

Musicians in the Spotlight

Musicians have been taking new roles at orchestras during the pandemic, commissioning and performing new music, stepping up as soloists, and curating and filming performances, often outdoors—even in an airplane hangar.

By Nancy Malitz

When music performances halted in the spring of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the U.S., it was devastating for the entire orchestra community, but wind and brass players were particularly hard hit. As smaller ensembles began returning to the stage, they mostly featured musicians who could play their instruments while wearing masks, like strings and percussion; many orchestras, in an effort to prevent aerosols from spreading the virus among musicians, made the decision that performances with winds or brass could involve only a few players onstage at a time. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's Heinz Hall implemented safety protocols that didn't allow *any* winds and brass to perform together. Yet more than anything, musicians needed to play.

Thus it came as great news for Pittsburgh Symphony Principal Clarinet Michael Rusinek and Principal Bassoon Nancy Goeres, who are married, that Music Director Manfred Honeck had commissioned a new quadruple concerto for them and their stand partners from American composer David Ludwig.

Goeres was thrilled. "The four of us are very close friends," she said recently from Aspen, where she and Rusinek

were spending the summer. "Philip Pandolfi and I have been colleagues for 25 years, and Mike's colleague Ronald Samuels has been in the orchestra 20 years." Rusinek, who joked that he told Ludwig to "make the second part the hard part," said he was especially happy because people don't necessarily think of the seconds as soloists, adding, "these guys could be principal players in any orchestra."

While winds and brasses are being highlighted by their orchestras in new ways to make up for their lack of stage time early in the pandemic, musicians from every section have become closely involved in programming while developing new skills. Amid evolving safety restrictions that affect rehearsals, concert halls, and in-person and online performances, orchestras nationwide are putting their own musicians center stage, whether that stage is virtual, outdoors, in more intimate venues, or as the soloists in brand-new scores commissioned just for them.

At the Pittsburgh Symphony, Ludwig's Concerto for Two Clarinets and Two Bassoons is scheduled to debut in February 2022, on a program led by Honeck that includes Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, which is scored for a large orchestra that includes piccolo, flutes, oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, soprano



Edward DeArmitt / FSO

Above left, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Principal Bassoon Nancy Goeres and Principal Clarinet Michael Rusinek perform the world premiere of Jonathan Leshnoff's Double Concerto, June 2019. This season, Goeres and Rusinek will perform with Second Clarinet Ronald Samuels (above right, top) and Second Bassoon Philip Pandolfi (above right, bottom) for the world premiere of David Ludwig's Concerto for Two Clarinets and Two Bassoons, led by Music Director Manfred Honeck.



Alicia Dallego



Rob Davidson



Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Principal Bassoon Nancy Goeres performs in a filmed Beethoven program at Fallingwater, the Frank Lloyd Wright landmark near Pittsburgh, in October 2020.



During the pandemic, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra musicians including Principal Cello Anne Martindale Williams have been featured in the PSO's "Front Row" series of virtual concerts.



Mary Persin, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's vice president of artistic planning, says during the pandemic "there was nothing else to do but be as creative as we possibly could."



Music Director Michael Buttermann conducts the Boulder Philharmonic in a streamed concert at the Brungard Aviation hangar at Boulder Municipal Airport, October 2020.



Clockwise from top left: Boulder Philharmonic Concertmaster Charles Wetherbee, Assistant Principal Second Violin Sharon Park, Executive Director Sara Parkinson. All have taken on new roles during the pandemic.

clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tenor tuba, and tuba: a celebration of winds and brass sufficient to rattle the rafters at Heinz Hall. Ludwig is the dean and director of Juilliard's Music Division and, incidentally, pianist Rudolf Serkin's grandson.

While winds and brasses are being highlighted to make up for their lack of stage time early in the pandemic, musicians from all sections have become involved in programming while developing new skills.

Mary Persin, vice president of artistic planning at the Pittsburgh Symphony, recalls the hard news that the orchestra would have to cancel last season's massive celebration of Beethoven's 250th birthday. "We were going to do the entire symphony cycle in one week, as well as all 16 string quartets at the Carnegie Library, and none of it could go on as planned," she says. "So we were forced into some tight corners, and there was nothing else to do but be as creative as we possibly could. That meant getting outside of the hall, which has always been part of our mission, but we were able to do that in a bigger way than normal, and it turned out to be this incredible, unexpected silver lining.

