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Pianist/Composer/
Arranger Joel A. Martin
performs the first
Piano By Nature virtual
concert of 2021. Learn
more on page 4



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THIS Bentley STILL RUNS

By Benjamin Pomerance



Photos provided by Joel A. Martin

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AT FIRST, Joel A. Martin thought that he had the flu.

It was an annual tradition, this unwelcome winter visit from influenza. "It will be over soon," the pianist/composer/arranger who will perform the next virtual concert on the Piano By Nature series thought to himself, even when all reasonable timeframes for "soon" had passed.

Then the fatigue smashed him like a steamroller. Getting out of bed in the morning felt like running a marathon. He would wake up each day believing that he had turned the corner in the direction of feeling better, only to admit that he felt even worse than the day before.

"Finally, my wife and another pianist convinced me that I needed to go to the emergency room," Martin remembers. "I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to my kids." He pauses. "Nothing will change your life more than taking the perp walk from the hospital parking lot to the emergency room. Nobody talks to you. They just stare and gesture at you."

The doctor uttered a term that would have sounded like an online coupon code a year ago. Every thought swimming in Martin's mind immediately collided like bumper cars. He had just started several major projects — a recording session for his first full-scale opera; a jazz-infused tribute to the Armenian priest and musicologist Komitas Vardapet; a jam-packed schedule of concerts of his trademarked multi-lingual art form that he calls "Jazzical;" and much more. Now, he wondered if COVID-19 would leave him fighting for his life.

He had fought dragons before. There are hopes for a kid who hops from entry-level exercises to Rachmaninoff preludes in his first year of playing the piano. There are expectations for a young man who becomes the youngest member of the Greater Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra at the age of 9, who plays two concerts at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts at the age of 14 and who is the youngest competitor in the field — and the first African-American — in the vaunted Van Cliburn International Piano Competition at the age of 17.

There are dreams that boil when Zubin Mehta brings that teenager on board to solo with the New York Philharmonic, visions that simmer when WQXR-FM highlights that prodigy on their artist showcase and goalposts that loom large when the artistic literati start tripping over their shoelaces to dangle grants in front of that youngster's nose. The teachers insist that the rising star focus on his craft with even greater devotion. The celebrities clamor for appearances of the next big thing. The commentators poise their pens to write his story.

And at the age of 28, with a dossier of achievements that most artistic aspirants would sacrifice bodily organs to achieve, Martin surveyed the field and decided to punt. The dreams were not his own. The expectations came from others. The clamoring and the insisting made him sick. He had been a SONY Innovator's Guild finalist in 1990, but he felt like he didn't possess a molecule of innovation. A concert hall career, the same concertos and sonatas on an infinite loop, wasn't for him. He knew that much. But he also knew that he could not convince everyone else.

He opened a food delivery service for upscale restaurants. He didn't touch the piano for almost a year. Still, music remained at the forefront of his thoughts, an invisible hand practically dragging him back to the keyboard. "I was looking for something to really challenge me," he recalls. "And I was pretty lost."

Then he found something. In the almost-empty sanctuary of a church in Port Chester, N.Y., with only his girlfriend to hear him, he sat down at a piano and started to play, beginning with a conventional classical tune but then expanding on this foundation, infusing the bedrock with improvised elements of jazz. After a while, his girlfriend cut in with a single sentence: "You should really try doing something more with that."

He tried. By the time he left the church on that day, he had developed arrangements of two nocturnes by Frederic

Chopin, music that kept the integrity of the classical structure but interwove improvisation, blue notes and jazz chords into that structure in an unexpectedly effortless manner. He dubbed his creation "Jazzical," the name that appeared on an entire album of jazz-classical marriages later that year. He followed this with a Jazzical holiday album and then a recording of Brazilian music joining the Jazzical verve.

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But there was a problem. Just as Martin had feared, people weren't listening. All of the Jazzical experiments flooded his soul with the first pure musical thrills that he had felt in several years. Yet there were too many potential audience members who shied away, happy to hear Martin play Bach, Chopin or Rachmaninoff as they were originally written but fearing that Jazzical was nothing more than a gimmick.

One day, he stood alone before a pond in Chappaqua, N.Y., a moment of torment in a setting of beauty. He wondered, for the zillionth time, if there was no true future pursuing the musical adventures that enthralled him. He thought about who he was doing this for, questioning whether the small circle of followers who had gravitated toward his Jazzical journeys would truly be enough. "What am I doing?" he asked the trees.

The trees didn't answer. But Jessye Norman eventually did. Playing at a Boys' Choir of Harlem gig with Norman as the featured soloist, Martin chased down the esteemed operatic soprano backstage and thrust one of his Jazzical CDs into her hand. "Just listen to five minutes of it," he pleaded. Norman took the album. A couple of weeks later, a letter arrived at Martin's residence. It was from Norman, asking Martin to create some Jazzical-style arrangements for her.

