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## Classical Singers and COVID-19: A Preliminary Report

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### Article Info.

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### Abstract

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Classical singers are part of a fragile ecosystem of live music performance that is only slowly coming out of deep-freeze during the current COVID-19 crisis, and that will likely suffer long-term consequences as social-distancing measures and audiences' fear of crowds inhibit attendance at live performances for years to come. Here we present preliminary findings on how COVID-19 has impacted the physical, mental, creative and professional wellbeing of a small cohort of professional classical solo singers. As part of a two-year study that began in July 2020, individual interviews exploring self-rated wellbeing are here collated and analysed within the context of the PERMA model for wellbeing. Results thus far are largely consistent with other studies of physical and mental health during COVID-19, especially that of performing arts professionals, with preliminary evidence that a negative wellbeing impact is falling disproportionately on younger, early career singers. Signs of resilience and adaptability in this cohort counterbalance largely negative experiences of social media and online streaming, with an uncertain medium-term outlook for this particular cultural industry.

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### 1. Introduction

This preliminary report outlines initial findings from a qualitative study, funded by the British Academy, of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic—especially the accompanying restrictions, closures and lockdowns<sup>1</sup> due to social distancing—on a specific cohort of live professional performers: solo

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<sup>1</sup> While 'lockdown' can be applied precisely in terms of the imposition of movement restrictions by city, state, and national governments, it had different personal and professional meanings for each singer and in each of the countries studied, so we allowed the participants to define when and how COVID affected them, and to frame their own experience of 'lockdown'. For example, theatre closures were rolling but fairly rapid once begun, and many venues closed ahead of official countrywide or citywide lockdown announcements: Milan was one of the first to close its opera house on 24 February, 2020, followed by the Philharmonie concert hall in Paris (9 March), Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels and all theatre venues in Berlin (11 March), the Metropolitan Opera and Carnegie Hall along with Broadway in New York (12 March), and almost all theatres in London (16 March, a week ahead of the official UK lockdown on 23 March). However, some rehearsals in certain venues were allowed to continue even as live performances with audiences were stopped, in the hope that the closures were temporary. Theatres in most countries also remained closed even as lockdown measures across Europe eased in May 2021 of what has been termed 'Lockdown 1.0'. Also, quarantine measures varied significantly in each country, with those in Lombardy from 22 February severely curtailing freedom of movement in and out of the region (weeks in advance of the 8 March nationwide Italian lockdown), and initial quarantine conditions in some cities and countries (Paris, Spain) banning or severely restricting outdoor exercise.

classical singers. While there are obviously overlaps with the experiences of other subgroups — especially theatrical performers, classical instrumentalists, and choral singers — the funding and professional ecosystem for solo classical singing is one that is highly specific – rarefied, even. With regard to the types of space in which they traditionally perform (such as opera houses and concert halls), their comparative reliance on state and arms-length funding bodies, the degree of cooperation, globalisation, and management of a classical music 'circuit' compared to other forms of live music (Towse 2003, Agrid and Tarondeau 2010, Rowse 2018), and the particular risks of aerosol spread due to loud singing (Barrett, 2020), there is a degree of common ground across classical singers of different career stages and nationalities that might be more difficult to establish between individuals in other types of music. Likewise, the high level of formal training required of classical singers to reach professional status, along with a more standardised repertoire compared to, say, rock or pop, allows for a relatively more unified picture of this cohort of artists, especially within the clearly delineated timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic to date. While there are some caveats noted below, this greater degree of congruence does allow for our selection of interviewees to be *broadly* representative enough to make some starting observations, and to point towards fruitful questions to ask in further research.

In what follows, we first set out the context, outline the methodology for our own qualitative research with prior findings on the wellbeing of professional singers with particular reference to the PERMA model (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment). We then provide evidence from our own respondents, covering their reactions to – at the time of initial interviews – the first six months of COVID-related career curtailments (roughly late February to August 2020). With reference to their professional, career-oriented sentiments, their broader interpersonal and work relationships, and their ways of working creatively and practically within and around the pandemic, we then conclude with some initial observations about how these responses point towards further research, the potential trajectory for classical singing as a career pathway on the other side of the pandemic, and the need for due support and other creative and practical solutions to negotiate this unprecedented challenge to their way of life.

## 2. Context

The commonplace that singing contributes to wellbeing is well-supported by research. A systematic literature review by Daykin et al (2016) provided strong evidence that singing improves mental health and quality of life and reduces anxiety and loneliness in older adults, with medium quality evidence for similar effects on other subgroups such as younger adults and the marginalised (Daykin et al., 2016: 4-5). However, Daykin et al.'s review deliberately excluded paid professionals. The picture becomes more complicated when one controls not only for professional versus amateur singing, but also for solo versus choral singing. For example, while an early study determined that solo and choral singing both produced an improvement in reported mood on a par with swimming (Valentine and Evans, 2001), a comparable contemporaneous study found that 'the positive effects of singing are more pronounced after choir singing compared with solo singing in the same participants . . . whereas feelings of excitement remained stable during choir singing, participants reported high excitement prior to solo singing, which then dropped significantly after solo singing.' (Schlady, Nordmann et al., 2002: 65). Similarly contrasting changes in arousal as well as mood between solo and professional singers were observed during singing lessons, in which there was reporting of 'more well-being and less arousal for amateurs compared to professional singers, who seemed to experience less well-being and more arousal' due perhaps to their being 'achievement-oriented' rather than using singing as a release from stress (Grape, 2003: 65).

Studies focussing exclusively on professional singers by Sandgren (2002), Kenny et al. (2004) and in performance artists by Willis et al. (2019) found similarly high levels of anxiety, occupational stress and/or preoccupation with physical symptoms of ill-health, especially vocal impairments (an 'extreme dependence on vocal functioning'). There was also evidence of an orientation towards achievement or perfection rather than expression or audience engagement in their practice, with a correspondingly high impact on self-esteem of criticism coming not only from audiences and critics but also colleagues and significant others. Despite some reservations noted below regarding its sample diversity, Cupido's mixed

survey (2016) found similar preoccupations with somatic issues and social relationships despite relative financial comfort in a survey of semi-professional singers.

These small-group studies of professional singers accord with the conclusions of a more recent, systematic and larger-group study of the wellbeing of professional classical musicians (Ascenso et al. 2018). It begins with a thorough literature review that makes the observation that, while 'listening to and making music are strongly linked with wellbeing . . . professional musicians themselves are exposed to specific, performance-related risks that may threaten their healthy functioning', including both mental and physical risks such as hearing loss, performance anxiety, lower social support, higher mental fatigue, disruptions in family life, employment insecurity, and the stresses of a 'roller-coaster of underwork/overwork' (Ascenso et al., 2018: 3). In attempting to move beyond affect-centred (hedonic) frameworks, Ascenso et al. found Seligman's mixed hedonic/eudaimonic PERMA model a more comprehensive model for professional musicians' self-reports of their wellbeing. Developed from Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's formulation of a 'positive psychology', this model shifts away from a traditional focus on mental ill health and instead uses a barometer that measures 'the good life' or 'flourishing' (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, Seligman 2011) and uses for its descriptive framework five categories or 'pillars' of *Positive Emotion*, *Engagement*, *Relationships*, *Meaning*, and *Accomplishment*. For the sake of this report, these five categories can be defined briefly as follows:

*Positive Emotion*: Seligman (2011) defines 'positive emotion' broadly as 'what we feel: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, comfort, and the like', as opposed to the negative emotional states: "sad," "depressed," "unhappy," "nervous," "hostile," and "resentful". These are temporary and subjective states of feeling rather than persistent moods or pathologic conditions.

