

Transcript of Interview with Matthew Mireles by Santos Mencio

Interviewee: Matthew Mireles

Interviewer: Santos Mencio

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Location (Interviewee):

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: This transcript has been provided by Otter.AI with a 2nd pass for accuracy provided by Bryan Paintiff, HST580 intern, at ASU.

Abstract: Dr. Matthew Mireles is the chair of the department of music at St. Mary's. Matthew begins the interview talking about how this virus was different than other ones, he brings up H1N1 and how it did not impact the US. Next Matthew describes challenges the pandemic introduced, one: are his students safe and two: how can music be taught online and still provide a good experience? Then Matthew speaks on how the school began hybrid style of teaching and they were able to have in person rehearsals in an outdoor setting and he explains challenges with this. The interview ends with Matthew talking about a musical fest that is being put on at the University celebrating a kind of unity and how it is during the same time as Dia De Los Muertos and how he is excited for everyone to hear the band perform Omar Thomas' Come Sunday.

Santos Mencio 00:05

All right. This is Santos Mencio interviewing Dr. Matthew Mireles of the St. Mary's rattler band. Introduce yourself.

Matthew Mireles 00:14

So Dr. Matthew Marilla I'm the chair of the Department of Music [inaudible].

Santos Mencio 00:24

All right, so start off, I just want to kind of talk to you about like, what were your kind of thoughts when COVID started? What are you thinking about? How are you feeling? You know?

Matthew Mireles 00:34

Well, it was kind of a kind of a thing, where we didn't really know what that would mean, what it would be. Different from previous viruses. I don't know. I remember I was in grad school, the swine flu was around the H1N1 what it was called. But that didn't really affect us like this one did, didn't quite come over here like this one did. So crazy thing for us is we held our wind ensemble concert on a Thursday, before spring break. So we got that in wonderful concert. And then as spring break was coming, the next week is kind of when everything was happening. So we're fortunate to have that last performance. But

yeah it was a thing where everybody was confused, everybody was scared, everybody was wondering what's happening, what's this is going to be and then how it's gonna affect everything. Everything. Not only I mean, obviously, for us for education. Curious to see how we'll be moving forward.

Santos Mencio 01:51

How do you feel when the university closed? You know, is that something you expected? Or is it kind of come out of nowhere?

Matthew Mireles 01:58

When it closed, I was expecting it. Because there are other things that closed. I remember the NBA, the National Basketball Association, they were kind of the first to kind of publicly shut down games and the whole season. And there were some other things starting to close. So I was assuming, eventually St. Mary's would and I was kind of, since I'm a chair, I'm not upper administration, but I at least have communication with them a little more than other professors would be. So I kind of knew that things were planning was being taken before the decision was made. So I wasn't really surprised when the decision was made.

Santos Mencio 02:47

Were you kind of planning in advance then like, do you have?

Matthew Mireles 02:49

Oh, yeah absolutly. Yeah, once, once, I mean, I've never wanted to just kind of wallow, or just stay put, I'm always looking for, okay, this is the problem. There's no sense in dwelling on it too long, I may give myself a day or so to be upset at something. But in general, I'm going to start looking for solutions. There's always going to be problems, nothing's gonna be perfect. So if you expect that there's a problem, then you can start working on solutions. So when when things are happening in my obvious attention was that not only how will it affect classes, but music? Because we have sort of different needs and different operating than most classes. Thats what my attention was on.

Santos Mencio 03:42

And so

Matthew Mireles 03:44

should we move somewhere else?

Santos Mencio 03:45

No it's fine I'm good. So what were kind of some of your concerns regarding like your students, you know, the band is pretty sizable, I figure you were worried about them you know?

Matthew Mireles 03:55

I was worried about two ways. Yeah. One for their safety and making sure everybody had access to things they needed. There's also a month after we had the snow and the electricity outages. So I was always concerned about their safety with that. Because a lot of students, just you don't really know their housing situations. But for this not only are they healthy, but they have access to good food good water. And it's hard to know that. As far as being in the Wind Ensemble in the band or the music department. I was concerned about how we could have an online environment for music, but still have an impactful semester. Because I didn't want it to be a case where we're just trying to get through the semester and it's, it's a waste. There are obvious challenges and gigantic issues and challenges with music instruction being online. And so that's what I was most worried about is that I wanted to make sure that they still had the same experiences and impact as it would in a normal class.

