

October 22 Arts and Entertainment Source: Annabelle's happy neighbors not anti-violins

VOENNA director keeps 'Strings on the Strait' going



Annabelle Marie and her a capella youth choir, VOENNA, was grounded because of COVID-19, so she took to her backyard to play for neighbors almost nightly since March. (Courtesy photo)

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For the residents of 10 homes along the Benicia waterfront, the sound is a welcome respite since the mid-March pandemic protocols.

Annabelle Marie, music director for children's choir VOENNA, stepping out from her home to stand by the rocks along the Carquinez Strait. Raising her violin, she waits for the programmed music to play and she jumps in.

It's about 40 minutes of near nightly escape for Annabelle Marie and the neighbors, who graciously applaud, photograph, video and, well, expect the free mini-concert.

"There's been so much negativity around — the pandemic, then the protests, the fires, so many things — that can bring you down," Annabelle Marie said. "I just chose to focus on what can bring you up and to me, it's music. It's always music. So I do it for me, and the neighbors are all part of it."



Annabelle Marie said it's tough to keep her children's choir involved because they're exhausted from being online all day with school. (Courtesy photo)

Yes, the human support is kind and humbling, Annabelle Marie said. But "even if I had no one watching, I would come out."

The performing began a day after the mid-March shelter-in-place at the suggestion of one of the neighbors. From then until June, "I did it every night," Annabelle Marie said.

At 6 p.m., Annabelle Marie would always be ready to go as neighbors slowly put folding chairs down along the waterfront on their property.

When she stopped playing for three weeks because of the bad air quality from the various fires, neighbors let her know they missed her.

"They're passing me on the street, 'Annabelle, no pressure, but we really miss your playing.' I'd say, 'I can't because it's too smoky,'" she said. "I do have incredible neighbors."

Annabelle Marie has leveled off a bit, playing three or four times a week now. Hey, there's tennis. And golf.

"What else do you do during a pandemic but learn a new sport?" she asks, laughing.

Annabelle Marie has about 50 lists of pre-programmed tunes. She'll flick on the laptop and join in with her violin. Though she sings and plays keyboard, this is about the violin.

"The feeling with the pandemic, just being home all the time, I was so creatively thirsting," she said. "I challenged myself — so when the music plays, I'm not going to practice ahead of time. I'm going to see what my fingers come up with. In the beginning, I made a lot of mistakes. I couldn't find the keys."

When it all began, it took a week until the neighbors realized it would be a nightly effort, Annabelle Marie said.

"They couldn't believe I was doing it every night," she said.

Bad weather? No matter.

"There were two nights it really rained, but I've got to do it. It's tradition," Annabelle Marie said.

Annabelle Marie's husband, Dale Robbins, held an umbrella over the amplifier as she played rain-related songs.

A Hogan High School graduate, Robbins was inspired by his wife's playing. During one evening performance, he dragged his clarinet out for a duo of Canon by Pachelbel that reached 10,000 YouTube views.

"We worked on it two weeks before he could get the nerve to do it," Annabelle Marie said.

It paid off. From an online view, the two got booked at a 2021 wedding at a winery "that I hope didn't burn down," Annabelle Marie said.

The VOENNA director would rather be preparing her a capella choir for rehearsals and concerts. But with COVID-19, it's all virtual right now — and not easy for a group of young people who have performed for presidents and even a crown prince.

"People think virtual is not as hard work as physically being there. It's 10 times harder to have a virtual programming and to get the kids excited," Annabelle Marie said. "You can never have ensembles. You have to do each kid one at a time. And the kids are tired of virtual. They're so burned out doing it all day for school."

Annabelle Marie figures it could be a year before everything is "back to normal."

"I miss the live audience, the interaction, the synergy," she said, fretting that when the pandemic is done with, "how many theaters will still be alive?"

Unfortunately, Annabelle Marie said, the United States doesn't value its artists as other countries do, including Belgium, where her son Dominic resides, and in Canada, where her son Francisco lives.

"They want to be 'artist-rich' and that's what the U.S. needs to do," Annabelle Marie said. "We need to care about our artists."

Meanwhile, she'll continue performing three or four times a week on the rocks along the Benicia shore.

"I can't stop yet," she said. "I just love it. It feeds me."



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