

Sound Embrace

Xian Zhang, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's music director, brings a sky-high energy level and full-body approach to the podium. She leans in almost as if to embrace the musicians, and that's not accidental. Even during the past year, with people socially distanced due to the pandemic, she has stayed tightly connected with NJSO musicians—and a film crew—to craft imaginative concert films. She has also traveled a surprising amount, guest conducting the Houston Symphony and Seattle Symphony, as well as the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, where she led the November world premiere of Tyshawn Sorey's *For Marcos Balter*. Here, she talks about keeping connected, shifting programming to include a more diverse group of composers, and what the past year taught her about not taking the music for granted.



Meredith Whitefield for DreamPlay Films

Xian Zhang conducts the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra for a concert film created during the pandemic.

During all the rehearsals and videos that we had to do this year—I think of myself and the musicians as “we”—we felt closer and more bonded compared to pre-pandemic times. And this is not just our musical level, this is on a personal level. People want to be closer in a way, and especially to be supportive to our colleagues. We seem to be able to understand each other a little better. We have been very lucky; we have received government funding twice, so our musicians have been taken care of financially.

During this past year and a half, we did two things very differently compared to the pre-pandemic. One is that we leaned much closer to media. We hired DreamPlay Films, and the concert videos they have produced are very artistic. We performed William Grant Still's *Mother*



Benjamin Ealovega

Xian Zhang

and *Child* for a film where they took shots of people on the streets in Newark, at the most difficult time a year ago, and it was really beautiful and fitting to the time.

The other thing we did differently this year is to shift our programming focus quite a lot more toward African Ameri-

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can, Latinx, and female composers. We commissioned a piece from José Luis Domínguez, our NJSO Youth Orchestras artistic director. We are starting the new Catalyst Residency with Daniel Bernard Roumain. It's a way to showcase what we are striving for, and what we care about. This past season, we wanted to make something special for our season-opening video, so we commissioned Daniel's *i am a white person who ____ Black people* just a month before the premiere, and he was

able to write a great piece for us, composed in response to the fight for social justice, in a short time. We are opening the 2021-22 season with his *Voodoo Violin Concerto*.

This past year, we had the extra luck to have some really top-level soloists joining us: Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto with Daniil Trifonov, the Wieniawski Violin Concerto No. 2 with Joshua Bell, and Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder* with Renée Fleming. I would never have imagined that I could have all three of these soloists in one season.

I think the way we use media live-streaming platforms will stay after the pandemic. At the same time, I think all of us crave the interaction and the direct contact, seeing the physical orchestra onstage. Everybody misses that. The chemistry that that produces, you can't deny it. For the videos we have produced during the past year, we have been meeting about once a month. For those weeks, my energy levels were much higher than usual compared to the rest of the pandemic months. That made me realize how much we have to cherish the whole music-making experience: concerts and rehearsals. We took it for granted most of the time, and one should never do that. This pandemic has taught us to absolutely treasure all of these moments. **S**

XIAN ZHANG has been music director since 2016 of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, where she has commissioned works from composers including Thomas Adès, Qigang Chen, Christopher Rouse, Tyshawn Sorey, Vivian Li, Gary Morgan, Christian McBride, and Paquito D'Rivera.