

# JESSELTON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA (JPO) IN THE NEW NORMAL

Lee See Ling<sup>1\*</sup>  
Lee Chie Tsang Isaiah<sup>2</sup>

*Academy of Arts and Creative Technology,  
Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah  
leeseeling@ums.edu.my; chie\_tsang@ums.edu.my*

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## ABSTRACT

The ongoing global Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) struck Malaysia in early March 2020 leading the government to introduce regulations on social distancing and gatherings. This has led to restrictions on all forms of music and arts-related events across the nation including workshops, concerts, and festivals. This paper examines how the Jesselton Philharmonic Orchestra of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah has restructured their musical activity in response to pandemic-related regulations through use of online platforms to keep the community and activities 'alive'. In doing so, we hope to provide a model by which other music and arts organizations may overcome barriers and continue to reach out to their respective communities.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, Jesselton Philharmonic Orchestra, virtual music festival, online platform.

## INTRODUCTION

In the first half of 2020, the global community underwent considerable upheaval due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent national and global response in the form of restrictions on travel, social gatherings and employment. The global music industry in particular has seen considerable disruption with financial losses of up to 10.2 billion USD in the United States (US) market alone in the year leading up to August 2020. This has been primarily attributed to the closure of performance venues which have accelerated the shift in music consumption away from live performance towards online music streaming services such as Spotify (Stockholm, Sweden) and Apple Music (Apple Inc, California, US) which have seen

a rapid rise in total industry revenue from 9% to 47% in just 6 years stated by Stefan (2020). In the absence of live music, artists have also been going direct to fans from their own homes using platforms such as Twitch (Amazon, Seattle, US), Instagram (Facebook, California, US) and YouTube (Google, California, US), and while this in itself is not a novel phenomenon, the effect of the pandemic has expanded audience availability with a rise in performing arts viewership on Twitch of 524% in the month of March 2020 alone stated by Kristin (2020). In Malaysia, according to the Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) report from May 2020, on average, more than 93% of artists and musicians in Malaysia have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 pandemic. All face-to-face music and arts-related activities in Malaysia including music classes, workshops, performances, exhibitions, and festivals have either been postponed or cancelled and although select live performances were briefly permitted between July to mid-October 2020 during the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) period, a rise in COVID-19 cases has meant efforts to restart music-related events have remained largely suspended. In comparison to other states, Sabah experienced both significant economic and security-related losses exacerbated by the state election which took place on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2020. According to PLOS (2021), mass gatherings during Sabah election directly caused 70% of COVID-19 cases detected in Sabah after the election, and indirectly caused 64.4% of cases else-where in Malaysia. With the cases spiked, Sabah entered a lockdown phase. All non-essential businesses are urged to close during the period, medical bases are set up, entry and exit zones are all closed.

### **Jesselton Philharmonic Orchestra in The New Normal**

Jesselton Philharmonic Orchestra (JPO), is a community orchestra based in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah with members comprised of a mix of students, working adults and professional musicians. Similar to many other arts organizations, JPO underwent a significant curtailing of activities for the year 2020 and 2021 with disruption to weekly rehearsals and the postponement and cancellation of events. According to Anne (2020), many planned events and gatherings have been cancelled or postponed. The list included the Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival, George Town Festival, Putrajaya International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta, concerts with visiting artists such as Kenny G and Jay Chou to name a few. With a view to maintaining communal spirit and sustaining ongoing musical activities, JPO decided to adopt the «new normal» shifting focus to online platforms such as Zoom (Zoom, California, US) starting off with a weekly broadcasting program named the *JPO family broadcast program* which

was introduced on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2020 and has published more than 150 broadcasts since its inception. Using this live broadcast, which airs live and is recorded on YouTube, guests from a diverse range of musical, educational and industry backgrounds are invited to share their experiences and views on topics as diverse as Music and Medicine in times of crisis, Bringing the World to Your Doorstep, Music education, outreach, and therapy etc. and to take part in virtual workshops, allowing the community as a whole to benefit from their collective wisdom and an ongoing educational resource. Student members from local schools are encouraged to take part in the interview and organizational aspects of the broadcast, developing skills in communication and project management. As the project has continued to grow in scope and reach, the online nature of the platform has allowed the involvement of an ever-growing array of international guests' speakers culminating in a virtual music festival which aired between 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020 featuring musicians from Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, the Philippines, and United Kingdom. Table 1 summarizes an abridged list of guest speakers invited to take part in the broadcast.

