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The National Philharmonic Releases Composers In Crisis Video Series
National Philharmonic Cover Conductor, Rebecca Smithorn, takes a deep-dive into the way past musicians have dealt with troubled times

WASHINGTON, DC (June 1, 2020)— French composer Maurice Ravel lived through both the first World War and the Spanish Flu. Beethoven took shelter in his brother’s cellar during the Napoleonic wars. Ruth Crawford Seeger, once a budding classical composer, found her way to folk music during the Great Depression. According to Rebecca Smithorn, a Cover Conductor and Lecturer with the National Philharmonic, these moments of world crisis not only influenced each composer’s music at the time, but would go on to shape who they became. And in the case of Ruth Crawford Seeger, her choice to pursue folk music would also end up having a huge impact on her own stepson, Pete Seeger.

Like many organizations, the National Philharmonic has been forced to move the bulk of their programming online during the COVID-19 pandemic. But Smithorn’s new series, Composers In Crisis, aims to look at how exulted musicians over time have dealt with periods of tribulation and what we might learn in our own harrowing moment from those past experiences.

“Some of the most famous composers we know had their lives disrupted by global events,” says Smithorn. “Musicians have always responded in emotional ways to world events, but what happens in the outside world also has real logistical consequences on what musicians are able to do,” she continues.

Smithorn points to 20th Century musicians during the two World Wars. The death and destruction during those periods left an absence of talented players and many pieces composed during that time were small budget works with just one player per part. However, those constraints do sometimes end up leading to new breakthroughs, one potential brightspot that we could see arise in our own time.

“No one wants to be living through what’s happening in our current moment,” says Smithorn. “But this whole thing could end up having some really creative responses that lead to new modes of music being produced.”
The National Philharmonic recently responded in their own new and creative way, producing a video by several of their musicians playing Aaron Copeland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man.” The piece, meant as a tribute to frontline workers, was recorded by each musician at their own home via cell phones with images of hospital workers battling COVID-19 interspersed throughout.

The Composers In Crisis series debuts on Thursday, June 4 and can be found on the National Philharmonic’s YouTube and social media channels. Once Smithorn has completed her dive into historical musicians, she plans to start interviewing living composers to talk about how COVID-19 is affecting them and how it might influence their music moving forward.

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The National Philharmonic serves the residents of the Washington, DC metro area. The primary goal of the organization is to provide audiences with high quality, professional performances at a convenient location and at affordable prices. The National Philharmonic also aims to appeal to the diverse cultural backgrounds of the community through its musical performances and educational programs.

https://www.nationalphilharmonic.org/