

# 'A MINI MUSIC FESTIVAL': POLYPHONIC CONCERT CLUB

Robert Hollingworth

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**I Fagiolini's Robert Hollingworth maps out a new online road trip of performances from the Polyphonic Arts Club**



*Isata Kanneh-Mason, one of the Concert Club's performers*

'Why do we do it, why put ourselves through it?' goes the song. Making a living out of the arts was never easy: it got harder a year ago but that's ok - we're 'creative'. Do you remember late March last year? All of us on social media playing the trombone with one foot and in the bath to show that we were 'still here'. Then came the composite performances - filmed in the bedroom, microphone dangling out of ear, singing in a cupboard to get a nice dry sound for the engineer to manipulate it to sound like the Sistine Chapel.

In the summer we actually *met* and made music (two-metre spacing please), the camera doing what it could, followed by the false dawn of tiny audiences in the room with us – before lockdown part two (and three). And now we're a whole year on from when theatres and concert halls were officially closed in the middle of March 2020.

On 25 March this year, my ensemble, I Fagiolini, is back with a new musical journey (at least on paper) at a time when an actual tour is probably the *last* thing on our minds (for any number of reasons). On our ROAD TRIP (*Viaggio*) we're visiting London, Paris, Venice and Leipzig, Byrd to Bach via all sorts some of my favourite pieces in between. How much Janequin or Ravenscroft do you know?

It's possibly not the *first* time you've seen us since lockdown first began, but we're rather proud of this one – a collaboration with Polyphonic Films: 'Polyphonic Concert Club', a really beautifully filmed series of six concerts.

Polyphonic Concert Club is a mini music festival with six very different artists: piano and strings sounds familiar but also a percussion quartet, rogue Baroque ensemble (Red Priest) and of course I Fagiolini.

I suppose we've assembled the sort of thing that I'd enjoy: 'a nice mix' but with *musicians* choosing the repertoire – and their choices are fascinating. Jennifer Pike plays a Szymanowski violin sonata that's a revelation, then Colin Currie's percussion quartet do mesmerising things that are outside most of our experience (finishing with a blinding by heart performance of Steve Reich's drumming. (I want to put them in an MRI machine to see exact how fast they're processing information when they play this.)

My own lot sing familiar double-choir Bach alongside naughty Venetian Carnival pieces to absolutely searing, lump in throat laments from Elizabethan England that you didn't know existed. This is the joy, isn't it? Discovering new works alongside classics. Much of the music I Fagiolini performs was never written to be performed 'at' an audience. Or if it was, the context was much more intimate than it's possible to recreate in a concert. Or its context means that it won't work in a straight recital.

For 35 years, this challenge has been behind everything I Fagiolini does and in many ways film has been a perfect medium as it allows us to recreate salon-like intimacy - but also because the camera can help *show* instead of *explain*. We've been doing this for years, from presenting Monteverdi madrigals in movie form to filming a surreal take on Janequin's oddball onomatopoeia-fest 'La chasse' in *The Stag Hunt*, complete with written-in sound effects. I wonder whether audiences will stay with such online ventures after the pandemic? 'Keep music live' – totally, but some actually works better on screen.

And on-screen can be a way good way to get to know music better. A year ago I started the Youtube series 'Sing the Score' as a way of looking under the bonnet of my favourite short pieces of choral repertoire. Bit of history, bit of being able to *show* how the composer has got what they wanted and then a singalong performance. It has tipped into the surreal at times: 'Dad, people *only* watch because of the gags', says younger daughter, but *at least they watch*: only in the low thousands but worth doing because if we've learnt one thing through this it's that *niche can work*: find your audience.

We also enjoyed letting our hair down (those of us who still can) by spoofing the 'grid performance' genre in **'Not In This Together'**. Its three miniatures - 'Cake Mix', 'Le Zoom' and 'Phoney Canzoney' - provided some paid work for singers at home and kept us all sane while driving our housemates round the bend (cake ending up on the wall, one wife having to throw glasses of water repeatedly over husband etc). A refusal to take ourselves too seriously seems to be part of the I Fagiolini brand, though I'm not talking about cheapening the music - the very opposite in fact: allowing humour to be a way of keeping a listener's focus.

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Beyond that, it's the care with the filming that we hope you'll enjoy in our Polyphonic Concert Club. This isn't the first days of lockdown any more: no 'fixed camera insta-stream' but people looking down the lens with as much love and understanding of their craft as the musicians. This way you can really *meet* the performers, even see them *thinking* as they play, sometimes suppressing a smile (they're not meant to 'enjoy' it, after all...)

We've created a club feel out of this so have chosen the model of a subscription for the whole series. It's important that we charge for these concerts: we get no core funding from public bodies at all: for the most part, we've had to exist totally commercially. Our musicians are freelancers and many of them have fallen through cracks and not otherwise received a penny in support since concert halls shut a year ago. We employ several camera-people: we know that look is as important as the sound and perhaps something that musicians haven't quite grasped, being very aural creatures: even the most aural audiences take in through the eye as much as they do through the ear.

Covering our costs on this will still be a challenge. Some venues – like the Wigmore Hall – are making access completely free and asking for donations, but they've also been heavily subsidised. A level playing field we are not on. All money for this project is split between those playing, filming and providing venues: the whole thing is done in collaboration with three of our favourite venues: St George's Bristol, The Stoller Hall, Manchester and The National Centre for Early Music, York. While everyone else is all up in arms about the new London concert hall that is now no longer, we're focussing instead on the brilliant leading concert platforms outside London that have let us reach audiences across the country for many years.

Trust us with this, if you can: beautiful humans, dedicated to performance their whole lives now seen up close and personal. Will it work? 'Why do we do it, why put ourselves through it?' Because this is what we do!

*The Polyphonic Concert Club launches on Thursday 11 March 2021 with six recitals from St George's Bristol, The Stoller Hall, Manchester and The National Centre for Early Music, York, featuring Jennifer Pike, The Colin Currie Quartet, The Castalian String Quartet, Red Priest, and Isata Kanneh-Mason. I Fagiolini perform on Thursday 25 March 2021. Season tickets and concessions are available from [www.polyphonic.club](http://www.polyphonic.club).*