



Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds, fresco by Giotto, c. 1297.

Art and Crisis: Messiaen's Music Beyond Time

As the pandemic has collided with painful race relations in America, we're recognizing outrage and fear among our nation's communities. Suffering is in full view; uncertainty inhabits almost every aspect of our lives. While many of us are experiencing a deep sadness about the state of current events, there remains a need for some joy.

Below are intertwined stories about music, hope, and resilience. These stories are meant not only to offer some

How to get the most out of virtual piano lessons

Well, here we are at the end of a nearly three-month quarantine. I wouldn't say it's been entirely easy, but I will say that students have adapted remarkably well to the virtual platform. Though I hope to get back into the studio in the near future, virtual lessons will continue for now. Below are some tips to maximize our virtual time together at the piano:

- 1. Re-evaluate your setup.** We've all been learning how to find the perfect setup for online learning, whether for school or piano or Zoom parties. Laptops are great for adjusting camera angles. But if you're using an iPhone or iPad, you might look into getting a tripod that can be adjusted so the student and his/her hands on the piano can be readily seen.
- 2. Settle in before our lesson begins.** Have your child warm up at the piano a few minutes before our scheduled time together. It's important to ease into a focused learning mindset. If there's a lot of activity in the background, it might be worth moving your piano/keyboard (if possible) to a quiet room or think about ways to minimize distractions.
- 3. Have piano books and supplies ready.** Be prepared with piano books opened to our songs, a pencil, eraser, notebook, and post-its or bookmark tabs. And off we go!

distraction, but also to remind us of the communal and healing forces music.

On May 15, 2020, *The New York Times* published [this piece](#) about a 92-year-old piano teacher, Ms. Vertenstein, who has continued teaching via FaceTime through COVID-19. She is also a Holocaust survivor. “When I was a little girl,” Vertenstein said, “I couldn’t go to public schools because of my religion. And they created a little school in the basement of an old building, which sometimes had heat and sometimes didn’t. Great minds and achievements came out of that school, which taught me in any situation you can strive, learn, look ahead and have dreams.”

Ms. Vertenstein’s story sheds light on a timely message: that it is indeed possible to bring the human spirit out of chaos and horror into a place of hope. For her, it was music that helped shape this possibility.



The original program for Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time* (1941).



French composer Olivier Messiaen at Stalag VIII-A, 1941.

The question of how to find hope amid the most horrid circumstances is one that has long been examined in philosophy, religion, art, literature, and film. Music is often cited as a central component for helping individuals get through extreme experience. We’ve seen this recently with [patients who’ve been hospitalized with COVID-19](#). Music has also played an essential role for grief-stricken members of communities of color, as seen in Barack Obama’s invocation of [Amazing Grace](#) after the church shooting in Charleston in 2015. A new rendition of [Lean on Me](#) by the Oakland Symphony, made before the death of George Floyd but now heard as a call for communities to come together, is another demonstration of this very concept: that music can heal.

The next story is the most profound example of the role of music during times of crisis. In 1940, French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was captured by the Nazis and imprisoned at Stalag VIII-A, a prisoner-of-war camp at Görlitz in what is now Eastern Germany. Three other professional musicians were also prisoners there, violinist Jean le Boulair, cellist Étienne Pasquier, and clarinetist Henri Akoka. With the help of a prison guard who secretly provided Messiaen paper and a pencil, he composed [The Quartet for the End of Time](#) (1941), known as one of the most important musical works of the 20th century. The eight-movement piece was premiered on old, battered instruments: a piano, cello, violin, and clarinet. More than 400 prisoners and guards made up the audience. “Never was I listened to with such rapt attention and comprehension,” Messiaen later said.



Medieval manuscript, c. 15th century.



Messiaen transcribing birdsong.

After WWII, Messiaen lived a long life as a prolific composer. The culminating work of his career was *St. Francis of Assisi* (1983), a grand opera about the life of the patron saint of nature known for his connection to the birds. Like *The Quartet*, much of the opera's score is based on birdsong. It's hard to not think that this music, which perhaps lies beyond time, embraces what we need most now: freedom, faith, and hope.