**Table 1** List of speakers, their affiliation and topic

<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Role and Affiliation(s)</b>	<b>Topic</b>
Datuk Mustafa Fuzer Nawi Malaysia	Former National Symphony Orchestra Music Director and Chief Conductor	From concertmaster to conductor
Professor Garry Kuan Malaysia	Violinist, Researcher, Lecturer University Sains Malaysia	The application of music as ergogenic aids during crisis
Dr Andrew Filmer Malaysia	Violist, Lecturer Sunway University School of Arts	Challenges for musicians in the time of a pandemic
Lee Shiak Yao Malaysia	Conductor Time Ensemble	Bringing the world to your doorstep
Dr Ian Stephen Baxter Malaysia	Educator, Arranger and Jazz Musician	A multiethnic approach to music education in Sabah, Malaysia
Mr Amin. A. Tamin Indonesia	Violinist, Big Data Business Analyst	Classical music and digital technology
Dr Chan Ning Lee United Kingdom	Ophthalmologist and Violinist	Music and medicine in times of crisis
Mr Shotaro Nishimura Cremona, Italy	Luthier	In the footsteps of Stradivarius: Luthier Shotaro Nishimura
Professor Antonio Mague Philippines	Flautist, Lecturer University of Philippines	Music in the time of COVID
Emmy Wils Belgium	Pianist	<a href="#">Through the eyes of a pianist</a>

Hans Sampath Blok Oslo, Norway	Trombonist, Composer and Conductor	What to consider when interpreting classical music and preparing for an informed performance
Jimson Hoi Kin Wa Macau	President of Board Directors of Macau Youth Symphony Orchestra Association	Orchestra and music activities during the pandemic
Rustem Khamidullin Russia	Professional Cellist	Competition preparation
Chen Zhangyi Singapore	Composer	Playing with sounds
Ibu Jeugelin Indonesia	Headmistress of Sekolah Misi Bagi Bangsa, Batam	Our dream come true
Sirius Quartet New York City	Fung Chern Hwei, Violin Gregor Huebner, Violin Ron Lawrence, Viola Jeremy Harman, Cello	Improvisation and multi-genre
Tengku Irfan Malaysia	Pianist, Composer and Conductor	Learning your Wishlist
Kenny Ooi Malaysia	Trumpeter and Arts Administrator	From a school band trumpeter to an aspiring music leader
Joanna Gill United Kingdom	Composer	music bringing people together in lockdown
Ian Scott Scotland	Clarinetist	The variety of music and different orchestras and groups that make up my musical life

The family broadcast program has received positive feedback from both speakers and attendees citing the international range of speakers and broad scope and depth of topics covered. Some audience members have also said that the program brings something to look forward to every week while the nation remains under lockdown.

### **The Virtual Concert**

Kirby (2020) stated that the virtual concert isn't an entirely new concept, but the pandemic has certainly given it new life. Many organizations, or individuals began to host livestreaming or pre-recorded concerts on their own channels for example YouTube, Facebook and own websites to connect with audiences. JPO virtual music festival were brought out because of the pandemic worldwide and lockdown happening in Malaysia. As this is the first virtual music festival being organized by JPO, it was not done in a professional and conventional

way. The main purpose of it was to connect the JPO members, players, outreach programs that JPO are currently running, and also the sponsors, and audiences that supported JPO activities yearly. Unlike other virtual festival happening in Borneo, for example Borneo Jazz Festival and Rainforest World Music Festival held in Sarawak which are more to commercial festival involving ticket selling, merchandise, Shopee Live and even food delivery services from GrabFood. JPO virtual music festival are not connected to any commercial activities throughout the program. By naming it as JPO family program, it aims to bring together members and friends, connecting musicians in different continent and sharing own experiences to everyone in the JPO family over the pandemic period. It was done mainly from an education sharing prospectus, which benefits the students and outreach program. The virtual concert were pre-recorded before the pandemic by individual guests speakers with the variety of chamber music groups, orchestras, choirs, and solo performances for the three evening during the music festival. Apart from that, the recording of orchestra finale *Dvořák's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony "From the New World"* by JPO players were played for the closing on the last day. Comparing to the past music festival that JPO done, this virtual concert had the privilege to connect and opens up to a much bigger crowd. From the past physical event which are done in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, the crowd are limited to those who are in the area. By moving to a virtual festival, it opens up the crowd to different location and even globalize which physically cannot be done previously. There are audiences from United Kingdom, Europe, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Singapore and many more who signed in, watched and participate in the three days JPO music festival.

### **JPO VIRTUAL MUSIC FESTIVAL**

The JPO virtual music festival was held from 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020 until 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020 and featured music masterclasses (termed "maestro clinics"), seminars (termed "music unboxing"), forums on current concepts of music and society, and 3 evening virtual music concerts contributed to by JPO members and the guests from the family broadcast and outreach program. Over 20 international artists contributed to masterclasses on various topics ranging from musicality to technique to instrument development and maintenance with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Feedback was excellent citing the convenience of attending from the comfort home, as well as the variety of topics covered with two stand-out sessions hosted by Cremona-based luthier Shotaro Nishimura discussing the history of string instruments and the uniqueness of the Stradivarius school, and Dr David Chin titled "Encountering Bach" exploring the life and works of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750) via a documentary-based

travelogue through Germany. A total of 4 online forums evenly split between Chinese and English were hosted during the festival bringing together experts in several fields to share experiences on underserved and relevant areas of musical challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Examples include “The Non-Solo Pianist” exploring the non-standard piano careers including the power of collaborative projects, and “The Present Situation and Prospect of Composition in Malaysia Composition” focused on developing opportunities to nurture homegrown talent. Each festival day culminated in a virtual concert compiled from hundreds of pre-recorded submissions by JPO and guest musicians ranging from solo performances to chamber ensembles, choirs, and a full symphonic orchestra finale of *Dvořák’s* 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony “From the New World”, example in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** A compiled snapshot of JPO and guest musicians performing *Antonin Dvořák’s* Symphony No. 9 in E minor, known as the *New World Symphony* for the finale concert (Source: <https://www.jpomusicfestival.org/>)



