

Mystic and Long Covid

How a New York cellist copes with his illness

By Andreas Robertz

An athlete who can no longer run 50 meters, a truck driver who can no longer drive, a musician who can no longer practice: Long-lasting effects of COVID-19 infection - Long COVID or post-COVID for short - can permanently change an entire life. In addition to physical problems, it is primarily cognitive problems that throw the patient into a health, existential and often emotional crisis. According to a research study by City University New York, nearly 19 million people in the U.S. suffer COVID symptoms more than six months after contracting the disease, and about 25% of them - just over 4.5 million people - report significant limitations in their lives. Slowly, Long COVID is being taken seriously as a chronic disease in the US.

US master cellist Joshua Ronan is one of them. Still, he says, his experience with Long COVID has made him a better musician. Andreas Robertz reports.

Audio

It's slowly getting dark at Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, one of the city's largest and most beautiful cemeteries. Here, about 100 chairs are set up in front of a stage, but most have sat down on blankets under the old trees.

The event label "Death of Classics" organizes classical concerts in unusual places in the city. For this evening, star cellist Joshua Ronan and the free string ensemble "Contemporaneous" are invited to play a rarely performed work by British composer John Tavener, entitled "The Protective Veil"

The mystical piece with its long held cello notes fits well in the evening setting. For Joshua Ronan, this is a special evening, he says after the concert, because he saw two members of his Long COVID group for the first time that evening, with whom he had

been meeting online for more than a year. And then, as an encore, he plays and sings "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen for them and all those who have to suffer from a chronic illness: an unexpected and touching moment for many.

COVID and long COVID can be a range of things to people and I think at the very beginning for me it was just, it just stopped everything. It really just stopped everything. I couldn't play the cello at all, I could barely make it up the stairs to go to bed most of the time, and it was very difficult to imagine lifting the bow and moving my arm. It takes a lot of energy to play the cello. And I don't think I appreciated that before, before long Covid.

I met Joshua a year and a half ago as part of the Long Covid Recovery Program at Mount Sinai Clinic in Manhattan. He had just started practicing again. That was three months after his first infection in January 2021.

When I first started playing the cello again. I could only play for five minutes before I would literally be shaking because I have now a trembling condition and I have Dysautonomia, which affects the heart rate and makes me feel tired when I shouldn't feel tired like after a couple of steps the signals get mixed up and my body thinks I just ran a marathon most of the time. Physically standing up to wash the dishes is a choice that I have to make, because if I do that then I have to rest and I won't be able to do something else.

Dysautonomia - a dysfunction of the autonomic nervous system - tremors in the hands, severe fatigue, heart fluttering, constant fatigue and difficulty concentrating: not a good mix for a professional musician. Joshua began to prepare two concerts which he did not want to cancel under any circumstances with medications, physical therapy, cognitive training and a lot of patience. Then came the breakdown.

After that, I really fell into a state because I had nothing in the next few months on the calendar. Everything had been canceled anyway because of COVID. And it had been such an effort to get ready for those very important things that afterwards I basically physically, mentally, and spiritually collapsed and really wondered whether I should bother picking up the cello again. I realized, how much of the cello I'd been thinking of as a conduit to give to other people, to create connection, to give to other people, but I'd been ignoring what it meant to me. So it was very profoundly important and I immediately knew, no, I cannot stop the cello. The cello is for me as much as it's for other people. And that was important. And that came again because of COVID. So despite the difficulties that continue to this day, I feel like it has helped me confront questions that maybe I've avoided in the past.

When the concert halls reopened, Joshua had to renegotiate many things with his agency: the amount of concerts, the number of rehearsals, the time slots between travel days and performances. He was afraid of getting a bad reputation and losing contracts because of Long COVID. At a concert at Princeton University, he spoke publicly about his illness for the first time. The positive feedback was overwhelming for him.

I still sometimes am concerned about my reputation when I announced publicly that I have long COVID and I'm actually doing a project right now that is centered around having long COVID and vulnerability and my profession is one where you're supposed to impress people and move people and really at the heart of it vulnerability is what helps us connect. But there's also a lot of virtuosity and bravado and confidence and all of these things that people don't necessarily think of as going together. I am human and I am worried and concerned that people see me saying I'm not who I used to be, and think, well, then he can't do what he used to do.

Encouraged by the feedback, he began a new musical project that he has called "Immunity," with concerts, discussions and a studio album of music that has become especially important to him during this time. And he continues to learn how to better manage his symptoms through the clinic's programs, until perhaps a medication can be

found. He understands, he says, that experiencing helplessness and vulnerability has led to more empathy in my life, and because of it he has become a better musician as a result.

I mean, I'm not a particularly religious person. I grew up in the church and I left that a long time ago. The rest of my family is very religious, but I feel that it's so important to acknowledge that we don't know everything. And no matter how much we learn, we will probably never know everything. And so you have to trust. And whatever you trust in that hopefully gives you a sense of something bigger, of purpose, of responsibility to treat your life and the lives around you as important, as beautiful as ... it's a reason for being here. So for me it's been so connected to music and my identity has been so wrapped up in doing, that when I couldn't do, and it was really hard to make music, I didn't know what I was for. I've recognized to a certain degree that I don't have to make perfect things and put them out there in order to connect and to be meaningful. To be a life that has meaning is not about perfection.