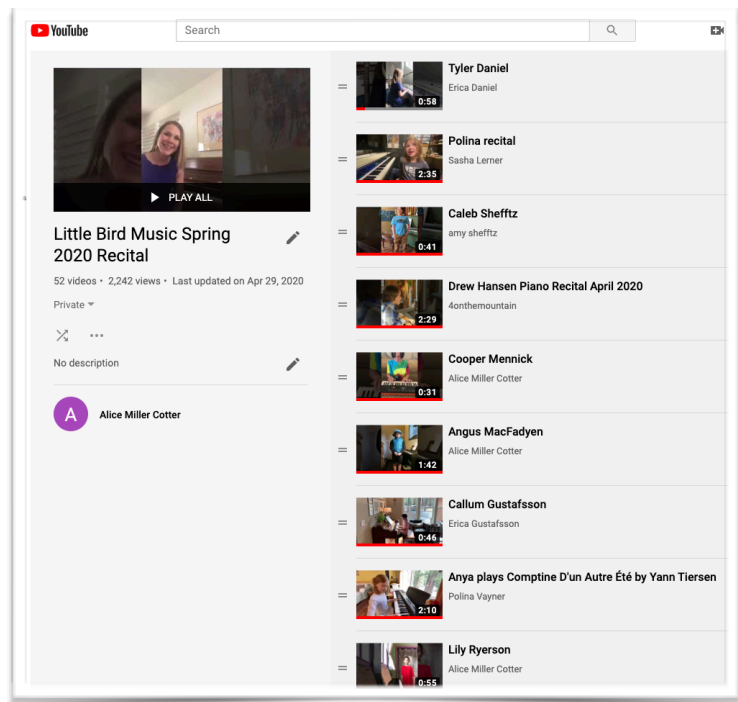
Spring 2020 Recital Recap

Two times a year, Little Bird students have the opportunity to get up onstage in front of more than a hundred people, introduce themselves, and perform a piece they've worked on for months. The experience is a ritual. It's a chance for kids to put themselves out there, take risks, and have courage.

This year, that opportunity seemed as if it would be squelched, along with so many others, by COVID-19. But on April 25, 2020, the Little Bird recital went on as planned, this time online. A total of 50 students submitted videos of their piano performances that were then compiled into a YouTube playlist. Friends and families watched from near and far. Over four days, the YouTube playlist saw more than 2,200 views, a testament to our community's adaptability and the value we place on music and the arts.

Messiaen, an admired composer trained at Paris Conservatoire and a devout Catholic, was also an ornithologist—a specialist in birds. His religious refuge was nature. At Stalag VIII-A, he listened intently to the birds and transcribed their songs. In *The Quartet*, Messiaen combined birdsong with his own modal techniques. The work was also a response to a passage from the Revelations about the Angel of the Apocalypse announcing the end of Time, the beginning of eternity.

Messiaen sought to compose a piece that existed somehow outside of time. For him, birds were symbols of the present moment, the loss of time. The first and third movements are about the birds and their jubilant song. In other parts of *The Quartet*, namely the fifth and eighth movements, stillness and serenity take over; there's no meter or fixed rhythm. Here, the music unfolds as a slow ascension through turmoil and terror to triumphant joy.



50 Little Bird Music students participated in the Spring 2020 Recital. The recital took place on YouTube due to COVID-19.

Honors and Awards: Certificate of Merit and 2020 National Piano Guild Audition Winners



Aleksandra (10) and Anya Vayner (8)



James Gordon, age 9



Keegan O'Brien, age 10

For the last ten months, Little Bird Music students have been hard at work preparing to participate in two nationally recognized programs available to Little Bird students: Certificate of Merit and the National Piano Guild Auditions. All Little Bird students successfully passed their exams, many with high honors.

Certificate of Merit, sponsored by the Music Teachers' Association of California, follows a comprehensive curriculum in technique, sight reading, performance, theory, and ear training. In February, students performed in front of a judge and took theory and ear training exams. The following Little Bird students earned the prestigious California State Honor: **Bettina Routhier, Ella Nishimori, James Gordon, Kanan Deinken, Keegan O'Brien, Riley Braud, Riordan Brown, and Stella Foygel. Andrew Buchanan, Drew Hansen, and Syllas Deinken** completed their exams with excellent marks. **Aleksandra and Anya Vayner**, who prepared for the February exam but weren't able to make it, will complete their evaluations in June.

This year 25 Little Bird students participated in the National Piano Guild Auditions. The program, which has been around since 1929, involves the preparation of five to twenty memorized pieces to be performed for a judge. Students spend an average of six to ten months preparing their pieces and scales. "It's a lot of hard work," said Alice Cotter, "but a wonderful opportunity to work towards a definitive set of goals. There's nothing like seeing students proud of their achievements." Typically, students would have performed in person for judge Carrie Cummins at the nearest Guild Center in Grass Valley. But in light of this year's pandemic, students performed for Carrie virtually from their homes. The photos below show some of these students just before or during their auditions.

