

# Music in the Time of a Pandemic



**In the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic and shut-down that evolve daily, orchestras and musicians are keeping the music going by embracing a new digital normal.**

by Jeremy Reynolds

Due to restrictions on large gatherings, Florida's Jacksonville Symphony could not perform for an audience or assemble the full orchestra. A March 20 orchestra concert was replaced by an intimate livestreamed event featuring the Jacksonville Symphony Percussion Section. Onstage at Jacoby Symphony Hall for the livestreamed concert are, from left, James Jenkins, principal tuba, who performed in one of the pieces; Steven Merrill, principal percussion; Kenneth Every, principal timpani; Joel Panian, percussion; and Kevin Garry, percussion.

Orchestras posting performance videos to social media is hardly novel. But on March 27 the Toronto Symphony Orchestra released a clip of Copland's "Appalachian Spring," the "Simple Gifts" excerpt, that garnered tens of thousands of views in the first day alone on Facebook and Instagram. What was special about this clip? None of the Toronto Symphony musicians were playing in the same room as one another—government mandates to limit the spread of COVID-19 meant that they weren't allowed to perform together. In-

dividual players recorded their parts from their homes, which the symphony then pasted into a collage that circulated amidst announcements of business closures and a shelter-in-place order in the city of Toronto.

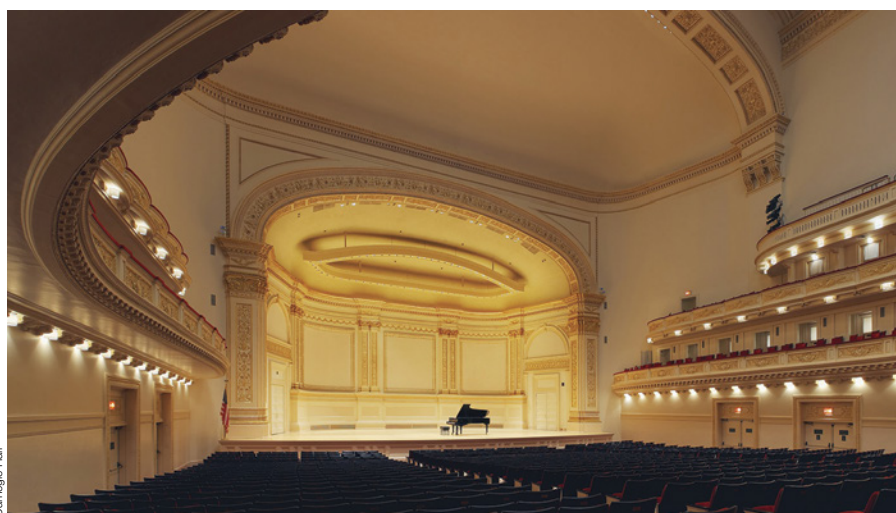
This isolation has become the new normal for cities and orchestras around the world. Immediately after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, cultural institutions began announcing cancellations and postponements, determined to help halt the spread of the novel



Though the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's March 12-14 performances were cancelled due to the pandemic, on March 30 the orchestra posted a video of its musicians virtually performing the final movement of Mahler's Third Symphony. Musicians recorded their individual parts at home; BSO violist Colin Sorgi produced and edited the video.

coronavirus. At the time of this writing, the situation is evolving daily, with some state and local government entities banning groups of 250 or more, then 100, then 50, and then 10. In some areas, authorities have instructed non-essential businesses to shutter indefinitely and residents to shelter at home. Conservatories and colleges have moved all classes and teaching to virtual formats. Live concerts are off the menu through May, potentially longer. Orchestras' loss of revenue is already staggering.

