

Chamber Crescendo



The Albany Symphony Orchestra and Music Director David Alan Miller perform a chamber version of Mahler's Fourth Symphony and the premiere of Andre Myers's *Black & Alive* for chamber orchestra.

Gary Gold

Symphonic blockbusters are being swapped out for chamber-sized works as orchestras adapt to pandemic health guidelines. Fresh discoveries abound—for musicians, orchestras, and audiences.

by Rebecca Winzenried

Orchestras are thinking small—as in the size of ensembles, the size of audiences, the size of programs. Granted, it was not entirely by choice. Pandemic-related restrictions on the number of persons allowed to gather, indoors or out, and social-distancing guidelines for onstage set-ups—have meant measuring programs out in 60-minute segments and six-foot increments. Yet amidst it all, a bit of silver lining has been glimpsed, as

symphony orchestras embrace the power of chamber music.

“It’s a time of great discovery, and realizing that small is not necessarily bad. I would not argue against great orchestras and the Mahler symphonies—sometimes I really miss the big string sound—but there is great beauty to smaller works,” says Albany Symphony Orchestra Music Director David Alan Miller. The ASO did turn to Mahler, actually, in a chamber arrange-

ment of his Fourth Symphony (more on Mahler 4 later). Like so many groups, the Albany Symphony also sought out works written specifically for smaller ensembles, like Brahms’s *Serenade No. 1*, originally scored by the composer for eight to nine instruments, and reductions of larger orchestral works, like Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. “You don’t want people thinking, well, we couldn’t do the real piece so we did this watered-down

version. But there are all these really wonderful arrangements and transcriptions made by the composers themselves or their disciples throughout history,” says Miller.

As orchestras began cautiously returning to their concert halls this fall, a few with limited in-person audiences, others with contactless virtual performances, reimagined seasons largely began with string ensembles. Tchaikovsky or Dvořák might still be on the program, but serenades took over from symphonies. Orchestras reached almost instinctively for the string serenades by those composers, even as they began thinking about other repertoire. “It was easy to say, let’s go with the Dvořák String Serenade and Tchaikovsky String Serenade,” says Jeremy Rothman, vice president of artistic planning at the Philadelphia Orchestra. “That’s really low-hanging fruit, but it’s also a good way for



Roger Mastroianni/Cleveland Orchestra

The Cleveland Orchestra with Music Director Franz Welser-Möst and pianist Yefim Bronfman at Severance Hall in October. The orchestra changed to repertoire requiring fewer musicians for this and other episodes of its virtual *In Focus* series.

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the orchestra to get their feet back underneath them, in playing in these new environments.” A performance of the Tchaikovsky Serenade recorded at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts in August for digital streaming was the first time musicians had been together on stage in more than four months.

In a number of cases, the customary serenades have been paired with George Walker’s lesser-known *Lyric for Strings*. That work’s more somber tone, scaled up or down in the number of musicians employed, emerged as an elegiac response to troubled times at orchestras nationwide this season, while also highlighting the music of an African American composer whose name might not be as familiar to audiences. *Lyric for Strings*, written in 1946, is the most frequently performed of Walker’s works, and its presence on many orchestral programs this season speaks for its power—and orchestras’ growing recognition of works by Walker and other Black composers, past and present.

For some orchestras, the reimagined season was a chance to get reacquainted with works that are not frequently performed. The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra’s performance of Dvořák’s Ser-

enade for Strings in October was its first in twenty years. The same program also included the orchestra’s first performance of Richard Strauss’s *Metamorphosen* in more than three decades. In other cases, performance of string serenades was a chance to connect with audiences in a new

way. The Charlotte Symphony Orchestra performed each of the Tchaikovsky and Dvořák serenades for its online CSO On Demand series, which was recorded live at the Knight Theater. “These are pieces we never really play on our main series because we have much bigger works,” says



Courtesy Charlotte Symphony

The Charlotte Symphony’s virtual-only “Charlotte Symphony *Al Fresco*” chamber concerts were held in Principal Cello Alan Black’s backyard. The eight concerts in the series were filmed and produced by CSO horn player Robert Rydel.



