

# A Minnow Navigates the Torrents

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*COVID-19's threat to the performing arts sector was existential but also propelled arts companies to reinvent themselves and build up their digital capabilities to sustain their artistic practices. Mervin Beng shares the story of Resound Collective's struggles and how the group, despite being a small and young arts company, overcame them with tenacity, optimism and a willingness to take risks.*

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## Introduction

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As a latecomer and one of the smallest arts companies in Singapore, Resound Collective can be considered a minnow, swimming in waters among larger fish. The COVID-19 pandemic hit all arts companies hard but, for our company, it often felt like we were at the mercy of fierce, unpredictable currents that could hurl us against deadly rocks or sweep us downstream into oblivion.

This article shares Resound Collective's pandemic journey, reflecting on how key decisions were made. It was not a time for measured, deliberate decision-making. Often, there were no options. At other times, a go or no-go decision had to be made within hours. The Resound Collective that exists today is, to a large extent, a reflection of some of the decisions made during those two years.

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## Background to Resound Collective

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In 2016, a band of enthusiastic musicians and music-lovers with many years of experience organising community-music making formed a non-profit musicians' collective. Resound Collective first focused on creating a chamber orchestra (a band of typically 25-40 musicians) named "re:Sound". Three years later, the company embarked on a year-long project to form a string quartet, eventually named Concordia Quartet.

After almost four years of incubation and developmental work, almost overnight in early 2020, the company's activities were shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on gatherings, concerts and face-to-face work meant that meeting for rehearsals and presenting concerts was impossible.

This was especially dramatic for the Concordia Quartet. Formed in October 2019, their debut concert on 1 February 2020 already saw reduced audience attendance over growing concerns about the new virus circulating in Singapore. Their stint in Wild Rice's *The Importance of Being Earnest* which followed soon after was shortened, and the COVID-19 "circuit breaker", which took effect from 7 April 2020, meant that the quartet musicians could not even meet to rehearse.

Our fiscal year 2020 (April 2020 to March 2021) was to have been a big year. There had been planned collaborations with European chamber musicians in April 2020, a concerto in August with top UK pianist Stephen Hough, and a symphonic jazz concert with Cultural Medallion recipient Jeremy Monteiro early

in 2021. It should have been the year when Resound Collective made its mark as a major player on the classical music scene in Singapore. Instead, with great reluctance, over the next months, these and other planned events were cancelled or postponed.

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## Planning with Strategic Intent

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Early on, it became clear that for a company built around promoting and presenting live classical music, the pandemic was an existential threat. Nonetheless, compared to other music groups, Resound Collective's size, structure and circumstances were unique. It had just four employees (quartet members), a handful of part-time staff, no physical office, and outsourced services extensively. Our comparative advantages included nimbleness, low overheads and the ability to act decisively. On the other hand, our track record and mindshare were very limited. Similarly, our audiences and donor base were still small.

The company had heavily invested in the previous years on building up a chamber orchestra and forming the new string quartet. We worried: if the artistic capabilities we had built up were lost or diminished by dormancy through a prolonged pandemic, what would be left? It soon became clear we had to emerge from the pandemic without losing too much of what we had built up.

Even if our priorities were clear, the strategic decisions we needed to make were not. Experts in medicine and science could not agree on how long pandemic measures would be in place. How would 6, 12 or 20 months of inactivity affect ensemble skills

and artistic drive? Would donors continue to support us if they could not see and hear our musicians for an extended period? Would music-lovers turn to the fast-emerging free digital treats being offered by top musicians and orchestras around the world?

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## Dogged Determination and Good Fortune

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Cancelling or postponing planned events did not take much deliberation. It had to be done. But finding a way to keep the very young Concordia Quartet learning, growing and performing seemed impossible. Two to four weeks off could mean the end of the world. But what would happen when the restrictions lasted longer than six months?

There had been previous pilot projects at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music on remote performances with musicians located across the world. Conceptually, this approach could allow our quartet's musicians to work with one another in a socially-distanced manner. However, we were also aware that these tests utilised very advanced, expensive video recording equipment running on next-generation university research networks.

