

The Stamford Symphony launched a new digital channel during the pandemic.



# Changing the Channels

The pandemic has accelerated the pace of digital engagement and innovation at orchestras, which are reaching audiences, expanding educational resources, and connecting with donors in new ways as they adapt to the demands of the twenty-first century.



Stamford Symphony President and CEO Russell Jones says the orchestra's new online channel is here to stay: "We've actually extended our mission to a wider base."



This spring, Stamford Symphony musicians performed "Amazing Grace" virtually in a performance dedicated to health workers in Fairfield County. The video received more than 10,000 views.

by Rebecca Schmid

When the coronavirus brought activities to a lurching halt last March, classical music organizations adapted rapidly by investing in online content in order to stay engaged with audiences. At the same time, the deluge of free material on the internet raised questions about how to maintain a sustainable business model for live performance. But with most traditional fall seasons cancelled and health protocols evolving, digital channels remain a lifeline not just for sharing live or archived performances but for creating opportunities for education and fundraising.

For some industry experts, this is in fact an overdue development against the backdrop of a digital revolution that has been underway for over two decades.

“The nonprofit arts are usually a little behind the curve in their adoption of technology,” says David Dombrosky, chief marketing officer at the technology company InstantEncore. “And there are good reasons for that. For a lot of organizations, it’s the easiest to cut when it comes to budget. Then we get hit with Covid, and the entire traditional part of the industry is placed on hold. You can pivot to digital engagement during the Great Pause. Or you can do nothing.”

Douglas McLennan, founder and editor of the online news site ArtsJournal, summed it up in a blog post in May when he identified two “camps” of people: “restorationists,” who enter survival mode as they wait for a return to normalcy, and “opportunists,” who accept a future in which

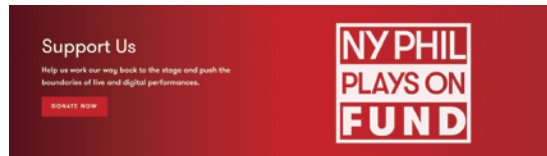
**For all the devastating effects of the crisis, it has ushered in a new level of experimentation and innovation online at orchestras.**

the business model for the arts is permanently changed. “Why would we want to return to a model that wasn’t working so well before anyway?” he asked rhetorically.

For all the devastating effects of the crisis, it has ushered in a new level of experimentation and innovation online. Peter Maniura, who serves as a freelance digital consultant, producer, and director of IMZ Academy, the Austrian arts-advocacy organization, says that “in a positive sense, there has been a great creative response from a lot of people who may have been digital doubters. This has made for a profound shift in people’s mentalities, from major artists producing content from home to big institutions opening up their back catalogue to communicate and share their art.”

Vince Ford, the New York Philharmonic’s vice president for digital strategy and customer experience, says that the cri-

sis “fully engaged the organization around every aspect of digital, from behind-the-scenes content to communications.” Within a week after lockdown, the musicians had signed off the rights to make archival content publicly available on the platform NYPhil Plays On. Within the first two



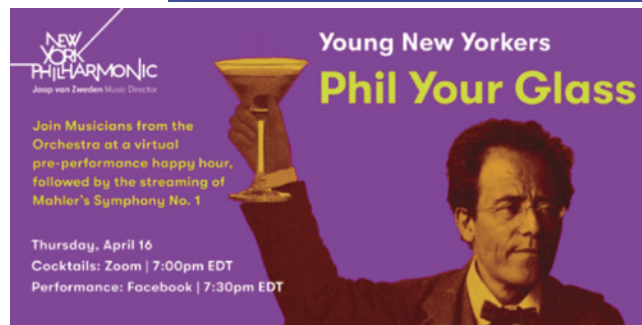
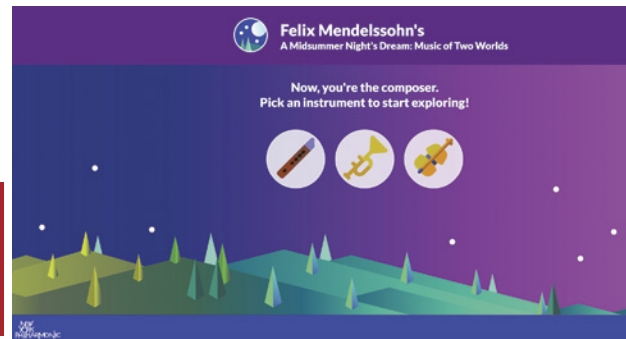
The New York Philharmonic has launched or expanded multiple digital initiatives in recent months.

months, the orchestra gained 50,000 social media followers. But Ford says that likes and shares are a mere “proxy for understanding digital engagement. The larger idea is about connecting to people’s minds and hearts.”

