

Participants on Awesome Online Experiences

In conversation with Sarah Albu, David Barnard, and Heather Daley.

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As part of our research into how to design awesome online conferences, events, and workshops, we've looked to participants to tell us about their awesome online experiences. The result are a number of examples of digital experiences and performance events that succeed by setting the place for meaningful human connections and interactions to occur.

Providing Avenues for Connection

Sarah Albu, singer, performer, and vocal explorer based in Montreal, Quebec, has found that participation and interactivity are key to her enjoyment of digital activities, providing her with a sense of human-to-human connection that set her up for an enjoyable online experience.

In early October 2020, Sarah attended Carmina Escobar's digital performance, [La Cola De La Serpiente, No Te Metas Con Mi Cucu](#). Carmina established a direct connection with audience members long before the performance began: upon registration, Sarah received instructions such as directions to have a certain drink prepared, to have a light source and object at hand, and to be in character, with a name and costume, during the event. By feeling physically linked to the digital event, attendees were elevated to participants who felt connection and ownership over their own experience right from the start.

Carmina's event used Zoom as the video platform, with gallery view so audience members could see each other, and break-out rooms for participants to move between. Through the use of several cameras with different angles, the audience could enjoy a varied and intriguing performance. This attention to production quality, personal interactions between artist and audience, and tangible links to the event,

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combined to create a very powerful, very human performance experience, describes Sarah. “It was so lovely to be seen and heard; it felt like that magic fantasy from childhood where the people on the TV can actually see you, too.”

High Quality Production and Intimate Performance Vibes

Heather Daley, a former festival organizer and arts administrator in Iqaluit, NU now operating [Raven Harmonies Consulting](#) from Ottawa, has been relishing digital performing arts events since March 2020. She attributes her enjoyment to the fact that artists have been able to present high quality online shows that produce a certain intimacy.

Watching James Ehnes’ series [Recitals from Home](#), Heather felt as though she had been invited to experience a very personal, professional performance. James hired professional technicians to ensure a high quality production delivered directly from his living room; on his [website](#), James explains:

When the concert halls of the world closed in the middle of March [2020], I, like all performing musicians, found myself in a strange new world, with no opportunities to share music and no artistic outlet. I was completely unprepared to share music from my home, having no recording equipment and, just as importantly, no understanding of the process! When I was contacted by several European festivals to create some content for online events, I reached out to some friends in the recording world for advice, and made an investment in some microphones (Telefunken M60 Master Set), an audio interface (Audient iD44), a few tripods and a studio light. I was delighted to discover that my living room made a rather nice recording studio, and my and my wife’s iPhones made perfectly acceptable cameras (Filmic Pro is an app that has my absolute highest recommendation).

Heather notes that a comparable feeling of intimacy was achieved by the Indian River Festival and Music PEI’s [Island Voices](#) through high quality production in a unique venue. The festival had a small live audience, excellent technical support, and was presented in an intimate setting: a gorgeous, acoustically renowned church on Prince Edward Island. Watching these “amazing performances with good quality sound in a beautiful venue” gave Heather a profound sense of satisfaction.

Performance Builds Community

Performing artists are in the community-building business; sharing performing arts experiences with like-minded people, audiences can feel connected to the artists and each other, part of something bigger. As it turns out, this can happen as readily online as it can in person.

Heather shared that she feels very much connected to other audience members who she sees on a regular basis attending performances. For example, [Side Door Access](#) shows, created by Dan Mangan, where artists and audiences join together on Zoom, [Whitehorse’s Happy Hour Fridays](#), charming in their simplicity, and [David Myles’ Myles from Home](#) evening talk show series with fascinating guests such as [Reeny Smith](#) and [Jeremy Dutcher](#), succeed at creating a sense of community, and a place where friendships, old and new, can flourish.

Participation Fosters Belonging

Heather explained the sense of belonging and community she has been gaining through her participation as part of [Wonderland Singers](#) led by [Coco Love Acorn](#). This weekly event is an 'online singing and creativity workshop series with a community choir spirit.' Each Wednesday evening folks gather from across the globe to learn from Coco through call and response, exploring 'melody, harmony, rhythm, creativity, improvisation, inspiration, and the joy of singing.' Despite the limitation of Internet latency, the lag time the Internet signal requires to be sent and received, the choir format works well as each singer practices alongside the leader while having their own video sound muted.

Sarah had a similar experience participating in a vocal workshop held in early October, [Praying for Rain](#). "It was amazing to take a singing workshop in real time with someone from Serbia... the series of six sessions added to the feeling of community, even with people I had never met in person." And yarn-spinning from her home with other spinners from across the world in the [Tour de Fleece](#), an online group that gathers for 'spinning yarn and all things related' during the Tour de France, gave Sarah a sense of community that she was very much missing when the realities of the continuing Covid-19 pandemic set in during early summer 2020.

Sensing a particular time and place

Sarah attended Winnipeg's [Cluster Festival](#) in May 2020, an annual inter-arts festival which pivoted to a fully online event once the realities of the restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic became apparent. Sarah notes that there is something special about live performance, knowing that "it doesn't exist forever." The Cluster Festival addressed this by having the festival content up for a limited time — in this case, one month — which in Sarah's opinion worked well, "otherwise events can drown in the wave of information we're adding to every day."

Similarly, No Hay Banda's 2020 [Fluxus Online](#), also planned originally as a live arts festival, chose to have their digital festival website up for only a certain duration. "Here the design of the website is interesting," describes Sarah, "built to create a sense of dimension so that participants feel like they're actually moving through time in a physical space."

Conversing Around the Table

David Barnard describes a deeply satisfying online experience as an attendee at [Global Toronto 2020](#) in June 2020. Like many conferences, the Global Toronto organizers took the COVID-19 shift to online as an opportunity to move beyond the traditional showcase conference model: the focus of the gathering became "good conversation about important subjects," says David. Deep discussions around significant issues relevant to the music world were led by knowledgeable, capable speakers. They were invited to exchange ideas and engage in dialogue with participants through small break-out sessions. This enabled

the generation of bigger conversations with diverse and democratic participation, conversations in which everyone could be equally seen and heard.

High quality, intimate productions set in a particular time and place, open to diverse audiences that feel they are part of a community, set the stage for meaningful human interactions, enjoyment at the emotional level, and authentic learning to take place. Digital events, if well-designed, can achieve this.

The digital gathering table has been in place for almost half a century; for decades, we've been adding to, and polishing, the place settings. Whether you heard it as the tinkling of a dinner bell, or a resounding alarm, the Covid-19 pandemic has called us all to the table; 2020 has given us a smorgasbord of awesome digital events. Let's continue to reimagine our feast!