"We staged our homage to Beethoven at Fallingwater, the Frank Lloyd Wright landmark in our backyard, just an hour from Pittsburgh," Persin continues. "It made so much sense. Wright was also a pathbreaker in many ways. We filmed during the first week of October. It was exquisite, with fall's changing leaves and colors, and the sound of water, and birds flying overhead. And being in the open air afforded us a chance to have duos, and trios, and the trombones all together. A performance of *Clair de lune*"—a chamber arrangement featuring Principal Oboe Cynthia DeAlmeida, Principal Harp Gretchen Van Hoesen, and Principal Flute Lorna McGhee—"will stay with me forever, with the falling leaves gathering at the base of the harp, and the breeze in the trees, and the cast of light overhead—just unbelievable music in a stunning setting."

Boulder Philharmonic: Aflutter in an Airplane Hangar

The Butterfly Lovers, a violin concerto, was already booked for Boulder Philharmonic Concertmaster Charles Wetherbee to perform with the orchestra as solo violinist when COVID hit. "I have the same memory that I did as a kid growing up," he says of Chen Gang and He Zhanhao's concerto, which is based on a tragic Chinese legend of star-crossed lovers that dates back to the seventh century. "I jumped at the chance. Folks will always say it is one of their favorite all-time pieces. But I can't recall hearing it live." Now the concerto is

rescheduled alongside an aerial ballet in April 2022 inside the Brungard Aviation hangar near Boulder Municipal Airport. It's the hangar now used by the Frequent Flyers Aerial Dance troupe, with which the orchestra has previously partnered. Music Director Michael Buttermann will lead the concert, which in addition to *The Butterfly Lovers* concerto will also feature Mason Bates's *Undistant*, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Russian Easter Overture*, and Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. "We only started performing at [the hangar] because of COVID," Wetherbee says. "I was kind of amazed how good the sound is, actually. It's a really cool venue. The dancers have used it for many years. The height is great, and the support structures are exposed for easy fixing of their lines. It also has been good for us because of the cross-ventilation, with doors at the two ends.

"Some of the choreography will be on the floor, and some in the air," Wetherbee says. "Of course, it is more challenging to play music when your colleagues are literally yards away, but the high ceilings are not crazy high, probably about the same as a large concert hall. We're going to use the hangar until we can truly get back into the main concert hall." All of the Boulder Philharmonic's seven 2020-21 virtual season concerts were filmed inside the hangar. The orchestra's 2021-22 season will begin in October with the first of several shortened, limited-capacity performances at Mountain View United Methodist Church in Boulder, followed by full-or-



Concertmaster Laura Colgate curated the National Philharmonic's filmed "Music That Travels Through Space" program, which featured space- and night-themed music and NASA images, with performers including cellist Lori Barnet, trumpeter Chris Gekker, clarinetist Suzanne Gekker, and pianist Elizabeth Hill.



National Philharmonic Concertmaster Laura Colgate (at left) curated a new biweekly virtual and broadcast series of themed hourlong performances.

chestra performances in 2022.

The Boulder Philharmonic's executive director, Sara Parkinson, stepped into leadership in early 2020. Her tasks included trimming the budget and hunting for a venue that would allow the orchestra to keep playing safely. As the local health department clamped down, the hardest things to see put on hold, Parkinson says, were the field trips to elementary-school students. In response, Assistant Principal Second Violin Sharon

"We did this early on in the pandemic, because it gave all of us something to cling to," National Philharmonic Concertmaster Laura Colgate says of the orchestra's forays into streamed and TV performances.

Park, who is also on the Boulder Philharmonic's board, taught herself how to create video resources for teachers, students, and people stuck at home. "It took many weeks, and a flurry of ramping up my video editing skills, but it did allow us to help bridge the gap," Park recalls.

National Philharmonic: Smaller Space, Livestreams, and TV

When Jim Kelly, a violist with the Bethesda, Maryland-based National Philharmonic, and since 2019 also the orchestra's president and CEO, met with the musicians in March 2021 to discuss the local requirement that all performers be vaccinated, he got a unanimous response: "Everyone was on board with the decision that anybody who didn't want to be vaccinated could stay at home, without it affecting tenure or their spot on the sub list, although they wouldn't be paid," he recalls. "We did 15 concerts, streamed online and aired on WETA television, and at least we were able to provide that



National Philharmonic violist Jim Kelly, who also serves as the ensemble's president and CEO, designed a virtual concert series with Concertmaster Laura Colgate during the pandemic.

work." The orchestra is made up mostly of musicians in the Washington, D.C. metro area, many with teaching positions or private studios. "Pre-COVID, we were performing concerts or chamber music every two weeks, generally some sort of event 20 to 22 weeks a year," Kelly says.