By a stroke of good fortune, two members of Resound Collective's management team had spent several decades in the technology industry. As specialists in high-performance networking and digital media streaming and motivated by the need to find a workaround to our quartet's restrictions, they were able to put together open-source software ("Jamulus"). This could run over Singapore's high-speed home broadband that allowed just about acceptable audio for the four musicians to test out



**Figure 1.** E-flyer for the first concert presented live under COVID “circuit breaker” restrictions in June 2020, where each of four performers played from their bedrooms. 2020. Image courtesy of Resound Collective.

working together. This was an audio-only solution, as video would have entailed greater latency, making it impossible for musicians to keep timing with each other.

But the initial experience of each musician playing at home into a microphone while keeping time with fellow musicians was intensely frustrating. The first trial lasted less than 45 minutes before the musicians gave up for the day. The two “techies” in the company persevered, spending hours to test and refine the connections. Over a three-week period, the delays each player heard from the others were reduced, while the musicians became more adept at playing through the latency, though it created fatigue over extended periods.

After six weeks, the musicians and technical team ran a live concert, broadcast with each player performing in their bedrooms. This was a world’s first and was reported on by the *BBC Music* magazine in their September 2020 issue.

The live broadcast in June was followed by an equally audacious project in August, where almost 30 musicians performed in four separate rooms, connected by microphones, headsets and a large audio console, playing Mozart’s *Symphony No. 40* live on YouTube. The mixing console and relatively proximity of the rooms meant much better audio latency, but again the musicians had to play “blind”, only able to use their ears to keep in time with one another.

The quality of the live digital broadcasts was a far cry from the pristine pre-recorded video streams that many orchestras offered during the pandemic, but most listeners understood that the technology used was very different. What the events offered was the spirit of a “live performance”, and a peek into how Resound Collective was trying to keep operating despite the COVID-19 measures. Had we decided against these relatively risky and costly projects, and stuck with more well-tested approaches, re:Sound and Concordia Quartet would have been completely dormant for five to seven months.

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## Building Capacity for the Next Generation

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Pre-pandemic, our regular stream of concerts and an internship program provided opportunities for the company to try out fresh conservatory graduates and newly returned postgraduates. The pandemic had put a complete stop to this. But in 2021, a grant to support self-employed persons (SEPs) in the arts was announced. Thanks to some fresh, lateral thinking by our General Manager, a re:Sound concert featuring these SEPs who had missed the chance to trial with the orchestra was planned.

The challenge thrown at them was huge. The five concerto soloists and half the orchestra had never played with the collective. Could they perform to the same level as our pre-COVID ensemble?

With just five rehearsals, the musicians prepared an all-Italian repertoire that our pre-pandemic collective would have found challenging. But the concert at the Victoria Concert Hall was a huge success, delighting music reviewers, teachers and fellow musicians. The young musicians' hunger to prove themselves, as well as their talent and plenty of adrenaline pulled them through.

A music group's destiny cannot be defined by just one concert, but the self-confidence and belief generated by the musicians involved and their many fellow musicians were infectious. There was a buzz on social media among the music community and, thanks to this SEP concert, a talented new cohort of top players and leaders became part of our collective.

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## Not All Smooth Sailing

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These examples of out-of-box thinking and willingness to take on higher risk in the face of uncertainty clearly paid off. But there were also times when spirits were low and energy was drained.

The unexpected COVID-19 "Heightened Alert" status announced on 15 May 2021 caught almost all arts companies by surprise. For Resound Collective, it meant the cancellation on short notice of concerts in May and July. This round of cancellations, following those in 2020, were particularly disheartening, as what we had read as light on the horizon turned out to be a mirage.

Later in 2021, informal chats with the quartet musicians signalled that pandemic fatigue was setting in. It should not have been a surprise; they had faced two concert cancellations, a cancelled overseas festival and months of rehearsals without the chance to perform. An overseas offsite was quickly arranged to give them some change of scenery and the chance to recharge before a coming concert. "Overseas" during a pandemic was strictly limited to Sentosa, but the gesture did help lift spirits and re-energise the players.