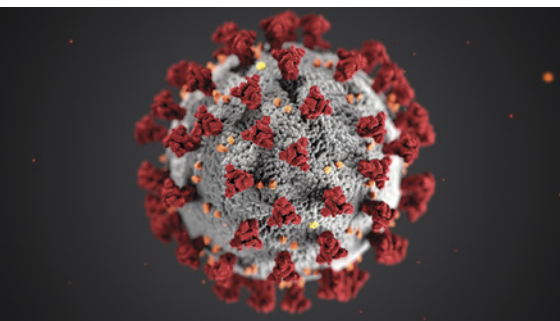
Still, orchestras and musicians are responding with resilience and creativity in the midst of an unprecedented global



Carnegie Hall in New York City is among the concert halls and performing arts centers that have closed due to health concerns and bans on public gatherings. Online, Carnegie Hall now spotlights performances from its rich history, new musical events, educational resources, and more.

shut-down. Ensembles and performing arts companies swiftly began working to find alternative ways to provide music to the public, live-streaming orchestra and chamber music concerts from eerily empty halls in Buffalo and Philadelphia and Jacksonville and cracking open archives to offer recordings of concerts past. Cellist

Yo-Yo Ma posted videos of himself performing short "Songs of Comfort" and has been encouraging musicians of all levels to do the same. Taking inspiration from viral videos of Italians serenading each other from balconies at home, singers in the U.S. have organized remote group singing to foster community, both online and from



The U.S. Centers for Disease Control's visualization of the microscopic novel coronavirus, responsible for COVID-19.

windows. Orchestral musicians are recording music and musings from their residences and conductors are leading virtual explorations of repertoire for listeners who must remain at home.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra, long a forward-thinking ensemble in terms of its dedication to accessibility, especially via internet streaming, is waiving the traditional fee to view archived performances and expanding those offerings to stream concerts designed for schoolchildren. The Boston Symphony Orchestra is streaming samples from its archive and distributing short performance and interview videos

**Immediately after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared COVID-19 a pandemic, cultural institutions worldwide began announcing cancellations and postponements to help halt the spread of the virus.**

self-produced by musicians through its social media channels and website. The Plano Symphony Orchestra in Texas is streaming concerts on Saturday evenings. The Metropolitan Opera in New York City is posting an HD broadcast



Vincere Syfip

At New England Conservatory, instruction and coaching has shifted to a virtual model. In photo: NEC faculty member Eyran Katsenelenbogen works from his home with student David Apostolides (visible on the laptop). Many conservatories, music schools, and youth orchestras have moved lessons and rehearsals online.

to its website each day for free; the Met normally broadcasts these live HD performances in movie theaters around the country for about \$25 a ticket. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra is posting curated videos of musicians to its social channels in the coming weeks, the first of which features PSO violinist Christopher Wu recounting how he brought his violin

to the delivery room for the birth of his daughter.

“These videos by musicians are some of the hidden gems in all of this mess,” says Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras. “There’s an incredible intimacy to this sort of content, and what a gift to be able to experience musicians as chamber and solo players from their homes. Maybe this is one of those things we shouldn’t have needed a pandemic to make happen.”