But types of events had to change, and so did the venue. The Music Centre at Strathmore's 1,976-seat concert hall, where the National Philharmonic usually performs, was just too vast for the smaller-scale musical offerings they had in mind (the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and Annapolis Symphony Orchestra are among other groups that perform at Strathmore). The musicians switched over to the AMP by Strathmore, a multi-purpose, configurable, high-tech dining and concert space in Bethesda, which seats several hundred people. Only a few years old, the AMP is where "more of their non-classical things happen," says National Philharmonic Concertmaster Laura Colgate. "Because of the size of AMP, and because of what we felt we could do in terms of cameras and props and lighting, it was the better way to go."

The concertmaster also stepped up to curate a new series of TV-friendly Sunday performances that were filmed five days prior and edited for broadcast on WETA television. The performances were given at two-week intervals, each an hour long with educational vignettes. The themes typically involved a partner, such as one program with a chef, "Music That Feeds the Soul," with music by Amy Beach and Scott Joplin. Between numbers, a local chef delivered a how-to demo for dishes like winter-squash gnocchi with roasted mushrooms and brown

butter. Ingredient kits could be ordered in advance, so viewers could cook the same chef's meal at home. The idea was to develop programs that could be made available for posting at the orchestra's website and its Vimeo, Facebook, and YouTube pages, all while meeting the requirements of the musicians' contract agreements.

"Editing with only five days was a Herculean effort," Kelly says. "Who knew?"

Another program, "Music that Travels through Space," featured Alistair Coleman's *Acquainted with the Night* for trumpet and piano as well as Golijov's *Tenebrae* arranged for string quartet, framed by magnificent space images from NASA and the Hubble space telescope. The learning curve on all the video programming was steep, Colgate admits. "The shows aired every other Sunday, and they had to be between 57 and 58 minutes long exactly. Music and scripts and the camera work had to be figured out precisely. It was a huge team effort involving a lot of work, strict deadlines, and much of it beyond the scope of what we usually have to think about. But with the expansion into streamed and TV performances, the orchestra's audience has increased as well, with a major increase in new donors. And after the first few shows, we found our groove."

"One of the biggest things was that we did this early on in the pandemic, because it gave all of us something to cling to," Colgate says. "It was super helpful, not just to keep our audience in place, but for the community to be able to experience this music even when they couldn't be there in person."

Seattle Symphony: New Music, New Space

Violinist Eduardo Rios hadn't yet completed a full season with the Seattle Symphony as assistant concertmaster on the March 2020 day that President and CEO Krishna Thiagarajan walked into the rehearsal and told everybody to stop playing and head home. "Then, after not working for over five months, I was feeling in desperate need to do something with my life," Rios recalls. Born in Lima, Peru, he was a winner of the 2015 Sphinx Competition and previous fellow with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, now eager to make his way in Seattle. "So when I finally heard that the orchestra was reopening, but that it was a voluntary thing, and only if you felt safe and were okay with participating, I pretty much did all I could," he says. Rios joined other Seattle Symphony musicians in September 2020 for the orchestra's first streamed performance, which took place at Benaroya Hall and featured Seattle vocalist and guitarist Whitney Mongé performing Mary D. Watkins's *Five Movements of Color: Soul of Remembrance*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* Overture, and Beethoven's Symphony No. 7. "Of course, there was no audience and no clapping, and we were reduced in size, but it was still the Seattle Symphony," Rios recalls. "I got those nerves that you get from being recorded or filmed. It pushes you to a different level, to play it perfectly every time." Thiagarajan, who had seen very quickly the need to create an online presence, credits the musicians for being instrumental in allowing the

orchestra to put content online.

In April 2022, Eric Jacobs, the Seattle Symphony's clarinet/bass clarinet and a passionate new-music advocate, will perform the premiere of a newly commissioned work by Angélica Negrón and Peter Shin for "singing clarinet," involving vocalization and electronics. It's to be performed in the orchestra's Octave 9 performance space, which opened in 2019 and is capable of 360-degree video projections and chameleon-like acoustical changes. "This is the venue that we hope can be a Seattle arts incubator," says Raff Wilson, the orchestra's vice president of artistic planning. "It's an amazing cohort of young voices we are seeing now," he says of the musicians and composers. "They reflect the music of this time, the way they tack and adjust to what has happened." Wilson says the orchestra's 2021-22 season opener is indicative of its exploration and reinvention: the world premiere of *Remember*, scored for full orchestra, by Indian-American composer Reena Esmail.

Quad City Symphony: "Vaccine Variations"

Organizing a pandemic response gets complex for an orchestra covering four cities across two states, but Quad City Symphony Orchestra Executive



The Seattle Symphony and guitarist Whitney Mongé perform at Benaroya Hall, September 19, 2020, the orchestra's first streamed performance.



