

QUARTER NOTES *Plus**

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HSO MUSICIANS UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

A CONVERSATION WITH ALLYSON AND JOSHUA MICHAL

As all of us (musicians and staff) continue to work from home, please enjoy this year's virtual donor benefit: an in-depth conversation with two of our musicians, along with a link to a special musical collaboration they've prepared just for you.

For our third musician collaboration this season, we happily introduce you to Joshua Michal (French Horn) and Allyson Michal (violin), one of several married couples in the Hartford Symphony. Josh won his position with the HSO first, in 2014, and when a violin audition was held in 2016, Allyson won the job. We were delighted that they asked to be interviewed for Quarter Notes Plus and their gift to you is a unique performance that you can access via the link at the bottom of the last page of this issue.

QN: We are so thrilled to be able to speak with both of you! First, tell us where you live and which orchestras you play with besides Hartford?

Josh: We live in Greenfield, Massachusetts, just south of Vermont. We love the location and can



Josh and Allyson in performance in Bezanson hall at UMass, Amherst

travel easily to play with Hartford Symphony as well as the Rhode Island Philharmonic, where I'm second horn and Allyson plays in the first violin section.

Allyson: We also both play with Portland Symphony in Maine, where I'm in the first violin section and Josh frequently subs.

QN: Our audiences are curious to know more about your musical journeys, so Allyson, ladies first!

Allyson: Our stories are so similar because we both come from musical families. I started on the piano at age four, and then added violin at age five. Both of my parents are musicians. My dad was a first-year band director when he met my mother, a first-year choir teacher in the same high school! My dad also performed with brass bands while my mother is a well-known composer of children's choral music, so music was a central part of my upbringing. I grew up in Lebanon,



Josh, at the Schuster Center
in Dayton, Ohio

and my sister played the trumpet, like my dad.

Josh: I also grew up in Ohio, but my hometown of McArthur is quite rural. Ours was a homestead farm with goats, chickens, rabbits, and a pet turkey named Scooter. Both of my parents were also musicians. They're retired from performing now, but my dad was a cellist with the Columbus Symphony, and my mom played cello with the Canton Symphony. I remember frequently attending Columbus Symphony concerts with my grandparents. They would bribe me to sit quietly with the promise of a muffin during intermission. It worked, but not always! I started piano lessons when I was three years old with my grandmother who taught in Columbus. My Grandma was one of the first women to receive a PhD in music from The Ohio State University! She had a very full studio and specialized in working with children who had special needs such as autism or Down's syndrome. She was a great teacher, but I wasn't the best student. If I practiced, I would get a quarter to buy candy, but usually she just gave me the quarter, even if I didn't practice! She just enjoyed spending time with me.

QN: With such varied musical "experiments", how did you settle on the instruments you play now?

Josh: When I was about seven years old, I was playing an interactive CD-ROM at my grandparents' house. The program allowed you to hear instruments from all over the world. If you clicked on a location, you'd

OH, in between Cincinnati and Dayton. From a young age, I attended Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra concerts with my family. I remember going to outdoor concerts at Riverbend before I was old enough to sit still in the concert hall. My younger sister is also a violinist (in the Knoxville Symphony), but we both grew up playing violin and piano. We also each played an instrument in the band at school; I played French Horn (like my mom growing up)



Allyson in performance at Merrill Auditorium in Portland, Maine

hear an instrument from that region. When I selected Chicago, the featured instrument was the French Horn, playing a section of a Mozart horn concerto. I was immediately drawn to the beautiful sound of the horn and apparently, I went downstairs and begged my parents to let me play horn but I was too young to begin.

When I turned nine, and finally big enough, my parents bought me

my first horn. I loved it, but I didn't have a formal teacher. My parents bought me recordings and a book by Phillip Farkas called "The Art of French Horn Playing" and I basically taught myself everything, with the help of my parents.

I listened to tons of recordings and would do my best to mimic the sound I heard. My high school band teacher, who played trombone, gave me a few lessons and I also had a few lessons from the horn teacher at Ohio University. But that was it! I really didn't have a teacher until I got to college.

Allyson: I started on piano, but was enthralled with the violin. Two videos that I watched at home simply hooked me. One was a taped special about Midori, and the other featured Leila Josefowicz performing with the New York Philharmonic at the age of 11. I started to beg for a violin, even though my parents weren't necessarily big fans at the time! I was driven to learn violin repertoire and idealized some of the young women artists who were so famous at the time.

