

{Intro Music}

This is the Institute for Music Leadership

Stephen: Here we are! Hey, Georgia, how are you?

Georgia Mills: Alright. How are you?

Stephen: I'm well, I'm well. Is Grant with you or is he going to be....

Georgia: He will be joining us.

Stephen: Welcome to another episode of *Create. Inspire. Lead.* I'm Stephen Biegner. Today, we're talking with Georgia...

Georgia: So my name is George Mills. I'm a second-year Masters in orchestral conducting under Brad Lubman here at Eastman.

Stephen: And in just a moment, we'll meet her colleague...

Stephen: There he is.

Georgia: Oh, look at that.

Grant: Hi

Georgia: Hey!

Stephen: Hey, Grant.

Grant: Figure, better late than never....

Stephen: This is Grant.

Grant: My name is Grant O'Brien. I'm a first-year Masters student studying with Professor Brad Lubman in orchestral conducting. I actually did my undergrad at Eastman.

Stephen: And when these two decided to come back to Eastman in the middle of a pandemic, they were met with some news.

Georgia: Yeah, so essentially what it was: we are typically conducting in Musica Nova. And Nova has gone virtual this semester because of the pandemic.

Stephen: Not only was Musica Nova virtual, but their teacher, Brad Lubman, would also be teaching remotely in the fall. So Georgia and Grant reached out to one another.

Grant: I mean, as soon as we learned that we wouldn't have Musica Nova, Georgia and I were like, "OK, we need to go on a walk. We gotta plot."

Stephen: The result of their plotting: starting their own ensemble.
Do you have a name for the group?

Georgia: We have a name. It was meant to be temporary, but we've ended up keeping it.
It's called MO Ensemble "M" "O" for Mills, O'Brien.

Stephen: And so today, we're going to talk to the founders of MO Ensemble and find out what went into getting this set up for the semester, what roadblocks did they encounter, and talk a little bit about the pieces they've chosen for the group and how you can hear the culmination of all their work. All of that coming up after a short break.

***AD:** Course registration for Eastman students begins the week of December 7th. And whether you're looking for an extra course to keep you full-time or you maybe just want to take a course to help you further your career, the Arts Leadership Program has several courses you can take during the spring semester. ALP courses aren't just "administrative courses" - but they run the gamut from Studio Teaching to Concert Programming and Community Engagement. You can take a course learning how to write grants or one on how to copyright and license your music. ALP courses help you consider your music and art from a different, often entrepreneurial perspective that's so important in today's musical landscape. Courses are open to all grad students, and to all sophomores, juniors, and seniors. For more information and to see a full list of courses offered, visit iml.esm.rochester.edu/alp. That's iml.esm.rochester.edu/alp.*

Stephen: Welcome back. So, facing a semester of no podium time for two conducting students was daunting. Podium time is so important, and while there are some things you can work on over Zoom, it's not quite the same.

Georgia: I mean, the way our teacher actually describes it is really great. He says "Conducting without an orchestra is like cooking with plastic food. You can't learn how it cooks all the way through. You're never going to understand all the nuances of how to make the taste or the flavor... bring out the flavor and things with plastic food. It's just... you're conducting with no one in front of you and no one's responding to you and you can't react to them."

Stephen: Georgia and Grant knew that having a group to conduct would be crucial to their educational experience. The trick was figuring out how to make that work during a pandemic and during a time when rehearsal space was at a premium. The first step was writing to the administration.

Georgia: So we kind of wrote a passionate letter to the administration explaining our situation and what we really hope to get out of the semester as in-person students.

Stephen: And in their impassioned letter, they offered a plan.

Georgia: We sent a proposal to the two deans here at Eastman. There were a couple little tweaks they wanted to make. I think I had initially proposed a piece with electronics. They rejected that because there's so many wires involved and COVID...you know, we want to remain as safe as possible. I completely understood that concern.

Stephen: So, the two circled back and reconsidered what rep they could perform. And it was tricky, because each group of instruments or singers - they all had different requirements. For example, if they had chosen pieces with winds or brass, students would need to be 9 feet apart, and for the size of the ensemble they were aiming for, they'd need a much bigger space which could be harder to come by. And there were concerns about other instruments as well.

Georgia: Also with percussion... it's hard to move percussion. There's a lot...there are a lot of, kind of, COVID concerns in terms of who's touching the percussion instruments.

Stephen: After carefully considering all the various restrictions and safety protocols for each type of ensemble, they came to a decision.