One by one, the doors began to open. Another operatic superstar, the famously demanding coloratura soprano Kathleen Battle, gave Jazzical her rare stamp of approval, inviting Martin to tour with her. Alan Menken permitted Martin to bring Jazzical to his songs from *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin* and a host of other Disney classics, leading to an album featuring the Gay Men's Chorus of LA and Broadway standouts Liz Callaway, Amanda McBroom and Christine Pedi. Standout vocalist Sharon Clark joined with Martin for a tribute to Ella Fitzgerald.

On each of these roads, Martin recognized what he had suspected all along. The higher mountains made for more rewarding climbs, preferably using trails that were unmarked or unused for many years. That was why he shook hands with Eugene Friesen, the award-winning cellist for the Paul Winter Consort, to see what sonic banquets they could cook together. That was why he embraced the chance to produce a star-laden tribute to Nelson Mandela at New York City's Riverside Church.

That was why, at the Sonata Piano Camp in Bennington, Vt., Martin walked onto the stage at the end of pianist George Lopez's concert and agreed to play some music for two pianos with him — even though nobody at the camp had any sheet music for two pianos available. The two men conjured up Jazzical-esque blends of solo piano works by Bach, Beethoven and Chopin on the fly, leaving the audience of their fellow pianists slack-jawed with awe. After that, they decided to make this a steady thing, anointing themselves The Sonicals Piano Duo.



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That was why, after seeing a movie with his two daughters and his father in 2018, Martin abruptly proclaimed that he wanted to write an opera. Dubbed "HipOpera," the creation seemed like huge chunks from music history had been placed into a blender: jazz, classical, hip-hop, spoken word and world music from multiple cultures. Yet Martin declares that all of this stands on the firmest of foundations. "I believe in the form and substance of the music," he explains. "But exactly how that gets expressed? That could be a whole bunch of different things."

And that was why, when the doctor uttered the now-infamous combination of letters and numbers, Martin felt like someone had kicked him into a vat of ice water. "I froze," he remembers. "There were so many questions. What happens next? What happens to my family? What happens with all of the projects that I had in motion?"

The emergency room team sent him home that night, accompanied by enough medicines to start a pharmacy and a strict regimen to follow. For an instant, Martin felt that being released to his house meant that the worst was over. He was wrong. "I was crippled physically," he recalls. "For the next five weeks, all I could do was stay in bed and rest and try to summon up the energy just to walk."

Finally, the clouds started to clear. Martin looked around, feeling like Rip Van Winkle, awakening after 20 years of slumber in a foreign world. "By the time I began to recover, the music scene had completely changed," he explains. "Concerts, tours, Broadway — all of the things that I do were gone, just like that."

He looked around his bedroom with the same stare that he had aimed years earlier at those trees by the pond in Chappaqua, another crisis of identity after it seemed as if everything had at last turned in his favor. "I remember saying to myself, 'The music business as I know it is dead,'" he recalls. "It's time for me to transition out again. But transition to what?"

There was only one absolute. "I realized that if I did not do music, I was going to die," Martin states. "I had to find some way to make this work."

With no place to perform, he figured that he could fill the silence by composing. He picked up a pencil and some paper and — without any particular plans in mind — started to write. As he sketched, images began to

materialize: the inexplicable sickness that would not leave, the horror of the diagnosis, the waves of exhaustion, the slow battle back.

And then something remarkable happened. "This piece just poured out of me — a 13-movement, 73-minute, fully orchestral work about the experiences I had with COVID-19," Martin remembers. "And then I wrote 43 minutes of brass fanfares. And then a 40-minute work inspired by a poem that I heard on NPR called *Running for Your Life*. It all poured out of me, straight from the heart."

Offers trickled in for virtual concerts live from Martin's living room. Then Theresa Thomason, lead singer for the Paul Winter Consort, asked him to play with her at a live program in Connecticut. He nearly said no. But by the time he finished playing that performance, he was ready for a hundred more. "I told her, 'I think you've given me a new sense of what magic is all about,'" he recalls. "And she said, 'No, Joel. The magic is in you.'"

Maybe she was right. Maybe there was some magic that gave this artist a chance to find something that he had missed. "I truly believe," he declares, his voice convulsing now, words pushing through tears, "that COVID spared my life and gave me this opportunity so I could do all of the things that I should have been doing all along. And I am not going to waste that."

He pauses. "Today is the only day that you have," he concludes. "You're not guaranteed tomorrow. That's what COVID-19 taught me. So, make it work. And enjoy the ride."

Then he laughs lightly. "People call me 'The Bentley,'" he chuckles, "because my ride is so good." With that, he dashes off again, speaking with luminescent joy about a book that he is writing titled *Rolling with The Bentley*, the multimedia package that will go with it, the recording of that massive work that he wrote about his COVID-19 experience and a dream for a concert series in the backyard of his new Connecticut home. And as his voice rises, it becomes unmistakable that despite everything that has led up to today, this Bentley is still running fine.

Joel A. Martin will perform on Jan. 16 at 7 p.m. in a virtual concert as part of the Piano By Nature series. Admission is free; donations are welcome. For more information or to receive the link for this concert, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.