

“We’re in the Defining Moment Where We’re Able to Figure Out What the Digital Norms are Going to Be”

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Article abstract

Cellist Mike Block (Silkroad Ensemble), here interviewed by Laura Risk, describes the work of moving his music camps online and the transition to teaching virtually in a conservatory setting. He discusses the challenges of learning to teach and perform online, and finding new ways to generate revenue in the digital realm.

“We’re in the Defining Moment Where We’re Able to Figure Out What the Digital Norms are Going to Be”

Mike Block Interviewed by Laura Risk

Mike Block is a pioneering cello player, singer, composer, and educator, hailed by Yo-Yo Ma as the "ideal musician of the 21st-Century." Mike is a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble (SRE), having joined in 2005 while a student at The Juilliard School. Touring extensively throughout the world with SRE, he has been featured as cello and vocal soloist, contributed arrangements and compositions, and earned a Grammy Award in 2017 for the ensemble's album, *Sing Me Home*. As an innovator, Mike is among the first wave of cellists to adopt a strap in order to stand and move while playing. With the Block Strap, Mike was the first standing cellist to perform at Carnegie Hall. *The New York Times* characterized the performance as, "breathless [. . .] Half dance, half dare." As an educator, Mike is passionate about creativity and collaboration. He is the founding director of Silkroad's Global Musician Workshop and the Mike Block String Camp. mikeblockmusic.com

The following interview was conducted on June 3, 2020.

Laura Risk: Tell me what you were doing in early March, when the pandemic started. What has changed since then?

Mike Block: I was performing in Troy, New York at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall with fellow cellists Matt Haimovitz and Ashley Bathgate for a Bach-inspired program on March 7, the day they declared a state of emergency for the state of New York. We went into soundcheck wondering if we should still play this concert or not, and that ended up being the last concert that I did play. At the reception, some people were already not shaking hands. In retrospect, that was the last post-concert reception I'll likely be at for a long time.

I flew to Florida for some shows soon after. I was staying in Vero Beach, where I run the Mike Block String Camp every July, and I was scheduled to visit the high school for a guest clinic. I know a lot of the kids there now because they have come to my camp over the years. I walked into the high school and they're saying, "Oh, we don't get hugs?"

After the school visit, my wife, Hanneke Cassel, and I were about to play five shows and they were all cancelled within a matter of hours. We flew home, and by the time we landed, the next two months of my calendar were gone. The question then was: just how long does this vacuum last? At first I was holding onto shows in April and May. Now I feel naive for holding onto shows in September and October.

I held onto my July camp for as long as possible. But even if everybody got tested the day before they came to camp there would be no way to prevent them from getting infected during travel. There didn't seem to be any safe way for me to take on the responsibility for everyone involved.

LR: Your camp will be online this year.

MB: Initially I was not excited about the idea of doing an online camp, but the camp community had been growing with record enrollment the last two years in a row. So, this year, pre-COVID, I had hired the largest faculty ever—sixteen teachers—in order to continue supporting that growth. Going online meant that I could create a full week of student experiences and keep the

faculty employed without needing them to teach very many hours.

In designing the camp experience, it's a matter of figuring out what translates meaningfully online and what doesn't. The focus of the in-person camp tends to be on small ensemble work, which is definitely not possible over Zoom. We're not trying to replace the in-person camp with an online experience. Instead, we're treating this as a new program. We have gotten some withdrawals from people who don't want to do an online camp, but we're also getting plenty of applications from people who wouldn't have been able to attend in person.

We'll have an open mic night at the online camp so the students can play for each other. They'll have the opportunity to see who the other students are and the opportunity to share something. This is something we don't do at the in-person camp; time is limited and I don't want to give up a whole night for people to play a bunch of music that they were playing before they got to camp.

What I value so much about camps is that progressive experience, where what you learn on day one of camp feeds into what you perform on the final day of camp. There's a once-in-a-lifetime element where people work together in a band for three days to create something that they couldn't have created by themselves or with any other combination of people. That is not going to be possible this year.

LR: You run several camps and you teach at Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory. You've taken on a certain responsibility to help the next generation of musicians move into creative careers. But what will those careers look like in the future? What will the students need to know?

MB: Yes, it's one thing for me to navigate the logistics of collaborating and teaching online, but that still leaves the open question of *what* we are actually teaching the students. What are we hoping that they'll be prepared for?

I don't think anybody knows what the next generation of musicians is actually going to face. There are time-tested aspects of being a musician that will always be important, like playing your instrument effectively. That is going to be necessary no matter what. Having a unique personal voice is going to be valuable no matter what. And there are other big-picture things that you can spend years working on and they, hypothetically, would always have value. But we're not just teaching musicians. We're training *professional* musicians in the college environment, so we have to ensure they are prepared to support themselves—as well as a family, potentially.

How can I stay five minutes ahead of my students as far as thinking about and actually engaging with this digital universe? How can I advise my students about forming an online presence if I'm not performing online myself? How can I help them put their best foot forward if I haven't tweaked my own home sound setup to get the best sound for myself? I feel like it's the teacher's obligation to try to engage with the same problems the students will face. If we're going to have anything of value to share with the next generation, we have to grapple with the same issues that they're grappling with. I can't just take this pandemic as an excuse to take a year off and bask in the fact that I can still teach online. To keep up my identity as an active performer in this changing environment is what would give further meaning to my teaching as it continues online.

