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Videos turn Houston Symphony player's kids into social-media stars

French horn player Robert Johnson and his three young sons have taken the internet by storm with their takes on the classics.

Chris Gray | June 15, 2020 Updated: June 16, 2020, 3:44 pm



Houston Symphony french horn player Robert Johnson and family whose Family Time Music Collection videos for the Houston Symphony have gone viral.

Photo: Houston Symphony

Robert Johnson's three sons have grown up with music. Shortly after the U.S. went into

quarantine, they became YouTube stars.

Johnson is the Houston Symphony's associate principal French horn. His elder sons, twins Ezra and Reuben, are 5; the youngest, Avi, just turned 3. When the orchestra's season began evaporating in mid-March, the marketing department emailed the players with a request for videos of their at-home musical activities, promising to share them on social media.

"I think they were thinking more along the lines of the bassoon players giving a 'how to make reeds' tutorial," Johnson says.

His family, though, had already incorporated music time into their daily quarantine routine – watching various opera or ballet performances on YouTube, or reenacting "West Side Story" in the garage. For their video, they chose a family favorite: Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf," which happens to have a prominent French horn part.

The video is barely 90 seconds long, but its viral potential is high. A barefoot Johnson plays his horn in front of the fireplace. Standing on a stool, pajama-clad Ezra holds a conductor's baton and waves his arms; on the opposite couch, Avi holds a broom somewhat like an oversize oboe. About midway through, Reuben enters in an Astros jersey and begins cavorting through the frame.

"It made a big splash on social media," says Johnson. "The marketing department reached out to us and said, 'This got a thousand views in the first hour – do you think you could do more of these?'"

Eleven more videos have followed to date, covering an impressive swath of the standard repertoire: Stravinsky's "Firebird," Elgar's "Enigma Variations" and "Pomp and Circumstance" (for graduation week), "The Nutcracker," "Star Wars." During "Carmen," both Ezra and Reuben wear suits; they opt for bath towels to showcase their best "West Side Story" moves.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these clips have struck a chord. According to the Houston Symphony marketing department, the so-called Family Music Time collection –

conveniently grouped into its own playlist on the symphony's [YouTube channel](#) – has been viewed more than 115,000 times. Multiple Houston TV stations have featured the family as well, Johnson adds.

Despite the brevity of the videos, Johnson chuckles that it takes a “perfect storm” to get a minute and a half of usable footage. Rather than setting a specific recording time, he and his wife (who works the camera) prefer to let things develop organically until certain conditions are met – “right after snack, before lunch, everybody (has) clothes on,” Johnson notes.

“Sunday morning was usually pretty good, as long as they had beef bacon for breakfast,” he laughs.

“What you don’t see is the 15 minutes before we press record,” says Johnson’s wife, flutist Ariella Perlman. “Everybody’s fighting over which instrument they want, and then they decide to switch, and then one of them falls down.”

“What you’re seeing is completely who they are,” she adds.

Jokes Johnson, “We’ve been telling people that the real show is all the outtakes.”

Neither Johnson nor Perlman are especially big on social media, she says, but they’re pleased to see their videos resonate so widely. One symphony colleague told Johnson, “We enjoy watching the mailman deliver the mail and your videos on Wednesday, and that’s our week.”

“If you look at some of the comments (on YouTube), people are talking about ‘This is my favorite day of the week’ (or) ‘We really look forward to this every Wednesday,’” he says. “To be able to contribute and share, it feels really good.”

And although, according to their dad, the Johnson kids don’t otherwise watch much TV, they definitely enjoy their own videos.

“They don’t have any thought of other people besides us seeing this,” he says. “But they love watching themselves, that’s for sure. They just think they’re so funny.”

Chris Gray is a Galveston-based writer.



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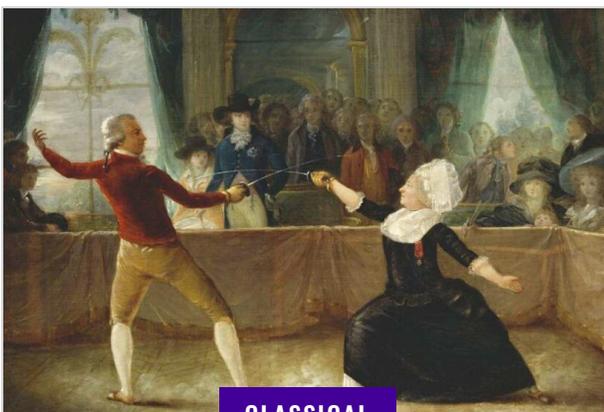
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