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Xuanyu Zhou

Okay, good morning, Professor Pritchard.

Eric Pritchard

Well, hello, nice to be with you.

Zhou

Same here. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and about the Ciompi Quartet before we begin?

Pritchard

Sure. I have been a professor of practice and a member of the Ciompi Quartet for a little over 20 years. My job at Duke is a full-time position which involves 50% as a teacher of violin and chamber music and [also] the Alexander Technique, and 50% as a member of the Ciompi Quartet. So, [the] Ciompi Quartet rehearses generally, four or five mornings a week, and we do concerts regularly on campus in the area, and we tour nationally and internationally.

Zhou

Amazing.

Pritchard

I'm also active as a solo violinist and a member of other ensembles occasionally, but most of my work as a performer is with the Ciompi Quartet.

Zhou

That's amazing. Can you bring us back to about two years ago when the pandemic started? What was the environment you were performing in? And what were your career goals at that point?

Pritchard

So, in other words, before we knew anything about COVID at all, just what was the reality in January of 2020? Well, we had a sort of a whole series of concerts planned for the spring, I think all of which were canceled. Everything after March 5 was canceled. So that involved a concert in Baldwin auditorium being canceled and involved a number of out-of-town concerts being canceled. And the Ciompi Quartet actually stopped rehearsing at that moment, but you wanted to know just before that. So, the pattern that we had established over the previous years, as I said, was rehearsing pretty much every day and preparing programs that would go into all those different venues. And so, our first, Okay, so that's, that's reality, probably your next question is what changed?

Zhou

But actually, before we go into that, I would love to hear about what got you into music in the first place, and what led you and other members to find the Quartet?

Pritchard

Okay, well, I started off as most violinists do at a young age, playing [the] violin. And when I was a young teenager, thirteen? Fourteen? I discovered chamber music and sort of realized that at the same time that I was discovering chamber music, I was starting to think about career aspirations, and then the discovery of chamber music sort of led me to feel that that was the type of musical career I would most want to pursue. So, of course, when you're training, you're also learning how to be a soloist and an orchestral player. So, what changed for me at the age of 14 was [that] the motivation became so completely self-directed. So, I had been basically reluctant about practicing, and I sort of needed parental [reinforcement]

Zhou

Like all kids [laugh]

Pritchard

Then all of a sudden, they had to try to get me to stop practicing. And it coincided with a lot of things, like a new violin teacher, a bigger pond to be in; I was from a small town in New Hampshire, but it was not very far from Boston. So then I started going to Boston to New England Conservatory every weekend. For a very wonderful youth program that they have there. And then, of course, I went to music school for [a] bachelor's and master's degree. And I was really fortunate to get an invitation to audition and then eventually join a professional string quartet that already had won a few competitions and had sort of a career developing in New York City. And I was going to grad school in New York City. So, it was like I did both of those at the same time, quickly graduated, and then moved straight into what had been my intended career path and stayed with that quartet for nine years. Felt like I was turning thirty and just having kind of a sense of... wasn't sure, exactly. I wanted to shake up my life and I sort of put everything on the table about do I stay with music? Do I stay with [the] violin? Do I stay with chamber music? And try some other things as a member of the [quartet], the quartet had moved to San Francisco State University, but joining the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, which was like, **going from being a big part of a small ensemble into a small part of a large ensemble was a real kind of liberation in a way because it felt a little bit like a vacation and like I needed to sort of get back to my vocation.** So, within a year, I was in another string quartet, [the] University String Quartet position in Oxford, Ohio, then I was invited to apply for the position at Duke in 1995. And fortunately, I was invited to apply because I wouldn't have known about it. It was a real dream job and so I've been there ever since.

Zhou

That's amazing. So, for some of our audiences who might not be familiar with the different types of groups that are performing, could you tell us a little bit more about the differences between chamber music, playing in an orchestra, and maybe as a solo violinist. Getting into violin, through chamber music as one of your greatest inspirations is, to me, very unique. So, can you talk a little bit about what those different experiences felt like for you? And what made chamber music and what you're doing now with the [Ciompi] Quartet really, stand out for you.