Rethinking the online listening experience may even have the potential to change audience members’ relationship to an orchestra. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra already had an ambitious free web-streaming program, and last summer upgraded its in-hall cameras to 4K. With the outbreak of Covid-19, the organization created an innovation committee consisting of staff members and musicians to come up with ideas for how to repurpose archival material and create new formats. Among the new features to emerge were “Watch Parties” on Facebook, hosted by orchestra players.

DSO Vice President and General Manager Erik Rönmark says that the orchestra never would have landed on the idea to create the Watch Parties under normal circumstances because the musicians were busy playing onstage. “Getting their perspective is so unique and has connected our audiences with the individual musicians in a different way,” he says. “We know

that they are all superstars, but when you come to a concert, you love the orchestra—it’s one big group.” Even when concert life resumes, Rönmark would like to continue the Watch Parties on days when the players are available, because the parties provide a personal connection to the



musicians, in real time.

The Stamford Symphony in Connecticut has proven that smaller orchestras, too, can create powerful community in the digital space. When the lockdown arrived, the orchestra quickly launched a video platform on its website including such features as house concerts featuring musicians from the orchestra and virtual conversa-

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tions in which President and CEO Russell Jones chats with musicians. “We let our audience understand that they’re not the one-dimensional onstage characters they see uniformed with 65 others,” Jones says.

The orchestra relies on private donations for a large percent of its income and launched its new website with the support





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of the Connecticut-based Jeniam Foundation, which redirected funds that normally would have gone to underwrite concerts in March and April. For Jones, the unexpected reallocation of funds has already paid off. He cites the statistic of over 10,000 views for video featuring orchestra musicians performing “Amazing Grace” as an example of “numbers we could only have dreamed” before the crisis, adding that the channel is here to stay even “if by some miracle we were to get vaccinated over the summer and be back this fall. We’ve actually extended our mission to a wider base.”

The growth in the size of online audiences is also the case even for internationally prominent organizations like the Los Angeles Philharmonic. A radio series on KUSC-FM—initiated at the behest of Music Director Gustavo Dudamel and including episodes in Spanish and English—received over 4 million listeners weekly during lockdown. In July, traffic to the site was up 25 percent, according to Vice President of Marketing and Communications Nora Brady. Social media channels also saw a significant rise, with as much as 72 percent more visitors to the Facebook site for the Hollywood Bowl.

In August, the orchestra was able to take advantage of the Bowl’s size—the venue is outdoors and has a large stage for presentations that in typical years are performed before up to 17,000 people—to film concerts for a streaming series, SoundStage,

designed for viewing on a mobile device or computer screen. Dudamel also hosted a six-episode television series featuring archival material on KCET in collaboration with PBS. “It’s been a moment to focus on not just what we can’t do but pivot to do what we *can*,” says Brady, “which is exciting, even in these challenging times.”

### The Monetization Challenge

The pandemic has by necessity further streamlined pathways for soliciting online donations. Organizations have refocused their websites around donation functionality rather than the traditional transaction of ticket sales. The LAPhil had revamped its website shortly before the outbreak but went on to weave even more widgets

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throughout the site. Symphony Spot, created by the League of American Orchestras in April, provides a centralized online hub for orchestras’ virtual offerings, with alphabetical directories for performances and education resources—plus direct links to their donation paths.

At this point, the potential of streaming programs to directly generate revenue through a subscription model remains

Detroit Symphony Orchestra staff prepare for a concert in the orchestra’s “Live from Orchestra Hall” webcast series. Last summer the DSO upgraded to 4K robotic cameras and created nine new camera positions in Orchestra Hall; the new cameras offer clear, colorful images even in low light.

Detroit Symphony Orchestra Vice President and General Manager Erik Rönmark says that even when concert life resumes, he would like to continue the Watch Parties when the orchestra musicians are available.



inconclusive. McLennan pointed out in May that there is a need for sophisticated search engines and other technology that facilitates a viable business model. “Maybe it bundles experiences and allows me to buy packages,” he says. “But more than that, you need a mapped-out digital payments plan that includes micro-payments; several levels and kinds of membership support; subscription support; freemium strategies; crowd-sourcing as well as your regular ticket-selling models.”

