

Safety First

Orchestras are adopting new health protocols to keep everyone safe for the return of in-person concerts this fall. The emergence of the Delta variant and fluctuating COVID-19 infection rates mean that proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID-19 test, plus masking and social distancing, are being implemented for audiences, musicians, and staff alike. Actions vary from orchestra to orchestra, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. How is everyone coping?

By Brin Solomon



Carnegie Hall photo by Richard Termine. Inset: Excelsior Pass, an app for New York residents that displays proof of COVID-19 vaccination.

Not that long ago, debates about audience dress at concerts revolved around tuxedos versus t-shirts. Going into the fall of 2021, the stakes are a bit higher. Should patrons wear masks? Should they come with proof of vaccination? Can they even sit next to each other in an enclosed space? As orchestras around the country gear up for their new seasons, they face not only an ongoing pandemic but also a seemingly intractable culture war that has made basic public safety measures into political third rails. In such a landscape, what are orchestras doing to keep people safe? How are they staying on top of the ever-changing COVID-19 crisis? To

get an inside look at the thinking behind their plans, I spoke with administrators at five orchestras around the country to hear how they're approaching the fall season.

The first piece of the puzzle is, of course, keeping the musicians, administrators, and concert hall staff safe. It doesn't matter what your audience policy is if your musicians can't play the concert, your stagehands can't prepare the stage, your ushers can't manage the hall, or your janitors clean it. Unsurprisingly, then, the organizations I spoke to require all workers to be fully vaccinated. "We have agreed, musicians and management, that the orchestra and staff would all be vaccinated



Joe Bassett 2021



Luz Rodriguez



Rob McIver



Rob McIver



Rob McIver

At the **Annapolis Symphony Orchestra's** outdoor concert at Quiet Waters Park on September 4, the audience spontaneously observed self-distancing protocols. Bottom row from left: ASO Executive Director and Chief Development Officer Edgar Herrera says that the orchestra's vaccine mandate has widespread support. Annapolis Symphony musicians, including violinist Paul Bagley, wear masks during concerts and rehearsals. Music Director José-Luis Novo leads the orchestra on May 1, 2021. Cellists (from left) Pei Lu and April Studeny in masks.

and provide proof of vaccination” says Christina Littlejohn, CEO of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra. The Dallas Symphony Orchestra gave its workers a deadline of August 1 to be vaccinated, before the governor banned vaccine mandates. Edgar Herrera, executive director and chief development officer of the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra in Maryland, emphasizes that his orchestra’s policy had been put in place with union support. “The musicians’ union fully supports this policy because it makes them feel and be safer,” he says.

In cases where an orchestra does not own its concert hall, shares it with other groups, or performs in a multi-use performing arts center, some venues are imposing vaccine mandates, masks, or other precautions that orchestras must observe. Many localities have regulations regarding vaccinations and masks, and those can vary widely. At the national level, on September 9 the Biden adminis-

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tration required that workers at businesses with more than 100 employees must be immunized or face weekly testing, and also issued an executive order mandating COVID-19 vaccinations for all federal employees, subject to some exceptions. Orchestras are keeping a close eye on

city, state, and federal protocols, and are adopting the latest health guidance as it emerges.

Not all musicians are happy to follow these new rules. On August 30, the *Wilmington Star-News* reported that Martha Dippold, who has played clarinet with the Wilmington

Symphony Orchestra in North Carolina for several years, refused to comply with the orchestra’s vaccine mandate for musicians and performers. Citing a need to keep all musicians, staff, and audiences healthy, the orchestra turned down Dippold’s request for a religious exemption and did not permit her to perform at its season-opening concerts; at press time, a longer-term resolution of the situation

was pending. (The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission states that employers are allowed to mandate vaccines as a means of protecting the safety and well-being of their workforces.)

Research Matters

Even when vaccinated, people at orchestras are still encouraged to mask up and keep their distance, but this isn’t always possible in a concert hall. Few stages can accommodate six feet between everyone, and woodwind and brass players obviously cannot play masked. Early on in the pandemic, social media feeds filled with images of bassoonists in plexiglass cubes and other such contraptions, but audiences shouldn’t necessarily expect to see such things when they come to concerts this fall.

“It turns out that a clear airflow to vents is more important,” says Erik Finley, vice president and general manager of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Plexiglass barriers between musicians can create stagnant air that traps viral particles and increases the odds of infection. The SLSO performed with barriers for a mere two weeks before its team of medical advisors and researchers told the orchestra to take them down. Multiple studies conducted during the pandemic reported that barriers like these are minimally effective, at best.