Santos Mencio 05:31

So like, what were some of the challenges and with taking it online? You know, like, what, what were you really worried about what kind of got in the way?

Matthew Mireles 05:38

And this is not unique to St. Mary's, it's not unique to me. But the main challenge is, you know, rehearsals are in person. And it's an interactive situation, where it's more than just you doing your homework at home and turn it in or listen to a lecture, you're really involved with your colleagues and making music. And the experience of that is vivid, and creative and supportive, even more so beyond the normal lecture base class. So in order to preserve that experience that was the that was the main concern for me, was that they still had that experience.

Santos Mencio 06:34

So when the school started opening up, you know, and you guys started outdoor practice, you know, how did you feel about that? What were like your concerns and challenges relating to that then?

Matthew Mireles 06:44

So that helped a lot when we were able to rehearse outside. That helped a lot, because we were able to actually meet together, make music together. we found other ways, I mean, even though things were online, we still found ways to have good and insightful experiences. Like for instance, we would I had friends and colleagues of the, that composed the music we wrote. So I was able to easily ask them to join us on Zoom. and rather, while we're not meeting in person with them and playing their music for them, that is just a unique setting. In general, how many times are you really able to meet with the composer of the piece you're playing? That's pretty rare. And so when this happened, all the composers were ready to meet. And let's let's do this, this. So that was that was good, but, but then when we finally got to meet in person, I think myself, for sure, but I think a lot of the students finally had a sense of that music making experience that they had lost. And we're very excited to be back. And then it was a very fulfilling experience for everyone being there. I could just see it in their eyes and body language of how warm and welcoming it was for them.

Santos Mencio 08:15

And obviously, there were challenges that came with that the wind just being outside and all that. You know, you want to talk about that a little bit?

Matthew Mireles 08:22

Yeah, I mean, so well, unique to us we have the pecan Grove awning. So a lot of the universities had to sort of build some kind of tents. Or just be a lot of a lot of universities shifted to chamber music. In large rooms, we have one large room. So we can only do one thing like that if we wanted to do that. But the awning down there worked really well as far as the space so you can hear a lot, you can hear everything you need. Yeah, problems being the wind problems being there were studies coming out from the University of Colorado, that everybody was looking to, to know about as far as how your droplets and aerosols are transferred through your instrument amongst the room. So we use the recommendations from that scientific study as far as using masks when you play, bell covers, because this study showed that it was significantly reduced as far as the amount of droplets and aerosols that are sprayed out. So that was that was good to have as far as some concrete data on minimizing that because for string players, or percussionists, it's easy to still rehearse inside social distance with a mask because You're not expelling any aerosols or droplets. For us as a band wind players, that's a huge concern. So being outside and with the masks and the instrument and bell covers that minimized the aerosol and droplet greatly. So we did that, and then the and then the housekeeping people here built me to a panel clear barrier, that I would stand behind where everybody could see me. And then I'm sort of protected from any extra aerosols. That was, that was cool that they built that for me. The last little challenge was at St. Mary's, we were in person, but we were in person virtual hybrid model for the class. So we were required to offer a way for students to be able to stay at home and be in the class virtually. If they felt more comfortable that way. Or if, if they wanted to be in person then com in person. So for the band, that was real tricky. But essentially, every rehearsal we would have little more than half the band was there. And then, as you were one of them, watch online and listen through with a microphone I had set up and a camera, so that we couldn't hear you, but you can at least follow along with the rehearsal. And that's kind of the best we could come up with, as far as the hybrid classroom.

Santos Mencio 11:49

You know, and then obviously, you guys started having concerts again. And you know, what were kind of your concerns with that, you know, what were you thinking when you were planning concerts with that hybrid in person virtual model?

Matthew Mireles 11:59

So, with the students practicing at home, along with us, I knew that, okay, we can have a good concert. But we didn't really want to draw too much attention to the performances to where there's a large crowd, so we didn't really advertise it, we were thinking more of the performances as being a setting for the students to actually present the music and make music in a performance environment per se. So that can

happen for you as a performer, whether it's just one person listening to the audience, or 1000, you can have that, that same performance, experience and process just for anybody listening. So we forego with our normal 7:30pm concerts and just had the performance during the normal rehearsal time. And then just sort of invited people on campus to watch outside.

Santos Mencio 13:00

And then, lastly, obviously, tomorrow is the first real in person or a performance the band has had in year and a half or so, you know, how are you feeling about that, excited for that? You know, is there something about it that you're worried about?