Ford says that when the New York Philharmonic begins to perform again, the orchestra plans to revisit its strategy “to identify the right amount of content and opportunities for monetization. Is it around selling digital access, encouraging fundraising, or some other revenue stream? If we look at the flexibility digital brings and successful models like Netflix and Hulu, we’ll be able to take away some of those ideas and integrate them into our own subscription model.”

Digital strategy incorporating sophisticated Netflix/Hulu models may be limited to a handful of big players. While Jones hopes to further exploit the Stamford Symphony’s new website to reach members of the community who have retired in Florida, for example, early

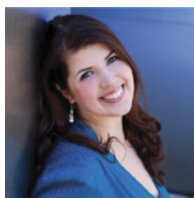




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research suggested that “about 65 percent of the audience wouldn’t pay at all and the rest would pay an amount south of \$25,” says Jones. “So our view would be that you can’t monetize this. There is too much out there to make it competitive, and I think the way to go is to make it free but ask people afterwards to contribute.” He cites as an example a personal contribution of \$25 he made to the Metropolitan Opera after its Virtual Gala in April.

The Detroit Symphony’s Rönmark similarly recalls a donation he made to New York City Ballet following the reaction of his youngest daughter to a free Saturday morning series: “When you see the excitement, it’s hard to not give.”



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72 percent more visitors to the Facebook site for the Hollywood Bowl.

He also emphasizes that, in the present situation, retaining income is at least as important as generating it by communicating with audiences and patrons. One avenue has been to create exclusive content for existing donors, in part to replace the in-person interactions that would be possible under normal circumstances. The Detroit musicians created a video series called “Intermezzos” offering instructional but highly personal guides to their instruments. The New York Philharmonic introduced virtual a Happy Hour to connect musicians with patrons.

Pedagogical activities have, likewise, found a meaningful presence online. The New York Philharmonic has added digital features to the series “Young People’s



Concerts Play!,” which includes a video game-like “Variation Playground;” interactive videos with orchestra players; and other options. The LAPhil capitalized on the annual conference of the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles—which was held exclusively online in July—to create a learning hub with master classes, curricular materials, podcasts and more. Brady says an “ongoing goal” will be to “reach an even wider audience” by leveraging this content.

### Music and Meaning

The elephant in the room is that moving an orchestra’s activities online carries not only financial but artistic risks. “You can be creative, but it’s hard to be artistically creative when you can’t make music together,” says Rönmark. “This has been a great substitute, but it’s not the real thing.” On the other hand, the past few months have encouraged organizations to produce explicitly for the digital medium. Houston’s ROCO, for example, had added a second screen experience to its live streaming events using Instant Encore’s LiveNote program, with musicians creating content that comments on the music or provides historical context.

And this is just scratching the surface of

the possibilities. Maniura, the digital consultant, says that the orchestra world lies further behind the curve than some opera and dance organizations, whose presentations inevitably “involve movement, song, and design. Orchestral concerts are by nature static; however, the creative possibilities are enormous because they are not necessarily fettered by linear storytelling.” He also believes that there is “a whole leap to be made” in terms of new commissions. “There is the reproduction and dissemination of the canon, but it gets really exciting when you have artists create new work using the challenge of technology because then you’re not recreating something. You’re creating something fresh.”

For Instant Encore’s Dombrosky, now that “we have opened Pandora’s box, the question is, how do we harness everything coming out of it?” While he believes that there will be a shift back to the real-life experience after a vaccine is distributed, “we’ll see that the business is evolving to adapt to our behaviors as a culture.” That includes not just a “hybridized membership or subscription model by which people attend in both the real world and in the virtual world,” he says. Dombrosky envisions organizations “doing everything to reduce touch points and potential points of transmission” through mobile tickets and contactless payment not just for the concert but parking and concessions.

Maniura predicts that, ideally, organizations that have only recently learned to deploy digital channels will continue to do so and increase their audience base. “The most rosy scenario is that teams will be far more familiar and at ease with this way of communicating,” he says. “Therefore, there will be more organizations that have seen the value and can reach a larger number of people. You will still be able to offer the physical experience. Because we’re communal and gregarious creatures, the need to be together and experience live music is going to be a very powerful one. And maybe we’ll have found some friends and converts along the way.” **S**

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