Clockwise from top left: Seattle Symphony Assistant Concertmaster Eduardo Rios, President and CEO Krishna Thiagarajan, clarinet/bass clarinet Eric Jacobs, and Vice President of Artistic Planning Raff Wilson. Thiagarajan credits the musicians for being instrumental in allowing the orchestra to put content online.



Nicholas Propp

Quad City Symphony Orchestra Music Director Mark Russell Smith conducts the orchestra at the 2,200-seat Adler Theatre in Davenport, Iowa; the size of the space allows for social distancing during the pandemic.

Director Brian Baxter says that all four communities in Illinois (Moline and Rock Island) and Iowa (Bettendorf and Davenport) have offered great support. “Our first show since the March shutdown was in September 2020, an outdoor pops concert that took a lot of collaborative work, in particular by the musicians, so that they could perform as much as they could, as safely as they could,” Baxter says. “It was really kind of tear-inducing—we’ll never again take for granted what we do. And none of it would have been possible if we weren’t all rolling in the same direction.”

One of the orchestra’s regular performance spaces, Davenport’s Adler Theatre, seats 2,200, which Music Director Mark Russell Smith says is normally almost too big: “We can’t fill all those seats. But during COVID, it was great for distancing, and we could put 42 musicians onstage.”

French horn player Marc Zyla, who is also the QCSO’s director of community engagement, is hopeful that his chance to play the Strauss Horn Concerto may actually come in December, given COVID rates. But he’ll take what comes—and he’s been creative. “We kind of just took an approach that whatever happens, we need to make stuff and stay busy. We feel like we are one of the first orchestras to have a TikTok account,” Zyla says of the QCSO’s short-form videos, on 15-second repeat and abun-



Nicholas Propp



Nicholas Propp



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Left to right: Quad City Symphony Orchestra French horn player Marc Zyla, Music Director Mark Russell Smith, and Executive Director Brian Baxter.

dant social-media tie-ins, that he helps to manage. And even though the musicians got vaccinated, he said the percentages of vaccinated in the region were “just okay” at first. “So each week for about six weeks we’d send a quartet of our string players to go to medical clinics and play for about an hour. We called it ‘Vaccine Variations,’ and the media were really good in terms of picking it up. We feel we did a nice job of helping everybody get back to normal.”

Philadelphia Orchestra: Fresh Winds, Online and In Person

The Philadelphia Orchestra’s new principal oboe, Philippe Tondre, who took his place in the orchestra’s storied wind corps during the pandemic, contends that his biggest initial challenge was just getting into the U.S. from his native France. His bow with the Mozart Oboe Concerto in January 2021 won notably warm applause from his colleagues. A March 2021 virtual concert featured Mozart’s *Gran Partita*, and its dazzling

roles for 13 winds.

Last winter, winds and brass had not been able to be onstage together in many months, but Tondre says he was just grateful to be playing. “That was the first issue,” he recalls. “The orchestra did incredible work trying to be active. It is vital to be able to use the stage.” Meanwhile, Tondre has created a series of charming videos documenting the many sounds his oboe can make, and his sometimes baffling new experiences—including Philly Cheesesteak.

Principal Tuba Carol Jantsch is preparing for the December world premiere of Wynton Marsalis’s new tuba concerto. She can take pride in the fact that it exists at all. “There weren’t any tuba concertos until John Williams,” she says, “but when Wynton came to town four years ago to work with [violinist] Nicola Benedetti on some edits here and there for his violin concerto, which is almost cinematic, he was chummy with the brass section, and he said some nice things about my playing.”



Philippe Tondre, a native of France, was hired as the Philadelphia Orchestra's principal oboe during the pandemic. He introduced himself to audiences with a humorous video sharing his reactions to unfamiliar U.S. customs and traditions—such as his new hometown's Philly Cheesesteak.

Philadelphia Orchestra Principal Tuba Carol Jantsch will premiere Wynton Marsalis's tuba concerto in December. "After the first read-through, I thought, 'This is super cool,'" says Jantsch.

"And I said, 'Yes, so the tuba concerto is next, right?' And he didn't say no! So I made sure they knew I was fully pushing for this—I am really good friends with his copyist, who's a bass player. We bass-clef people have to stick together! I think he saw the potential for how Wynton's writing could make a concerto for bass that makes the instrument alive like the world has never seen before. After the first read-through, I thought, 'This is super cool.' Wynton had been talking about how virtuosity comes in different forms, and the finesse with which you play a bass line doesn't need a ton of notes to be virtuosic. You will hear it. This movement just grooves so hard." **S**

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In December, Philadelphia Orchestra Principal Tuba Carol Jantsch will perform in the orchestra's world premiere of Wynton Marsalis's new tuba concerto.

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