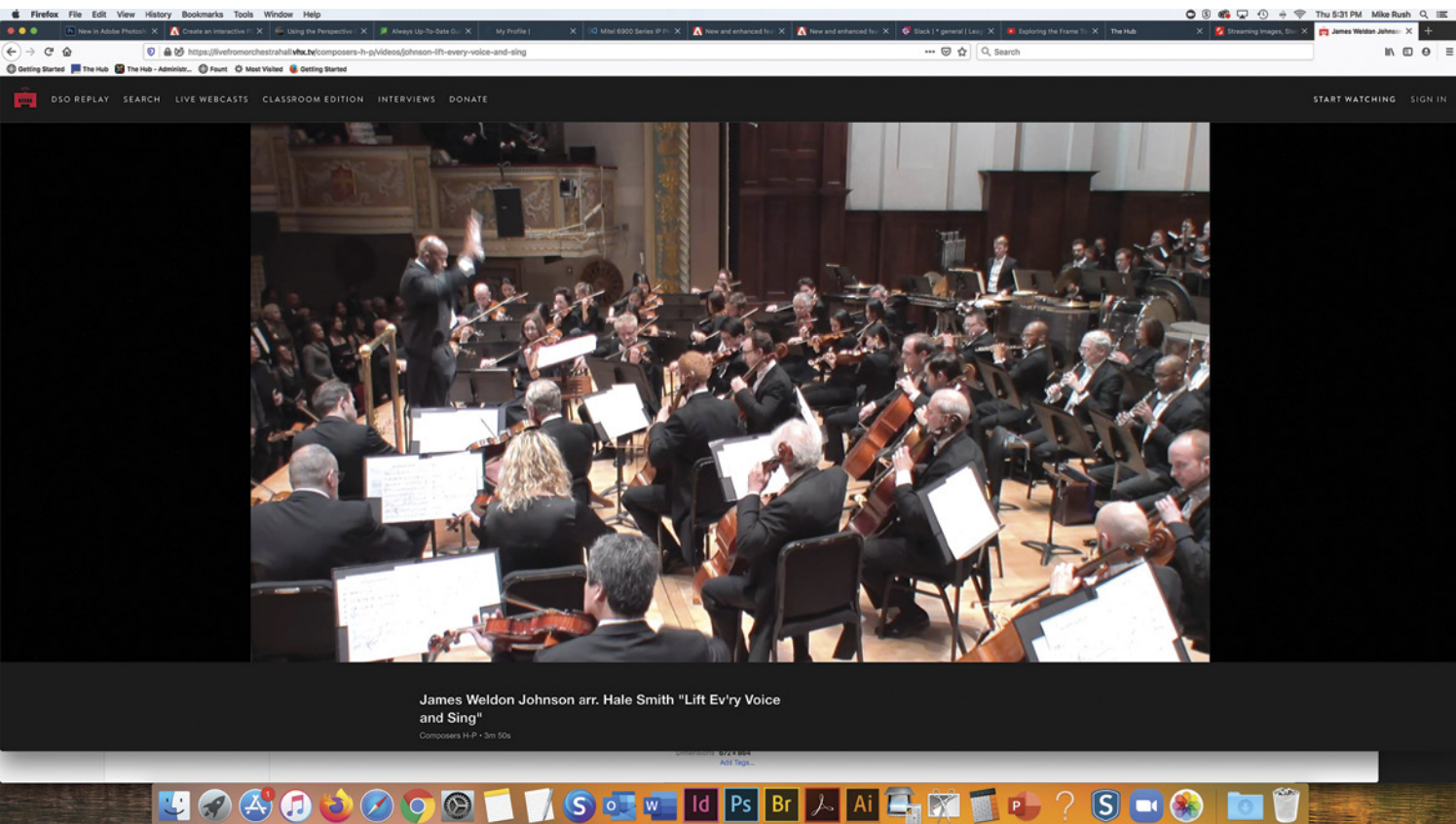
**New Approaches to Streaming**

Orchestras aren’t new to the streaming world, but it took some brisk negotiation to allow for more widespread streaming, as the American Federation of Musicians’ current agreement with the Electronic Media Association (EMA) runs to 2022. On March 8, the AFM and EMA took action, negotiating a side letter in just four days to expand streaming rights in light of the pandemic. “Conditions changed hour by hour during that period,” recalls Rochelle Skolnick, special council at the AFM and director of the organization’s

Behind the scenes in the control room for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s DSO Replay webcasts. The orchestra has made these concerts and an expanded array of online media available for free during the pandemic.



Detroit Symphony Orchestra



Detroit Symphony Orchestra

A screengrab of a Detroit Symphony Orchestra DSO Reply webcast captures a March 2019 performance led by André Raphel. The orchestra has long embraced online media, and recently launched further digital initiatives in response to the shutdown of live performances.