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General Manager John Clapp. Listening to the first performance, which included the Tchaikovsky Serenade and Grieg's *Holberg Suite* for Strings, Clapp says he was struck by how his concerns about presenting a small ensemble of socially distanced players in a 1,200-seat theater, with no audience, seemed to diminish. "It was a real adjustment, at first, for the musicians," he says. "But by moving them apart and using more of the [acoustic] shell, it actu-

ally had a warmer sound—a big sound."

The Charlotte Symphony turned to its musicians in retooling its regular On Tap concerts, performed at a local brewery. The series morphed from an indoor event with a chamber orchestra of about twenty musicians to chamber-ensemble performances in the venue's outdoor garden. Musicians took the lead in suggesting works they had been playing in informal appearances around the city over the summer. On one program, cellist Jeremy Lamb's arrangements of Shostakovich's *Jazz Suite No. 2* and *Waltz No. 2* and William Bolcom's *Graceful Ghost Rag* sat alongside his own jazz-inflected compositions.

As orchestras cautiously returned to concert halls this fall, some with limited in-person audiences, others with contactless virtual performances, reimagined seasons largely began with string ensembles.

Orchestras of all sizes have been seeking input from musicians who particularly love performing chamber music. "Conductors who have pretty deep symphonic repertoire don't necessarily get to do a lot of chamber orchestra repertoire, so it's always good to get ideas [from musicians] because everybody comes from different



Courtesy Charlotte Symphony

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra General Manager John Clapp introduces one of the orchestra's online chamber-scale "On Tap concerts," performed at a local brewery. The series morphed from indoors to the venue's garden.

places," says St. Louis Symphony Orchestra President and CEO Marie-Hélène Bernard. "There are all these little gems, things I would not have heard unless I was, say, a flutist or a harpist." She points to one program curated, in part, by Principal Harp Allegra Lily that included Debussy's *Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp*, and *Reflections*, by the American composer and flutist Katherine Hoover. That performance was part of SLSO fall programming that alternated weeks of chamber orchestra and smaller chamber ensemble concerts.

At the Cleveland Orchestra, Chief Artistic Officer Mark Williams took inspiration from guest artist Yefim Bronfman, who suggested Schnittke's *Concerto for Piano and Strings* as an alternative to the Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 2* he had originally been scheduled to perform. Williams did not know the work well



Audience members at the Charlotte Symphony's "On Tap" in-person and virtual chamber concerts, in the beer garden of NoDa Brewing Company. Masked audiences sat socially distanced at tables; musicians performed in a small shelter to protect them from the weather.



Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Orchestra

The Fargo-Moorhead Symphony's opening-night virtual concert featured a chamber version of Mahler 4, with soprano Adrienne Danrich. She also performed songs including her own *Breathe*, written in response to the killing of George Floyd. In photo: Danrich and Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Music Director Christopher Zimmerman discuss the program in a video for the online event.

Courtesy Charlotte Symphony



Camera operators capture socially distanced Cleveland Orchestra musicians at Severance Hall in an August rehearsal for the virtual *In Focus* series, which is available on the orchestra's Adella streaming app.

and it proved something of a revelation, paired with an instrumentally expanded version of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 10 ("Harp"). The quartet's nickname comes from *pizzicato* string phrasing in the first movement. The quartet made for an interesting musical challenge—"It's hard enough for a quartet of people. Now expand that to 40 people, at six- to

seven-foot distance," says Williams—and the performance was recorded for digital streaming. Since Severance Hall was able to accommodate slightly more than the maximum of 30 or so musicians permitted at many venues, he wanted to push the limits of a familiar work. The musical ideas of late Beethoven quartets are so big, he says, that the sound can be almost more

than the instruments of a typical string quartet can bear. "That goes away when you have a larger group. It's created an opportunity to be challenged artistically, and I think that's also very important, in this bizarre season."