QN: We know you are both teachers. Where do you teach, and how have your early experiences shaped you as a teacher?

Allyson: I teach privately and at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley. Due to some bad habits from childhood, I had to fix my technique in college; but I think this makes me a better teacher. The Suzuki method



Allyson and Josh, married 6 years, at the Schuster Center in Dayton, Ohio

(which I studied on both piano and violin) encourages students and teachers to say two good things about their performance before discussing anything that needs to be corrected, and I apply this technique in my lessons. I also really push my students to use their knowledge to problem-solve on their own, and to be their own teachers. This was a skill I learned while studying with Mauricio Fuks, at Indiana University.

Josh: I am Assistant Professor of

Horn at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. My full-time, tenure track job brought us to this area from Ohio and it keeps me quite busy! Teaching is deeply rewarding. It's all about giving back and sharing my experiences. I love being actively involved in my students' musical journeys. We spend a lot of time talking about goals and developing plans to reach those goals. Teaching also gives meaning and purpose to all of the things I struggled with early

on. I'm a much better teacher today because many aspects of horn playing didn't come naturally or easily to me. I had to figure it out for myself and I'm certainly a more empathetic and effective teacher as a result.

I am also on the faculty of the Interlochen Summer Arts Camp in Interlochen, Michigan where I coach some of the best and brightest high school horn and brass players from around the world. It's a special place and I get to work with some amazing faculty. The camp was cancelled last summer, but I'm very excited to go back this year!

QN: How did the two of you meet and when did you get married?

Josh: We met during our undergraduate years at Indiana University. A mutual friend introduced us briefly in the cafeteria, but we really connected when Allyson needed a ride back to IU from Ohio after break. She called her friend from Cincinnati Youth Orchestra to see if he could help, and as it happened, I'd already agreed to give him a lift. Allyson joined us and I made quite the impression on her parents. I couldn't figure out how to reattach my unicycle onto the bike rack after loading her suitcase into the trunk! That trip solidified our friendship. From there, we started working on the Brahms horn trio, and our post-rehearsal hangouts turned into dates. We finally made it official and started dating about a month later.

QN: Wait, Josh, you ride a unicycle? Do you still have it?

Josh: I started riding a unicycle in undergrad. A friend gave me one and I thought it was a fun challenge. I practiced in the dorm hallways by using the walls to stabilize myself until the custodian yelled at me for scuffing up the walls whenever I fell, which happened fairly often. (OK - every time.) I moved my practice outside to

the tennis courts and got pretty good at riding circles around the nets. It takes a lot of practice and patience to ride a unicycle so I haven't really kept up with it. I have sadly retired from unicycling but perhaps I can pass the baton to my son one day - it really was a blast! (And as it turns out, it was a good way to get Allyson's attention too!)

Allyson: He's right! That unicycle absolutely got my attention! We got engaged during my senior year at IU, and after deliberating over which schools to apply to together, we decided to attend Northwestern University for our graduate work while also playing in the Civic Orchestra of Chicago. We actually skipped our NU graduation ceremony to get married in June 2008. While at

Northwestern, we became friends with Kyra Sovronsky, Ruth Sovronsky's daughter! (Ruth is HSO Director of Development.) That just goes to show how small the music world is!

QN: We know Josh pursued an advanced degree and holds a Doctor of Music.

Josh: I wasn't planning on returning to school after my Masters degree, but after several years on the audition circuit, I felt I needed to take some more lessons. I reached out to Bruce Henniss at Ohio State University because I had heard really good things about him and his teaching. After one lesson, I knew I had found a special teacher and immediately applied for the Doctoral program at OSU. Bruce is such an important person in my life and we stay in touch



Josh and Allyson, with Clark, at 3 weeks - November 2018

regularly. I was granted a fellowship at OSU, which gave me a three-year position that included a stipend, benefits, and time for me to complete my dissertation. I learned so much about myself and my approach to horn playing by studying with Bruce. Additionally, I was offered the job at UMass during my last year of the program so it was definitely a worthwhile experience!

QN: Can you tell us what music you are listening to when you're not performing?

Allyson: Well, with a two-year-old at home, we listen to a lot of children's music, like Raffi! But, like most musicians I know, my musical taste is rather eclectic. I like Joni Mitchell, Muse, the Jezabels, I'm with Her, Nothing but Thieves, and Chris Thile, among many others. I feel like I enjoy listening to other types of music since classical music is my job.