Symphonic Services Division. “The first thing we did was lift the caps on an employer’s ability to stream a full concert, but it became clear over that period that we had to be much more expansive.” The union negotiated additional side letters to allow organizations to stream other projects and types of content with similar expeditiousness. The union is also working to weave a safety net for its members, who

includes its orchestra, and much of the staff. Many local branches of the union have relief funds available in certain circumstances, and some are running fundraising efforts specifically for freelance symphonic services. “It’s an economic crisis for everybody, not just for us,” says

Meredith Snow, chairperson of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (Snow is also a longtime violinist at the Los Angeles Philharmonic). “A majority of ensembles so far have been working to cover a portion of their performers’ salaries.”

**Orchestras and musicians are responding with resilience and creativity in the midst of an unprecedented global shut-down.**

will face significant financial strain during the pandemic.

Musicians who have built a living playing for multiple small per-service orchestras are taking a particularly severe financial hit from the cancellations. The Oregon Symphony has furloughed musicians and staff alike, while the Metropolitan Opera has furloughed all union members, which



The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., parent organization for the National Symphony Orchestra, Washington Opera, and other groups, as well as a major regional arts presenter, has shut down to help limit the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Some but not all contracts have force majeure clauses built in, a provision that releases contractual parties from obligations and liabilities due to unforeseen ca-

## League Resources

The League of American Orchestras is posting resources and information about coping with the pandemic as a service to the orchestra field. These resources include regularly updated information about the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security package; links to other assistance programs; discussion groups and one-on-one consultations for League members; guidance from the Centers for Disease Control; and more. These resources are being expanded and updated on an ongoing basis. Find resources, guidance, and information from the League at [americanorchestras.org](http://americanorchestras.org).

In April, the League of American Orchestras unveiled *Symphony Spot*, an online hub of livestreams, videos, and digital learning events from members and friends of the League. As concert halls across the country go dark due to the COVID-19 pandemic, orchestras have given hope and solace to a quarantined public by making an unprecedented number of online performances and educational resources available free of charge. *Symphony Spot* gives teachers, journalists, bloggers, and the general public a one-stop landing place to explore the inspiration that only orchestral music can provide. Visit [symphonyspot.org](http://symphonyspot.org).

From the time that COVID-19 first impacted the performing arts, The Hub, the League's news site, has been posting daily updates about the effects of the pandemic on orchestras, musicians, concert halls, and conservatories. The Hub also posts news coverage of the concert streams and recordings that orchestras and musicians are making available online. The Hub will continue to report up-to-date news as the situation evolves. Visit <https://hub.americanorchestras.org/> for more.

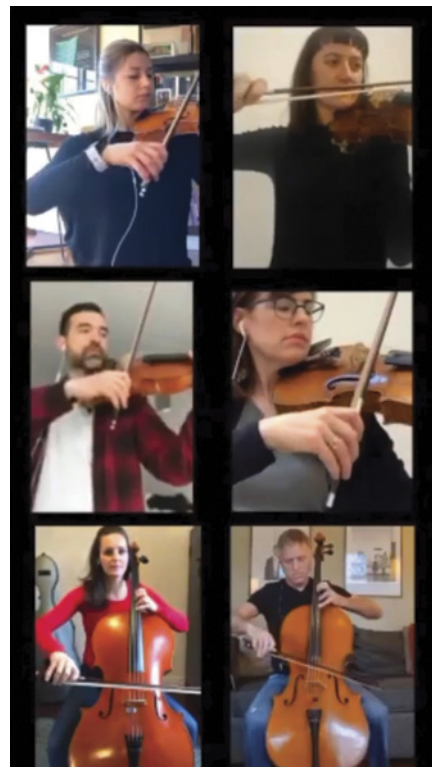
tastrophes or disasters. A global pandemic certainly applies, though many orchestras are working to cover at least partial salaries for musicians. The New York Philharmonic, for example, announced that it was cancelling the remainder of its season and anticipating a \$10 million dollar loss in revenue. The orchestra paid musicians their full salaries in March before reducing to base pay in April and then 75 percent of base in May. Musicians and management will meet to determine compensation for the summer months as the pandemic progresses. Some orchestras, among them the Kansas City Symphony, will continue to pay musicians through the end of the season despite cancelled concerts.