Pritchard

Yeah, I mean, it has a lot to do with autonomy. So, in a way, you give up a great deal of autonomy when you join an orchestra because the artistic direction is so clearly top-down. And it's [a] very

secure, we hope, secure kind of position because you have an orchestra has a multi-million-dollar budget and something that can, when things are going right, really allows for a sense of job security, but it does have its limitations in terms of your own artistic profile and your ability. So being a soloist seems like you would have kind of the freest reins of all, but to some extent, that's not true because soloists choose their collaborators, yes, but when you collaborate as a concert soloist in front of an orchestra, there are a lot of very strict parameters that you have to work within, in order to make that type of collaboration work. And it's very exciting but very, very specific, and it's also a career path. It's sort of like you're at the top of a pyramid that is extremely small and [as is] the number of people who actually can, to some extent, be trained for that. Like we all learn those concertos, we all learn how to play with that level of technical skill, but very few of us will actually end up making that our livelihood. So chamber music is sort of in-between, and the autonomy is tremendous because if you can find people to work compatibly with, you really are shaping your destiny. I think the healthiest quartets sort of work with a consensus model where you really have a 100%: each member has a 100% stake in their destiny. And of course, sometimes decisions have to be made. "Majority rules" is tough in String Quartet, though, because it's two and two, so it really has to do with how passionately do you hold this opinion if you're trying to make an artistic or business decision with three other people. It really matters who feels the strongest about it. And you know, hopefully, if you have people on opposite sides of a question, feeling equally passionate about it, sometimes you have to agree to disagree. You have to agree to try it one way for a while and then try it another way for a while, and those kinds of decisions sometimes, like all human interactions, sometimes people who keep an open mind, they'll actually change and see it a different way. That's humbling, and actually, something that people think if you have some more maturity and experience, you can actually recognize that could full-out happen in a decision-making process. So, this is a really healthy collaborative group that I'm a part of now. I do feel like sometimes I'm really living the dream, and sort of these are the good old days. It really does feel like that. In the Ciompi quartet

Zhou

Wow, that's so fortunate.

Pritchard

Yeah, as much work as it is. And you know, there are plenty of moments where I, particularly the last few years, where I've really had that experience, and that's very, very satisfying.

Zhou

Absolutely. And speaking of decision making and negotiating within the Quartet, what was the process like when you decided your direction? Did you have a common goal in mind? Was there an artistic destination that you were all aiming for? Or were there divergences, differences in opinion on that front?

Pritchard

[gets up and pours water]. Ciompi quartet has been around for about 55 years at Duke the whole time. It was founded by Giorgio Ciompi. [drinks then sets down cup] He was the first violinist, and it was in an era when there could be more room for that kind of top-down way of taking a group, naming it after yourself, and he was an established artist. When Mary Biddle Duke Trent Semans came to him as a violin soloist, she was the benefactress of the arts at Duke for decades, and she asked Giorgio Ciompi "what would it take to get you to join our faculty," because he was head of the string department at the Cleveland Institute of Music Major conservatory and he said, "If you allowed me to hire three colleagues and form a string quartet then I'll come to Duke." So that was the way the

Ciampi Quartet got started. And so, from the 60s until 1983, when he passed away, it was very much of his vision. He was by far the elder statesman of the group. I really don't know exactly what the internal dynamics were, but I've heard some stories, and they were wonderful. He was sort of like a father figure to them all. And he was actually a teacher of mine and Jonathan Bagg in the 1970s: we study chamber music with him at the festival in Maine, the Summer Chamber Music Festival, so I knew about the Ciampi Quartet from a long time back, actually. [Pause] So then, there was a period of about 13 years with a different first violinist, 1983 to 1995, that I can't speak so much about but when that position became mine in 1995, I was entering into a group that had a lot of tradition and a lot of sort of preexisting vision. It was pretty compatible with the way I had been doing string quartets [for the] previous 12 years or so with these other two groups. And the string quartet repertoire is among the greatest of any genre in Western classical music. We have really from the 18th through the 21st century; we have a body of work that's on, you know, there's really no major composers that haven't contributed something to that and certain composers like Hyden writing 68 string quartets, Beethoven writing 17, Mozart writing 35, Bartók writing six. This lifetime isn't enough time for me to digest the string quartets that have already been written, and it's very much a genre that's still alive and functional for composers today. So our vision is not to be specialists; it's more to be generalists. That's a choice that string quartets can make. You can specialize in maybe an 18th-century performance practice. You can become a group that only plays works by living composers. You can become a group that wants to become known for anything in between those periods as well. So we try to stay pretty balanced and choosing repertoire for the next season is always fun but always challenging because there are so many options and so many ways of thinking of what does it actually mean to be balanced?

Zhou

Absolutely. Wow, the type of music styles you can perform is definitely diverse. And during the pandemic, a lot of musicians had to make [a] choice, let's say, one to make their music more accessible through technology, and two to play a different type of music that were more accessible to their audience in terms of playing more modern repertoires, playing more repertoire that are focused on solo players, so you wouldn't have to get a group of people together to collaborate that often during the pandemic, and performing works that are from you know, more recent composers or composers during the pandemic that are written specifically to fit the technological hardships of this period. So, did you feel like in some ways you had to make that choice?