*Engagement*: Seligman (2011) describes this as 'being one with the music, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity' further defined by Ascenso et al (2018) as a 'deep psychological connection' or 'absorption ...implying interest, intense involvement, effort and immersion' to any 'particular activity, organization or cause'. This is, importantly, *not* a feeling but rather a state of [non-self-] consciousness, perceived only after the fact, and possibly linked to but distinguishable from either positive or negative emotion.

*Relationships*: Our social ties and networks, both their number and quality, as well as objectively received and subjectively perceived support from those ties and networks, and giving support to others (Taga, 2006, cited in Butler and Kern 2016, 3). Often linked with positive emotion, meaning, and engagement, relationships are seen by Seligman (2011) as a positive factor for wellbeing in and of themselves.

*Meaning*: Seligman (2011) defines meaning as 'belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self'. With both subjective and objective elements, it can be defined independently of the other four PERMA categories.

*Accomplishment*: beyond mere engagement, this is a subjective fulfilment or the ongoing pursuit of internal or external goals, and Seligman (2011) notes that accomplishments may be pursued by certain individuals for their own sake, and are often not tied to any positive emotion or necessarily to any objective or exterior yardsticks for accomplishment (for classical singers these may be awards for recordings, competition wins, contracts with high-status opera houses and conductors, etc.).

In their survey of professional classical musicians using these five PERMA categories, Ascenso et al. found that professional classical musicians scored on a par with the general population in Engagement and Accomplishment and noticeably higher in Positive Emotion, Relationships, and especially Meaning.

The hedonic components of these studies—whether it is the negative emotion scorings found in the previous studies or the positive emotion scorings used by Ascenso et al. — were all conducted before February 2020, and therefore in a pre-COVID time in which the physiological and psychological effects immediately surrounding the physical act of performing or singing itself were measurable in their participants. What might we expect from a group of singers who have been mostly— or in many cases, entirely—prevented from performing for an indefinite amount of time? It may be that removing singing from a singer's life would produce indicators of Positive and Negative emotion that are just as contradictory, but diametrically opposed to those found in earlier studies of working professional singers: all of the occupational stressors surrounding singing in front of an audience noted by Sandgren are gone but so is the thrill, engagement, and satisfaction of performing for an audience. Furthermore, the model would suggest that, almost by definition, the more eudaimonic categories of Meaning and Achievement that normally contribute to singers' sense of wellbeing would heavily suffer. Finally, given a potential lack of clarity noted by Ascenso et al. on whether Seligman's 'Relationships' category was perceived by musicians as being primarily work-related or private (Ascenso et al. 2018: 10) one might also predict mixed results in self-reported wellbeing in this category.

As will be seen below, despite the small sample group in this initial phase and the mostly qualitative subject-led interviews that did not map directly onto the PERMA model, participants' responses were indeed largely consistent with it and our preliminary results are organised so as to roughly align with the PERMA categories.

### 3. Method

The research presented here forms the initial stages of a two-year project, starting in July 2020. Our ongoing initial participant group consists of 20 professional solo classical singers, selected in late June and interviewed individually in July and early August for one to two hours, with follow-up questions by email. All were fluent in English, and all but one<sup>2</sup> were freelance, self-employed solo singers, deriving their primary income from short-term singing soloist contracts, such as recitals, concerts, and opera projects of one to three months in duration. Because one of the research questions concerns the different responses of national governments, there is an equal representation of natives from, or current residents in, five countries: the USA, UK, France, Germany, and Italy.

Because of the intimate and confidential nature of many of the questions and a need for a certain amount of initial trust and rapport in order to elicit full and candid responses, all of the singers with a sole exception have worked professionally with one of the co-authors at least once, as either performer or student. While the possibility for selection bias to have skewed these initial results will have to be kept in mind as the study progresses and more participants are included, given singer availability and willingness to take part [all gave informed consent to use their responses here], we are confident that a reasonable spread of participant diversity was achieved. Participants are equally-distributed by gender (50% male/ 50% female), age (4 in their 20s, 6 in their 30s, 5 in their 40s and 5 in their 50s), country of residence or origin (four each from USA, UK, France, Italy, and Germany), and finally career stage (eight early-career singers [career length 10 years or less], seven mid-career singers [10-20 years], and five late-career or 'established' singers [20 years or more]). It may also be parenthetically noted that eight of the twenty singers in this study have a BAME background: while not initially a research question, ethnic background did have some relevance to the experience of several of the singers during lockdown (see below), and as the study progresses, data will be later re-evaluated with this variable in mind to determine a possible pattern of impact related to ethnicity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The sole exception is soprano Christina Clark, who is a fully-employed ('Fest') and permanent ('unkündbar') member of the ensemble at the Aalto-Musiktheater, Essen. Christina was included in this study to provide some context for the life of a self-employed vs. an employed singer in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> A preliminary study in April 2020 by Proto and Quintana-Domeque found that levels of deterioration in mental health during the initial phase of Covid-19 was higher in BAME males than British white males, while the deterioration in females is the same across ethnicities (and consistently higher than males) (Proto and Quintana-Domeque 2020, 1). However, while Fancourt et al. 2020 nor

The one exception to relative sample diversity is voice type: while a reasonably complete range of voice types has been included (soprano, mezzo, countertenor, tenor, baritone, bass-baritone), the participation of 9 sopranos against 1 to 3 each of the other voice types must be acknowledged, although this does not appear to have noticeably affected the results. An earlier mixed study of opera singers' wellbeing by Cupido (2016) also had a small sample size and prevalence of sopranos (20 out of 46) alongside a diversity of career-stages and a reasonable division of gender. However, this earlier study, perhaps because of the self-selection methodology of an open online survey, was more heavily weighted towards USA-based singers (65.2%) and, perhaps more problematically, towards those for whom singing was only a secondary source of income (69.9%). Sandgren's earlier small-sample study of opera singers concentrated on professional singers (49) but had only a 55%/45% breakdown between freelance singers and singers with permanent positions, in either choruses or opera houses (Sandgren 2002, 16). This current study to our knowledge is the first to focus exclusively on professional classical singers with equal weighting across five countries, who are both freelancers (with the one noted exception) and solo singers, and who derive the majority of their income from professional solo performance.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews were semi-structured, involving a series of core questions but also subject-led, allowing for some freedom to inductively pursue lines of inquiry suggested by the participants themselves. An open format was deliberately chosen at this early stage, in order to use responses as a basis to formulate a survey which will be sent out to a larger cohort in the second stage of the study. Interview length was similarly open-ended depending on the singers' availability and willingness to engage, ranging from 70 to 120 minutes. All of the singers signed a consent form to have material from these interviews published, with an exercisable right to keep certain matters, both financial and personal, anonymous or off the record. Transcriptions of the recordings of these interviews were coded and used as the bases for analysis, which took the form of identifying initial core themes of 'health and wellbeing', 'career' and 'musical practice'. Further reviews of the transcripts and coding allowed us to determine commonalities as well as variation of experience across subgroups (for example by career stage), and then to map these core themes onto the seven categories within the PERMA model as described below.

