

## Episode One: The Elephant Confined to Its Room

(Intro music)

This is the Institute for Music Leadership

**Stephen Biegner (SB):** Hello, and welcome to the first episode of “Create. Inspire. Lead.” – a podcast from Eastman School of Music’s IML Office. My name is Stephen Biegner, and I will be your de facto host. You know, we’d actually been planning a podcast since at least the beginning of the Fall semester. One of our wonderful student workers – Melissa O’Hara – she’d been doing all this research into things like equipment we’d need, she was brainstorming various topics, reaching out to guests – we had planned to do a call for scores to create a theme song. We thought about reaching out to a local artist to create artwork for the podcast. We were being thoughtful, methodical, diligent. And then, COVID-19 happened. And, so I’m here, in my guest bedroom/music room/home office with a loaner laptop, a USB mic my wife and I use sometimes to record choral parts for these practice recordings we do, and, well, this is it.

We hope that moving forward we can bring you interviews, stories, quick tips from a variety of guests from within the Institute for Music Leadership as well as from Eastman faculty and outside experts. But today, for the first episode, I thought we could talk about the elephant in the room. The elephant that is now confined to its room.

Of course, I’m talking about us. Stuck. Inside. Unable to meet with friends and colleagues, to make music, to live out our purpose. And, if you’re anything like me –there’s been a mix of emotions. Sometimes, the introverted, anti-social version of me is secretly a little happy to be stuck inside. I’ve been listening to music like crazy, I get to spend more time with my son and my wife – but, other times, I feel wracked with anxiety, it’s hard to focus, stay driven, and I wonder, why am I doing this?

So, today, I thought we could talk to two people. Dr. Blaire Koerner and Dr. Eric Laprade. Blaire is the Career Advisor for the IML, and Eric is the managing editor of the Paul R. Judy Center for Innovation and Research which is also part of the IML. They’re also both alums of Eastman – Blaire’s a bassoonist and Eric is a conductor – and they collaborated on putting together all of these resources for musicians who have been affected by the pandemic. I figured it would be good to talk with each of them to get their perspective on what we can be doing now.

Also – quick note – because we had to do these interviews over Zoom, the quality of the audio is not always as high as we’d like it to be. So, for future episodes, we’ll be looking into how we can realistically improve these issues, but, for now, please bear with us.

If you take a look at the list of resources that Blaire and Eric put together, one of the first things you’ll notice right away is how extensive the list is. And that’s the first thing that I decided to talk to Blaire about.

**SB:** So, in scanning through it, it’s a lot – um, which is helpful – but it’s also, it can feel overwhelming, um, where do you recommend students start?

**Blaire Koerner (BK):** Great question. I think it starts with what's their situation. So, if they are a performer, a freelancer, or even a teacher, as a student who has lost their income because of these things, whether it's because they had to go back home and they don't have the gigs that they were planning, or because their, you know, assistantship is no longer functioning properly because of their situation. So the first thing is kind of assessing where they are currently. And if they need funding, if they need relief, if they need some sort of support, there is a boatload out there.

Yes, there are bigger packages that the government has passed through. We just don't know the timing for those, we also, you know, there's a lot of details behind that. And they're gonna be *bigger* than some of these 200, 300-dollar offerings that some of these organizations are offering, but it's worth looking and seeing where can I apply, what is valuable to me.

The second thing I believe would be, keep on top of what is happening. So, when you can read your messages that are being sent by the university, read the messages that are being sent by the news, um, because right now everything is in a state of flux, and it will be for a little while. So. Checking in to the American Musicians Federation – the union – because they are also highlighting and specifically focusing on music related situations, music related concepts. So just trying to keep up with that type of news, so if anything does come around, you are aware of it, you can move forward, and you can get curious and explore it.

**SB:** Blaire gave a lot of incredible information, and there's a lot to unpack in there. But after talking with Blaire and Eric, I noticed they each said specific things repeatedly throughout their interviews. We'll get to Eric's, but for Blaire, it's how many times she mentions staying curious.