Pritchard

Oh, we did make that choice. So, we didn't meet in person, I guess for six months, March, April, May, June, July, August, and then we started rehearsing in the same room in August. And over the course of that summer, we decided to create something called the "portfolio project," which would choose three or four of our Ph.D. students in the music department, and we would commission a piece from each one of them. The first time we did that, we specifically asked these composers to write music that they thought would somehow lend itself to being done remotely. So, we would record four separate tracks and create, you know, a "Hollywood Squares" zoom look or maybe a different video element that would go into the performance on the screen. Truth be told, by the time the music was done, even though we made remote versions of those pieces, we decided to hire an audio engineer and go into Baldwin auditorium and make a normal recording because we were meeting in person at that point, and we knew that the artistic product would be much better that way. So as much as everybody was very flexible and willing to try something new, the pieces didn't have to be done remotely on separate tracks, and in all three cases, we thought they would be better realized in that way. So, we just went ahead and did it. And then we've since decided to turn this into an annual event. So, every summer,

we'll commission three or four graduate students to write us a piece, and then we'll get them performed and recorded the following year. So that was sort of a happy outcome to the different cold situation. Another thing we [tried was] also playing music from undergraduate composers that needed to be put together for somebody's portfolio by the beginning of May, I think, of 2020. So, we experimented with an online platform. We managed to create a mix that I think realized the piece okay, but there wasn't anybody in our group that was really passionately a technologist and crazy about spending the hundreds of hours that it takes to do it really well in front of a computer. And to do something with a videographer, perhaps, oh, we actually did do, and then we did a couple of projects with a videographer out on the steps in front of Baldwin and in front of the Biddle. One involved a dancer, and it was actually one of the most popular videos we released; it got hundreds of views fairly quickly. It was actually quite beautifully realized. But interestingly enough, we pretended to play, but we did what you would call lip-synching with a recording of ours that we [had] already made. So, the audio quality was much better than it would have been if we had been recording a string quartet outdoors because you basically needed an acoustic [environment] to get good sound on a string quartet. So, we did that twice, once with a dancer and once with a very creative videographer, and put those things out over the course of 2020, and then we started; the next step was just all the concerts that we had planned on our season we just basically went ahead and made a YouTube version of those concerts. We actually didn't do [it] as a live concert, we did [it] as an edited performance, so we did multiple takes, digital editing of the sound and the audio, trying to get a higher standard level of production in things, and they would be released with a little bit of fanfare on the music department website and or the Duke performances website, and we sold tickets and did our best in 20 and 21 to sort of make it feel like there was a sense of occasion, [pause] like it would matter. And I think as the months wore on, people's interest really kind of started to wane. I think people got tired of watching clever zoom videos of musicians. So it became a little bit less fun to do because it just seemed like we were working so hard to create this thing, and we wouldn't get the satisfaction of a live performance with a live audience, and then, okay, so we put it out on some website somewhere. Does anybody care? You know, sure, some people do, but it, it became less satisfying, and fortunately, that stage didn't last forever.

Zhou

Imagine what it would have been like if it did. I am very impressed by the way that you kept performing. What motivated you to do that during the pandemic?

Pritchard

You know, I think it's the same combination of things that motivates us to perform not during a pandemic. A, it's our job. B, it's our passion. C, it can be fun to take on new challenges and to explore ways of being adaptable and resilient. We were lucky we still had all of the support that existed before for our work at Duke, unlike artists who are completely freelance. So, we were still getting paid to do this. So it felt important to fulfill and do it as best we could. That being said, all of our outside work just disappeared immediately. We lost a dozen concerts in the spring of 2020 and then quite a few in the fall of 2020. Although there were a few venues that actually fulfilled their contractual obligations to us and took videos and then there were other places which asked us to come in and do a live stream on their stage, [pause] but that was the exception to the rule. **Most of them just canceled and didn't compensate us for that.** They tried to hire us since then.

Zhou

So, it's often hard as a performer when let's say, when your audience is not that encouraging. And you mentioned that the interest of your audience waned during a specific period of the pandemic. So, can

you talk a little bit more about what was the relationship you guys had with your audience community? Let's say during the pandemic.

