

What COVID-19 has changed in the musical life of South Korea - from the perspective of view of a vocal music educator: A New Normal

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Our lives have completely changed during and after the pandemic. Especially in Korea, with so many people living in a small area, life patterns such as classes and meetings used to be mostly face-to-face. Although society has been rapidly digitizing, most of the work is still done face-to-face, but due to COVID-19 many relationships have become non-face-to-face in recent years. It took a long time for all countries to adapt to this new system, but it was more unfamiliar and challenging for South Korea, where face-to-face work is very common.

Impact on vocalists – soloists in particular

For me personally, as a musician and professor of music education, there were two main challenges. The first is that being a vocalist is a very disadvantaged profession in the context of COVID-19. Singers are not just people who speak in public. They need to breathe deeply using diaphragmatic breathing, which increases abdominal pressure and maximizes resonance to send sound farther. In a society where we are used to wearing masks at all times - due to the fear of droplet infections - the very idea of a vocalist taking off their mask and singing is very unsettling. While string and piano players may be able to get away with wearing masks, it is a deadly situation for singers and wind players. As a result many performances have been cancelled or scaled back. Choirs have been able to perform with masks in some cases, but for soloists, it is nearly impossible.

The rise of virtual performances

One solution has been the rise of virtual performances. Instead of attending a concert, audiences are using online systems to enjoy live or recorded performances from their homes or offices without worrying about getting infected. Musicians can also play in front of recording equipment without the risk of infection, even though the audience is not there. The big difference is that now it is not just the performer's skill that matters, but also the quality of the recording equipment, the way it is transmitted online, and the quality of the equipment used by the audience.

Change in pedagogy

Second, the change in my pedagogical perspective is significant. When I teach voice, I teach singing from two perspectives: the first is to impart the skills of a *professional performer*. This requires a combination of apprenticeship-style practical training and systematic theoretical training. The importance of practical training, especially for singers, cannot be overemphasized. You can learn theory on your own, but this is not the case at all in practice. First of all, we need to

turn the ordinary human body into an instrument, train breathing techniques and resonance, and then train it to perform as an opera singer or professional vocalist. A second is to train *professional music teachers*. They should be trained to teach basic singing to young students in junior high and high school, and they should be trained to lead choral education, which is increasingly important for character education, especially for young students.

Disruption of COVID-19

I have spent the last three years in the midst of COVID-19 disrupting all of this, and the first challenge, the transfer of apprenticeship techniques to professional performers, has been accomplished in a very limited way through virtual lessons. Since singing is a more salivating activity than "speaking" in general, face-to-face lessons were discouraged, and since students were unable to sing in the same room with a pianist as accompanist, they would record the accompaniment or obtain an mp3 of the accompaniment and then sing over the recorded accompaniment and be guided by it. This limited artistic expression made it difficult to represent live music, as the accompaniment and singing were not synchronized. Simply pointing out whether the recorded accompaniment was in time with the singing, or whether the pitch was correct, also made it difficult to provide in-depth lessons. Adding meaning to the notes by controlling the intensity of breathing, and colouring the lyrics, is very difficult for students who are still too new to perform with recorded accompaniment, and in fact, it is not easy to get them to understand this stuff over the phone.

On the other hand, in terms of the second challenge - training music teachers - there were benefits to teaching singing to pre-service and in-service teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online lessons saved physical time, allowed for real-time checking of notes and rhythms, and in some ways felt more structured for those who were used to having lessons that fit a certain standardized format to fit the school calendar. Teachers did not feel overwhelmed by the lack of high-quality artistic expression. In fact, there was a general consensus that excessive emotional expression and immersion in music might be pedagogically inappropriate in public education.

As a result, the students significantly improved pitch and rhythm and were exposed to more standardized vocal music for the students they were supposed to be teaching in school, rather than the deep emotional expression of a professional musician. Students who are now accustomed to this kind of cost-effective music may be uncomfortable later in life when convenience and efficiency are lost by other teaching methods. They may prefer the precision, organization, and efficiency of factory-made vocal music to the handmade, artistic expression of a craftsman.

A new normal – a new reality

It is a popular saying that we cannot go back to the way things were before the COVID-19 pandemic. *A new normal has begun*. While I agree with this statement to a large extent, as scholars, we should not passively be dragged into the new

normal, but rather seek to fuse the best of the old with the new to create a better way of being a musician or teaching music. This is a common task for the Musicum20 in the new era that we are pursuing.

Personally, as someone who has pursued vocal music like stitch-by-stitch craftsmanship, I have spent a lifetime transforming the human body into a durable instrument, a luxury instrument with a craftsman's touch, even if it takes time. Therefore, I am more familiar with the *old style*, and although the new form of vocal music education is convenient, it is difficult to be satisfied with the limitations of the light and non-delicate factory-style vocal music education. However, I completely agree that we need a new form of teaching that utilizes the technology of modern science and allows for delicate teaching. I remember the phrase "Dynamic Korea" being used to promote Korea. Korea has experienced tremendous growth, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in a short period of time, so I think we can adapt to this new normal faster than anyone else. For example, right now, Korea is balancing virtual and in-person learning, and even as in-person learning is revitalized, we are still using practical methods developed during the height of the pandemic.

Heaven helps those who help themselves

Harmonizing the past with the present, the pre-COVID-19 with the post-COVID-19 and the traditional craftsmanship with the pragmatic spirit of the scientific age is my task, the task of Korea, and the task of every musician in the world. It is said that *heaven helps those who help themselves*. Musicians who live as active first movers, not passive fast followers, will survive in the end.

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