



Up Close, Far Away

The Philadelphia Orchestra and Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin perform an audience-less concert at the Kimmel Center, March 12, 2020.

During the time of coronavirus, with large-group gatherings banned and concert halls closed, streamed orchestra concerts are proliferating. For a brief period in March, orchestras performed their concerts to empty halls—the audiences were online. Here, a viewer's perspective on the experience of orchestra livestreams that week.

by Clive Paget

This March, a global pandemic put a halt to live music as we know it. All around the globe, orchestras and musicians scrambled to adapt to the enforced closure of concert halls. Soloists performed in their own living rooms, and orchestras presented concerts in empty auditoriums as virtual viewers tuned in at Facebook, YouTube, and other streaming sites. But could performances without audiences truly feel “live”?

The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra was among the first to join the stream of orchestra streams, announcing that their March 11 concert at the St. Louis Cathe-



A screenshot from the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra's livestream of its March 12 program of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* at an empty Symphony Hall. Viewers could watch the stream on Vimeo; the archived stream was posted online the next day.

dral would be audience-free and streamed at the orchestra's website and on TV station WLAE.com. The Philadelphia Orchestra played Beethoven on March 12 to an empty Verizon Hall, offering a free livestream on its website. The following night, Ohio's Toledo Symphony Orchestra followed suit with a lively program of Lili Boulanger, Mahler, and Brahms,

The Philadelphia Orchestra's March 12 livestreamed concert made no attempt to hide the empty seats, lending an enormous poignancy to the event.

while New York's Rochester Philharmonic switched online to stream their education concert to participating schools. Others livestreamed music for the first time, as the New Haven Symphony Orchestra did on March 5 at the Yale School of Music's on-line portal.

Watching a concert from the comfort of your own home has advantages. While some events are available only in real time, channel-hopping allows you to pick and

mix from several programs. And while a bored dog demanding your attention might be an unwelcome distraction, there's no pesky usher to stop you sipping a glass of wine or munching on popcorn (full disclosure: I have done both). Archived live-streamed concerts on websites and at Facebook and YouTube allow audiences to tune in and enjoy the music-making days, weeks, even years later.

The Philadelphia Orchestra's March 12 performance of Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth symphonies, livestreamed on Facebook, included surreal shots of players in tails tuning in front of empty seats, and a little nervous laughter when Concertmaster David Kim was greeted not with audience applause but silence. Then came a thoughtful address from Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin. "This music that we cherish, that we love, that inspires us, has survived hundreds of years of hardship and struggles," he said, addressing the empty house—and, by extension, the viewers online. "I know that soon we are going to be back sharing this music with all of you as a great community, as a joyful event. But as we now share with you virtually, I know it will help us through these strange and difficult times for the entire

League launches Symphony Spot, online destination for orchestra livestreams, videos, and more

In early April, the League of American Orchestras unveiled *Symphony Spot*, an online hub of livestreams, videos, and digital learning events from League-member orchestras. 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.

world, helping us feel together on this beautiful planet Earth."

The livestream—which also included the world premiere of Iman Habibi's *Jeder Baum spricht*, a piece about global warming—made no attempt to hide the empty seats, lending an enormous poignancy to



The Berlin Philharmonic's March 12 concert featuring Berio's *Sinfonia* and Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* was conducted by Simon Rattle in empty Philharmonie, to an all-online audience.

the event. The view was exemplary, with sharp camerawork and excellent sound. Apart from the shot-to-shot segues, you could imagine you were in the best seat in the house. The first concert in a now-abandoned Beethoven symphony cycle, the performances were electrifying: crisp, urgent and alert. At the end, the orchestra stood in what felt like a moment of silent prayer.

With live audience stats on the computer screen, it is possible to see how many people are tuning in to the livestream. I watched the South Carolina Philharmonic's number of viewers rise to more than 1,000 mid-concert.