{clips of Blaire saying "curious" overlapping}

See? We'll hear those in context a bit later, but right now, I thought it would be interesting to hear what Eric had to say to a similar question. We had some....technical issues at the beginning of the interview:

**Eric Laprade (EL):** Hey Stephen.

**SB:** Hello! Hi Eric

**EL:** How are you?

**SB:** Good, nice to meet you.

**EL:** Yeah, I'm just, give me one second...

**SB:** Yeah, sure I'm also just opening...

(Siri alarm going off).

**EL:** Sorry, my Siri thing keeps going!

**SB:** Oh, that's all right. (laughs)

**SB:** Eric is the director of bands and an assistant professor at the College of New Jersey, or TCNJ, and he is also the managing editor for the Paul R. Judy Center for the IML. He's been putting together some really great blog posts with resources, links to videos, thoughts on what's important right now. I thought he'd also have a laundry list of things to go over – and I mean, he does. But here's how he answered the question of where to start:

**EL:** Sure, I mean it's um, I think nobody knows to be honest. I um, it's I think it's hard to even still and I wrote down a note that said, like trying to move through, or get beyond sort of like the initial like triage and shock of what has happened and try to start to think well what's next, how do I respond or react to this and quite frankly I think that's really hard to do, and um that in itself is overwhelming.

**SB:** Honestly, that was so refreshing to hear. It's so easy to feel alone or like you're over-reacting to the situation. And maybe you're neither of those things. But for me, four, five weeks in to working remotely with a wife who is also a DMA student and a 2-year-old who is pure id, these conversations were just what I needed. Essentially throughout these interviews both Blaire and Eric lifted me up in different ways: Blaire helped me create a path forward, gave me action items, and confidence that I wouldn't end up falling behind or stagnating; Eric helped me see hope in the situation and honestly, just commiserated a little bit. Like, here's him talking about what it's been like writing for the PRJC blog:

**EL:** And, you know, the type of work we typically do - We might share, we might write about programming, we might write about using technology, or profile innovative artists, even then, I was feeling um, you know this pressure, like, this all feels irrelevant. Like how can I possibly write a blog post in good faith about like best programming practices when the world felt like you know it was crumbling around us.

And, the speed at which our lives have been upended, I'm still processing, struggling with. I see it in our students at the college where I teach. This is incredibly traumatic, these students who are working day in and day out towards, like, this goal they have - to learn that you're no longer can attend classes, you can't be in the same room and create music together, things that are like integral to us as human beings. I mean I can feel - I feel a giant void, personally, because I'm not conducting on a regular basis. It's something I've done almost every day for the last 15 years and then out of nowhere, I'm sitting here and staring at a computer screen for 8, 10, 12 hours a day.

**SB:** This made me think about something Blaire had said:

**BK:** So how can you continue developing your skill sets, performance-wise, doing projects with one another, doing recording projects you've been meaning to do, but have been not doing them, and then of course acknowledging that you may need to also find a position that is just gonna hold you over?

**SB:** This would happen throughout our interview: Blaire would formulate the question for me and of course, had an answer. One thing you could do is use this situation we've all been thrust into to add skills to your resume:

**BK:** So, when you have a resume that's a non-performance based resume – performance based resume we're putting off to the side because that's a unique situation – so if you have a teaching, an administrative, a composition, even, there's a lot of different categories but one of them that I always insist and you always put at the bottom at least is a skills category. And yes, soft skills are absolutely 100% important. But soft skills are something that you can incorporate into bullets of other experiences so, leadership, organizational, communication.

These skill sets are really the hard skills, so what equipment do you know? And that could be software, that could be hardware, but what do you know. So yes, Microsoft Suite, Excel, that type of thing. So, technology is one of those skill sets, languages is another, um, but technology is one of those things that you can keep building.

So, at this point, a lot of us are getting very familiar with Zoom. Awesome, however, attending a Zoom session is a little bit different than running one. So how about you practice running one – putting people in break out rooms, understanding how to share things, anything special, so that you really get familiar.