## 4. Preliminary Results

### 4.1 Self-measured hedonic wellbeing (Positive and Negative Emotion)<sup>5</sup>

Given that our study began with interviews in mid-July 2020, we are somewhat limited in our ability to objectively measure any quantitative change in wellbeing pre/during/post-COVID, so we must rely on the participants' own subjective perceptions of these changes. Interviews began with two open questions—(1) 'How has the experience of lockdown changed you for the better or worse?' and (2) 'What has your lowest point been since lockdown?'<sup>6</sup> participants gave a range of answers that contextualised noticeable and evolving changes in self-perceptions of wellbeing, before and after the first experience of the pandemic in late February/early March 2020 and up to the time of interviews in late July/August 2020. In terms of hedonic wellbeing, four singers reported that, during the first month to six weeks of quarantine, they had feelings of forced isolation or claustrophobia ('like being in a prison' or 'being punished')

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Daly et al. (2020) both found similarly increases in levels of depression and anxiety across their samples during the first lockdown period (23 March-, there was no differential link to ethnicity. (Fancourt 2020, 145).

<sup>4</sup> As it becomes clear that the health risks of communal singing may be cause even greater damage to the choral ecosystem, and given the significant number of freelance choral singers both in the UK and elsewhere, a study of a subgroup of freelance professional choral singers is also needed, and may prove a fruitful tributary avenue of exploration as this current study progresses.

<sup>5</sup> Given the subjectivity inherent in these self-reported measures and the transience of positive and negative emotions, Butler and Kern (2016), as well as Seligman (2011) resist—as we do here - a narrow definition of wellbeing. Butler and Kern note that 'in the literature, terms such as "happiness", "subjective wellbeing", "thriving", and "flourishing" are often used interchangeably'. Later they define "flourishing" as a 'dynamic optimal state of psychosocial functioning that arises from functioning well across multiple psychosocial domains.' (Butler and Kern 2016, 2).

<sup>6</sup> See note 1 regarding the necessarily loose (and self-defined) meaning of 'lockdown' for the participants.

combined with an 'uneasy' feeling or being 'scared' or having a 'panic attack' for their own physical health due to ignorance at that point about the true effects or being in higher-risk categories. For one, experience of the mixed public compliance with social-distancing rules developed into mild symptoms of agoraphobia, and he wondered whether he would feel nervous when returning to crowded rehearsal rooms and narrow backstage areas common to live performing. For another, the confinement triggered recurrent symptoms of PTSD stemming from surviving an earthquake in early childhood.

Singers tend to be anxious about exposure to airborne viruses, probably more so than the general population, which is understandable given the threat of loss of work due to throat infection or even a bad cold. Surprisingly, however, the fear of COVID infection for themselves or families was surprisingly low in the participants, reported in only three cases, with another two worried about long term effects on the lungs rather than death. Instead, feelings of boredom were more commonly reported, even in some of these same participants, citing a lack of structure to the day, 'staring at the wall', 'twiddling the thumbs', 'I'm done with this', or being 'stuck in my house'. More seriously, two of the singers, soprano Sun Hae Im from Korea, and countertenor Meili Li from China, were anxious as a result of being verbally assaulted on the streets in Germany in late March where they reside, unfortunately consistent with reports of increasing anti-Asian sentiment not just in Germany but in the USA, UK, and France since early March ('Anti-Asian' 2020, Abdelkader 2020, Simeng Wang et al 2020).

Again, somewhat surprisingly, only two singers reported a feeling of 'withdrawal' from not being able to perform (either a feeling that 'something had been chopped off', or 'mourning' their singing<sup>7</sup>), although this was in what was still, at the time of interview, the relatively early stages of the pandemic. Instead, the temporary release from singing — or at least from the professional exercise of singing to a live audience — was the reported cause of a number of positive wellbeing outcomes for a majority of the singers, at least in the opening phase of the pandemic response.

Physical wellbeing was also mixed but tending to the positive, consistent with 'compelling links' found by Spiro and Perkins between physical activity and positive wellbeing in their study of performing arts professionals during the initial lockdown period (Spiro and Perkins 2021, 1).<sup>8</sup> While none at the time of interview had contracted COVID-19, the amount of physical exercise available was highly dependent on lockdown conditions imposed in their resident cities and countries: for example, those living in apartments in countries with stricter lockdown conditions preventing outdoor exercise (France, Italy, Spain) missed the ability to exercise in other than a limited way on balconies or courtyards. Five reported weight gain; one resumed a long-dormant smoking habit. However, a majority welcomed the opportunity to exercise more (running, walking, hiking, tennis, cricket, running or rowing machines, exercise bikes) or even develop a routine: 'I'm feeling healthy, I'm stronger, fitter, and faster', 'I was really fit. I was really positive.' Several lost weight (16 kg in one case) after some weeks of initial weight gain, and UK bass-baritone Henry Waddington was especially pleased to be able to complete the NHS 9-week 'Couch to 5K' running challenge despite being asthmatic. The disappearance of cold sores delighted one singer, the disappearance of acne another, while a third noted the healthier functioning of their thyroid and the absence of the usual colds/infections usually experienced due to frequent travel. Sleeping patterns were quite mixed, with no discernible pattern amongst respondents, ranging from 'poor', to poor but at least 'longer hours', to sleeping 'well and hard' to 'having the most beautiful dreams', the improvements in sleeping ascribed to being in their own home beds rather than in foreign hotels and temporary apartment rentals.

We asked the singers to also give us a picture of their wellbeing over the roughly five months since the arrival of COVID-19 in Europe and North America in late February to their time of interview. A

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<sup>7</sup> A respondent in Spiro and Perkins' study similarly spoke of 'mourning for an industry which I know will never be the same.' (Spiro and Perkins 2021,11).

<sup>8</sup> Spiro and Perkins note that this is consistent with pre-Covid studies (for example, Araujo et al. 2017) noting a link between physical health and increased wellbeing in musicians.

number of them experienced a noted change in perceived wellbeing either to the negative or to the positive beginning three weeks to several months into the pandemic, as a result of a distinct event or events or some concrete realisation or mindful decision. Henry Waddington remembered initially being 'sat on the sofa for four weeks ... obsessed with the five o'clock briefings', but then:

I just sort of shrugged it off and just thought, you know what, this is crazy, it's not a way to live a life freely, and also there is nothing I could do about it and I now have a philosophy. You know, I do worry and it concerns me and I worry for my family and friends and all that sort of stuff. But there's actually nothing I can do. . . My dad was a scientist, so I have an in-built trust for science, that they will eventually sort something out, and we will get over this, we will get through this.