Pritchard

Well, it felt fairly distant. But, the good news is it motivated us to do some things we probably should have done a long time ago, like, create an email mailing list that currently stands at about 2000. We started sending out announcements on the platform called MailChimp at that time. And so just this idea. We beefed up our Facebook page and not so much on Instagram. So those things which we could have been doing more in the past became obvious to us that we really needed to get to it and so that did happen. And the MailChimp, I think, is particularly good because we use it now to announce live concerts, we use it to announce new videos, things going up on the website. So, I think it was essential during the months where we weren't going to ever have people live in the hall, but it actually had some benefit to us coming out the other side.

Zhou

I see. Yeah. Just exploring a little bit more about the community you were playing in. Because I know that the Ciompi Quartet has been playing for a variety of different groups on campus and off-campus and I really admired the way that you collaborate with your undergraduate students and your Ph.D. students. So, what type of community is the Duke community here? What motivated you to play? I read on your website you were performing in dormitories and in Baldwin and in all different kinds of venues. What was the community like? And what was performing in these environments like? Did that change for you guys during the pandemic?

Pritchard

Well, absolutely, it changed. We haven't played in the dorm for a couple of years now, and trust we'll start doing that again in the fall. We particularly like going to the freshmen dorms and just letting, you know, letting them know, we're here, and we're on the same campus as them. There. You know, it's a little bit of a liaison

Zhou

Who gets to be the lucky dorm?

Pritchard

Whichever faculty advisor requests it; basically, we'll go whenever anyone asks us to, and Hsiao-Mei Ku is actually a resident or faculty at Pegram, so that's been a bit of an art in store all along. But I think specifically during the 2021 academic year. We did a lot of in-person instruction. And even though we didn't have concerts, we were running a chamber music program. For all of the students who were in chamber music groups. [For] most of them, that was the only live interaction they had in academic work for the whole year. So they were sitting in their dorm room, taking zoom classes, and then come into the music building and taking in-person lessons, and rehearsing in person with kids their own age, and all of a sudden that felt like a real lifeline. I think people who weren't doing something like music probably spent the whole year absolutely deprived of that opportunity. So, we felt really good about being able to offer in-person instruction in a way that conformed to the strict rules that were in place during that time. And that felt like something really important to be able to offer.

Zhou

I can imagine. I wish when I was in freshman year, I had the opportunity to see you guys perform. That must have been amazing. And I am sure students appreciate the opportunity to engage in in-person connections through music when they couldn't in other forms academically. So before we end our conversation today, I would just like to know, what do you think will stay with you as you move on? Beyond the pandemic, anything artistically? Because you mentioned that the approach that you took professionally needed to change at some point. Community wise? What do you think will stay with you and the Ciompi Quartet as we move on?

Pritchard

Well, I mean, there is this whole way of sort of taking a dinosaur-like the Ciompi Quartet and trying to bring it into the 21st century, and so becoming more savvy about social media is something we thought we had to do because of the pandemic but we probably needed to do it anyway, so that continues. We have a better online presence now than we did before. Now there's no telling what other kinds of world circumstances might lead to artists needing to change their platforms, and so having gone through this once, we feel like we learn a lot, and we could know better how to do it again if that happens.

Zhou

Absolutely.

Pritchard

But to a large extent, there's the overwhelming feeling is just sort of the pleasure and satisfaction of going back to normal, and so normal really had a lot going for it. And so that sense of feeling like we are living in, we're very blessed and we're living in an age where as things start to get back to normal, it kind of does lead me to feel a lot of gratitude about the opportunities that I have in this sort of platform that the Quartet has to express itself and to collaborate with really interesting people and have an audience that cares about what we do and will follow us in new directions. Very, very, very fortunate to have that. All those things.

Zhou

Absolutely. Well, what's the immediate next step?

Pritchard

Well, we just finished a big project of performing the night before [the] last in Baldwin. I should have let you know about that. This week is a really big week with dissertation projects from our Ph.D. students, so there's an ensemble from New York called the Imani Wind Quintet, which is on campus this week. And so the Ciompi Quartet and the Amani Winds [are] the backbone of the ensembles that are coming together to do recordings: there won't be any live performances, but recordings of the works that represent five, six years of graduate study for a number of Ph.D. students. And then we have another series of our informal concerts to prepare and do in April and this semester will be coming to an end before we know it.

Zhou

Sounds good. We are so fortunate to be able to sit down with you today, Professor Pritchard. For our audiences, professor Eric Pritchard is [the First Violinist] of the Ciompi Quartet along with three other members Hsiao-mei Ku, who plays the violin, Jonathan Bagg who plays the viola, and Caroline Stinson, who plays the cello. And like Professor Pritchard said there will be upcoming performances

and events, so you are welcome to check them out and follow their performances and thank you so much for joining us today, Professor Pritchard.

Pritchard

Thanks for having me. It's my pleasure.