Grant: We decided we want to do our string rep because for one logistical reason is that they can rehearse for longer. So, that gives us more podium time.

Georgia: Luckily, we don't have to be more than six feet away from each other with string players.

Stephen: So, Georgia and Grant got to work on a new proposal. After a few repertoire tweaks and limiting their group to a string ensemble, the administration said, "Ok. We'll give you a space as long as you adhere to the safety protocols." And so MO Ensemble got underway.

Georgia: I think it's three on a part. So it's not a large ensemble by any means, but it was enough for us to still practice our conducting and especially to work with string players, which is something that Grant and I both wanted this semester.

Stephen: Of course, getting the ok from the administration was just the beginning. Now, they had to recruit. And Grant jumped right on it.

Grant: I don't want to spend one more second not having an orchestra. It scares the daylights out of me, like, I want everything set, you know.

Stephen: So, he just sent out emails.

Grant: So I just sent out emails... we didn't really talk. We just... like, I was like, "OK, let's go. Let's start figuring this stuff out."

Stephen: Grant reached out to Meredith Gangler in the ensemble library and asked for help connecting him with players. He and Georgia tapped into their collective resources and reached out, followed up, and tracked people down. And it was tough, because sometimes the players themselves weren't sure what their plans for the semester would be. Some people Georgia and Grant spoke to thought they might take a leave of absence, or maybe they'd stay at home and take all remote classes and lessons. But eventually, the group solidified.

Grant: So about a month into school, we got thirteen string players.

Georgia: We ended up with just like the best ensemble that we could have asked for, and they were all very enthusiastic about it. So we were lucky in that way.

Stephen: And all the wonderful players they recruited - they're doing this project solely on a volunteer basis.

Georgia: They're all such champs for saying yes, because we can't offer much. I mean, I'm offering them baked goods and, you know, Java's at the end of the semester.

Stephen: Georgia and Grant had their ensemble, but it wasn't all smooth sailing from there.

Grant: And so the first thing I'll say is that when you're stepping into a new rehearsal, it's one thing to look at a new piece, but when it's a new group, you're kind of understanding the dynamic of everyone. You're like, okay well this is the concertmaster... like, who's working with me here? Like, who is... you know? And I don't know all of them personally, but I've gotten to know them all personally. So there's that element to it as well. Like, "OK, what kind of culture are we creating here?" Like what... yeah. So getting each other is just kind of...getting used to me was something that was kind of a first step.

Stephen: Aside from the interpersonal elements, there were other more concrete issues they had to deal with. Like, Georgia had planned to do *Shaker Loops* by John Adams.

Georgia: I have always loved *Shaker Loops*. It's one of my favorite string orchestra pieces. I've always wanted to conduct a John Adams work. John Adams himself conducts his own work. So it's great to hear his recordings and then try to emulate it or maybe even change a couple of the interpretive things just because that's something that as a conductor you need to be able to do is put your own spin on things, so...

Stephen: But she was only just able to start rehearsing it the week of October 19th, almost two months into the semester.

Georgia: And the only reason we had to wait this long is because it was on back-order. So that's another problem with COVID-era ensemble playing, is that you have to wait for rentals. It takes a long time for it to get to you, so....

Stephen: So, for the first few weeks of having the ensemble, Georgia had to figure out how to best utilize them. And so she decided it would be good for her and fun for the group to just read through a bunch of pieces.

Georgia: For me, I'm just going through repertoire with them: standard rep, string orchestra pieces. So, we've done so far... Last week, we did Janacek String's Suite, which was very fun. We read through Barber's Adagio for Strings. And then the week before, we had read Mendelssohn Octet.

Stephen: For Grant, though, he's been able to work on the repertoire he chose pretty much from the very beginning. And he had put a lot of thought into what he wanted to program.

Grant: Yeah, I mean, this summer, you know, after the death of George Floyd and the protests began to erupt here and in the United States. And I... a political awakening arose within me. And I immediately started looking up underrepresented composers. I was just like, "OK, there's databases online. There's Spotify. I need to enrich my playlists. I need to enrich my, like, vocabulary on, like, you know, these composers.

Stephen: Grant dug in and was reading books, getting recommendations, skimming through playlists, and sometimes, just randomly looking things up.

Grant: At a random point. I stumbled upon... there's an album that's specifically just Black women of color, like orchestral composers. And I stumbled upon *Banner* actually, which is an amazing piece of music for orchestra that Jesse Montgomery had written... the year's dropping me now, but I was like, there's a pretty cool tuba solo in this...

