



## The art of medicine

### COVID duets

It was a Saturday afternoon in March, 2020. COVID-19 cases had started to trickle into our hospital, but I had a different sort of acute case on my hands. Thanks to the sweltering heat in New York City apartments, two seams on my cello had splayed open. If I didn't get them sutured, stat, the entire instrument could eviscerate.

I hustled downtown for an emergency consultation at a Tribeca tenement on a cobblestoned street, little changed from when my grandfather stepped off the boat from Latvia a century earlier, just blocks away. The on-duty luthier took a careful history and then hauled my cello onto the examination table. Unlike some of us in medicine, he did not skimp on the orderly progression of inspection, palpation, percussion, and auscultation. His final diagnosis included a warped bridge, two loose pegs, and a G string on its last legs, in addition to the split seams. He gave me a loaner cello and told me to come back in a week.

The next day, however, the mayor announced that schools would be closing. Within the week, New York City was officially in lockdown, with business activity limited only to essential workers, a category that evidently did not include luthiers.

The chaos and desperation of a COVID-19 surge are sadly familiar to medical workers throughout the world. March and April were the peak months for New York, with every day somehow, impossibly, worse than the day before. During its darkest abyss, about 1000 New Yorkers perished every day. Refrigerated trailer trucks loomed behind our hospital as extended morgues.

Within the disorienting swell of a pandemic surge, every health-care worker struggles to find their own strand of stability. For me, I tried my best to keep up cello practice with my loaner. Given the death and destruction all around us, it felt unseemly to complain about coming home to a strange cello every night. Objectively, the loaner was a perfectly decent instrument, but playing someone else's cello is like sleeping on someone else's mattress: everything feels wrong. Your own mattress may be a lumpy shamble, but they are your own lumps and gullies, and they offer the solace of familiarity.

Like so much else during the pandemic, my cello lessons reconstituted on Zoom. Despite my griping, I had to give Zoom credit for allowing us to continue. My teacher could still critique my Bach. I could still muddle through the Franck sonata. But the one thing we couldn't do was the Boccherini.

Luigi Boccherini was one of the first in a century's worth of cellist-composers. The cello was somewhat of an afterthought for the great composers of the canon, taken as they were by the expansive range of the piano, the piercing lyricism of the violin, and the titanic possibilities

of the orchestra. Thus it fell to the working cellists of the day to compose music to explore the virtuosity of their instrument. Born in 1743, Boccherini was an early cello prodigy. His talents took him from Tuscany to Vienna, Paris, and Madrid, where he served as court kapellmeister. He composed a prodigious amount of chamber music, plus a dozen cello concertos and more than 30 sonatas, reminding the world that the cello can be more than just the *basso continuo*, the dull sawing baseline to everyone else's flights of musical fancy. A quarter of a millennium later, one of those sonatas—the C major, scored as a duet for two cellos—sat on my music stand.

Zoom might be able to orchestrate beviés of employees from far-flung locales, living in disparate time zones, but its technical wizardry peters out when it comes to the simple musical duet. The streaming delay is just long enough to make it impossible for two people to play music together. So although our Zoom lessons could prevent my Bach and Franck from completely unravelling during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Boccherini duet could only limp along.

Spring bulldozed through, at a pace that managed to be both a vertiginous *presto* and a brutal *largo*. In parallel with the city's infection rate, our hospital's COVID-19 census crescendoed inexorably. A peak can only be identified in retrospect; in the moment, it's just a terrifying ascent.

Every night, after checking the latest, nerve-rattling stats, I'd tune up my loaner cello, rosin my bow, and work methodically through my assignments. The familiarity of ritual cannot be overstated, and I now understand how my religious father could recite the same prayers every day for 86 years. Like a dogged medical student with a scut list,



The Outdoor Concert (oil on panel), Italian School, 16th century/Musee de l'Hotel Lallemand, Bourges, France/ Bridgeman Images

I put my head down and ploughed forward with my lumpy loaner. First the scales, then the Popper etudes. Next, the mandatory Bach. Then the heavier repertory work, the Franck sonata. Last, the duets. There could be a climate catastrophe, a political crisis, or a pandemic—or all three at once—and I will plug away in the same order, every night.

In May, the numbers of COVID-19 cases in New York began to ease, although they exploded over the rest of the USA in a blaze of science-denial fatalism. Early June saw the first phase of New York's reopening and I made a beeline downtown. A masked luthier met me outside, and we executed our sidewalk exchange like characters in a second-rate mafia movie. I handed over my begrudgingly befriended loaner and received, finally, my long-quarantined cello.