**SB:** Blaire mentioned a few other platforms – GoToMeeting, GoToWebinar, even Skype and Google Hangouts, but Zoom – I'm sure you're familiar – Zoom added more video-conferencing users in the past few weeks than it did in all of 2019 because of Coronavirus. According to a CNBC article, Zoom added over 2.22 million new users so far in 2020. Over the entirety of 2019, it managed to bring in 1.99 million people. Again, so far, in 2020 – 2.22 million new users. It's April.

But as Blaire mentions, even if you're familiar with some of these products, there's still a lot you can learn and use to your benefit:

**BK:** There's a lot of free materials on their own websites, and training on their own websites, of how to use their equipment. So that's a first way to start and really understand that. See what's popular. There's a lot of talk right now of Zoom and things because they are university-based, but Zoom is not used in a lot of other organizations because the license may be too expensive. So, what are the alternative versions?

Find that list of alternatives, feel which ones you're comfortable with, which ones you can have access to. Most of them are free, not all of them, or if they are free, they have some sort of

limitation on it. Play around with it, experiment, hang out with friends through it, hang out with family, do a project, see the limitations and understand. And then you can mention that in your resume, you can mention that in a cover letter, you can mention that in an email to an employer who is currently thinking about stopping your position and you can say, “Well, an alternative which is to make this position an online version and here’s what skills I happen to have in that position and how would that help you with your progress and your projects?”

**SB:** This last bit is important. Part of the fight has always been to show how you’re relevant to a group or organization – whether this is a chamber group, or an administrative position, or whatever – but it seems urgently critical now. So, you might have some skills already that organizations are now suddenly finding they need to possess.

**EL:** Yeah I think, Music teachers have unknowingly entered the world of video editing and production, um, because there's this urge or this desire to want to cultivate shared performances so um, I shared a post I shared a blog post this Monday, it was just a curated list of virtual orchestra performances, and quite frankly, you know, in five clicks you could hear NY Philharmonic, Toronto Symphony, San Antonio Symphony, ranging from *Bolero*, Baltimore Symphony played some Mahler together, so like, it's fascinating to again thing about how quickly times have changed.

**SB:** All of those organizations who put these videos together – sure, some of them are maybe big enough to have someone on staff who would have done it anyway, but for some smaller organizations, if you’re involved, they may not know that you are great at recording, or that you have a YouTube channel and know all this video editing software. They might even need someone who just understands Twitter or Instagram. This is crucial now, but moving forward, it’s still a great thing to have on your resume.

In addition to working on your resume and learning new skills, it’s also a great time to work on some projects you’ve had on the backburner for a while – like Blaire said earlier:

**BK:** Doing projects with one another, doing recording projects you’ve been meaning to do, but have been not doing them -

I had this crazy idea – both to kill some time and to stay in shape musically - that my wife and I could record all of Monteverdi’s *Vespers* – including singing all the instrumental parts. I was gonna brush up on my horribly, rudimentary Italian, go through sight-singing books. And Eric had similar ideas:

**EL:** I can share that on March 7th or whatever date it was, when TCNJ shared that we were moving online, my initial thought was oh my goodness, I have, I'm gonna have so much time to practice, study, develop, grow. I made a list of these projects. I secured the rights for a new transcription I've been wanting to do, I have plans - and I mean the list - it was inspiring. And then reality sets in of like OK, now I'm like, stuck in my apartment, you know how do I, and I'm like, struggling motivation.

And so now you're, you know, waking up and going to class is like getting up from your bed and walking to your desk, and then you have to go to the practice room which is the chair right next to your desk, and I think that can be tough to, to maintain that sort of rigor when you're just in a different space.