Soprano Lisette Oropesa similarly reported feeling 'miserable' for five weeks, but then 'We [my husband and I] were like: you know what, we need to settle down, put our things in order and figure out what we're going to do.' For tenor David Portillo, the turn similarly came after about 4-6 weeks of lockdown when, whilst trying to make some online content (see the section on Creativity below) he found that:

I was not happy with my technology. I wasn't happy with my singing at the time, I was upset because I had taken a month off of singing and then I was like, Why do I sound like this? I hate it. . . I have to reinforce where I am and decide that I'm going to make some goals for myself. I'm going to start doing the little things during the day that make me happy. And then actually set some sort of normalcy. We got a dog just a week after I came home, so the dog actually has helped give a little more of a structure to what I still find a very structureless atmosphere at home, because anytime [before COVID] I was home from a gig, I was always kind of on vacation . . . I have to figure out what my day-to-day goals are, what my long-term goals are here in this space.

The evolving experiences of these three singers follows the pattern of a study of the general UK population, which found a more gradual but similar decrease in anxiety over the first 20 weeks of lockdown (Fancourt et al, 2020, 144). For a number of the other singers, however, the opposite occurred. UK tenor Ben Hulett, after a mostly positive early experience resting and spending time with family, realised in June that the restrictions on live performances were more than temporary, putting him 'on a short fuse . . . knowing there is no way I can provide I find incredibly depressing.' Italian baritone Riccardo Novaro reported being similarly 'angry', 'aggressive' and 'short-tempered' after the first 45 to 60 days, once he realised that, while his wife and many others were able to go back to work, his contracted music projects continued to be cancelled or delayed further into the 2020/21 season.

This transition to a more negative affect was not limited to men: Italian soprano Giulia Semenzato noted that, in March and April 2020, 'I was able to wind down because it was complete silence. I could hear birds and everything'. But with the loosening of Italian restrictions on 5 May, 2020 'when I started again to hear cars, then I felt like 'I'm still stuck here. And the world is going on now.' French soprano Julie Roset started to feel 'homeless' in mid-July, as she became unsure of her autumn start in the prestigious Julliard School postgraduate programme (she has since begun classes online and will travel to New York in January). UK soprano Soraya Mafi's anxiety increased after the first three weeks with the increasing drip of cancellations and lack of activity, with another wave of anxiety in the summer with uncertainty about the ending of the UK government's aid (this aid has since been extended (albeit on a much more limited basis into 2021). US soprano Elizabeth Sutphen experienced a wellbeing low point in late June with the cancellation of the NYC marathon, for which she had been intensively training during the first three months of lockdown. This had felt for her like a ray of light and a rare opportunity offered by COVID given the difficulty for travelling singers to qualify for such events, and at the time perhaps even more disappointing than her singing cancellations. Such experiences may indicate that the trajectory of performers' wellbeing will continue to diverge from that of the general population if the classical music does not return to life in line with other industries over the coming months.

## 4.2 Relationships

Three participants spent the period completely or mostly alone, apart from their partner and family. However, while Fancourt et al. (2021) reported high levels of anxiety and depression amongst those living alone in the general UK population during this same period, amongst our cohort, even those who were alone, the danger of isolation was replaced by engagement: the enjoyment of a 'relaxing' time cooking and baking, reading, playing guitar, watching TV, and rediscovering of piano playing. Several took pleasure in gardening as a way of appreciating 'the little things' or experiencing some sort of progression amidst the boredom: 'Tomorrow was exactly like yesterday, like a sort of prisoner so I needed to see something changing.' Several found the enforced cessation of work a very welcome respite from busy performing schedules: one singer admitted that 'to have a sabbatical has been fairly good for me . . . I was pretty much at breaking point', another 'needed a break', two particularly welcomed the vocal rest, and another took his first holiday since 2005 once lockdown restrictions were loosened.

Those with families were unanimously pleased with the unexpected extra time they had with them, a 'vacation', 'nesting' or an almost 'normal' home life that is normally interrupted by frequent travel for an international singer. Singers reported that 'it's nice to be reminded of what life can be like', 'I don't have to do this game for a while', 'enjoying my family and my friends at home [is] as much of a pull as 'the road' ', even as they also missed socialising with friends and being 'depressed' about not seeing members of their extended families. This was especially acute if they were currently resident in non-native countries (true of nine out of the 20 singers): 'I couldn't care less whether I never go to a high street shop again, to be honest, but I want to be back with family and friends.' However, others reported pleasure at the forced discipline of organising weekly catchups with old friends on Zoom, or really getting to know neighbours through socially-distanced block parties.

Relationships were not without their challenges, and three reported periods of 'adjustment' or tensions from 'living on top of each other'. One singer welcomed the opportunity to talk through issues in their marriage and is now considering adoption with their spouse. Three singers ended relationships just before lockdown, and for two, the inability to see friends in person to share their experiences or meet new people was tempered by a welcome space to 'process': 'it was good that I was forced to spend a lot of time with my own thoughts' and not 'jumping into other kind of things that maybe would have not been too healthy for me.' While lockdown reawakened a recurrent struggle with depression for one singer, the enforced period at home allowed them to 'deal with it now rather than later' by having frequent and regular teletherapy sessions that are normally extremely difficult to timetable in the irregular travelling schedule of most professional singers.

Perhaps in keeping with the high scoring on 'Relationships' reported by Ascenso et al. by professional musicians in general, and going against a common perception of singers as aloof, attention-seeking divas, while close family relationships thrived, many missed the social and collegial experience of singing with other performers, especially during rehearsals. As noted in previous studies of vocal and orchestral ensembles, harmonious interpersonal relationships with colleagues are seen by performers as critical not only for musical excellence but also for wellbeing (Lim, 2014; Dobson and Gaunt, 2015). For Riccardo Novaro, 'rehearsals are like living daily life in a theatre, something in which I give and receive energy for six hours a day for a month. That's being alive.' For Ben Hulett, 'music is seeing other people, and communicating music brings you together and you're working for a common goal and it lifts the spirits.' Patrick Terry noted how dependent singers are on the 'creativity of others', and the collaborative 'synthesizing' nature of a singer's work.

## 4.3 Engagement and Accomplishment

We now consider the effects of the pandemic on the eudaimonic wellbeing of professional singers. If one considers the PERMA categories in light of Ascenso et al.'s findings that professional musicians normally score particularly high in measurements of Meaning and average in Engagement and



Accomplishment, the question of how the participants reacted to the withdrawal of one of the principal pursuits for generating these sources of wellbeing— performing — becomes more crucial. We begin with the reports of engagement and accomplishment. The enforced absence of collective music-making made even solo home practice more difficult or even painful for some. None reported doing any singing that was not attached to a particular project: on the contrary, one even viewed singing practice as 'useless', another was unable to concentrate, and a third found that singing led to a 'spiralling' false hope. Six singers reported not doing any singing at all for at least two months.<sup>9</sup>

However, singers took advantage of whatever opportunities there were to perform, especially during the warmer summer months. For instance:

