

My unexpected year of covid, kids and Kenya

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Cordelia Williams

Friday, August 13, 2021

Pianist Cordelia Williams tells us how the pandemic has proved to be an unusually productive and creative time for her and her family



On Being a Pianist in Kenya: 'one of my proudest and most unexpected achievements'

At the start of 2020 I was looking forward to a year of recitals and concertos in the UK, France and Italy, sometimes touring with my two young sons and sometimes taking the opportunity for a blissfully quiet night away, and all culminating in recording my *Nightlight* album for SOMM. I was excited about getting back into the swing of performing and traveling after several months off for the birth of my second son. But like for everyone, 2020-21 turned out to be an extraordinary time of surprises. I found myself with an empty concert diary and two boisterous little boys to keep busy and happy in the house every day.

It was while eating dinner during the first lockdown that I thought out loud, 'What I need is a book of ideas for fun activities, so I can easily pick different ones each day– then it wouldn't be so tiring!'. And it was about five minutes after that that we realised there are activity books for arts and crafts, or for writing, counting and matching, but I'd never seen a book of musical activities for families. As a performer and mother of two pre-schoolers this is rather my 'niche', so I thought if no-one else has written it maybe I should. And that was the birth of *The Happy Music Play Book*.

The book is a collection of easy, joyful, everyday games for enjoying music and creativity with young children (and passing some time when parents are exhausted or out of inspiration). It brings together all the little musical ideas and funny activities I've come up with to pass the days at home, to make my two boys laugh, to calm and comfort, to persuade them to get up the stairs or put on their pants, and sometimes just to amuse myself. In that sense it's really written for the parents, but it's also a way of introducing light-hearted music-making into the child's everyday life, encouraging an early joy in music-making and playing with sound.

This year has been an uncharacteristic one for everyone, and especially for performers. We've all had to find new ways to communicate music to others and this, oddly, has resulted in a particularly creative period. *Nightlight* was to be my fourth album for SOMM in December 2020; thank goodness recordings could still go ahead because having that to practise and prepare for kept me sane with concerts cancelled. The concept of *Nightlight* – comfort during the darkness, hope within desperation – turned out to be very prescient when my husband and I came down with Covid two weeks before the booked recording sessions. Being horribly ill and in quarantine with two children wasn't exactly the calm fortnight of final preparation I had envisaged. But in the end I think the intense emotional and physical struggle of those two weeks added something to the poignancy and depth of the album (I got out of isolation the day before the first recording session).

I was thankful to be able to actually make the recording and to bring together wide-ranging musical works which I believe make a beautiful progression. I think my favourite surprise on the album is how perfectly Thomas Tomkins' *Sad Pavan for These Distracted Times* leads into Bill Evans' jazz masterpiece *Peace Piece*. The composers are writing centuries apart but somehow the musical languages seem to speak to one another. The album finds its resolution in Schumann's *Gesänge der Frühe*, 'Songs of Dawn'. These five pieces have a shimmering quality, an anticipation of the approach of light and new possibilities. This is a sentiment that I've been coming back to again and again recently, and makes the *Songs of Dawn* one of my favourite works to play at the moment. (I'd add to this Brahms' three *Intermezzi op. 117*. I can't stop playing these intimate and heart-breaking pieces.)

Three weeks after the recording dates we moved as a family to Nairobi. We were lucky that the opportunity arose to escape the British winter and another lockdown and we absolutely jumped at it! Guildhall School of Music & Drama had asked me to work in depth with Kenyan pianists and to research the musical opportunities that are currently available and that are still needed in the country. This was with a view to setting up some kind of future scholarship or assistance for promising talent.

In the absence of concerts during 2020, I'd started learning how to make videos for YouTube, largely about piano music and my own practice methods, and whilst in Kenya this developed into a larger scale project. Working with a Kenyan cameraman and with support from the Royal Philharmonic Society's Enterprise Fund, I spent time getting to know some of the young aspiring Kenyan pianists I met and coached. I wanted to learn about the obstacles they face in trying to learn classical music, and came away feeling

absolutely inspired by their uncommon determination, passion and desire to be challenged. The resulting documentary-film, *On Being a Pianist in Kenya*, has now been released and is one of my proudest and most unexpected achievements.

I am now planning to visit Nairobi three times per year to carry on coaching and mentoring the most promising pianists I found; I can't wait to see how they continue to develop with a bit of consistent investment in their talents. I also hope that I will be able to find summer school places for some of them. By common consent among those I spoke to, that focused music-making and learning, as well as meeting other serious musicians, can be a life-changing opportunity for a young Kenyan pianist.

Like everyone, I'm impatient for life to go back to 'normal' and excited and happy to be performing again this summer and autumn. Even so, I feel weirdly grateful for the past 18 months, for the new perspective they've given, and for the way that they've forced me to find new avenues for creativity which I could never have predicted. I feel I've realised more who I am as a musician and as a human being.

***Nightlight* is released on 20 August on SOMM**

Watch *On Being a Pianist in Kenya* below

***The Happy Music Play Book* is published on 6 September**

Cordeliawilliams.net

Watch



Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/Wv9Cpb8Dc_c