Josh: Both of our families primarily listened to classical music, so that's what we each knew until middle or high school. I went through a rebellious country music phase, and now I like classic bands such as Queen and Chicago. I've also been enjoying some folk music by Chris Thile, Aoife O'Donovan, and Molly Tuttle, all thanks to Allyson's influence and introductions. No matter the style of music we listen to, we want to hear good musicians, who are skilled and have depth.

After a long day of practicing, teaching, and performing though, I usually listen to podcasts such as Throughline, Car Talk, and The Splendid Table on my drive home.

QN: Can you tell us anything special about the instruments you now play?

Allyson: I have a modern instrument made by Peter Psarianos and Jonathan Price in Troy, MI. I bought



Best buddies. Clark (6 months) and the family Samoyed, Fitz

it a year after it was made (in 2010). It has a beautiful sound and distinguishable engravings on the end piece, pegs, tail piece, and chin rest.

Josh: For 17 years, I played a German-made horn by Engelbert Schmid. That's the horn I was playing when I won the HSO audition. I loved this horn but was ready for a change after playing the same instrument for my entire career. The problem is that it takes time to get used to a new instrument, so between playing and teaching, I never had the time to transition to a new horn. The pandemic gave me that chance. With very few performance obligations I had the break necessary to make a change. I decided to purchase a custom-made horn from Stephen Shires in Vermont. The Shires Company, which Stephen founded, is very well regarded for trumpets and trombones. Stephen sold the company a few years ago and moved to Vermont where he now makes

horns. I had the opportunity to travel to his shop several times and worked closely with him to create a horn that is custom built for me. I love it!

QN: Tell us about your family and what you've been doing during this pandemic.

Allyson: Our son Clark is almost 2 and a half, and like any toddler, takes up an enormous amount of time and energy. We're constantly trying to come up with new activities with him that engage him but don't drive us nuts! It takes some patience and creativity but it is so much fun. Between family life and work, I've never had a real hobby. But since the pandemic started, I've actually been incredibly busy pursuing a nursing career and taking prerequisite courses, which has been a total change of pace.

Josh: While Allyson has been busy with classes, Clark and I have had a lot of time to bond and play. I am now a



Clark, age 2 - Fall 2020

professional fort builder and I'm also frequently called to be a jungle gym to swing on, a horse to ride, or a mountain for trucks to drive on. When the weather was nice, we loved to go for bike rides and walks as a family with our dog - a Samoyed named Fitz. This winter, we've been playing in the snow and going for hikes which Fitz and Clark both really enjoy!

As a musician, it's unusual to have so much down time and it has been a challenge to stay motivated artistically. But the pandemic did give me the time to complete a huge project, the recording of a solo CD.

QN: Tell us more about the CD!

Josh: I'm so excited to have this CD officially released. It's been a four-year journey from start to finish and there were definitely times when I thought it wasn't going to happen. The CD is called "Ekphrasis: New Music for Horn and Electronics." I commissioned a number of the pieces featured on the CD and the others are world premiere recordings so it really is unique. The music is electro-acoustic, meaning it blends electronic and computer generated sounds with the acoustic sounds of the horn. I know this may not sound

palatable to many, but my mission from the start was to create music that was interesting and accessible to a wide audience. I think I was successful - I really like every piece on the album! The title, Ekphrasis, comes from one of the pieces I commissioned that shares the same name. The term is Greek in origin and is a rhetorical exercise where one art form, often literary, is used to vividly describe another work of art. As an added bonus, Allyson performs with me on one of the pieces as well. We recorded it while she was pregnant with Clark so it really was a family event! Ekphrasis is published by MSR Classics and is available directly from MSR and on Amazon, iTunes, and YouTube.

QN: And who is the cook in your family? Any favorite recipes we can share with the Quarter Notes audience?

Josh: I really love to cook. It's been a passion of mine for a long time. I think I enjoy having a creative outlet that isn't music and that also results in a delicious meal. I even considered going to culinary school instead of music school! I don't really have a favorite recipe because I love finding new recipes to make. I am obsessed with the flavors and spices of Spanish and Mediterranean cuisine though. I have started writing down recipes that I like so that I can keep track of them better. The latest recipes I've tried are for a pork and cider stew from thekitchn.com and an apple crumble pie from preppykitchen.com. I've made both a few times now and they are a hit with Allyson and Clark. (Clark now asks for apple pie on a daily basis...uh oh)

To hear what Allyson and Josh have prepared just for you, please click this link!

[CLICK HERE](#)