Stephen: Grant is a tuba player himself, so...he's always on the lookout for a hot tuba solo. But after all the tuba excitement subsided, he listened to other pieces by Montgomery. There was a great piece called *Strum* for string quartet. A big string piece called *Starburst*. And then he heard the piece he ultimately settled on.

Grant: And then there's *Source Code* which is also for string quartet. But she has a version for string ensemble. And so I listened to it and thought, "Wow, there's some moments in here that's gonna be difficult for me as a conductor...."

Stephen: Grant appreciated all the challenges the piece would present technically, and was also excited to bring a piece of music from a Black, female composer to the group. And *Source Code* felt like the right piece of hers to choose because the "source code" or raw materials that Montgomery uses - well, I'll let Grant explain.

Grant: And in her program notes, she explains that the melodies aren't derived from a specific song, but they're all derived from, essentially, you know, slave songs. And they're all derived from the kind of motive's that you might hear. And so in that, I was like, this is amazing. And I just fell in love with them.

Stephen: Finally, on top of all the start-up issues and the musical, artistic concerns, there's the day-to-day of keeping a small ensemble running. Georgia's top tip for handling that:

Georgia: Being very proactive about emails. There's a lot of, kind of, administrative...

Stephen: And the administrative aspects were not totally foreign to Georgia, or to Grant, necessarily, but a lot of people look at administrative jobs as something to fall back on - something separate from their music-making. But Georgia and Grant were finding that it was also a crucial skill they needed in order to achieve and continue their music-making.

Georgia: Because we were scheduling rehearsals, we were organizing time with our players specifically, we were getting subs and helping people get subs, we were acting as liaisons between the administration at Eastman and our group... So I think, as you know, I was part of the Institute of Music Leadership degree program.

Stephen: Georgia got an MA in the Music Leadership program which is part of the IML, led by the wonderful Rachel Roberts.

Georgia: So I actually went through a lot about how to run an ensemble. And that definitely came to play as we've been organizing this group. Just in terms of being able to be a leader, take administrative action where it's needed, be very, very pointed and stalwart about what we wanted out of this ensemble especially toward the administration.

Stephen: Administrating is essential to what you do in order to make your music. Even if you just play in a small ensemble, or as a soloist, you're using admin skills to organize your time, keep track of and answer emails about gigs or other opportunities, update your resume, and on and on. It's intrinsic to what you do whether you realize it or not. And if you can hone and develop your admin chops - it can yield some pretty good results.

Grant: I always like to start with a large group. And if there is a change in personnel and then the second work has less and less. So that it's like people... If you need everyone there at the beginning, keep them all there, and then gradually people leave until the rehearsal's done. It's like a really good program.

Stephen: Bless you. The number of rehearsals I've been in...

Grant: No one does that!

Stephen: No one does that, and it's so....

Seriously, if you take nothing away from this episode other than scheduling your rehearsals around personnel needed for each piece, I'll consider it a success. I can't even begin to explain...Anyway. The ensemble is still ongoing. They're still meeting each week to give Georgia and Grant podium time - and just so you know - they aren't doing this in a vacuum. Their teacher, Brad Lubman, totally supports them and often sits in on rehearsals.

Georgia: He's actually in a Zoom call with us. So he's watching our conducting. He doesn't really weigh in on a ton in those rehearsals, but afterwards he'll send us e-mails full of paragraphs of things that we can do better for next time, and good feedback. So that's always helpful.

Stephen: So, there are still elements of running their own ensemble that Georgia and Grant are discovering in the moment. But, what's the end goal?

Georgia: Grant is scheduling a recording session for this weekend, I believe. Yeah, it's on Sunday, so it's soon. And they've been... he's been working on them with this piece for the past month or so since the beginning of October. They're culminating that project with a recording session, video and audio on Sunday. And then he's probably going to move on to another piece. For the John Adams, I plan on doing a recording session at the end of the semester with them, so probably mid-November. So we're gonna have something to show for all of this.

Stephen: They couldn't get a space for a final performance, so this is the next best thing - a moment of ingenuity that came out of the pandemic. Which made me wonder - would they be doing this if there weren't a pandemic? Or, even, now that they have done it, would they continue?