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## Back to the New Normal?

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In 2022, there was a burst of activity in the cultural scene to firm up and present events, including some that had been postponed since 2020. There was great optimism and relief. However, this bounce-back was accompanied by a relatively slow return of audiences

to concerts. Anecdotally, it was not that they had lost the appetite for live events, but that social gatherings, an urgency to celebrate weddings and birthdays, and revenge travel took priority.

After the struggles of the pandemic, and the hectic post-COVID rebound, the road ahead for Resound Collective will hopefully be a little less bumpy, as audiences return to the best of what arts and culture can offer them. The backlog of concerts that were postponed by COVID has been cleared, so events for 2023 and 2024 will be a little less hectic. At last, there is enough calm to revive thoughts of an overseas tour!

The “new normal” will also throw us challenges, as COVID-19 has reminded us many times. Already inflation has driven operating costs up. Air travel is much more costly, and venue hire dates have become more difficult to secure. But, for now, these seem like minor worries compared to the situation from 2020 to 2022.

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## What Will “Success” Look Like?

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Thus far, Resound Collective has been promoting chamber music primarily through chamber orchestra and the Concordia Quartet. For a more enduring impact, a *chamber music loving culture* in the broader public needs to exist. This would mean not just strong audience numbers and a healthy range of performances year-round, but the adoption of regular practice of chamber music as a norm among music lovers.

In 2014, when Igor Yuzefovich, the then newly-appointed concertmaster of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) arrived in Singapore, one of the first things he did was to look for fellow chamber musicians. This was not for a public performance, but a house concert in Singapore. I was fortunate to be present at this immensely enjoyable event. Since then, I have attended others, primarily presented by musicians from our company, as well as one by a mix of amateur and professional musicians.

Orchestral music can only be performed in a hall or auditorium. But chamber music performances can take place outside formal venues for family, friends, enthusiasts and other musicians. With thousands of music students trumping their examinations and attaining diplomas, Singapore is well-placed to see more chamber music performed in budget-friendly, non-traditional spaces.

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## A Small Step in That Direction

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Early next year, Resound Collective presents the Singapore Chamber Music Festival (SMCF), a gathering of musicians of all ages and abilities to celebrate chamber music. While many festivals in Singapore tend to emphasise high profile *international* visiting stars, there is equal, if not greater, focus at SCMF to encourage students of music, young or old(er) to connect with other musicians, to form groups and participate.

At the time of writing, registrations have just opened, but three groups intending to take part have caught our attention—a piano trio of mainly retirees who have dusted off their instruments and aptly named

their group “Diamonds and Rust”, a young string quartet with players (aged 10 years and older) from different music studios, and an adult string quartet from Malaysia, who are working hard to secure financial support for their trip to Singapore.

One run of a chamber music festival may make a small impression on the music landscape. However, over years, its impact can be surprising. SCMF had run on a smaller scale, in 2003, 2005 and 2010, and many young participants in those runs are now leading chamber artists and musicians in Singapore and beyond, playing in the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and of course, Resound Collective.

Who knows? The next time you hear chamber music in Singapore, it may not be in a concert hall, but at a home soirée, performed by friends who have bonded for years over music. And hopefully in time, all over the island, we will hear such sweet sounds from private spaces as the community music landscape expands. □

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## About The Author



After over three decades in the technology industry spanning regional technical consulting to marketing and education in networking, Mervin Beng now spends most of his available time on his lifelong pursuits of music and acoustics. Beng's engagement with community music-making started from his National Service days. A founding member of the Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra, Singapore Youth Orchestra under the National University of Singapore, the NUS Symphony Orchestra, and the Chamber Players, Beng has also served on the boards and committees of the Singapore National Youth Orchestra, T'ang Quartet, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. He has contributed classical music reviews to *The Straits Times* since 2002. Beng founded the Singapore Chamber Music Festival in 2003. In 2015, he formed Resound Collective, where he is currently the Chairman.

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