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ALERT

richmond philharmonic

Lohmann: Richmond Philharmonic and friends perform at local vaccine clinics

Bill Lohmann

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Violinists Marissa Resmini (left) and Becca Longhenry, both members of the Richmond Philharmonic, performed inside the Dominion Building at the Richmond Raceway on Friday.

photos by BOB BROWN/Times-dispatch

Bill Lohmann

Richmond violinists offer Beatles with a classical twist to COV...

Mary Poppins had her spoonful of sugar; we have string music.

Since January, volunteers from the Richmond Philharmonic and their friends have performed at many of the COVID-19 vaccine clinics at Richmond Raceway, providing a soothing soundtrack for those getting their shots and an opportunity for the musicians to perform in public after a long, quiet interlude brought on by the pandemic.

“We have all been missing playing together so much and just playing for people,” said Becca Longhenry, violinist and assistant concertmaster for the **philharmonic**. “I think it’s been beneficial for everyone.”

Various configurations of philharmonic volunteers — from soloists to ensembles of five or six; only string players, no wind instruments because of COVID-19 protocols — have been giving up their lunch hours on Saturday afternoons to play these little heartening concerts. They show up, mask up and get to work making music in the back of the large hall where vaccines are administered, entertaining both the people who’ve come for their rescue from the viral scourge and those health department staffers and volunteers making this happen.

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In such an air of hope and gratitude, what could be a more perfect pairing than vaccines and music?

There was no grand plan at the beginning to offer live music at the clinics. Rather, it was more a case of one thing leading to another, which led to another, and here we are.

Henrico deputy county manager Tony McDowell said when officials were first developing plans for the clinics they realized the first group to be vaccinated were going to be older people, many of whom hadn't been in public in a year and were probably anxious about this whole process anyway.

“We were talking about ideas of what we could do to help lower their anxiety level and to make the experience as pleasant as possible,” McDowell said.

About the same time, McDowell was talking to a friend, a member of the Richmond Philharmonic, who mentioned how the orchestra hadn't been able to get together and play since the pandemic started. Somewhere along the way, a light bulb came on: maybe a few musicians could play at the clinic and provide calming background music? Calls were made, several musicians raised their hands and an ensemble performed at the first large-scale clinic at the raceway on the last Saturday in January. They've been coming ever since when schedules worked out.

“It gives you a little sense of order, that things will be OK,” McDowell said. “I think it’s been a great success.”

It’s been a great outreach for the orchestra, said Dave Davis, president of the **philharmonic**, a semiprofessional classical orchestra that first performed for Richmond audiences in 1972 but not since December 2019 when it presented a Christmas concert.

“We were supposed to do a concert on March 14, 2020,” he said. “We had this wonderful concert of Italian music planned ... and had to cancel two days before. Probably one of the hardest decisions I’ve had to make, to pull the plug on that.

“We thought, ‘Well, we’ve got a concert coming up in May [2020]. This will certainly be over by then.’”

But it wasn’t over by then or by its June pops concert. Fall plans went out the window, too.

For now, to keep engaged with the community, it’s doing online events such as “Cocktails With Conductors” on every other Monday evening, and it’s planning a virtual performance for May.

“It’s going to be at least fall before we get back together,” Davis said.

Which is why the vaccine clinics have been such a welcomed opportunity.

Davis plays bass trombone, so he hasn’t been able to perform at the clinics, but he has attended some as president. He was at the first one when a passerby motioned him over — “You could see her smile behind the mask,” Davis recalls — and she said, “This is the first live music I’ve heard in a year!”

Davis thought: “We’ve got to figure out how to do more of these.”

The result has been all that he expected and more, and performers have come to

include friends of philharmonic members, such as the Cary Street Ramblers and other bands, all of whom play for an hour or three.

“The musicians are just excited to have a place to play, something to prepare for,” Davis said. “Henrico County has been very generous in giving us the space. It’s been a really wonderful collaboration.”

Cellist Angela Lehman has performed twice, and found it “very gratifying.”

“A man sat near us while he waited his 15 minutes after his shot,” Lehman said. “He told us that he doesn’t like shots and wasn’t really looking forward to this one, but he heard the music when he first entered and that helped him feel more at ease.”

Staffers and volunteers working the clinic have also told her how much the music helps them get through their shifts, shot after shot.

Longhenry and concertmaster Marissa Resmini performed a violin duet on Friday, playing classical and pop pieces, including Beatles music as a lunch-hour crowd arrived for their vaccinations. Aside from the appreciation they feel from those who are listening, Longhenry said the musicians are grateful themselves to the medical staff and volunteers who are running the clinics.

“I mean, these people are literally saving lives,” said Longhenry, who’s performed at perhaps a half-dozen clinics. “It’s just wonderful we can give back to the community in this way.”

An unexpected benefit: A few of the musicians playing a gig at the end of a clinic day have been to get vaccinated if there doses left over. Longhenry was among them.

I asked Longhenry if the raceway clinic was the oddest place she had performed music, and she said not at all. Part of that is because one of her jobs — she also teaches music — is general director of **Classical Revolution RVA**, a nonprofit

collective of musicians whose mission is to make classical music more universal and accessible by performing in places not necessarily accustomed to classical music: bars, restaurants, cafes, almost anywhere.

“It’s not the strangest place,” she said of the clinic setting. “The music seems very at home, and I feel at home playing.”

She added, “I feel like any place is a good place for music.”

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