For the St. Louis Symphony, that team’s advice carries a lot of weight. An interdisciplinary panel of experts from Washington University, it includes both medical doctors—one of whom, Dr. Abigail Carlson, left last fall to work at the Centers for Disease Control—and structural engineers who can answer detailed technical questions about performing conditions. “This team conducted aerosol studies in our space so we could come up with a plan that was specific to our hall,” covering everything from patron seating to the air filtration system, Finley says. “There’s actually a hospital-approved study at Washington University that will be coming out in the fall based on our performance environment.”

Orchestras including the Houston Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra also collaborated with researchers at local universities and institutes on studies of aerosol spread, mitigation strategies,

Surveying Orchestra Audiences

The Audience Outlook Monitor, organized by the arts consulting firm WolfBrown, is a longitudinal tracking study to keep tabs on arts attendees' thoughts, concerns, and intentions about returning to in-person events during the pandemic. The League of American Orchestras partnered with WolfBrown to survey the preferences of orchestra audiences while also creating resources for the orchestra field. Beginning in February 2021, 15 League-member orchestras started surveying their patrons, either monthly or bi-monthly, depending on the size of their customer database; surveying will continue through November. Participating orchestras access their results via WolfBrown's dashboard and share results with each other. The 15 orchestras agreed to share aggregated results with the larger orchestra field through a dashboard created specifically for League members. Periodic summaries, webinars, and briefings keep orchestras up to date with the latest survey results. Learn more at <https://www.audienceoutlookmonitor.com/league-of-american-orchestras>.

Orchestra Participants in the COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor

The Cleveland Orchestra
Detroit Symphony Orchestra
Madison Symphony Orchestra
Nashville Symphony
New World Symphony
New York Philharmonic
North Carolina Symphony
Omaha Symphony
Oregon Symphony
Pacific Symphony
The Philadelphia Orchestra
San Diego Symphony
San Francisco Symphony
Tucson Symphony Orchestra
Walt Disney Concert Hall

and safety protocols, and a coalition of more than 125 performing arts groups including the League of American Orchestras released a report earlier this year on reducing the spread of COVID-19 at performing arts activities. Several orchestras and concert halls turned to specific scientific guides during the pandemic; the Annapolis Symphony convened an eight-to-nine-person task force that still meets on an as-needed basis.

When it comes to audience members, there are different wrinkles. "Unfortunately, our governor issued an executive order, so we cannot require our audiences show proof of vaccination, which we wish we could do," says Kim Noltemy, president and CEO of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. As such, the DSO is the only orchestra I spoke to not requiring audience members to be vaccinated. The orchestra is, for the time

Orchestras including the Houston Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, and St. Louis Symphony Orchestra collaborated with scientists on studies of aerosol spread, mitigation strategies, and safety protocols.

being, allowed to require patrons to wear masks. In other states, regional restrictions can cause difficulties. The Annapolis Symphony plays in two concert halls, each of which is in a different county. At one point, the two counties had different caps on the largest permissible size of an

indoor gathering. "We had to cancel a live-stream because we couldn't make [the county's] numbers work in the hall that we stream from," Herrera says ruefully, though the concert would have been allowed in the other county.

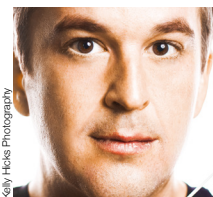
Lest they have to turn people away over a miscommunication, orchestras are going to great lengths to inform patrons of these new admittance policies. "We made sure people saw the safety requirements at least four times when buying their tickets," says Tyler Rand, executive director of the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra in Michigan, "and when we



Kelly Hicks Photography



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Arkansas Symphony Orchestra string players wear masks at a rehearsal for the orchestra's September 16 *Celebrate Little Rock, Together* free concert. Bottom row from left: CEO Christina Littlejohn says, "We have agreed, musicians and management, that the orchestra and staff would all be vaccinated and provide proof of vaccination." Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Artistic Director Geoffrey Robson. Percussionists rehearse while masked. Robson and musicians rehearse for the *Celebrate Little Rock, Together* concert.

send people their tickets in the mail, they're actually wrapped in a 'please read first: important information' document." These efforts seem to have paid off: For the orchestra's first concert of the season, only one patron showed up without the necessary documentation, and, according to Rand, this seems to have been a case of forgetfulness, not ignorance.