- Garden concerts for neighbours or on the village green (Ralf Simon and Ben Hulett)
- Drive-in performance of *La Boheme* at Alexandra Palace (Soraya Mafi)
- Jazz in a theatre foyer with a bass player (Christina Clark)
- Outdoor Lakes Area Music Festival concert with John Taylor Ward (David Portillo)
- Open air concert in a large parking lot in Frankfurt for 60 cars, with popular as well as classical music (Ralf Simon with wife Juanita Lascarro)
- CD recordings (Julie Roset, Lisette Oropesa, and Meili Li)
- ROH Jette Parker Young Artists piano recital on the opera house stage to an empty auditorium (Masabane Rangwanasha)
- Live performance of the song 'Smile' during a drive-in theatre showing of *Joker* in Essen (Christina Clark)
- Evening concerts from his Paris apartment window (Paul Gay)
- Online opera galas in aid of the MET, Garsington, and Grange Park (Lisette Oropesa, Soraya Mafi, Ben Hulett)
- Socially-distanced filming of Menotti's *The Telephone* for Scottish Opera (Soraya Mafi)

Lisette Oropesa, Luigi de Donato, and Giulia Semenzato sang in three of the very few staged and indoor opera performances over the summer (Verdi's *La Traviata* in Madrid, Paer's *Leonora* in Innsbruck, and Vivaldi's *Ottone in Villa* in Venice). These used the safety precautions (fully-tested cast, use of masks except when singing, socially-distanced chorus and soloists in two-metre 'zones', socially-distanced and masked audience at 50% seating capacity or less) that have proven to be a model not only for the Salzburg Festival ('Corona und Kultur' 2020) but the few opera houses in Europe that returned to rehearsals for limited seasons before new lockdowns in the autumn of 2020. For Semenzato, who learnt her role for *Ottone in Villa* in 10 days, this got her 'adrenaline moving again. . . I saw a lot of enthusiasm from everybody, which means that there's a lot of will to do this again'. Similarly, Riccardo Novaro, after performing in his first concert in the pandemic outdoor in Chiasso, Italy in July, realised how vital the hedonic thrill of singing is to his wellbeing: 'My God, the adrenaline was there for 48 hours, and I can tell I missed that. You feel you're alive.'

Whatever the positive affect expressed by singers during these rare performances, however, the continued closures of most theatres and extremely limited opportunities for live streamed content in theatres meant that all needed to find other avenues to engage or to express themselves creatively, interact socially with peers or their fan bases, or put their skills to other uses. This was, like most creative activity over the spring and summer, almost entirely online. Giulia Semenzato found a 21-day online Deepak Chopra meditation course very helpful not only in finding private peace within the crisis but also in providing some social comfort given the shared online network it produced. South African soprano Masabane Rangwanasha found her online lessons and coaching with the Jette Parker Young Artists

<sup>9</sup> This is very much in line with Spiro and Perkins findings that 33% of respondents 'indicated they had not engaged with learning/practicing/preparing/reflecting in any medium' (Spiro and Perkins, 2021, 6).

Programme—a prestigious scheme for young artists at the UK's Royal Opera House (ROH)—very helpful, as well as the virtual connection to her 'London family' this programme provided while in isolation in South Africa. French soprano Julie Roset's online voice lessons also 'saved' her. A number of singers were active in online teaching, even if it was not previously a serious 'side job'. Soprano Lisette Oropesa continued to provide a series of free masterclasses and talks with invited guest singers on Zoom and Facebook (with online audiences of over a thousand) while Ben Hulett ramped up his offering of what he sees as much-needed pro bono coaching on oratorio singing to young singers online:

[T]he wheels were set in motion beforehand but COVID gave me the great opportunity to just simply reach out to students and say, 'Listen, I'm doing this and the ethos is for free. . . that's very important, because I feel I'm filling a gap in their education. . . oratorio singing at conservatories is not particularly well-supported.'

Developing recital or radio and online programmes was also reported: Soraya Mafi worked on a programme for the BBC's *Music Matters* focussing on her Persian background, Riccardo Novaro a recital centred around Metastasio, irony, and drama, and Giulia Semenzato a song programme centred on the women in Ariosti's *Orlando Furioso*. Several singers took innovative approaches in an almost exclusively online environment: Italian Bass Luigi de Donato, fearing that audiences 'had forgotten about us' because of a saturation of archived video on-demand performances that continued to be streamed free online, started a series called 'In Cucina Cantando' on Facebook throughout April 2020, in which he sang unaccompanied opera arias while cooking a traditional dish in his kitchen, interacting as he did so with viewers via Facebook chat.

Dallas Opera commissioned Elizabeth Sutphen to create an online comedy and interview show, 'Late Night with Liz'. Involving more than 80 hours per week of writing, filming, editing, and marketing, it garnered significant online traffic, and led to a second commissioning of 'Pitch Squad', a series of five-minute sketch comedies with fellow singer Elena Villalòn ('Pitch Squad' 2020, see Figure 1). For Sutphen, who always considered comedy a second potential career, this generated a significant sense of engagement as well as achievement, given the new skills involved. Similarly, Sunhae Im was asked to create and host a six-episode TV programme in South Korea with six other Korean musicians on the subject of 'Music and Faith', which tapped into these artists' need to express their feelings and tell their stories, and was for her a 'dream come true' (Figure 2). Tenor Ralf Simon is writing a political historical novel, and Filippo Mineccia has returned to his love of painting (Figure 3).

However, the respondents were unanimous in feeling that the limited performing options open to them, especially those involving singing online, were a pale substitute for singing to a live audience in a theatre, a view also shared by their audiences (Collins-Hughes 2020). If online singing was, at best, a necessity to maintain their professional profile and audience engagement, at worst it was described as an activity that brought out the higher levels of anxiety associated with performance observed in previous studies without the 'payoff' of an audience's energy. They noted, variously:

I've now spent three or four months recording things for people, it's all for charity, it's all great. And I love being asked to do it, but I would much rather do it for real than electronically. . . not satisfying.'

I love the energy that an audience gives you. You cannot compare it to doing a video or anything that anybody has come up with as an alternative. It's all a pale or worst version of what we had before, something that you don't want to get used to'

'a very poor substitute for the real thing'

I prefer really 200 seats or singing in an empty theatre with no mics than singing through Zoom. Most of the people that I know did it just to survive and to make sure that people could see them because the ego was so present that they said, 'oh my god, I'm gonna die if I don't sing,

even in front of a camera' ... But I need an audience, you need to be in an opera theatre. It's not cinema.'

'I'm never proud of what I'm doing [online]. And this is a sort of perfectionism.'

'I can do one zoom recital, and that's fine. And my friends and family can like Skype in and people all over the world. But opera is not on zoom, I'm sorry. Singing is a live art. I need the audience just as much. They need me. You know, I need them. Otherwise, what I do is not interesting. It's not interesting for me to sing in my living room into a camera. At least I [don't] find it interesting. It doesn't have the same energy and never will ... The energy between the audience and performer, that can't be replaced by something else ... no recording that I've ever done in a recording studio [can be] compared to live performance because it cannot be replicated and something special happens. And I would say that that is what I miss, because not everyone is capable of going on stage and doing a recital and be in the moment and take that risk of anything could happen and having a rapport with the audience. . . that's what I can contribute and I'm not able to contribute to society at the moment.'

