Society: “Chamber Music in the Pandemic”

by Jarrett Hoffman



When live music as we know it came to a halt at the start of the pandemic, clarinetist and Rocky River Chamber Music Society board member Daniel McKelway knew he wanted to do something for concertgoers who live in retirement communities in the area.

“I immediately had a sense that these people are not going to have the connections that are so important to their lives and their happiness in their later years,” McKelway said during a recent telephone call. “These are people who have

not been able to have contact with their children and their grandchildren, and who are at greater risk than younger people if they do get the virus.”

His idea was to put on a live concert of chamber music, with generous measures of social distancing to be followed by the performers, and without a live audience in attendance, to be viewed for free over the web. That’s exactly what the Rocky River Chamber Music Society will present on Monday, May 18 at 7:15 pm.

“Chamber Music in the Pandemic” will feature five locals — McKelway, trumpeter Amanda Bekeny, violinist Lembi Veskimets, saxophonist Gabriel Pique, and pianist Leah Frank — in music by Béla Kovács, Henry Purcell, Max Bruch, Joseph Turrin, Paul Creston, and Vittorio Monti. The performances will take place at the West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church, which will offer live streaming on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).

The church has been an important collaborator in making this happen. “They’ve been incredible in terms of their enthusiasm in reaching out to their congregation,”

McKelway said, “so we’re using their equipment, and two members of the church are going to do the technical work.” Those technicians will operate the camera from “fairly far back” in the sanctuary.

Anyone tuning in throughout the concert will see performers who are “socially distanced like crazy,” McKelway said. “We are not going to sit or stand anywhere near each other like we normally would. We want to make sure that it’s obvious when people are viewing it that we are being super careful, so that nobody’s thinking, ‘These guys are nuts.’”

He acknowledged that some people may think that anyway, since so few groups are performing together at this time. “I’ve heard about the Berlin Philharmonic doing some really small-orchestra stuff, so we’re by no means the first,” McKelway said. “We may be the first in this area, but we certainly won’t be the last.”

McKelway, who is assistant principal and E-flat clarinet in The Cleveland Orchestra, has gotten the sense from all types of musicians in Northeast Ohio that they want to play. “They want to do it safely, and they want to do it in a way that doesn’t create problems and certainly doesn’t make anyone sick,” he said.

“From what we hear — from the musicians’ union to the freelance community to The Cleveland Orchestra and various music schools and departments around the area — everyone’s thinking really hard all the time about how they’re going to get to be able to perform. And depending on the size of the group, the size of the hall, and all that stuff, we’re just going to have to see.”

The largest grouping of performers on Monday’s program will be a trio of clarinet, viola, and piano for Bruch’s *Acht Stücke*. “These are just incredibly beautiful, sweet, wonderful little pieces,” McKelway said. “We’re doing three of the eight, our favorites.” He noted that he and Lembi Veskimets usually face each other when they perform, allowing eye contact, visual cues, and facial expressions to affect their playing. “In this case, I’m probably not going to face her, and certainly we’ll be farther away.”

Trumpeter Amanda Bekeny will be featured in works by Purcell and Turrin. “Amanda is just a phenomenal player who is also on the board of the Rocky River Chamber Music Society,” McKelway said. “She’s one of the superstar freelancers from the Cleveland area and a great teacher.”

Another “superstar,” McKelway said, is Gabriel Pique, “an absolute young hotshot on the saxophone.” Pique will conclude the evening with Creston’s *Sonata* and a

rendition of the famous *Czardas* by Vittorio Monti — the latter per the request of McKelway. “It’s so much fun,” the clarinetist said. “It’s just completely outrageous, an amazing way to end. I’ve heard him play it before, and I told him, ‘You may be bored with it, but I’m not, so if you’re willing to play it, I’d sure like that.’”



By including music for saxophone, the series also maintains a connection to the original plans for this concert, which was to have included saxophonist Steven Banks (*left*) on April 20. Because of the pandemic, it was delayed, and eventually reinvented entirely. “It became clear that Steven, who is now living in Ithaca, New York, just wasn’t ready to travel, and that made a tremendous amount of sense,” McKelway said.

To start the program, the clarinetist will play a solo work from Béla Kovács’ book of homages to different composers — this one in honor of J.S. Bach.

As many performers have noted, choosing music during the pandemic can be difficult. “It’s tempting during a time like this to play something that’s completely upbeat, put a smile on everybody’s faces, and sort of forget what’s happening,” McKelway said. “On the other hand, there’s been a lot of tragedy. People have died and have been really sick. People are out of work, really struggling with finances.

“Sometimes in these moments, I feel that the best thing to do is just to play the greatest music you can think of and play it well, and have a few minutes of normalcy in a way — though people can’t come to the church and listen like normal. We’re just trying to play something beautiful for anyone who loves music and loves what we do.”

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