

PT High School musicians present virtual concert, fundraiser for families in need



A distanced in-person practice session in Port Townsend. Such measures, as well as using video and audio recordings and digital compilations, will allow a revised version of Port Townsend High School's annual Winter Stringfest to return Saturday, Dec. 12.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SORINA JOHNSTON

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Everyone knows champions play through the pain. And although this year has been pretty painful, the musical members of the Port Townsend High School orchestra are working around the restrictions and tackling unforeseen technology challenges to stage the 2020 Winter Stringfest regardless.

And they're doing it for a good cause, too.

The performance, set to be streamed live at www.ptthsmusic.com at 5 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 12, is equal parts a celebration of creativity despite adversity and a fundraiser for the Port Townsend Kiwanis' Project Backpack program, which provides meals to families who qualify for free and reduced lunches in the Port Townsend School District.

“Food insecurity is a real concern for many children in East Jefferson County [and] we are glad to support and partner with Port Townsend High School’s music program to continue this service,” said PT Kiwanis president Liz Quayle.

Last year, officials said, Project Backpack provided almost 18,000 weekend meals, and it’s now more important than ever as families face pandemic-induced financial hardships.

The student musicians have been fundraising in the lead-up to the show, but in this case, much like the election, every vote (or, you know, every view) will matter.

A “Backpack Giving Fund” has been established, and will be donating up to \$1,212 to Project Backpack, giving a dollar for each viewer of the concert’s livestream up to 1,212 (as in the date of the show, 12/12).

A separate link will be posted along with the link to the concert video for those looking to donate on the day of the event.

Typically, the PTHS music programs raise money to go on trips. This year, however, things being what they are, senior leadership in the orchestra decided to put fundraising efforts toward community needs instead.

Senior cellist Sorina Johnston said the students are happy just to be playing at all.

“We’re just trying to do something, like give something to the community and be able to perform,” she said.

The group has been experimenting with digital options since the early days of the pandemic, but it’s just not the same.

“It’s definitely sad,” Johnston said. “It’s super complicated, in the first place, and I think I feel bad mostly for the younger players because I’ve been in orchestra for four years and so I’ve had all these experiences and understand the social connections and how nice it is to play together with a large, pretty talented group.”

There are, Johnston said, very few orchestras left in Washington state at public high schools, and the PT program is one of the most robust.

“I think it’s the largest class at the high school,” she said. “Most of my classes have like 18 kids in them and then orchestra has like 50.”

The entire music program, both orchestra and band, boasts about 85 students. Obviously, too many to be gathering right now.

Although mostly conducted online, the high school continued limited in-person music classes through the fall. Students were attending weekly small group ensemble rehearsals of five to seven people, and also practicing at home to prepare for their winter concert.

It was an emotional boon while it lasted, Johnston said.

“Going to my ensemble rehearsal on Mondays had been like my favorite part of my week,” she said. “It’s so nice to play together in person and it’s magical. Anyone who is a musician knows how magical it is to be able to make music with other people.”

To return some of that magic to the Winter Stringfest now, in the wake of fresh restrictions and an almost complete cessation of in-person education, PTHS music director Daniel Ferland is melding two approaches and incorporating just the right amount of tech.

“Due to the pandemic, a live audience is out of the question,” Ferland said. “So we’ll present music that students have pre-recorded from home or in small groups along with live elements as well.”

Ensembles will gather in separate rooms at Blue Heron Middle School, with some pieces being played together and the respective tracks overlaid, others compiled from individual recordings made earlier.

“What we’re planning for this concert is kind of a hybrid between the original plan and that that we used at the spring concert,” Johnston explained.

For the spring show, the music department broadcast a virtual concert for the first time ever. Their familiarity with the tools have come a long way since.

“It was very unfortunate that we couldn’t do a live performance for an audience last [school] year, but a virtual concert was the next best thing and turned out very well,” Ferland said. “I was happy with the result.”

Johnston, who is also class president and engaged in other extracurricular activities, said some older adults may be under the misguided impression students are glad to miss school.

However, speaking for herself and her friends, she said nothing could be further from the truth.

“That’s absolutely so far off,” she said. “I love going to school.”

“I was pretty optimistic,” Johnston added. “I’ve always been a pretty stable person, I guess. And this stuff is taking a huge toll on my mental health. This is so hard for me — and I have a good home life and relatively stable mind. And it just sucks. It sucks so much. It’s hard.”

Under such circumstances, the chance to make music as a group again, however it’s accomplished, and contribute to a good cause is a welcome opportunity.

“It’s not just fundraising, it’s good entertainment,” Johnston said. “It’s going to be wonderful music; we have a nice variety of songs.”

The program is not specifically holiday music, but consists of several separate compositions by different composers.

“We picked pieces that weren’t super complicated because the whole process is already so complicated it would have been crazy to use a hard piece and not being able to practice together,” Johnston said. “And our conductor usually gives us a random holiday piece at the last minute on the day of the concert, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he did that.”