**Figure 1.** 'Pitch Squad' with Elizabeth Sutphen and Elena Villalón



**Figure 2.** Sunyul: Music and Faith; South Korean TV programme hosted by Sunhae Im, soprano



**Figure 3.** Untitled. Filippo Mineccia, 2020



An ever-present outlet during the pandemic, social media has the potential to be an opportunity for creative, professional, and personal expression. Many of the surveyed singers remained incredibly active on social media throughout the crisis, seeing it as a way to remind fans that 'we're still here', to reach different, younger potential audiences, and even to give support to struggling young singers who reached out to them because of their social media presence. For one young singer, accessing social media during the first months of the crisis helped to create a sense of community and solidarity within the normally competitive and atomised singing community: 'it was kind of nice to feel like, gosh, you know I'm in the same position as everybody else'. Another similarly remarked that for once all singers were 'in the same boat . . . it's actually nice to think, okay, none of us are doing anything . . . we don't need to feel bad about or feel good about anything; I can put this kind of professional peer pressure aside, kick it away for at least a few months.'

However, in accordance with recent studies that reported mixed benefits of social media both before and during the pandemic (Berry 2018, Islam et al. 2020), once a limited number of singers returned to limited professional activity, social media postings only added to an anxiety of being 'left out' and solidarity vanished when some performers started to return to work: 'we don't need to see that every day. I love these people, but I don't need to see the fact that [they're busy] but we're all upset that we're not doing this and we're not doing that.' One singer adept at social media admitted that, even pre-COVID, maintaining a social media presence is part of the job but still 'sucks', causing stress and requiring continual feeding. If we are to accept Abigail de Kosnik's formulation that social media platforms are 'performance spaces', the singers' pandemic experience with them suggest such platforms provide more of the negative and little of the positive emotion these singers normally expect from their live performing (De Kosnik 2019:20).

#### 4.4 Meaning and 'Identity'

The first lockdown period gave many singers the space and time to really consider questions about how enmeshed their careers were with their identity, and the importance of music and music-making for them, given its relative absence. Other studies have noted the strong connections between identity and wellbeing for performance arts professionals (Teague and Smith 2015, Spiro and Perkins 2021), and mentions of 'identity' suggest a link to Seligman's category of Meaning. Some interviewees felt 'a cosmic emptiness' or 'useless' or a crisis of identity ('we don't feel like them [singers] anymore'), but also, conversely, a positive opportunity to stop 'running' and instead ask the 'really difficult' existential questions with 'a lot of self-analysis and honesty.' The pandemic roughly coincided with the birth of US soprano Lauren Libaw's first daughter, and both experiences have given her the space away from her singing to consider how she makes life choices:

[W]hat's really right for me or not. What do people expect even when you find yourself 10 years into an opera career or, at the Royal College of Music in your mid-20s? Do I actually want to do X, Y, or Z, or what's best for me? What kind of life do I want? . . . And as soon as I knew how to sit in a dark room and be like, 'What do I want?' things became easier because it was me making choices for myself, not based on what I felt like I should be doing.

Identity and meaning can also be tied to place, and therefore associated with, if not identical to, issues of relationships and networks. Given that a typical opera project or concert tour lasts from a week to ten days to two months, and may follow on from or be followed by another project of similar length in a different country or countries, most busy professional singers typically experience feelings of rootlessness that can become habituated and disguised as 'freedom'. For Giulia Semenzato, the enforced isolation due to lockdown caused her to question:

where I should be ... this is, of course, caused by the fact that I'm nowhere anyway. I'm in Vienna, but I'm thinking maybe I could live in Madrid; if I'm in Milan, I think, well, I like London actually, but at some point I realized that most of our colleagues have the same pathology.

The pandemic similarly reinforced Chinese countertenor Meili Li's uncomfortable threefold sense of being a 'wanderer': not only as an East Asian in Western Europe and a constant traveller for his singing, but as a worker perpetually 'subject to winds of change' due to the increasing precarious and last-minute nature of work offered to young singers.

Questions of identity can take on additional significance for classical singers: all of the respondents were experienced actors, habitually involved in assuming different personae onstage. One author of this paper noted that this role-playing or sense of leading multiple lives can spill out into one's non-professional life, for example with the development of a 'touring self' and 'home self,' or the multiple professional roles assumed in a 'portfolio' teaching and performing career common to many singers. Of course, role-playing has been seen as quite normal, even normative psychology, even for non-performers (see, for instance, Goffman's still well-regarded 1959 dramaturgical model of social life in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959). However, what Goffman describes as 'impression management' intensified for some of these performers, even when temporarily denied a literal 'frontstage' and 'backstage' for their psyche. US countertenor Patrick Terry envisioned a non-singing life 'that could bring me close to my family and maybe I get married and adopt a child or have a dog — a life like that's something that I'm interested in. But it also feels like that person's name isn't Patrick Terry. It's like, his name is Jeff and he's very happy.' Italian countertenor Filippo Mineccia describes the 'two Filippos: (1) the diva, who desires to be onstage, the insane castrato, tormented, larger than life, and (2) the reasonable, adaptable, flexible one'.

#### 4.5 Adaptability and Resilience

Given the reluctance of the majority of our participants to enthusiastically engage with the production of online content, it may appear surprising that 'adaptability', 'flexibility', and 'resilience' were common threads in the interviews. However, classical music, especially opera, regularly requires a great deal of flexibility and compromise, not only in the many years required to establish a career, but in the large number of disciplines and personalities that must come together in an often messy rehearsal process to make the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is music drama. Elizabeth Sutphen suggested that singers are 'oddly well-equipped to deal with uncertainty' because of the precarity of their work. Patrick Terry has learned to 'temper my aspirations with realism and so I've always got contingency plans B, C, D, and E every day.' This adaptability was forged in some by previous hardships: many noted that they had already experienced, pre-pandemic, what one singer called their own 'private coronacrisis' in their personal or professional lives. Whether it was an earthquake, a serious vocal injury leading to months of enforced vocal rest (two singers), or a bout of depression/breakdown (two singers), these previous traumas gave these singers a 'bit of perspective' that 'there is a life outside the opera world.'

To this resilience or adaptability can be added an attitude of optimism, both for their personal futures and for that of classical music. In almost all of the singers, this optimism and the possibility of transformative change far outweighed the pessimism, even in the face of great uncertainty about the return to health of the classical music and performance industries:

'I seem to be an optimist, which I have to say, I'm not sure I ever knew that I was.'

'I've always thought that if I continue to move forward, something will happen, something will come.'

'I think that something that I practice is to sort of picture how I could be happy in any scenario'

'OK, I'm a big believer and I have faith. And I think that there's something good that is going to come out of this very bad situation.'

'There doesn't exist a problem without a solution.'

'I feel hopeful for the future. I think there are lots of people who are active on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram showing lots of folks connecting who would never have connected before . . . People from rural areas come to London and then stay in London and it becomes very insular . . . [but now] you see people having some hometown pride . . . it could diversify the landscape and become more local and could start to include more people'

'I like the idea that the industry [will] think about doing new things . . . I think a lot of young directors will benefit from it because they think outside the box...'