There are a lot of ways that musicians can make money digitally. I've been doing a lot of arranging in work-for-hire projects over the past few months for artists such as Yo-Yo Ma,

Angelique Kidjo, Raffi, Rhiannon Giddens, and more.

I've also had some live performance opportunities online crop up where I can partner with presenters such as The Celebrity Series, Club Passim, Fallingwater, or Silkroad. I've found it much more desirable to find partners for performances than to just try and appeal to my existing friends on my social media feeds. Because I am friends with so many musicians, I am inundated with music on social media. It seems like such a crowded space, and fighting for attention in a space where you're not actually making any money doesn't serve anybody.

The struggle online is figuring out how you can serve people outside of your initial circle, how you can perform music in a way where it's not just about me playing for myself and asking my friends to pay. By working with a venue or a presenter, it feels more like a concert. I'm going out and performing for people I don't know.

LR: What would you say to the digital media companies like YouTube and Facebook that are now broadcasting all of these performances?

MB: Well, all of those services are amazing in that they give us the ability to share publicly. What's needed now is a way for people to monetize these outlets without just having a handwritten sign with their Venmo handle. Digital media platforms that support payment options could be a win-win. YouTube and Facebook are losing out on money by not figuring this out because this is a legitimate service they could be offering. Instead of performers putting our PayPal or Venmo links in these videos, the platforms could be the conduit for payment. Facebook has a donate button that is most often linked to charity fundraisers for birthdays. I'm sure they could figure out how to add a donate or tip button to any live video.

Spotify added the donation button, which is a direct link to your PayPal account. My wife and I did that and I don't think we've gotten a single donation through it. But Spotify did add that button and I don't know, honestly, if there's much more to ask of them—other than changing their entire corporate model of how much they pay per stream.

LR: All these payment models involve donations and tips. I'm guessing that you typically wouldn't do a lot of shows that are by donation only, or tip only.

MB: The key issue, regardless of the platform, is sustainability. As the pandemic goes on for months and months—and months—the issue for musicians is the ability to monetize these performances.

The infrastructure for online paywalls is developing. Rachel Barton Pine, the classical violinist, and her husband and her manager are collaborating on a business specifically for this. Ticketed online concerts. They have all these classical presenters that they've connected with. It's at ourconcerts.live.

The only downside—and this is the same issue that there was with Concert Window (a livestreaming platform that shut down in 2019)—is that, by definition of being a third-party platform, it is difficult to get people onto your website. It may be easy to get a hundred people watching a Facebook stream, but that same artist might get only fifteen people clicking through and going to Concert Window. We'll see if OurConcerts.live is able to manage that better if they're partnering with presenters. I imagine it would be more successful.

Perhaps there's a way to broadcast the first five minutes to Facebook and then require people

to keep watching on your site? Ideally there would be multiple companies all trying out different models and we'd figure out what actually is the most successful.

The other question is not about how musicians can make it through the pandemic, but what the performance environment looks like after the vaccine. They're saying we're going to lose 40% of independent restaurants this year and I think something similar could be said about venues. Large orchestras and presenting organizations are, in some ways, no more secure than the smaller venues because they are carrying a much bigger overhead through this shutdown.

Even when things are "back to normal," the embrace of the digital experience is going to necessarily continue to be a larger part of the musician's career than it was pre-COVID. I have imagined continuing to do livestream performances in a way that I would not have thought of doing previously. For example, at the end of a tour I might do a livestream performance that people can watch from wherever they are. Both audiences and musicians are going to be more comfortable with the digital concert experience, whatever that means. It'll just stay a part of the toolkit even when we can do concerts.

LR: What are some of your hopes and fears for the live music scene after the pandemic?

MB: The question is: to what degree will the opportunities for musicians to perform live still be there? Honestly, both venues and audiences seem like they will be reduced. My hope is that, after a year of no concerts, people will just be so hungry to have live concert experiences that every band is going to have the most successful tour they've ever had, but it's hard to say.

I can imagine that once health is no longer the main issue, people may have a special appreciation for what culture means in society and what it means to support the people that make it. Because they will likely go the rest of 2020 without experiencing culture off-screen in any meaningful way. Ideally, that would hammer home the value that we, as musicians, will be able to offer when things are back to normal.

LR: This interview is for *Critical Studies in Improvisation*. Can you speak about how your responses to the pandemic have been improvisatory? Are there some lessons to be learned?

MB: Just responding to the environment around you is an act of improvisation. Your journey as an improviser, as a business person, or as a musician, is often the journey of becoming more intentional and more aware of the results of your actions, and being able to perform with that understanding. As the environment is changing, I don't actually know how successful something will be anymore. For example, I've directed probably thirty-five weeks of camps in the past eleven years, in various formats, and yet now I don't know how this online camp is going to go in July. That lack of clarity is new. But it's also freeing in that the playing field is leveled. *Nobody* else knows anything more than I do. I think audiences and students alike are more willing to try new things because of this. We're in the defining moment where we're able to figure out what the digital norms are going to be. Because the expectations are less clear, it's a more creative mindset. You have to be willing to try something brand new, which I would have been less inclined to do pre-COVID.