### Financial Impact

In terms of financial risk to institutions arising from the loss of box-office and other income due to the pandemic, League President and CEO Rosen says orchestras of all sizes are impacted, but in different ways. Medium-sized organizations are particularly vulnerable with their high fixed costs but more fragile income streams both philanthropically and from


### The loss of income from the box office and other sources due to the pandemic is presenting significant financial challenges to orchestras.

ticket sales than orchestras in larger communities. Large-budget orchestras can have very large payrolls and high sensitivity to stock market volatility, impacting endowments and pension funds. And while smaller-budget orchestras have the most flexibility, they often have the thinnest margins. "Cash is still king," Rosen says. "There's a reliance on that cash for real day-to-day needs." To that end, many orchestras have initiated emergency fundraisers, targeting individuals and donors close to the organizations. "This is totally appropriate—no one should hold back," Rosen says. "There's a category of funders who are deeply aligned with the organization and have a personal stake in helping. Many of these funders, both individual and institutional, are stepping up."

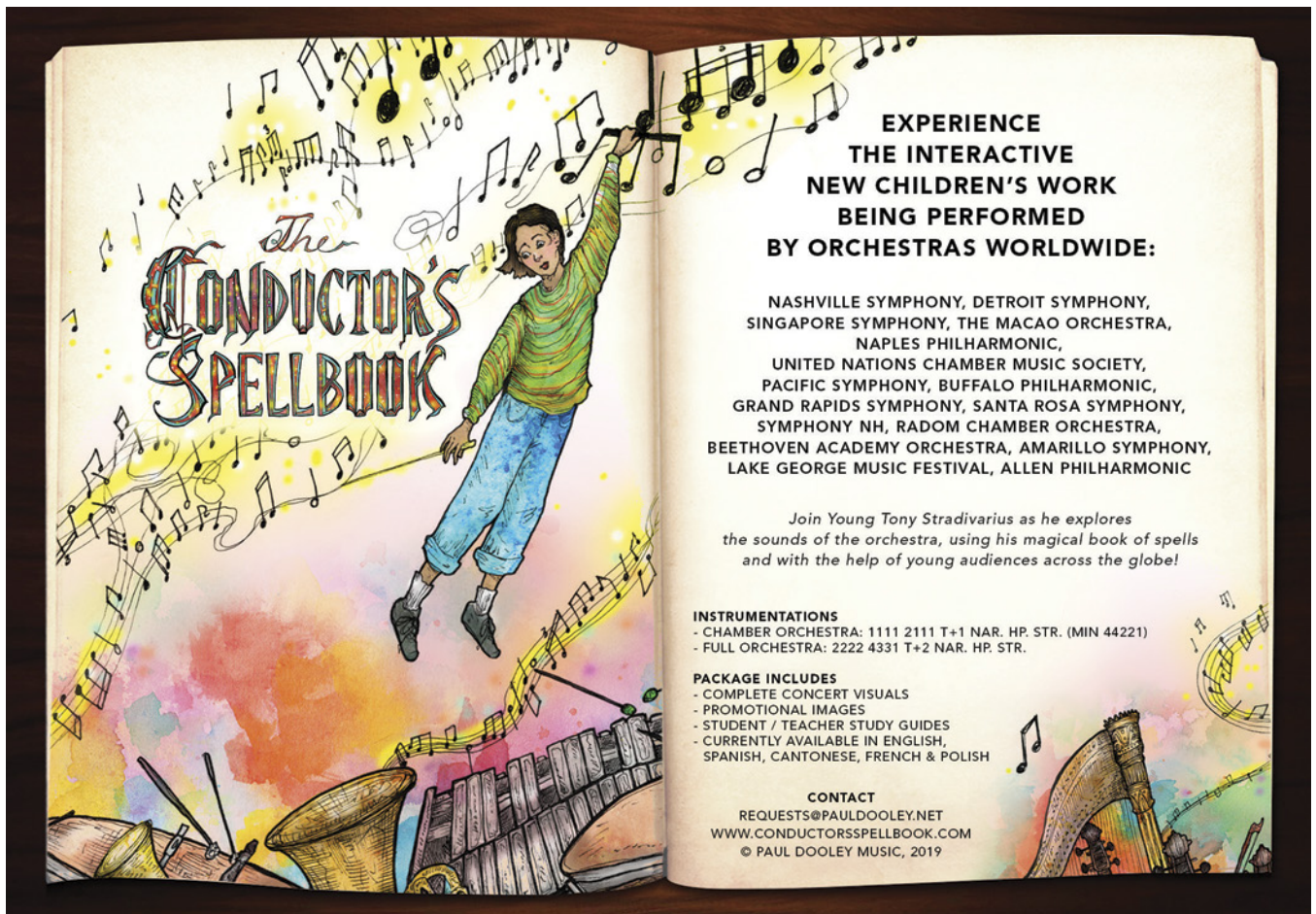


On March 27 musicians from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra performed an excerpt from Copland's "Appalachian Spring" that garnered tens of thousands of views in the first day alone. None of the musicians were playing in the same room.

At this moment, each day brings news of streaming offerings and emergency funds, of current cancellations and announcements for the coming season. The speed with which contracts have been updated and the creativity demonstrated by individual musicians and organizations shows a promising streak of adaptation. This is a good thing. But to assume that the concert landscape won't be deeply impacted would be overly optimistic.