**SB:** So, what can you do?

**EL:** I've been encouraging my students to - we have to find some sort of silver lining, or hope, or positive element to what is a terrible situation, um, and so I've been encouraging students, a.) Think about your core musicianship -

**SB:** When Eric talks about core musicianship, he's not joking around – later in our interview, he mentions how he has assigned his conducting students exercises from Hindemith's *Elementary Training for Musicians*. Nice, innocuous title, right? Let me...see if I have a copy...it should be ...yeah. Here it is. Oh man. I don't think there's a single copy of this book that hasn't been like chucked across a room in frustration in existence. So, anyway, first thing - Paul Hindemith's headshot? He's...truly terrifying. He looks like a chained- up junkyard bulldog who eats his students. He's horrifying. But, the other thing is, that this book goes from "Tap these quarter notes" to "play this rhythm in your left hand, tap this one in another meter in your right hand, and sing this atonal melody, then switch all the parts" in a matter of pages. It's intense. Anyway, unnecessary digression. Back to Eric:

**EL:** ...um, - I've encouraged students to set specific, discreet goals, set specific, discreet schedules, and define mechanisms to hold themselves accountable. And so, whether that's sharing via social media performances, whether that's cultivating an online recital, whether that's saying I'm going to apply for these festivals or go through these auditions processes virtually, whatever it might be. I'm going to record an album, I'm going to compose a new piece - I mean I think trying to develop some sort of project-based, or, benchmarks to work to, I always find helpful.

**BK:** (overlapping) Yes. Absolutely. Continue moving ahead. Right, so eventually, this will die down. Eventually we will be hopefully COVID-free. You still want to keep moving forward, with plans. You still wanna keep applying. You still want to be curious and explore.

**SB:** Here's Blaire – again, reminding you to stay curious. And keep moving ahead. For example, if you apply to summer festivals:

**BK:** You may get accepted and then it gets canceled. Or you may get accepted and it turns to an online, virtual position. Or you get accepted and it gets postponed. But at least you got accepted because you tried. Right? So, you don't know what the options are.

A lot of organizations are doing their best to try and do *something* rather than do nothing. So, you know, the Eastman Community Music School this summer, I mean, they have a summer

camp and they're trying – they really are hoping that it will go. They will prefer to do an online and try to do as many classes and opportunities online as they possibly can then do cancelling altogether. Because they'd rather offer some sort of experience than nothing.

So, keep applying, keep looking forward, keep looking at things.

We don't know the trickle-down effect, so you have to keep active, you have to keep looking, you have to keep being curious. But some of those positions may be altered, changed, removed, or not hired at all together just because of the fact that the organization doesn't have the funding anymore.

**SB:** Shortly after this was recorded, ECMS announced that it would move all their summer courses online. So...so far we've covered that this is a difficult situation, but we've talked about how we can still work on skills to improve our resumes, we can work on our musicianship, and come up with a schedule and clear goals, and we should keep moving forward – apply to festivals, cultivate online recitals – and, perhaps this is an obvious one, but -

**EL:** Create art as much as you can in this situation, create music, create beautiful music, and share it. We're story tellers, right? And now the story teller is locked in an 8x8 room where it's hard to share that story. So, finding ways to connect with people.

**SB:** That's consistently Eric's takeaway. And I find that really inspiring and hopeful. But while it might be the ideal to use this time to better ourselves and create art, this whole situation is not without its challenges.

**BK:** One of the things that this situation has acknowledged is there are lots of barriers with it, right? So, not everyone, especially even faculty had equipment when they were sent off to then go and then do online classes –

**SB:** Right.

**BK:** Right. So, students are in another similar situation potentially as well as all the other ones that you mentioned. So, um, one of the things I am getting out of this is a lot of people are being incredibly generous. Whether it's with a mindset, whether it's with lending things, whether it's with flexibility, um, so you don't know until you ask. You don't know until you try.

**SB:** This was totally my situation. I had this old laptop from, like, 2007? And it was...like, computer adjacent in its identity at this point. It was so slow, it took forever to do anything. And, long story short – I let my colleagues know, and the team worked together to make sure everyone could do their work remotely. And we're still figuring it out, but, you can do the same thing for your own job or for classes; you could come up with a schedule with your boss to check in at the beginning and end of your shift, or maybe let your teacher know you can't do a bunch of recordings throughout the day. Or?

**BK:** Or a phone call, right? We're so technology based, but a phone call, if you have a phone, let's do that instead as well.