Georgia: I think I...now that I've done it, I would do it again in a non-pandemic era because there are some benefits to running your own ensemble and kind of as... although we do, we do have Brad kind of watching over Zoom. We are running the entire ensemble ourselves. So I actually gained a lot more experience coaching and, you know, taking direct action in terms of my interpretation of these pieces, choosing repertoire, things like that. So there are a lot of benefits to putting together your own group just for fun, a reading group or, you know, reading contemporary music as well.

Grant: Well, you know, that's a great question. And I. Well, I mean, with Empire, I have people that I call upon that I'll recruit regularly. But I, so I would be doing that... What you know, if this summer has taught me anything, it's that we have got a responsibility as musicians to really consider how we are programming and everything. So. So, you know... it would have been different, that's for sure. But yeah. Recruiting ensembles, definitely. Maybe... maybe not MO ensemble. But you know, something like that.

Stephen: Georgia's maybe a little more open to the idea of continuing the group.

Georgia: I was thinking about it. I would love to. It really depends if we can get those players back if people have time. Hopefully if we can hold the same players and those members stick with us and want to continue working with us. I would be more than happy to continue our group.

Stephen: Musica Nova will be back in the spring, as will Brad Lubman. So, in that sense, things get back to normal. But obviously, there will still be constraints and precautions they'll have to take. And MO ensemble? Well. It could be up in the air, but, what isn't during the time of

COVID? Either way, both Georgia and Grant have learned a lot from this experience. And sure, it was sort of born out of necessity because of the pandemic, but they both have some big ideas for when the pandemic is finally over.

Georgia: Oh my gosh. I really want to perform *Effete* by Debussy. It's one of those pieces that I've just always. It's always called me and I've... It's a huge orchestral work, so it's definitely not something that could be done. Right now. But that would be kind of a dream piece for when the pandemic is over.

Grant: Well, this is gonna be kind of selfish, but over the quarantine, I wrote a piece and it is a tone poem. And I spent so long, like, and I was... it was a great project to do over the summer. So I was... like, I would have loved to teach kids to do that. It's for a small ensemble. I thought that maybe that's not as splendid of an answer. But I am...yeah. That's the first thing that comes to mind is to finally get to perform the work that I worked on during the summer.

Stephen: Now, these are Georgia and Grant's sort of post-COVID dream pieces, and we didn't talk about how realistic it would be to put these things together once we can finally be closer than 6 feet apart from one another. But, undoubtedly, MO Ensemble has given them a unique experience that can inform how they approach future projects or how they can make their own opportunities in a post-COVID landscape - whenever that happens. Yet, even though this ensemble has ultimately a positive experience, and sure, they could probably translate the skills they learned from doing it into a future concert or ensemble, I get the sense that, like many current students, both are yearning for something simpler and non-musical.

Georgia: So I really look forward to being able to just be in close proximity with people without being nervous about it. I think restaurants, social gatherings, things like that. I do miss it. I'm not necessarily a huge extrovert, but I really do miss being around my friends in one kind of bunch without having to, like, limit our time together and the number of people. So that's what I look forward to.

{outro music}

Stephen: Special thanks to both Georgia Mills and Grant O'Brien for taking the time to talk with me about MO Ensemble. In addition to that project, they're actually also starting their own podcast.

Grant: So it's part of our nonprofit Empire Film and Media Ensemble. And it's a podcast that explores different media music composers. So the first podcast was all about Bernard Hermann,

who wrote all the Hitchcock scores, Brian De Palma scores. And so we spent like three hours more than that, like talking about his entire life. And we did it in three different charts. And it was really fun. Oh, my gosh. It was so much fun.

Stephen: We'll try to share their first episode when it's ready, and if you don't already, be sure to follow the IML on Facebook. Once Georgia and Grant have their final recordings of Jesse Montgomery's *Source Code* and John Adams' *Shaker Loops*, we'll try to share that out on our Facebook page so you can see and hear everything they've been talking about and working on all semester. Anyway, I'm so grateful to both Georgia and Grant - they spent a lot of time with me, and there's so much we talked about that didn't make it into the episode, but I'm so happy we were able to have those conversations.

This episode was mixed by Frances Inzenhofer - thank you Frances! And Emma Gierszal edited the transcript and came up with the idea for this episode. And if you have an idea for an episode, or if you just have questions or comments, please feel free to send me an email - my email will be in the show notes. You can also comment directly on our SoundCloud page. Thank you so much for listening. Go out, make art, do good work. From the IML, I'm Stephen Biegner. Until next time.