"It may take a while for people to feel comfortable coming back to concerts," says Rosen. "They may love their orchestras and love music and want to keep donating and supporting but they may not feel comfortable going out. But I think we'd like to believe that the appetite and desire for live performances by orchestras for large groups of people won't be shaken." 

JEREMY REYNOLDS is the classical music critic at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. He also writes for *Opera* and *Early Music America* magazines and *San Francisco Classical Voice*.



**EXPERIENCE  
THE INTERACTIVE  
NEW CHILDREN'S WORK  
BEING PERFORMED  
BY ORCHESTRAS WORLDWIDE:**

NASHVILLE SYMPHONY, DETROIT SYMPHONY,  
SINGAPORE SYMPHONY, THE MACAO ORCHESTRA,  
NAPLES PHILHARMONIC,  
UNITED NATIONS CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY,  
PACIFIC SYMPHONY, BUFFALO PHILHARMONIC,  
GRAND RAPIDS SYMPHONY, SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY,  
SYMPHONY NH, RADOM CHAMBER ORCHESTRA,  
BEETHOVEN ACADEMY ORCHESTRA, AMARILLO SYMPHONY,  
LAKE GEORGE MUSIC FESTIVAL, ALLEN PHILHARMONIC

*Join Young Tony Stradivarius as he explores  
the sounds of the orchestra, using his magical book of spells  
and with the help of young audiences across the globe!*

**INSTRUMENTATIONS**

- CHAMBER ORCHESTRA: 1111 2111 T+1 NAR. HP. STR. (MIN 44221)
- FULL ORCHESTRA: 2222 4331 T+2 NAR. HP. STR.

**PACKAGE INCLUDES**

- COMPLETE CONCERT VISUALS
- PROMOTIONAL IMAGES
- STUDENT / TEACHER STUDY GUIDES
- CURRENTLY AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH,  
SPANISH, CANTONESE, FRENCH & POLISH

**CONTACT**

REQUESTS@PAULDOOLEY.NET  
WWW.CONDUCTORSPELLBOOK.COM  
© PAUL DOOLEY MUSIC, 2019

**Don't miss a *single note!***

*subscribe to*

**symphony**

With vibrant photographs and timely  
articles, *Symphony* is transforming the way  
America thinks about its orchestras.

Hear from the conductors, musicians, and  
people on the inside who are making  
innovative choices, provoking change, and  
electrifying the orchestral world.

One year – four printed issues  
(and all six online): \$25

To subscribe, visit [americanorchestras.org](http://americanorchestras.org)

symphony