

Inside Stories: The Longest Intermission Transcript

Scott Simmie: Hi there. I've brought along some different music today. It's a nod to our guest who will be joining us in a moment from France. He too has a unique inside story to share. Kind of a before and after snapshot of how his life changed during this global pandemic. So please take your assigned seat. A reminder to please turn the ringer off on your cellular phone as today's sold out performance will begin shortly.

Scott Simmie: Today on Inside Stories, I'm pleased to be joined by Maestro Kent Nagorno, the music director of the orchestra symphonic Montreal Symphony Orchestra, a position he's held since 2006. Maestro Nagorno is also the general music director of the Hamburg State Opera, and chief conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic State Orchestra. Maestro joins us from Paris today. Maestro, how are things in Paris?

Maestro Nagano: Well, just as we speak, the sun is poked through what used to be a rainy morning. So, it's beautiful outside. Springtime and fresh air. The sun is shining.

Scott Simmie: I'm curious, everyone's lives have changed so dramatically. What was a typical day like for you before everyone was asked to self isolate.

Maestro Nagano: Like most musicians that I know, we rely so much upon a discipline of practicing and studying that the normal rhythm, I would say of a more traditional job, it really doesn't apply. We're sort of on-call all of the time. So a typical day would be from 5:00 until 8:30 in the morning, that's the time that I would reserve for studying, for reading, for practicing, because the telephone inevitably starts to ring at 8:30. First rehearsal would be at 10 o'clock, usually going until 12:30. Then would be a series of meetings that would happen. Administrative meetings, second rehearsal at 2:00 PM going until around 4:30, 5:00. More administrative meetings, a number of usually obligations having to do with music director would come in, be at interaction with the government, interaction with sponsors, trying to have community outreach activities stretching into the evenings, usually around 10 o'clock at night.

Scott Simmie: That is an incredibly busy day. I mean, I can't even imagine what it's like on nights when you're conducting as well.

Maestro Nagano: Well, usually four days out of the seven, there will be a performance of the evening. And depending on what the performance is, typically they would start at around 8:00 in the evening, finishing around 11 o'clock at night, followed by some sort of social responsibilities going into 1:00 in the morning, 2:00 in the morning. Or if it's an opera in Hamburg, for example, very often the opera would begin at 4:00 in the afternoon, 5:00 in the afternoon and go on towards 11:00 at night. So I don't want to sound particularly exceptional. Most of the people whom I know, it's kind of a typical schedule, seven days a week and no vacations, of course. So it just goes straight through the year. So you can imagine what a radical difference it is being under home confinement, sheltering at home, and having absolutely no planned schedule, because what I forgot to mention is that, again, it's rather typical in our business to have our calendars fairly well sketched out for the next five years. So if you were to ask me typically what I would be doing June 23rd two years from now, I could tell you exactly what I was going to be doing, but now yes, all of this is doesn't exist anymore.

Scott Simmie: Believe me, you're far busier person than I am, but I'm curious now how you made that transition and what it's like for you now to suddenly have so many of those things just simply fall away?

Maestro Nagano: Well, it should be said that the transition was not voluntary. It was definitely imposed and very, very quickly. And I must say that Paris has been like the country of France, rather hit hard. It's been a tragic situation here socially for the community, for the city. The infection rate here, the death rate has been colossal. It really is a situation that affects all of us. So it's something that is a universal challenge that we're going through.

Scott Simmie: Maestro, I understand that the timing of the shutdown worked out fortuitously so that you were together with your family in Paris. Could you explain please how that happened?

Maestro Nagano: In our case, we were extremely fortunate, just by chance, by coincidence. My daughter, who is a senior at Yale University finishing up her final semester, just happened to be home on her spring academic break, visiting Paris. My wife, who was meant to be on a sort of piano tour with an orchestra in Asia because of the beginnings of the Corona virus, the international tour was counseled for her. So she decided to come home to Paris and spent some time with our daughter. And when my [inaudible 00:06:21] was counseled in Vienna, the easiest place for me to go was to fly home to Paris. So the three of us in our family, all three of us were together at lockdown together. And for us, while being very sensitive to the tragic situations around us, we also feel like it's kind of a blessing for us because we've had this quality family time.

