Matthew Mireles Interview

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 this is Dr. Matthew Mireles I'm the chair of the department of music. It's interesting

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 it's kind of a thing where we didn't really know what that would mean what it would be different from previous viruses like I don't know, don't like I remember I was in grad school and swine flu was around the h1n1 was called but that didn't really affect us like this one. We might come over here like this. 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, that was the thing where everybody was confused. Everybody was scared if I was wondering, what's happening what this is gonna be and then how it's gonna affect everything. Everything. Not only I mean, obviously for us for education. Hear's to seeing how it will be moving forward.

Santos Mencio 01:51

How did you feel in the university closed? You know, is that something you expected or did 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 of the 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 did you have?

Matthew Mireles 02:50

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. What's, I mean, I'm never one 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 going to be perfect. So if you expect that there's a problem, then you can start working on solutions. So when when things are happening, then, my obvious attention was not not only how will it affect classes, but music because we have sort of different needs and different operating than most classes. That's what my attention was on.

Santos Mencio 03:42

And so, should we move somewhere else, no it's fine. I'm good. Um, so what were you 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 03:56

I was worried about two ways. Yeah. One for their safety and making sure everybody has 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 do they have access to good food and water and it's hard to know all 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 then with taking it online? You know, like what what were you really worried about what kind of got in the way.

Matthew Mireles 05:37

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 turning it in or listen to a lecture you're really involved with your colleagues in making music and the experience that is vivid and creative and supportive even more so beyond the normal lecture based class. So in order to preserve that experience that was the that was the main concern for me, so that they still had that experience.

Santos Mencio 06:34

And so when the school started opening up, you know, and you guys started outdoor practice, you know, how'd 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 are online, we still found ways to have good and insightful experiences like for instance, we would, I had friends and colleagues of the that compose 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 these should be 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, 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 I could just see it in their eyes and their body language of how warm and welcoming it was.

Santos Mencio 08:15

Now, obviously, there were challenges that came with that, the wind, being outside and all that. No, do 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 other 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 but 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 and social distance with a mask because you're not expelling any aerosols with the drums, but for us as a band of wind players, that's a huge concern. So being outside and with the masks and the instrument and Bell covers that minimize the aerosol and droplet greatly so we did that and then the and then the housekeeping people here built me up a panel clear sort of barrier that I would stand behind where everybody could see me and then I'm sort of protected from any extra aerosols. So that was that was cool that they built that. The last little challenge was that 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 they want to be in person and come first. So for the band, that was real tricky. But essentially every rehearsal would have a little more than half the band was there. And then as you were one of them. Watch online and listen through with a microphone or headset up and a camera so that we couldn't hear you but you can at least follow along with it. 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 that we were thinking more of the performances as being a setting for the students to actually present their music and make music in a performance environment or setting. So that can happen for you as a performer, whether it's just one person listening to an audience or 1000 you can have that that same performance, experience and process just with anybody listening so we forgoed 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's the first real in person performance that the band has had in the last year and a half or so, you know, how are you feeling about that? Are you excited for that you know, is there something about it that you're worried about?

Matthew Mireles 13:16

Excited about it is very much an understatement. I mean, I don't think I'm the only one and I don't even think the band's only one the university has just been. I mean the 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 combo the Jazz Orchestra, the percussion ensemble. The Munoz Brothers Band who are St. Mary's 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, which is collaborate on an event that's campus wide, that'll bring everyone back together a unity concert so if 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 I just can't wait. Now the one 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 months. You know, do you 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 just appreciate life. We all went into isolation. And we lost all those little connections, those 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. And then people wanted to oh, that'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 thats 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 wasn't.

Santos Mencio 17:00

And then the one last thing is I'm just curious, what's your favorite piece that's being performed tomorrow? You know, and don't don't answer with a wind ensemble piece just because it's me. You know, I do want to know what piece are you most 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 with 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 go ahead and start it. But this year, we had a 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 gonna happen with them. It'll live beyond them. So I'm excited for the debut performance to be this even 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 for a few different reasons. One was I wanted a piece that that sort of got everybody excited. Listen, 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 one of 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 why I'm excited about that piece of particular theme, 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 group by far. I programmed some tough pieces before. But this one, 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 students performers. But just the sheer magnitude of this piece and difficulty it's going to be it's gonna be very heartfelt for me. Because my, from where the band was my first year the kind of repertoire we were programming progressively getting more difficult and more difficult to now play that piece. That'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 like oh, this is a fun piece. But from where we were to where we got I'm excited for everyone here.

Santos Mencio 20:48

Certainly