Global Virtual Stages

The chance to choose between orchestras across the U.S. and ensembles from all over the globe found me tuning in later the same evening to a live Berlin Philharmonic performance at the Berlin Philharmonie, led by Simon Rattle, the orchestra's former chief conductor. Speaking on camera about the "wonderful, if strange evening," Rattle drew parallels between Berio's 1968 *Sinfonia*, composed in a time of social upheaval, and Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, written in America during a time of social isolation for the Hungar-

ian exile, who famously spoke no English. Its folk-like themes, Rattle explained, expressed Bartók's need to "retain a little piece of himself when he had no real contact with the outside world."

Close-ups helped the ear untangle the highly complex music, and the sound was superb. Whether the balance was Rattle's doing or the work of engineers, the clarity

someone there," quipped Rattle.

The following evening, I was able to catch the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra's March 12 Berlioz and Stravinsky program, which was streamed live on March 12, then archived for later streaming. Streamed in decent sound through Vimeo, BPYO's cameras provided a vantage point as if sitting in a box high above the stage. Despite a half-hour of pre-concert milling around and a live feed that cut out during the crucial trumpet solo in *Petrushka*, it was a more rudimentary but no less inspiring affair.

As conductor Benjamin Zander pointed out in his eloquent address, the Symphony Hall concert was being performed for the benefit of the young people themselves. "It's important for you to play these pieces in this space," he told the players, his back to the empty auditorium. "When my father got old and couldn't go out anymore, he would listen to music on the radio, but



Bach Collegium Japan and Music Director Masaaki Suzuki wave to the online audience at the end of their March 15 live-streamed performance of Bach's *St. John Passion*. The period-instrument orchestra and choir performed to an empty auditorium at the Kölner Philharmonie in Cologne, Germany.

may well have exceeded the experience of sitting in the hall. With shots meticulously planned, this was state of the art, although the Philharmonie's empty wraparound seating emphasized the loneliness of the event. "There's often a small audience for contemporary music, but there's always

only live music, never a recording. There is something about live music that shines, radiates, and creates a feeling of daring."

Listening Together

For smaller-budget orchestras, one potential upside of livestreams is a larger, more



The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra's March 11 concert at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans was not open to the public, due to coronavirus concerns. However, the orchestra provided a free livestream of the performance via its website and on local radio stations.

widespread audience. The South Carolina Philharmonic's March 14 broadcast on both Facebook and YouTube was an excellent case in point. Music Director Morihiko Nakahara led a program that included Schumann's Symphony No. 2 (a work



Behind-the-scenes tech for the South Carolina Philharmonic's March 14 concert led by Music Director Morihiko Nakahara at the Koger Center for the Arts, which was broadcast live on Facebook and YouTube.

that celebrated recovery after a period of illness) and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 with seventeen-year-old Yerin Yang the elegant soloist. Frequent use of the long-shot made this feel lonely, and silences between items were especially odd with only the orchestra to applaud the soloist. With live audience stats visible on the computer screen, it was possible to see how many people were tuning in to the livestream. I watched the South Carolina Philhar-

monic's number of viewers rise from 90 (five minutes before the concert began) to more than 1,000 mid-concert. With most families staying put at home, it seems likely that those stats were higher, with more viewers watching the same livestream together.

Though the catchphrase of the moment is "social distancing," many live-streamed concerts are in fact quite social: people watching on the same social media platform can chat (or listen to others chat) during the concert, in real time. The comment stream on YouTube during the South Carolina Philharmonic's livestream made for fascinating reading: "Sounds great on my TV," wrote more than one viewer. Frequent use of emojis became a

little distracting, but the banter was good-

Once the coronavirus crisis has passed, many orchestras will have learned lessons about livestreaming with intriguing implications for the future.

natured: "Am I the only one feeling strange for talking during the concert?" typed one watcher. "Shhhh!" replied another. Best of all were interstate comments like, "Those of us under quarantine in New York state really appreciate this," and "I'm watching from Spokane, WA." Elbow bumps and an awkward moment over delivery of a bouquet during bows raised smiles and online thanks from as far afield as Utah, Massachusetts, and Illinois, with much talk of donations to the South Carolina Philharmonic's musician relief fund.

Heart-warming though these livestreams were, a few days later it was mostly over as new social distancing rules prevented players coming together at all. Nevertheless, once the coronavirus crisis has passed, many orchestras will have learned a technological lesson with intriguing implications for the future. **S**

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