About That Mahler 4

A desire to keep stretching artistic boundaries found chamber versions of Mahler's Symphony No. 4 popping up on programs across the country. The Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Orchestra in North Dakota had planned a performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 for its season opener. When it became apparent that would not be feasible, Executive Director Paul Hegland and Music Director Christopher Zimmerman began looking for alterna-

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tives. "I knew that many Mahler symphonies had been arranged for small groups, but I did not know that almost every single one had," says Zimmermann. He had never conducted one of those arrangements when the orchestra decided upon the Fourth Symphony. "I was a bit nervous about that, how it was going to be, if it was going to lose a huge part of what Mahler is. But in some ways the distillation of the huge forces brings out the essence of the piece. It gets right to the core." With a total of fifteen socially distanced musicians, he adds, "Every player knew the spotlight was on them, one on a part. They came to this project super prepared, super focused." That focus on musicians was amplified in a conversation included as part of the virtual concert; the performance was filmed at the orchestra's venue at North Dakota State University. Zimmermann and Concertmaster Sonja Bosca-Harasim discussed Mahler's use of a secondary tuning for the violin solo in the second movement, and she demonstrated differences between the two instruments she used in the performance. Viewers were then primed to look for the changeover, waiting to see when the second violin, perched neatly on a table next to Bosca-Harasim, would come into play.



The Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Orchestra in North Dakota replaced Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 for its virtual opening night with a chamber-orchestra arrangement of Mahler's Symphony No. 4. In photo: Music Director Christopher Zimmerman and Fargo-Moorhead Symphony musicians rehearse the program. Says Zimmerman, "Every player knew the spotlight was on them, one on a part. They came to this project super prepared, super focused."



Jeff Fusco

Lina Gonzalez-Granados leads the Philadelphia Orchestra and Branford Marsalis in Villa-Lobos's *Fantasia* for saxophone and orchestra at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts.



Jeff Fusco

Philadelphia Orchestra Co-Principal Trombone Matthew Vaughn, trumpet player Anthony Prisk, and Associate Principal Horn Jeffrey Lang perform at Valley Forge National Historical Park for the orchestra's "Our City, Your Orchestra" series.

The Fargo-Moorhead Symphony used the 2007 Klaus Simon arrangement of the Fourth Symphony. At the Albany Symphony, Miller chose to conduct another recent chamber arrangement by Iain Farrington instead of Simon's or the 1920 Erwin Stein arrangement used by several other groups. "This one is much more orchestral. I find it much more compelling," Miller says. "I was really impressed with how of much of the piece is still in this version, and how you have a really different experience by virtue of hearing the lines so clearly."

Soprano Adrienne Danrich served as soloist in the chamber version of Mahler's Fourth Symphony at the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony; she also performed

songs that included her own *Breathe*, which was written in response to the killing of George Floyd. At the Albany Symphony, the chamber version of Mahler's Fourth was performed along with the premiere of Andre Myers's *Black & Alive* for chamber orchestra. Myers worked on the ASO commission in early summer, as protests calling for racial justice gripped the nation. The title reflects his own thoughts and hopes as an African American, and the work moves through march rhythms to an uplifting resolu-

tion. The need to reimagine concert seasons on the fly, to program works written for fewer performers, and to consider that performances might not take place at all (the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony had to cancel its taping of a second concert in November when an uptick in COVID-19 cases put the safety of musicians and crew at risk) have all meant a chance to address current events in a way that was never possible with larger pieces and long-range planning.

Orchestras might eventually look back at this period with a bit of gratitude for the unexpected freedom, says Williams, of the Cleveland Orchestra. "We might be able to reflect as an industry on what it means for us to be able to respond to what



Jessica Griffin

Jeremy Rothman, vice president of artistic planning at the Philadelphia Orchestra, says that the orchestra is exploring works for chamber forces by contemporary composers including

Valerie Coleman and Jessie Montgomery, among others.

happens in real time in our world. Maybe we will leave a little wiggle room in our schedules so we can do that."