**Figure 2** The 7<sup>th</sup> JPO International Virtual Music Festival 2020  
(Source: <https://www.jpomusicfestival.org/>)

### Challenges and Learning Points

Challenges encountered for virtual workshops were the stability of internet connectivity, particularly in nations with poorer network infrastructure, and the inherent limitations of existing virtual platform software. Of note was the background noise suppressing function of Zoom which selectively mutes higher register instruments such as the violin in favor of pitch in the range of human phonation aptly demonstrated during a maestro clinic by Datuk Mustafa Fuzer Nawi on “The Use of Hrimaly Scales Studies to Improve Shifting Positions”. To overcome these hurdles, several measures were implemented in an iterative fashion:

- Advance rehearsal sessions were scheduled factoring education and familiarization time for guests new to the Zoom platform.
- A dedicated technical team with overarching host rights was in place for each session to ensure newly arising issues were rapidly and efficiently addressed.

- Post-session debriefs were held to identify recurring issues and implement adaptive changes to upcoming sessions.
- Clear instructions were developed for guest speakers to optimize Zoom for their instrument, including turning off the background noise suppression function and optimal placement of sound input devices.

### **The Preparation for Virtual Concert**

In preparation for the festival, weekly rehearsals were conducted led by Maestro Yap Ling (the current music director of JPO) and several guests as section tutors. *Dvořák's 9<sup>th</sup>* symphony was chosen to envisage a spirit of hope and solidarity amongst a global music community, and this sense of communal spirit was reflected in the make-up of rehearsals with musicians from multiple countries and time-zones joining in. Through the use of breakout rooms for different instrument sections, the online sessions aimed to develop aspects of music technique and phrasing one would expect to achieve through normal rehearsals, guiding musicians in their individual practice in preparation to record their parts. Some of the challenges faced were similar to aforementioned. By the end of each rehearsal, all players were placed back together in the main room playing together with an audio clip. As conducting on the spot is not possible for virtual rehearsals, because of different internet usage and audio latency, by avoiding distractions of out-of-time audio being sent to all players, the rehearsal can only use a recorded video clip as a guide for all players to play along. The leader will turn on the video clip and all other players will have their microphones muted. The leader will not hear any audio from the players but can view their playing from the video camera. For the outcome of weekly rehearsals, players are requested to do recordings of themselves following the audio clips one month before the virtual music festival, the recordings are to put together and formed a complete virtual orchestra performance as part of the finale virtual music festival. By having all players to be on the right tempo for video editing after, additional metronome clicks are added into the audio clips to ensure players are on the same tempo.

### **CONCLUSION**

The JPO virtual music festival received positive responses and high enthusiasm from the community locally and internationally. Among the feedback from participants, they gained valuable knowledge from different country speakers, which shows different culture as well. The virtual music festival also connects different part of the world during this pandemic bringing everyone together experiencing a divergent culture, method of workshops, forums, and concerts.



Despite the challenges of having technical problem with internet access, and the broadcast was not done professionally, the virtual music festival was conducted and ends well.

### NOTA

- <sup>1</sup> See <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-topic/disaster-preparedness/the-economic-impact-of-coronavirus-on-the-arts-and-culture-sector> for information about Impact of COVID-19 on the Arts & Cultural Sector of the United States.
- <sup>2</sup> See [https://www.cendana.com.my/clients/Cendana\\_78A7CADC-1C4A-44E8-A815-E2B4C1D11FE0/contentms/img/Reports/covid19-impact\\_final.pdf](https://www.cendana.com.my/clients/Cendana_78A7CADC-1C4A-44E8-A815-E2B4C1D11FE0/contentms/img/Reports/covid19-impact_final.pdf) for information about COVID-19 Impact to the Arts Report. Updated on May 10, 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> See <https://coconuts.co/kl/news/parts-of-sabah-enter-two-week-lockdown-amid-covid-19-surge-during-elections/> for news about Sabah lockdown after state election. Updated on September 29, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> See <http://jesseltonphilharmonicorchestra.blogspot.com/> for more information about JPO.
- <sup>5</sup> See <https://jazzborneo.com/> for more information about Borneo Jazz Festival.
- <sup>6</sup> See <https://rwmf.net/> for more information about Rainforest World Music Festival.
- <sup>7</sup> See <https://www.jpomusicfestival.org/> for more information about JPO virtual music festival.

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