Maestro Nagano: And we like to joke when we say that we've actually communicated with one another, rather than just sort of in our busy schedules to exchanging pleasantries or communicating on a superficial level when, as everyone knows, when you're really confined to a limited space and you're not allowed to go out of your dwelling, you are obligated to communicate with each other, to deal with things in a much deeper level and many families that I know never get that really, not after the parents and the child or children have gone into the workforce. It sort of changes. So we've had this blessing of having this time together. Also, the exceptional good fortune that we're in good health. We haven't gotten sick. And maybe as a surprise, we found out that we actually like each other, which is really good news.

Scott Simmie: That's wonderful. I mean, it's true. We have such busy lives these days, that luxury of time, even though this is the most unfortunate of circumstances to have it imposed upon us, but to be able to have just simply time together is something that's a commodity that's not really available in much of our lives.

Maestro Nagano: Yes. And that does have a number of add on results that come out of having time. For example, all of us with busy schedules, we're prone to eating irregularly, perhaps consuming much too much processed foods or fast foods or snacks. And just as one example. So to actually return to a routine, which we really haven't had since our daughter was an infant, where they were three fixed meals a day, and each one of them homemade and zero consumption of fast foods and real care goes into choosing the ingredients. This must have some sort of health benefit, I would think. And just small factors like that, that are a result of really this a higher quality of interaction as a family unit, we found not only refreshing, but actually we're feeling that we've been missing this for the past few years.

Maestro Nagano: So yes, it's a huge challenge for us to deal with as we're all very, very worried, very anxious about some sort of vaccine progress in a vaccine being made. Yes, we do follow the infection rates regularly to see whether or not there's a sign of a peaking or a reduction of the danger. So we're very sensitive to what's going on around us. But on the other side, we are also sensitive to the fact that as a quality of life issue, it doesn't only have to do with how much you consume or how much time you spend socializing. We've been able to tap into a completely different rich aspect of quality of life.

Scott Simmie: I'm sure it's too early to predict, but do you expect that this may make a difference to how you go about your lives once the pandemic is over?

Maestro Nagano: You never know. We human beings are creatures of habit. It's difficult to say. I can say that for us, in our family, all three of us are musicians. And when I speak to my colleagues from time to time in the orchestras with whom I work, we all share a sense of terrific loss and longing for sharing music with one another, live music, because live music is different from recorded music or streaming music, or somehow music that you listened to through electronically transmitted signals over loud speakers. It's just different. All of us miss this terribly and sharing it with not only between ourselves, but with the public, because an orchestra's public, for example, or even a chamber music public, it is like a family in that you share common values. You're exchanging in communication, not necessarily verbal communication, but communication of humanism or human values that takes place during a concert. And the one thing that I'm keenly aware of is that's something that we all miss public as well, many when I've had a chance to speak to some of our public members, we all miss this together. And I think when we eventually can go back to performing, I can't imagine that we won't savor that moment. That's something really special.

Scott Simmie: I'm sure we'll all savor that moment when it happens, but certainly you and your colleagues, especially. Maestro, what else is there that you truly miss right now?

Maestro Nagano: But this is maybe the thing that I miss the most. I derive quite a bit of inspiration from being out alone in nature. Usually I just go out and spend hours and hours walking around hiking. It's a great way for me personally to open up my mind, trigger some creativity. I don't know the fresh air and the nature brings automatically inspiration with it for me. So we are fortunate enough in that we overlook the [inaudible 00:13:23] here in Paris. So I can kind of vicariously look out over the forest, but here it is police controlled lockdown. So we're really not allowed to go into the woods. We can perhaps stroll along the outskirts of the woods for an hour a day. But even that is sort of under police control. But what I really miss is the freedom to simply to start walking and not particularly have an end in mind, just to be completely free.