Singers were similarly optimistic about the return of audiences, even given the higher mortality rates of COVID among one of their principal sectors, the elderly:

'In 25 years I've been singing, [our audience] has always had grey hair. If I know those sorts of people well enough, they're the type of audience that will be going, I want to go back and see *Lohengrin*, I want to go and see such and such, because life for me is that, that's what my life is.'<sup>10</sup> 'The vibrating emotion, the vibration of the voice is not the same [online] as in the concert hall and of course the emotion of the story and all that. Music or theatre is the same. You just want to see people die on stage. You can watch sports on TV pretty well, but it's also amazing when you go and see tennis live — it's another thing.'

'[Audiences] will always be there and they will always want to go and see and listen to singers because they are the most passionate.'

'I always was relatively positive and just sort of thought that 'it will come'. I got enough positive feedback that I just thought, 'well this will happen' and it did, and I was lucky as well. I mean, there were just factors that fell into place that made it possible for me to get my first job here over 20 years ago.'

#### 4.6 Career stages and the 'worst year'

A developing question for this study is whether singers in certain categories, whether it be age, career stage, country of residence, gender or ethnic background, are impacted disproportionately by COVID-19. The recently conducted Big Freelancer Survey noted that self-identified 'early career' artists were a subgroup with the second highest negative wellbeing impact from COVID (the first being the deaf and disabled) ('Covid-19:Routes' 2020, 12). Spiro and Perkins similarly found a positive correlation between age and general wellbeing, with older participants reporting less depression and more social relatedness (Spiro and Perkins 2021, 7). While Spiro and Perkins suggest that the established reputations and larger social and professional network contributed to their better wellbeing during Covid (11), Ascenso et al. ascribed a similar pre-Covid finding — that older musicians experience less Negative Emotion — to better coping strategies developed over years of experience (Ascenso et al., 2018: 10). These findings are consistent with ours: when asked the double question 'Is this the worst year in your career to lose work? If not, which year in your career would have been worse?', 11 out of the 20 singers pointed to the start of their careers as the worst time. Soprano Christina Clark thought that it would have been terrible having opportunities as a developing singer 'ripped out from under me' in her mid to late 20s. Tenor David Portillo was also:

fearful for young artists, just starting in their career. I would have had a difficult time with this. There's already so many uncertainties about expectations financially, professionally, musically, artistically; COVID would only make things more emotional and unknown.

<sup>10</sup> This contention appears to be supported by work on the cultural value that accrues to live music of different kinds, and for different audiences, with a subscriber to the Scottish Chamber Orchestra noting that it formed part of the 'fabric of their regular activities' (Behr *et al.*, 411)

An earlier 'worst year' was reported even by artists who can still be considered early career despite busy schedules. Early career sopranos Giulia Semenzato, Soraya Mafi, and Elizabeth Sutphen all agreed that the very youngest professionals would be hardest hit. Mafi observes that 'it must be difficult to just have the rug pulled out from under your feet as a freelance artist who's just cutting their teeth . . . with no agent to represent you', while Sutphen notes the potential 'lost momentum' to a career if the pandemic had struck only a few years earlier when relatively fresh out of conservatory. She feels badly now for younger singers who will not be able to 'get their foot in the door' via the apprentice programmes, competitions, or auditions rounds that are now so critical in a young singer's transition to professional life.

However, several of the mid-career and established singers were of two minds when asked to name their 'worst year'. While acknowledging the difficulties facing young singers, many also pointed to other, later stages in their careers when this pandemic may have had a worse effect. Particularly in mid-career, with the real possibility of the need for a career change or supplemental sources of income, an existential threat to performance such as COVID would have been even more challenging due to certain life or career situations. For example, a divorce, the recent purchase of a house, single-earner status, additional childcare and/or lost earnings due to the birth of a child, a change in artistic management with an associated gap in performing contracts, or a debilitating vocal illness requiring months of rest may all temporarily exhaust savings for freelance singers in later career stages. Likewise, missing particularly exciting projects, new roles, or opportunities to work in certain opera houses or with certain conductors that may only occur mid-career can still adversely affect careers for years going forward.

In fact, the anxiety produced when contemplating potential future rather than actual career jeopardy can skew measurements of how COVID affects Positive Emotion at various career stages. A good example is Baritone Riccardo Novaro's double vision as he compared the financial difficulties he experienced as a student in the 1990s with his current responsibilities as a father and principal earner in his 40s and the development of his voice:

'I was 25 so I didn't really consider this the end of the world because I was alone. I didn't have a family. I was not a father. So this now is harder for me, as it is for many of us who have a family because I've been responsible for my family now for 10 years. Yet I'm not homeless or living under a bridge, I can live. I feel very fortunate because there are younger people, you know, in a worse situation than mine. . .[Yet] I'm a baritone and this is the time when baritones come into their own—you're just getting started. You know I feel like a good bottle of French wine, where you can just start to enjoy it now. And so I say, 'oh my God, I don't want to retire now, I just want to give myself 15 years more . . .[finding another career] is a sad idea for me, really difficult to digest.'

Bass-baritone Paul Gay similarly called attention to the greater financial difficulties mid-career singers might encounter during this crisis since, after enduring the sacrifices required to build a career, they were finally able to take on larger financial obligations simply not possible for younger singers. Tenor Ben Hulett noted the worries of future as well as present financial and emotional commitments created by children: 'I've got to provide for my kids when they're older and dealing with the pressure in their own lives...I might feel that pressure a little bit less [if I were younger].' Mezzo soprano Anna Bonitatibus similarly viewed the career threats posed by the pandemic as more clearly impacting older singers, not just because of increased family and financial commitments but also on account of a reduced ability to respond flexibly to changing economic conditions in general and the feeling of sunken costs:

younger generations have a capability of living with very low expenses and a couple of contracts can make a difference and they can still look for another profession, even if is not the 'dream' job. For mid-career artists it is a bit more complicated because of a bigger involvement financially (taxes!), experience not to be wasted, age (pretty impossible to get another profession at mid-age), commitments both personal (family) and professional.



US soprano Lisette Oropesa agreed, noting that '10 to 15 years ago I would have moved right back to Baton Rouge and right back down to my little cheap apartment that I had there.' But now, 'I'm sad that the money that I put away for when I was going to need it, like when I really need help, I'm having to use now. What if I get pregnant? What if I get cancer? What if I lose my voice? You know all the what ifs. I didn't put this away for this disaster. This is not okay.'

#### 4.7 Financial Anxiety

One of the potential drawbacks of the PERMA model is that financial security is grouped under the Positive Emotion category along with many of the other hedonic measures of wellbeing discussed so far, despite its potential to disproportionately affect a perception of 'perceived satisfaction' in a crisis that carries serious economic as well as health risks. Spiro and Perkins (2021) found evidence of financial hardship across the majority of their performing-art professionals cohort as a result of COVID: 'by mid June 2020, 76% of respondents had experienced a decrease in income – nearly 30% reported having already lost over £4000 and 54% considered themselves to be in financial hardship' (Spiro and Perkins 2021, 6). The Big Freelancer Survey of 8000 arts freelancers found that 33% of UK freelancers were ineligible for government support of any kind, with a similar percentage indicating they were thinking of leaving the industry/ ('Covid-19: Routes' 2020, 1-2).