It's only an intermediate-level cello, but at that moment I felt as though I were gazing upon Stradivarius material. Its maple body shimmered in the late-afternoon sun, its purfling precise and elegant. The scroll curled reassuringly in my palm.

It took a few days to break it back in, but it was like hugging an old friend again. Given how little hugging was permitted during the lockdown, I felt extra fortunate. Evening practices were just that much warmer, now that I had my buddy back. But the pandemic raged and my cello lessons remained consigned to the glitchiness of Zoom.

One early autumn Sunday my teacher sought my medical opinion as to whether it might be safe to have an outdoor lesson. If we could keep our distance and keep our masks on, I reasoned, it could be an acceptable option, given that we'd be in the fully ventilated outdoors.

We met in a nearby playground and took up opposite ends of a park bench. For me, attempting my awkward-edged Bach in public was a mortification of epic proportions, but one of New York City's finest attributes is that you can execute just about any sort of oddity and nobody bats an eye. Kids screeched by on skateboards and scooters. Frisbees and soccer balls whizzed through. Tennis players on the half-court thwacked their rackets—just arrhythmically enough, I should add, to discombobulate my timing. The fire station across the street was a veritable philharmonic of sirens and flashing lights.

I muddled through my repertoire, braving the critiques from my teacher, the dodgy retakes, the missed notes, and the writhing humiliation of doing it all beyond the safety of my living room. The only saving grace was the true anonymity provided by the pandemic-required face masks. When it came time for the Boccherini duet, my teacher saddled up his cello and we pegged our music to the stands in the face of the afternoon breeze. The C major Sonata is not particularly complex, but the thing about ensemble music is that one plus one turns out to be way more than two. My spirits immediately perked up from their self-flagellatory depths.

I was suddenly wide awake and hyperalert for the fusillade of cues I couldn't afford to miss—come in on

the downbeat, match the intonation, decrescendo simultaneously, indulge that fermata uniformly, nail those dotted eighth notes in sync, feel the flow, and let the music breathe. None of these can be done on Zoom, or with a recording. They can only be done with a fellow human being.

As we played, I imagined Boccherini sharing the same delight, palling around with a couple of friends in 1780, testing out a new composition before presenting it to the Spanish royal court. I suspect, though, that he probably didn't have pigeons scrounging underfoot or wafts of cannabis slinking by.

In my enthusiasm, I posted a photo on Twitter—two masked cellists on a random bench, Boccherini on our stands, bows aloft. It turns out that New York City is not nearly as anonymous as we'd like to think and within minutes there was a tweet from a junior medical colleague in my hospital letting me know that he was one of the tennis players knocking balls into our end pins.

My teacher and I continued our playground lessons throughout the crisp days of autumn, pushing as far into November as our constitutions could handle. But as the mercury dropped—and the US elections and pandemic raged—we eventually had to retire back to Zoom.

For all its stuffy reputation, chamber music is about having fun with friends, joshing about in real time. The COVID-19 pandemic has denied us human connection for achingly long periods of time. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like. I won't deny the succour that virtual connections have offered us when there's nothing else at hand. But it's only that—virtual.

We're all counting down the months until mass vaccination can bring us back to actual human interaction, to when social distance is re-relegated to what's between you and the Queen, not between you and your friends. But there's still an inconsolable chasm of grief and death until we get there.

Until then, like everyone else, I'll rely on the facsimiles. I'm grateful, at least, that my cello is back in my pod. Perhaps Boccherini faced his own share of quarantine—smallpox, tuberculosis, and influenza rampaged through Europe in the 1700s. Without Zoom to connect with others, I wonder if he turned inward and focused on solo music. Or maybe he stuck with chamber music—his preferred genre—and simply conjured up all the other parts, virtually.

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**Further reading**

- Raychev ED. The virtuoso cellist-composers from Luigi Boccherini to David Popper: a review of their lives and works. Tallahassee: Florida State University, 2003
- Mayo SE. The development of the Italian cello sonatas by cellist/composers in the Baroque and classical eras. Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2014
- Ofri D. Thoughts on a G string. *Lancet* 2009; **373**: 116–17
- Ofri D. What doctors can learn from musicians. *The New York Times*, Feb 3, 2012