You know? Um, so, you don't know until you ask, so reaching out and saying "here's my current situation, um, this is what I'm asking of you whether that be flexible of time," and if you're in a different time zone that may be ok, so what is a good time that we can both check in, and then understanding that in a normal situation, your supervisor wouldn't necessarily be in the same room with you the entire eight hours six hours, that you'd be working anyway. They maybe would have the opportunity to walk by and check in on you and you can ask a quick question, which now is unfortunately gone, but figure out what communications would work for them. Is it ok for an email? Is it ok for a follow-up phone call? Even some people are going through text to really get a quick message across. See what's viable for them. See if they have equipment that they may be able to lend to you. See if you can maybe have a conversation, and where are they current, and how can you help them. That's really the best way to put it too, is how can I help your business currently, your organization currently move forward in a difficult situation. And here are the skills that I have to offer, and in return all I would ask is – then fill in the blank.

**SB:** In addition to issues of access – whether that's reliable internet, or an issue with your living situation, your time zone – there are also issues of how to navigate all the various funding websites. What are we eligible for in terms of making up income from gigs that have been canceled? And on top of that, what about grades?

**SB:** Is it worth it for students to sit down and just sort of plug through all of the – if they need the resources – to plug through all of those applications for, you know, a \$100 here or \$200 there to try to cobble something together, or is there a limit?

**BK:** Because they're all on different types of organizations, I don't see that there's a limit. Now they may be asking where else are you applying or getting support funds. I haven't gone that depth into, but a lot of them are also different, like there's an early music one, and then there's a contemporary chamber one, and so forth. So how many are you actually gonna apply for?

**SB:** (overlapping) Yeah! Some of them are crazy specific.

**BK:** - specific – yeah. So, you kind of have to go through them and say this one looks appropriate and is also realizing that in that list now that maybe a handful of them are closed because of applications have been submitted. But do what you can to see what you can get because you just don't know.

**SB:** When I said some are crazy specific, here's an example: (possibly overlap): There's a Blues Foundation site for blues musicians who have been affected. A fund for music producers, one for contemporary arts, one for early music, one for Gospel music, one for Southern Musicians whose tours were canceled, a fund for elderly musicians who need help specifically with medical bills. Yeah. It's a lot. But it's not unmanageable! I'll link to these lists and other

resources on the IML's Career page in the show notes. If you've had any gigs canceled, hopefully one of these will help you out.

But, as students, you may also be wondering what your transcript will look like if it has a few courses with pass/fail grades. Will it affect your GPA? Should you take a letter grade instead? And when I asked Blaire, she recommended to do what makes you comfortable, and do what you're able to do in your personal situation. And that's the point of changing to this system. Some of us maybe have to care for sick relatives, or don't have a good practice space, or access to good internet at home, so pass fail allows us to continue learning without the added pressure of having our grades docked for circumstances outside our control. But, if you're someone who wants to know your grade, or be able to show that grade in a transcript, you have that option. And it's about options. But it's also important to remember:

**BK:** Hopefully there will be some grace and flexibility and understanding in looking back at this whole "transcripts" thing, so whether they're applying for another program, whether applying for a faculty position, where they ask for all transcripts you've ever had, um, but there's usually some sort of area and opportunity to explain something. Whether that's a personal statement when you're applying to a graduate program or in a cover letter, you are allowed to explain things.

**SB:** So, I used to work in admissions, and I can say this is totally true, and can sometimes be really important. If I saw a weird blip in someone's transcripts, I'd maybe try to reach out to a reference or the school to find out if there was a larger reason behind it, or I'd check the file to see if there was an additional statement. Maybe someone got sick, or suffered the loss of a loved one. Admissions counselors, hiring managers, whoever – they're human beings on the other end. It's very likely they're affected by this situation as well. So, weigh that too when you're figuring out what to do.