In line with these findings, our interview group lost an estimated self-reported average of 69% of their work in 2020 due to the cancellations of musical performances. Nine out of the 20 received either no government support or less than £550 in total. Some were refused support because this support was conditional on earnings under a certain threshold in the previous tax year. While many were fortunate to have partners with jobs outside the performing arts, three singers had recently changed residency to another country (a frequent occurrence for professional musicians in Europe) and were therefore unlucky enough to be ineligible for aid from either their home or their newly-resident country.

Such was the case for US countertenor Patrick Terry, whose singing career had been most seriously affected by the timing of the crisis. Having reached the end of the two-year Jette Parker programme in the UK, facing the cancellation of a full year's bookings including a Brett Dean premiere with the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in Lyon and debuts at Opera North, Grange Park, and Irish Opera, and ineligible for either UK or US government support, with high student loan debt and no savings, he took the difficult decision to take full-time employment at a healthcare company based near his family in Madison, Wisconsin. Nevertheless, he remains hopeful, as his agents continue to promote him on their roster, and he is planning to 'ride it out in this job, keep my name in the mix' and return to singing in the 2021/22 season.

While Patrick's case is exceptional, and surely temporary, with a self-estimated average of 7.8 months' worth of emergency savings for each across the group, and with five singers reporting four months' worth of savings or less and two having no savings at all, financial anxiety was as common within the cohort as it is within classical music in general and other similarly affected cultural activities, in a sector in which employment is already precarious by nature and in which the effects of COVID are predicted to be longer-lasting (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2020, Travkina et al. 2020). All expressed mounting anxiety, especially in the developing second phase of COVID, about the continuance of government programmes, and many had stories of fellow singers in much more precarious situations. One reported a colleague in their 30s who only became freelance in January and, with two children to support, was now doing construction work. Soprano Julie Roset was grateful for the French government's *Intermittents du Spectacle* scheme, which supports artists who are temporarily between projects once they qualify with 507 hours' work in the previous year, and which was quickly extended by the French government in March 2020 ('French performing artists', 2020). She was lucky enough to qualify, while a friend who was a freelance choral singer was not eligible for any aid until spring 2021. South African soprano Masabane Rangwanasha completely relied on financial support from the Jette Parker Young Artist Programme which, despite enormous ROH losses since closing in March 2020, has enabled her not only

to support herself financially, but also to continue voice lessons, coachings, and even therapy sessions delivered by the programme via Zoom. She compared her good fortune with the desperate financial situation of many fellow singers in South Africa, who were already suffering from a series of cuts in government support for the arts and for whom the pandemic was an added blow.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that, even within the countries of Europe, there is considerable variance in terms of both the economic impact of the virus and the relative abilities of national governments to financially support affected citizens (Sapir 2020), and one of the longitudinal aims of this study is to see whether the longer-term wellbeing of professional singers is affected by policy and financial responses by their resident countries in both short and medium term.

## 5. Preliminary Conclusions

At this point in our study, it seems possible to derive some cautious optimism from the overwhelming trust this group has in their artform and in their shared community to survive this crisis, and, in general, a readiness to adapt to whatever changes await them in classical music's future — as long as that future includes live performance. The PERMA model does appear useful in predicting and structuring the mixed hedonic and eudaimonic impacts of the COVID crisis on this cohort's wellbeing, in a way that is consistent with previous pre-COVID studies. As we continue our study, some important long term questions remain, as they do in other studies which at this point lack sufficient longitudinal data: whether our selection method has been affected by survivor or selection bias, whether there are clear patterns of impact by gender, ethnicity, country of residence, or career stage, how to value personal versus work-related relationships, and to what extent the limited possibilities for live performing can be assuaged by other creative or professional outlets. As this study proceeds into its second phase, with focus-group discussions and an increase in sample size (a larger and more open anonymous and quantitative survey), we hope to be able to address these.

Since the initial interviews in the summer of 2020, the residents of all the countries represented here have experienced an uncertain series of reopenings and new lockdowns. At the time of finalising this article for print (March 2021), a singer in the study reported to us with some anxiety that contracts for the 2022-23 season were being cancelled as a result of the knock-on effects of rescheduling projects that were cancelled this year. Early predictions by scientists such as Dr. Gerald Haug, President of the Leopoldina National Academy of Sciences in Vienna, that restrictions to theatres may be in place for a year or longer (Agence France-Presse 2020) have proven to be accurate, and it is clear that testing, contact-tracing, yearly flu-like vaccinations and social distancing will remain a part of our lives for some time. There is considerable hope to be found in the first rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations in December 2020, as well as recent calculations from a study from the Hermann Rietschel Institute (Kriegel and Hartmann 2021) suggesting that the risk of infection for masked audiences in socially-distanced concert halls is lower than that of hair salons and supermarkets. However, this hope has been tempered by news of more contagious and potentially vaccine-resistant strains of COVID-19 that have caused renewed restrictions affecting musicians, especially to international travel, that are changing almost on a daily basis.<sup>12</sup>

We are therefore entering a tentative period of what might be considered the 'new normal' for classical music: an underpowered two-speed ecosystem. After a winter lockdown, both European and American opera houses and concert halls have announced tentative plans for reopening in April and May 2021, but only by operating under capacity or limiting audience numbers. The reasonably full programme of performances at Madrid's Teatro Real that have continued since July 2020 (Dombey 2021) is very much the exception, and it is clear that, while many businesses have been able to return to a reasonable level of

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<sup>11</sup> South African tenor Kagiso Boroko, in July 2020, who was already suffering loss of work due to the closing of the Gauteng Opera in Johannesburg in 2018 (leaving only one functioning opera house in South Africa, in Cape Town), and whose death was reported by South African MP Geordin Hill-Lewis as due the 'anxiety of financial ruin' (Magubane 2020).

<sup>12</sup> On 19 March, Parisian authorities announced a third full lockdown amidst fears of a third wave of infections overwhelming hospitals. ('Covid: Paris lockdown' 2021)

functionality, the great majority of theatres and concert venues look likely to be among the last venues to return to normal.

Measures to support the self-employed have also been further extended by the governments of all the countries represented here, but a tapering in payments and lingering gaps in support for the self-employed in the UK ('Support' 2021), especially in industries which are not considered 'viable' (Cavendish 2020), is worrisome. Indeed, the longer-term financial wellbeing of a substantial number of freelance professional singers across the countries studied may suffer: already 34% to 64% of classical singers may, as the UK Musician's Union and *Encore* have surveyed, even leave the profession (Beaumont-Thomas 2020, Venvell 2020) and a 'cultural depression' may face the 95% of American Federated Musicians in the US unemployed due to the shutdown (Cohen 2020). In the US, both unionised and freelance musicians have already faced enforced salary cuts and concessions as a result of pressures on cash-strapped orchestras and opera houses (Jacobs 2021). Alternative careers to supplement lost income and to rechannel creativity and engagement, especially for the youngest artists, are a real possibility for many in this cohort amidst continuing uncertainty in the medium-term. Whilst anxiety and loss due to COVID-19 have been experienced by all, we will continue to monitor, with the PERMA model in mind, the continuing and evolving effects of COVID-19 on the emotional, relational, creative and financial wellbeing of this discrete group of resilient but vulnerable freelance artists.

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