The Little Bird Music 2020 National Guild Piano Audition Winners are: **Aleksandra Vayner, Andrew Buchanan, Anya**

Vayner, Avery Buchanan, Bettina Routhier, Cal Nishimori, Callum Gustafsson, CJ Fogg, Cruz Snover, Ella Nishimori, Ethan Gustafsson, Giuseppe Juiliano, Ingrid Cotter, James Gordon, Kanan Deinken, Keegan O'Brien, Molly Daniel, Natalie Hamby, Parker Braud, Riley Braud, Riordan Brown, Samantha Osborne, Syllas Deinken, Tyler Daniel, and Zane Fogg. Congratulations to all!

Students of all ages and levels are invited to participate in Certificate of Merit and the National Guild Piano Auditions. Talk to Alice if you or your child are interested in participating next year.

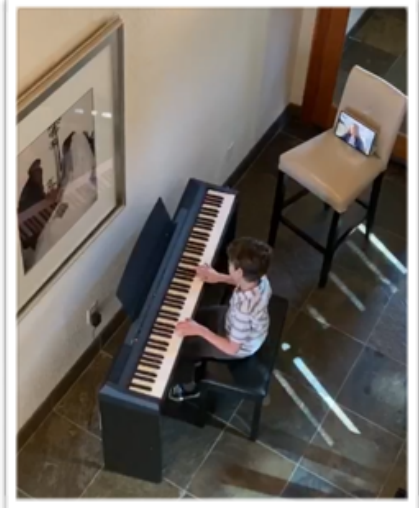
National Piano Guild Participants cont'd....



Natalie Hamby, age 7



Ingrid Cotter, age 6



Parker Braud, age 7



Giuseppe Juiliano, age 8



Callum Gustafsson, age 8



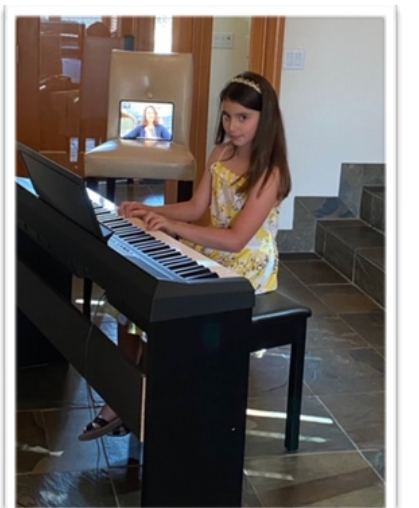
Ethan Gustafsson, age 12



Riordan Brown, age 11



Samantha Osborne, age 16



Riley Braud, age 9

Little Bird Music Graduating Seniors

Congratulations to Susie Greeno and Cameron Trummer, members of the Truckee High School 2020 graduating class!

Along with millions of high school seniors around the country, Susie and and Cameron will spend this season of celebration at home. A virtual graduation will take place online June 13, and an in-person commencement is planned for August. Susie will sing the graduation song in a pre-recorded video of herself performing in the Truckee High School stadium, where hundreds were planned to gather.

Despite the shift of pomp and circumstance from stadium to living room, Susie and Cameron are looking ahead to the next chapter. In September, Susie will begin the BFA program in Musical Theater at Long Island University in New York. Cameron will head to the University of Nevada, Reno, where he plans to major in music with an emphasis in jazz studies.

Cameron has spent this last year immersed in learning the art of arranging and composing. He's also an accomplished alto saxophone player. "If I could give any advice to young musicians," Cameron said, "I'd tell them to not be intimidated by high school band. Stick with music, and if you continue with band, it will give you a head start."

Susie, a composer and talented singer, offered her words of wisdom to the next generation of music students in Truckee: "Look for confidence in your past achievements. Know you have the skills to succeed."



Susie Greeno



Cameron Trummer

Upcoming Events

Ongoing Online: [San Francisco Opera Odes to Joy Series](#), streaming mini-concerts by SF Opera's best

Ongoing Online: [Nightly NYC Metropolitan Opera Streams](#), free *Live in HD* streaming operas

Ongoing Online: [Berlin Philharmonic Digital Concert Hall](#), free access to all concerts during COVID-19

Ongoing Online: [Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center](#), online playlist of events and concerts

Ongoing Online: [TED Talk - Michael Tilson Thomas on Music and Emotion through Time](#)

Ongoing Online: [San Francisco Symphony Music Connects Kids](#), online music education resources