Scott Simmie: It's interesting when you were talking about missing live music and these live performances that are so much a part of your everyday life. I found it quite interesting to watch on social media and to see the spontaneous performances that would take place from amateurs to professionals off their balconies for their neighbors, for their neighborhoods. I'm sure you've been watching some of these as well. I'm curious what your reaction was when you saw that becoming sort of a phenomenon.

Maestro Nagano: Well, it's joyous. You really cannot beat the human spirit down and you cannot somehow limit an artist's creativity. You can always try to do that, but by nature, musicians are wonderfully creative. Their imaginations, it doesn't stop just because you're under shelter at home restrictions. We, as human beings, the part of being alive is sharing that vitality with us. And yes, in here

in our neighborhood, there's an entire apartment building two blocks away that once a day, at 8:00 at night, they open up all of the windows of all of the stories, all of the apartments in the entire building, they open up their windows. They turn on the most horrible 1970s rock music that you can think of and they all sing along and the other apartment buildings nearby it's infectious. They can't help joining in with these really syrupy 70s pop songs. And it's not because of the quality of the music. It's not because of the quality of the singing. It's just the act of doing something together. And so, of course, for me, it was heartwarming to see that uplifting, really a lot of fun.

Scott Simmie: When I was younger, I used to sell high end audio equipment, and I particularly liked wonderful, classical recordings that sounded great on my sound system. And I'll be a little embarrassed telling you this story, but I would often play sort of popular classical music at volume and basically find myself conducting as I walked around my apartment. And I would feel this joy from feeling somehow as though I was interacting with this recording. So I can't even imagine what it must be like for you to be in front of the world's top musicians and hearing that music and being in charge of it. How would you describe what that feeling is like, particularly during an especially stirring moment of music?

Maestro Nagano: When you're performing, be it as a conductor or as a member of an orchestra or in a large choir, you're actually, yes, you're listening to the past and that you're evaluating what you've just performed. As, gee, is that the right note? I mean, it's split second of course, you're controlling what it is. You've just performed in the past, but you're living very, very much in the present and you are anticipating because you can already hear the future. You know what the next note is supposed to sound like, you know what the next 30 minutes are supposed to sound. So as a conductor in the position of responsibility, to take the responsibility to lead a performance, the level of concentration which is required doesn't really permit the kind of self abandoned X to C, I suppose, that you can have when you're listening to a marvelous recording. And of course, I felt that too. Some of the great historical performances, I just wonder what it must have been like to have been there while that performance was taking place. But live performances is something different.

Scott Simmie: This sound, [inaudible 00:18:27], means that we're coming to our final little round of our chat. I'm going to ask you a few quick questions and hopefully get a few quick answers. So number one, if you had to choose a second career, what would it be?

Maestro Nagano: Probably somewhere involved with the diplomatic corps. It was a great interest I had as a student. I took a lot of academic courses towards that direction. I still feel, especially with the metaphorically closing of the world today is getting tighter and closer and closer, the diplomatic core is really essential towards our communicating with one another.

Scott Simmie: What orchestra would you like to conduct given the opportunity?

Maestro Nagano: Of course, the OSM. There's no question about that. And the Humberg Philharmonic, naturally.

Scott Simmie: What is the one thing the Maestro would really like to do now that isolation prevents him from doing?

Maestro Nagano: Going for a walk in the woods without police control.

Scott Simmie: Maestro, Kent Nagano. Thank you so much for sharing your inside story today.

Maestro Nagano: Thank you very much.

Scott Simmie: That music we're listening to right now? Maestro Kent Nagano is at the helm conducting this performance of the [foreign language 00:20:06] Montreal from the 2014 recording Beethoven, symphonies numbers one and seven. I've heard a number of people mentioned just how much they miss live music. And I do too, almost as much as I miss just being around other people, but we did share part of today. I know I enjoyed your company and I hope you enjoyed mine. I'm Scott Simmie, with a shout out to BMO for presenting this podcast. If you're enjoying this, please subscribe. We have plenty of other inside stories coming your way.

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