We closed down on that infamous Friday 13 March 2020. In one day, we cancelled the rest of the season, paid our artists, notified our audience, changed our website and social media posts, and contacted all the users of the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts (the Isabel) while putting in new protocol for working from home. It was a profoundly sad time, but the thought of no music was so unbearable that it fuelled a whole new paradigm for us to support artists and connect with audiences – this is when we let our imaginations soar in the new world that was thrust upon us.

ONLINE EXPERIMENTS
Our first step was to convert our Bader and Overton Canadian Cello Competition to an online competition (with the belief and support of Isabel Bader and Bader Philanthropies, Inc.) That ran from June 24-27 and was webcast internationally by CBC. It was absolutely thrilling – and a real challenge – as the eight cellists were in seven cities in three countries. Finding venues during the lockdown was not easy, and nor was remote streaming with a variety of strengths of signal.

The timing of this event could not have been more perfect. These extraordinary young musicians do not have a platform to be heard with the COVID-19 shutdowns, yet all of Canada and beyond heard them through this marvellous competition, broadcast by our wonderful collaborators at CBC who jumped in to help with alacrity.

The window for young talents to firmly establish themselves on the world stage is already small, so creating a national platform for these young musicians to be heard and appreciated during this period of artistic silence (with venues closed and concerts cancelled) was so important. It showed how powerful music can be at a time when the world longs for hope and optimism for the future. With talents like these, we can be very confident about the future of live music. It ended up that 32,000 people from Kingston, Canada to Tasmania, Australia heard these fabulous young cellists.

In order to make online events a success you must treat online concerts as seriously as your live concerts, ensuring that audio, lighting design, and camera work is appropriate for the medium in which the audience member experiences the performance. We are all audiophiles at the Isabel, and after hearing the horrendously bad, patched-together recordings and streaming that was rampant on social media, we became committed to discovering and creating high fidelity online sound. We experimented with streaming software, microphones, and had a set up designed to capture excellent source sound and to deliver high-fidelity sound to our audience.

WHAT WORKS?
TRICIA BALDWIN, DIRECTOR OF THE ISABEL BADER CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS, DISCUSSES HOW HER GOAL HAS BEEN TO KEEP ARTISTS IN WORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND HOW THE ARTS SECTOR HAS CHANGED FOREVER
Skeleton Park Arts Festival, Toronto Bach Festival, and Electric Circuits festival. We have all shared our learning of what has worked and what has not, and the quality of the streaming has grown tremendously. This level of collaboration is a silver lining during this difficult time.

**KEEPING ARTISTS IN WORK**

I never thought I would talk like an economist, but with the devastating effects of COVID-19 lockdowns, I have been focused on creating employment for artists and arts workers. We asked ourselves, ‘What can we do during COVID?’ and launched the online events I have already discussed, as well as our new IMAGINE programme to support artists with artist residencies to create new works, recording/filming projects, and online arts education initiatives. Each of these projects has led to multiple artists and support staff being paid, helping them to support themselves and their families.

Our next step was creating the free Ballytobin LIVE FROM THE ISABEL Online Summer Festival that reached 47,000 people worldwide, followed by the Fall Festival (which was a combination of in-person and online ticketed performances). These festivals featured live performances, which is crucial in my opinion. Having the artists performing live, even if the performance is online, adds so much energy. We also set up a system for audience feedback, which created a communal experience. After the performances audiences could ask questions to the performers.

Our curation model had to change to support these festivals. For the summer festival, we relied on members of the local arts community to create the programme. We were fortunate that innovation-inspired Joan Tobin of the Ballytobin Foundation provided a major gift that enabled us to pay everyone involved, even though the programme was free to the audience.

The irony of this period of isolation is the number and quality of true collaborations. In this short time we have partnered with the Gryphon Trio, Ottawa Chamberfest, Music Toronto, Chamber Music Society of Detroit, Rhode Island Chamber Music Concerts, Grosse Pointe War Memorial, Skeleton Park Arts Festival, Toronto Bach Festival, and Electric Circuits festival. We have all shared our learning of what has worked and what has not, and the quality of the streaming has grown tremendously. This level of collaboration is a silver lining during this difficult time.

“In order to make online events a success you must treat online concerts as seriously as your live concerts”

What has impressed me most at the Isabel is the willingness of our production and operations staff to leap in with both feet, reinventing how we share music at the highest level. To assist with this, we have supported professional development and ensured that people could stay employed. Their jobs needed to go through a metamorphosis to meet the needs of the altered world. However, COVID-19 has been disastrous for independent musicians and there is tremendous concern for artists right now. A number of us in Canada are working around the clock to create work for artists and arts workers, but more needs to be done.

**THE FUTURE**

Post-COVID-19, we will be permanently in a multiplatform world where the arts are experienced through live and online platforms. This will be a Darwinian world where arts organisations will either adapt or not survive and ‘new species’ will come into being. In addition to a multiplatform delivery system for the performing arts, there will be profound changes in the structures around producing the arts. In the West, we have used the institutional model as ‘the model’ for arts production, but I expect that a greater diversity...
"A number of us in Canada are working around the clock to create work for artists and arts workers"

of more fluid and adaptable organisational structures and collaborative shared-services platforms will come into play that solely focus on putting performing arts on stage without such large institutional overheads. It will be a more culturally inclusive world where non-institutionalised arts and culturally diverse arts can thrive with different platforms, rather than the old, expensive, and prescribed platforms for arts dissemination. We live in difficult times where oil is being poured on the fire of hate by politicians, and the socially engaged arts will shine a necessary light on social justice issues. The arts will have a more integrated role in societal reflections and solutions; we have a larger opportunity and responsibility as a change agent for the human condition.

I believe that collaboration and mutual concern is rampant in the most beautiful way right now. We fast-forwarded our learning curve on digital production and dissemination, and we are now open to different and flexible models of production and planning. After years of talking about being entrepreneurial in the arts, we actually are.

I love the concept of new Agnes Etherington Art Centre director and curator Emelie Chhangur, who has lived a philosophy she calls ‘in-reach’ (as opposed to community outreach that has at times approached communities with a colonial ‘let us educate you in civilisation’ attitude, rather than creating a dialogue). With in-reach it is the community that transforms the arts organisation, not just the arts transforming the community. Given our diverse communities and the genuine initiatives required to achieve equity and Indigeneity in a post-colonial world, this is a major step forward required by the arts community.

In terms of monetising online content, there needs to be a major disruption in the corrupt streaming model so that the majority of proceeds come back to the artists and arts organisations who actually pay for the content to be produced and on whose talent and abilities the sales are based. Right now, the streaming sites, Apple, Google et al, along with the distributors, often pay nothing for the production but reap the vast majority of revenues. What is left over for the artists and arts organisations is infinitesimal.

In the future, cryptocurrencies will provide both the payment and the contract, with the proceeds going directly to the artists. If we can change the current monetisation model before any future crisis, then we will have created a new and more sustainable revenue stream for artists and arts organisations.

New jobs in the arts will include digital/online production, and the need for extensively and strategically trained revenue staff will be even more marked. Roles will be less delineated, and artists will lead the way in innovation. Their urgency to create and perform is so strong that it will find innovative solutions to make performances happen.

The greatest advancements in the arts often have happened in very difficult times, and COVID-19 will push us to innovate the way we include audiences, the way we produce the arts, the way we disseminate the arts, and the way we focus on true innovation within our art forms. I have great faith in the power of the arts to inspire and transform us in astounding ways that we experience collectively. My optimism has not diminished. In this cynical world, music speaks the truth and is the direct evidence of humanity’s most beautiful and profound aspirations. It will survive because it has to.