But despite all of the challenges this situation has brought to light, Eric focused on what all of these issues reaffirm for us as musicians:

**EL:** My perspective is - this is what 3 weeks in to online teaching and online wind ensemble - is I've learned a lot and I've definitely, it's caused me to reassess to rethink how I operate, how I structure things, but I will say I also - I haven't found the way to replace that human, in-person, that element of music making, and if anything it's reaffirmed for me the value and importance of it.

**SB:** Eric spoke a lot about various things other organizations were doing to try to bridge that gap between all the new virtual things they were having to do and the fact that they were missing these in-person interactions, whether it was sending in parts recorded to a backing track to assemble a performance to maintaining a staff or faculty coffee hour so people could just - decompress. Which made me think of a question:

**SB:** What do you think we'll bring forward, or what do you hope we'll bring forward from this experience? Um...

**EL:** Sure. I can say - I can answer quickly and say I will never take for granted the opportunity to make music together with another human being, and I will cherish every single one of those moments. I hope that, you know this whole experience is like, it just has shown what's important and what's not important, beyond music, in my opinion too. And I hope our society is humbled by it.

But here's I guess here's maybe a, just a thing I took away from Eastman - um, we spend, you know you're there like to develop your craft and um become the most compelling artist possible, and at the end of the day though, it's the relationships that I think are most important. And it's through art, through music making that bring these things, that bring us together, so this experience for me has like quadruple reaffirmed that belief in the power of relationships.

**SB:** I had recorded all of this stuff with Blaire and Eric about how they've been affected personally – and of course, they have. Blaire has lost a bunch of sub gigs in various orchestras; she has an amazing bassoon and harp duo that's been affected. Eric would do conducting clinics, work at a few summer festivals. Even I've lost some income for this choral workshop my wife and I always work at as part of an early music festival. But, yes, the lost income is hard, but what's harder is the fact that we don't get to make that music that we'd been hoping to make. We won't get to see friends, colleagues – some we maybe only see at these summer gigs, or only when that certain ensemble gets together.

To me, all of the things that Blaire and Eric shared are so helpful and practical, and it's good to have things to work on, to keep busy, to keep moving forward and developing. But all of this feels like it comes back to one common theme:

**EL:** It's been amazing for me in reaffirming, to feel and sense the sort of relevance and purpose – uh – of what we do.

But just imagine, though, that first time when you are back together – hopefully it's, you know, in the summer, hopefully it's in June. It could be in December for all we know. But just imagine that time when you are finally back as a chamber ensemble as an ensemble, that first downbeat, and you know the purpose and fire and passion and drive that's gonna be in that room. And so, um, I think for me, that's something to like work towards or to sort of stay inspired is to remember that you know that we will get through this. And again, I bet, I'm too young to have the wisdom to say "we will get through this" but I mean, we have to believe that I think. We have to know that we will navigate this, we will come out stronger, and our art will feel more compelling and relevant than ever.

(Outro music – opening of Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*)

**SB:** Special thanks to Dr. Blaire Koerner and Dr. Eric Laprade for talking with me for so long. There's so much we talked about that I didn't get to include here. They were just incredible to talk to and so generous with their time and resources. If you want to get in touch with Blaire, you can either set an appointment via Handshake, or you can send her an email at [bkoerner@ur.rochester.edu](mailto:bkoerner@ur.rochester.edu). And you can find Eric's PRJC blog posts on the PRJC page of the IML website. He's also offered to talk with students, so I'll include his email – as well as Blaire's and any other contact links in the episode description.

Thanks also to Melissa O'Hara who did so much prep work for this podcast. I'm so sorry she didn't get to finish working on it, but it was a huge help, and will be a great resource once we all come back from this. Thanks Melissa!

And the music? Yes. This is the Monteverdi project that my wife and I are working on. Here it is in all its embarrassing glory. Go out, make art, and keep working.

Again, I'm Stephen Biegner from the Institute for Music Leadership. If you have any comments, or questions – topics you're interested in – you can email the IML – all of our contact information and other programming we offer is on our website at [iml.esm.rochester.edu](http://iml.esm.rochester.edu). Thanks so much for listening. Until next time.

(Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* finishes)