Shortened concerts—limited to about an hour, without intermission, due to safety concerns—have also reshaped the very structure of orchestra programs; today, programs aren't following the usual overture/concerto/symphony model, and

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even works by traditional composers are their shorter or smaller-ensemble scores, equal in length and instrumentation to the contemporary pieces being performed. Contemporary works that may have been overshadowed by full symphonies are suddenly more prominent, with a more diverse range of composers in the lineup.

That's benefitted composers whose port-



Dino Vichnerat

Safety precautions for concerts at the St. Louis Symphony were not only onstage and backstage; the experience for masked audiences and ushers included contactless ticket scanning as well as socially distanced seating.



Drip Vishwanath

The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's October 2020 concert at Powell Hall featured Music Director Stéphane Denève leading a smaller ensemble of musicians in Jessie Montgomery's *Starburst* and Beethoven's Symphony No. 3.

folios lean toward chamber music. The Philadelphia Orchestra has commissioned and premiered works from Valerie Coleman including the orchestral version of her *Umoja*, and the 2020 tribute to frontline workers, *Seven O'Clock Shout*. However, Rothman says he first became acquainted with her smaller pieces. "So now it's an opportunity to say, okay, we can do some of her chamber music." Likewise, the orchestra had first performed music by Jessie Montgomery, her *Coincident Dances*, in March (coincidentally, on the last program with live audience before the shutdown). Rothman had also first become aware of Montgomery through her chamber mu-

sic, and in the new landscape, "there were these works that were already available that were perfect." The orchestra gave its first performance of Montgomery's *Starburst* in December 2020 (paired with Mahler's Fourth Symphony, coincidentally).

Starburst was also performed by the St. Louis Symphony in October—and indeed, the work is pretty much ubiquitous this season. The St. Louis Symphony had commissioned a full orchestral version of the work for the season opener, and still plans to present that version down the road, according to Bernard. But experience with chamber performances this season has

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given Bernard a whole new perspective. The SLSO began welcoming 100 to 150 patrons into the 2,700-seat Powell Hall for live performances (pausing in November and December when COVID cases started rising). Bernard was a bit surprised by the interest in chamber music, with half the ticketholders being first-timers, and by the robust sound produced in the space. "We've



South Bend Symphony Orchestra

In November, the South Bend Symphony Orchestra collaborated with the Riverlights Music Festival on *Octet*, an installation at the South Bend Museum of Art. Visitors encountered eight speakers in a circle, each projecting the individual parts of musicians performing selections from Purcell's *Abdelazer*, Sibelius's *Andante Festivo*, and Holst's *St. Paul's Suite*.

been chasing possible chamber venues for years, thinking, oh, we can't have chamber music in Powell Hall, it's too big. Now we're thinking very differently," she says.

The very nature of chamber performance has been rethought in a new project at the South Bend Symphony Orchestra. In November, the orchestra's collaboration with the Riverlights Music Festival, *Octet*, was unveiled at the South Bend Museum of Art. Visitors encounter an installation consisting of eight speakers, situated in a circle, each projecting the individual lines of musicians performing the Rondeau from Purcell's *Abdelazer*, *Andante Festivo* by Sibelius, and the Jig from Holst's *St. Paul's Suite*. *Octet* allows listeners to immerse themselves in the music by moving around the circle to zero in on specific instruments, then step back to hear the ensemble blend. A group of eight South Bend musicians was recorded in a socially distanced performance for the project.

Octet was created in response to the pandemic, but the portable installation may continue to play a part in the orchestra's plans going forward. The South Bend Symphony envisions recording additional chamber pieces and taking the installation to schools, hospitals, and other places where listeners can find a new way into the music, even when they can't be in the presence of musicians. **S**



Chuck Fry

Led by Music Director Alastair Willis, musicians from the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in Indiana recorded chamber works for *Octet*, an installation at the South Bend Museum of Art. *Octet* was created in response to the pandemic, but the portable installation may play a part in the orchestra's future plans.

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