Matthew Mireles 13:17

Excited about it is very much an understatement. And I don't think I'm the only one and I don't even think the bands the only one. The university has just been me administration, faculty, students, staff. The whole campus, the whole community has just been wanting some, some event to bring us all back together. And so this being our first performance, and not only is it the wind ensemble, like the mariachi, the jazz comp, the Jazz Orchestra, the percussion ensemble, the Munoz Brothers Band, who are St. Mary students. That was our plan at first just to have a big sort of festival of music. But then, when we started planning that festival of music around this time, which is the week of Dia De Los Muertos, and I started talking with other colleagues around that possibly wanted to collaborate with us. Not only did they want to collaborate with us on the Dia De Los Muertos theme, we just collaborate on an event that's campus wide that'll bring everyone back together. Sort of a unity concert. So everybody's excited to have a Dia de los Muertos event on campus. Obviously, that's, that's a big deal in and of itself. But the fact that we're just having an event for all students, faculty and staff, with live music from the from the music department, and collaboration with registered student organizations that are gonna fundraise or have games and food, and can't wait, my only concern is the weather.

Santos Mencio 15:16

Do you think it's a sign of better things to come? Obviously, it's a very different thing than the performances in the last couple of months, you know. Think that shows that things are getting better?

Matthew Mireles 15:28

Not only do I think it shows that things are getting better, I think people are gonna start to appreciate, appreciate life. We all went into isolation. And we lost all those little connections, little interactions that live music makes. Now this is a grand event, obviously, now it's evolved into such. But the reason it evolved into that is because we were just going to have a performance. People wanted to oh, let's, I want to come, I want to do something, I want to come, I want to do something. And now it's, it's beyond any of our vision of what it would be. And so moving forward, now that we've experienced life, in isolation, in fear. We've all learned to savor and appreciate things more. And that's what live music does. That's what art does. That's what creative outlets do, that no other disciplines can really have that kind of

impact on a person. And for that being gone for a year and a half. I think moving forward, people will have a greater appreciation for what was lost, since it was lost.

Santos Mencio 17:00

And then one last thing is I'm just curious, what's your favorite piece that's being performed tomorrow? You know, don't don't answer with a wind ensemble piece. Just because it's me, you know, I do want to know what [inaudible] looking forward to.

Matthew Mireles 17:13

I'm gonna answer this with a few answers. I'm excited about our mariachi, is the first time ever of a St. Mary's University mariachi. It's been something that we've always wanted as a campus and community. And every year students come up to me, do you have a mariachi, do you have a mariachi? I said, No, we don't. But there's a few of y'all asking me about it. Why don't y'all go ahead and create one. And for years, this is my sixth year, every year I say, hey, y'all know each other, just getting start it. But this year, we had freshmen and sophomore that took the charge and did it. So I'm really excited because they've set it up for sustainability, to where it's not just going to happen with them, it'll live beyond. So I'm excited for the debut performance of this event. But I'm really, really excited for everyone to hear the Omar Thomas' Come Sunday. Very excited. That's my answer. I wanted to just talk about the mariachi but the Omar Thomas' Come Sunday is my favorite on a, for a few different reasons. One, was I wanted a piece that that sort of got everybody excited the list- listening. This is going to close our portion of the concert, and it's going to be one where even if you're kind of eating or if you're playing one of the games that the RSO's have set up. You're gonna hear this piece and be like, what is this? And then you can't you can't help but be enthralled by it and probably clapping along and excited and cheering for it. That's what it's supposed to do. So that's what I'm excited about that piece in particular being the piece that's our sort of unifying piece of music. But on top of that it's the hardest piece I've ever programmed for this by far. I programmed some tough pieces before. But this one it's it's difficult on many levels. We're getting to showcase a few individuals that solo with it, or have prominent parts in it that I'm excited to showcase to campus, the success of our student performers. But just the sheer magnitude of this piece and difficulty it's gonna be, it's gonna be very heartfelt for me. Because my, from where the band was my first year kind of repertoire we were programming progressively getting more difficult and more difficult to now play that piece. There's something special. Maybe I'm only the one that could see that because I've been here long enough. And the people just entering are like oh this is a fun piece, but from where we were to where we got, I'm excited for everyone to hear that piece

Santos Mencio 20:48

Yeah, certainly.