What the Stats Say

Having decided what patrons must do to gain entry, orchestras must then decide how many patrons to grant entry to. Along those lines, many orchestras are moving to paperless tickets and programs in order to cut down on contact points that could conceivably spread the virus. Partly because it cannot guarantee that every member of the audience will be vaccinated, the Dallas Symphony is selling only 60 percent of possible tickets. The other orchestras I spoke to are putting 100 percent of their tickets on sale. But then again, as Arkansas's Littlejohn wryly notes, given the pandemic, "It's been a while since we sold at capacity anyway."

The DSO is asking audiences what they think. "We did a survey of our audience, and 90 percent are fully vaccinated," Noltemy says. "So that makes us feel good, but of course you never know who isn't, so we're following all of the mask mandates and the distancing that we can."

This figure is largely in line with a survey of orchestras that are members of the League of American Orchestras and their audiences that found that, as of July, 96 percent of respondents were partially or fully vaccinated. The COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor, administered by the arts consulting firm WolfBrown, is a longitudinal study of audience attitudes about going to cultural events during the pandemic. The League is hosting 15 orchestras for the study, which also surveys arts and culture groups in multiple genres; participating organizations circulate the survey to audiences from five to nine times in 2021, depending on the size of their database. (Read the report at <https://www.audienceoutlookmonitor.com/league-of-american-orchestras>.)

That said, being vaccinated isn't the same thing as feeling safe. The Audi-



Sylvia Eblarfon



Sylvia Eblarfon

Music Director Fabio Luisi leads the **Dallas Symphony Orchestra**, September 16, 2021; Luisi enters and exits the stage wearing a mask, and conducts without it. Bottom row from left: President and CEO Kim Noltemy says, "Our governor issued an executive order, so we cannot require our audiences show proof of vaccination, which we wish we could do." Signs such as these at the Dallas Symphony have become widespread at concert halls and theaters.

ence Outlook Monitor found that only 60 percent of vaccinated respondents felt ready to return to in-person events; 33 percent were waiting for lower case numbers, which means they're likely to stay away for some time yet given the current caseload statistics—statistics that could rise or fall at any time.

The survey reveals some useful indications of what might be necessary to get audiences coming back to the symphony: 61 percent of respondents said they'd be more likely to attend if everyone in the audience had to show proof of vaccination status to attend, and 9 percent said they'd only attend if such a policy were in place. But some of these things are simply not under orchestras' control. Numerous respondents said they were waiting for it to be possible to vaccinate children under 12, and others said that they were waiting for cases to drop to near zero. And indeed, at least one respondent who said they

would not attend a concert that required everyone in the audience to be vaccinated said that they were motivated in equal parts by equity concerns (the young and the immuno-compromised cannot be vaccinated and thus cannot attend)

"We've learned a lot about how to be a modern, flexible, involved, and aware organization," says Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Artistic Director Geoffrey Robson.

and by fears of breakthrough cases among the vaccinated leading to new variants, potentially turning even fully vaccinated concerts into transmission events.

The generally high vaccination rates among those surveyed probably do much to explain the minimal negative response orchestra administrators say they've

received for instituting these policies. "So far we haven't had any pushback," Annapolis's Herrera says. "In fact, we've had people reach out to thank us for doing this, saying they appreciate it." Other orchestras I spoke with reported a handful of complaints, but, as Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Artistic Director Geoffrey Robson notes, "There are always people



Eric Duncanson



Dilip Veshwanath



Dilip Veshwanath



Dawn Moore

Audience members cheer the September 18, 2021 concert by the **St. Louis Symphony Orchestra** at Powell Hall, where concertgoers and artists are required to show proof of vaccination and wear masks. Bottom row from left: Music Director Stéphane Denève led the orchestra on October 15, 2020, the first performance in Powell Hall since March 2020. Violinists Eva Kozma, left, and Kristin Ahlstrom wear masks and maintain social distance. At the St. Louis Symphony, masks and hand sanitizers are becoming familiar sights.

behind the shroud of the internet who will say things just to provoke a reaction.” The Ann Arbor Symphony’s Rand says that some of patrons did not receive the new requirements well at first, but that a robust education campaign was successful in allaying qualms. (Ann Arbor is also accepting recent negative PCR test results in lieu of vaccine cards.) The DSO’s Noltemy summed up the attitude of administrators regarding these complaints: “At the end of the day, I’m the one who can’t sleep if I’m the one responsible for someone getting COVID because of us.”

So the mask and vaccine requirements aren’t going away just because of a few complaints. How are such people going to be handled at the door? “We know a lot of orchestras are using app-based systems,” St. Louis’s Finley says, “but there’s so much that can’t be handled with an app. We’ve tried to keep everything personal, to listen to everyone.”

Quick thinking by orchestras has been necessary in order to stay on top of the pandemic’s curveballs—curveballs that will likely keep coming for a while yet.

