

Thursday, 07 May 2020

OPINION PIECE

EXPERT COMMENT: UP Music prof riffs on Trump calling the WHO a “pipe organ for China”

By Prof Theo van Wyk, Associate Professor of Music at the University of Pretoria.

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has affected our lives in unimaginable ways, including in how we relate to several daily facets of our existence. The virus has even informed how we utilise metaphors to bring across a particular sentiment or message, directly or insidiously.

However, conflating the pandemic as a foundation and a musical instrument such as the pipe organ to advance a political ideology against perceived adversaries (real or imagined) has certainly never been proffered in history according to my knowledge. That was until US president Donald Trump launched an investigation into the alleged role of the World Health Organisation (WHO) in spreading the virus and its apparent close ties with China. During Trump’s soliloquy in April 2020, he accused the WHO of being “literally a pipe organ for China”, suggesting the organisation has “misled us”, followed by his usual disclaimer: “I don’t know”.

It is not readily clear why he used the pipe organ as a negative symbol to illustrate his point, other than to (wrongly) project it as a naturally loud and intrusive instrument used to impart some ambiguous modus operandi in a dubious context.

With this virus-fuelled geopolitical diatribe as the backdrop and the ubiquitous term “corona” in the universal vocabulary, it is perhaps an opportune time to refocus and place a somewhat positive spin on the nomenclature of this novel virus.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, one of the meanings of the word “corona” is “something suggesting a crown”. What many people are not aware of is that, in the specifications of some pipe organs, a stop called Corona is not uncommon – which denotes a link between the idea of a “crowning” to the sonic capabilities of the pipe organ.

The pipe organ produces sound by pushing air under pressure through pipes that correspond to a particular keyboard called a manual. The pipes are placed on a windchest in specific formations called ranks, each containing a uniform sound character. Pipe organs have a variety of pipe ranks of a different tone, pitch and volume that can be used individually or in combination. These ranks are controlled by a mechanism known as a “stop”, which is used to allow or prevent controlled pressurised air flowing through the pipes.

Registration in organ music is the learned art of combining stops (or registers) in order to produce the desired timbre. A peculiar sound combination unique to the organ is the foundational combination of the so-called principal family of stops, with the lowest pipes ranging from 32 feet to 1 foot in length. To supply more brilliance of tone to this carefully chosen sound palette, the organist would usually add a compound stop called a mixture.

These types of stops (or registers) consist of multiple ranks of pipes, each sounding at the intervals of octaves and fifths above the unison pitch. A stop knob usually denotes the name of the specific pipe rank – for example, the oboe, trumpet, flute, etc., as well as the length of the lowest pipe measured in feet, such as Principal 8', Octave 4', Piccolo 2', etc. The number of pipe ranks in a mixture is denoted by a Roman numeral on the actual stop knob. Therefore, a stop with the inscription "Mixture V" would contain a rank of five pipes per note; for every key played, five different pipes sound, all of which are controlled by the same stop.

The organ register Corona is a mixture stop and usually contains three pipes per note as explained above. The stop knob would therefore feature the label "Corona III". When this type of register is added to the foundation stops, the multiple pipes per note pressed create a "crowning" of the combination for clarity of sound.

One of the internationally revered pipe organs that boasts a Corona III stop is the impressive gallery organ in Ulm Minster in southern Germany, the world's largest Lutheran church as well as the world's tallest church tower. The instrument, built in 1969 by the organ-building firm EF Walcker, has five manuals (keyboards), a pedal division (played by the feet) and a total of 95 stops. The Corona III stop of this organ is located on the *Oberwerk* ("Upper Work") manual, which is the fourth keyboard from the lowest one. The *Oberwerk* appropriately houses the pipework that is located in the highest division in the organ case "crowned" by the Corona III rank.

Having a stop called Corona as part of its lexicon surely crowns and solidifies the concept of the pipe organ as "the king of instruments", as espoused by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In addition, having a Corona stop on an organ will undeniably lead more to the spreading of beautiful messages through music sans the virus – as long as the organist wears a mask with the obligatory sanitiser at hand to pull out all the stops with an added Corona.

Hopefully, President Trump will in future utilise an alternative musical instrument other than the organ as a metaphor to describe a particularly nasty view of the relationship between the WHO and China.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is

building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za