Ushers at St. Louis Symphony concerts will be checking vaccination status at the entrance, as will staffers at the Arkansas and Annapolis orchestras; these groups expect to hire additional ushers to help get patrons seated in a timely manner.

“We’re understanding folks, and our patrons are understanding folks,” Robson says, “so there’s no doubt we can resolve any issues that come up around vaccination status equitably.” But he emphasized the need for handling things on a case-by-case basis that couldn’t easily be effected with the impersonal automation of an app.

Lurking in the background is the question of what would happen if an unvaccinated person showed up with a ticket to the evening’s performance. Perhaps understandably, no one wants to get too specific about such a hypothetical. “Any administration of any protocol is going to involve a dialogue, not just smacking down a rule,” Finley says. Robson floats

the idea of gently diverting such patrons to a digital broadcast of the performance instead so that they would still get their money’s worth, but notes, “we’re still finalizing how this will work.”

Adapting and Then Adapting Again

Arkansas is far from alone in turning to digital alternatives. Many orchestras were making forays into the world of streaming before the pandemic, but COVID-19 accelerated the timelines—sometimes in big ways. “Last summer, we installed a robotic camera system and a digital control room,” the Dallas Symphony’s Noltemy says, “and this allowed us to make huge strides in terms of our online presence, because there’d been such hesitation for so many years about whether our audiences would watch anything online.” Such fears seem to have been misplaced: The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra’s nightly Facebook stream has racked up nearly one million viewers from 30 countries over the course of the pandemic; the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra pushed up its digital timeline by two years, and its online educational resources have reached around 35,000 students, many of whom may live far from the city.

Under the guidance of Herrera, the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra developed its own digital platform to give more control over the final product, which is an indication that these streaming options aren’t just temporary stopgaps. All the orchestras interviewed had expanded their digital presence over the course of the pandemic, and only Ann Arbor was planning to scale back now that in-person concerts were becoming viable again. “We took a lot of time to get in-depth audience feedback,” Rand explains, “and what people really want from an orchestra like ours is the live experience. There isn’t the demand in our community for streaming. No one has requested it.” But others touted streaming’s greater flexibility, noting it also creates a more inclusive orchestra for people who cannot attend in person due to distance or disability. “How could we go back?” Arkansas’s Robson asks.

Adding ushers and livestreaming costs money, and one might wonder whether these strategies to take care of everyone’s physical health are adding

to these musical institutions' financial burden. This turns out not to be the case. "We had actually initially planned for COVID to be gone by now," Arkansas's Littlejohn explains, "so it was already in our budget to do streaming this year." "Fundraising has been better than ever," Herrera says of Annapolis's financial outlook, "because we guaranteed to pay our musicians, regardless of if they could play or not. And that created tremendous goodwill." To shore things up further, the symphony released a new five-year plan to account for the changed financial landscape in the wake of the pandemic's onset.

Things will probably not unfold exactly according to that plan, but Herrera isn't alone in seeing this crisis—in spite of everything—as an opportunity for transformation. "The name of the game is being more nimble than our business may have been in the past," the St. Louis Symphony's Finley says, a sentiment that Arkansas's Robson echoes: "A symphony orchestra has typically not been an organization that has been quick on its feet, and boy has this situation lit a fire there. We've learned a lot about how to be a modern, flexible, involved, and aware organization." At the Ann Arbor Symphony, Rand emphasizes this flexibility as well: "We have multiple backup plans in place, and can pivot as necessary as things evolve."

This quick thinking has been necessary in order to stay on top of the pandemic's curveballs—curveballs that will likely keep coming for a while yet. Some of the changes COVID-19 has wrought, though, have been a long time coming. As Arkansas's Littlejohn puts it: "I'm a 25-year veteran in this field, and it's been fascinating to dig through my old files and see all these things that year after year were on the 'it would be so nice to do' list that this year we just *did*. It turns out you can just figure it out." **S**

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Ann Arbor Symphony/Kevin Baker



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Ann Arbor Symphony/Kevin Baker



Karla Tu Photography

At the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, ushers and volunteers prepare to greet concertgoers. Bottom row from left: Musicians, including Associate Concertmaster Kathryn Votapek, wear masks for rehearsals and performances. The orchestra opened its 2021-22 season on September 10, led by Lina González-Granados; masks and proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID test were required of musicians, audience members, and staff. Ann Arbor Symphony musicians perform wearing masks. Executive Director Tyler Rand says, "We have multiple backup plans in place, and can pivot as necessary as things evolve."

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