



The Tyler Gate at the Ravinia Festival, in Highland Park, Illinois, where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has a summer residency. In 2021, the CSO will return, performing in a smaller configuration, and the smaller indoor Martin Theatre will be closed.

Courtesy Ravinia Festival

Festival Overtures

Last summer, most music festivals were on hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic, but this year many festivals are gearing up to return—for a very different kind of summer season. As classical music fans head to outdoor stages or log in to soak up the sounds of orchestral music, what can they expect to see and hear?

by Jeff Lunden



Zach Mahone

The New York Philharmonic, one of Bravo! Vail's four resident orchestras, performs at the festival, before the pandemic. The festival now presents outdoor concerts from its Mobile Music Box and smaller-scale programs at its regular outdoor venue, the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater, with COVID protocols in place.

For the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc with live performances throughout the classical music industry, including summer music festivals. Most cancelled in-person concerts in 2020, but against all odds, some festivals *did* find innovative ways to get live music to audiences last summer.

“We’re in the lemonade business now,” says Caitlin Murray, executive director of the Bravo! Vail music festival. “We’re going to just make lemonade wherever we can.” When it became clear that Bravo! Vail’s resident orchestras—the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Academy of St. Martin in the Fields—couldn’t come to the Colorado resort last summer, pianist Anne-Marie McDermott, the festival’s artistic director, along with some family members and friends—including sister Kerry McDermott (violin), brother-in-law Paul Neubauer (viola), and the festival’s founder, Ida Kavafian (violin/viola)—formed a small pod and gave free 30-minute chamber music concerts around the Vail Valley from the Music Box, a brand-new, custom-built trailer/stage. “It’s probably been the most meaningful experience



Ashley Wilkerson

A pre-pandemic photo of an outdoor concert at Wyoming’s Grand Teton Music Festival, with the spectacular backdrop of the snow-capped Grand Teton mountain range.

Marin Alsop, the Ravinia Festival’s chief conductor and curator, conducts the Chicago Symphony in Mahler’s Symphony No. 8 (“Symphony of a Thousand”) in 2019, before the pandemic. Performances will be scaled down in size this summer.



Courtesy Ravinia Festival

Courtesy Ravinia Festival



Courtesy Ravinia Festival

Audience members stroll outside the pavilion at the Ravinia Festival. This summer, there will be seating of pods of two, four, or six people in the pavilion and on the lawn.

of my career,” says Murray. “We did 41 concerts with it. The smallest was for one couple and their children in their driveway, and the largest was probably close to 175, which was the maximum that we could have.” They went to donors’ homes, assisted living facilities, the fire department, and a

local day camp, where they performed for the children of essential workers. And the festival presented eight socially distanced concerts, for free, in their regular outdoor venue, the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater, with COVID protocols in place, including a reduced-capacity audience.

Last summer, the Bravo! Vail music festival presented 30-minute concerts around Vail Valley from its new Mobile Music Box trailer/stage. The festival plans to continue to give free concerts throughout the community from the Music Box, even after the pandemic is over.



Thomas Cohen Photography



In San Diego, Mainly Mozart came up with a stereotypically Southern California solution: drive-in chamber music concerts, in an overflow dirt parking lot at the Del Mar Fairgrounds. The festival tested the concept with two concerts on July 11, each with 70 cars whose occupants listened on FM radios, with their windows down.

Programming free chamber music concerts last summer from the Music Box, a custom-built trailer/stage, was “the most meaningful experience of my career,” says Bravo! Vail Executive Director Caitlin Murray.



Those concerts, which featured the Mendelssohn Octet, were said to be the first presented by a major arts organization in the United States, since the COVID pandemic began. “It was the most emotional concert I have ever attended,” says Nancy Laturno, Mainly Mozart’s chief executive officer, of the first performance. “There were a lot of tears on the stage. There were a lot of tears in the audience.” And, instead of applause, the audience showed its appreciation by honking car horns. By summer’s end, the drive-in concerts were no longer an experiment—a local caterer sold charcuterie, vendors hawked T-shirts showing Mozart in a red convertible, and there were banners and large LED screens



Robert Kusef

Concerts at this summer's Grand Teton Music Festival will look different than one from 2018 in Walk Festival Hall, led by Music Director Donald Runnicles. This summer, indoor concerts at the 700-seat theater will take place with a top capacity of 200.

onstage. Once festival organizers realized the concept could work, they opened the concerts up to 300 cars in the parking lot. Laturno explains that the experience was so emotional “because we feel like we’re doing something undoable, something impossible, something that makes us really proud and reminds us how important art is to unifying us and healing us.”



Gabe Palacco

“Our team here has been spending a lot of time looking at what the sports leagues,

amusement parks, other orchestras, and our counterparts in Europe are doing,” says **Jeffrey Haydon**, president and CEO of the **Ravinia Festival**, where the **Chicago Symphony Orchestra** is in residence.

While some summer festivals managed to give in-person concerts in one form or other last summer, many festivals weren’t so lucky. “It was absolutely wrenching,” says Nigel Redden, the Spoleto Festival USA’s general director, of the summer of 2020. The Charleston, South Carolina organization cancelled its entire season, postponing chamber music, theater, and

dance offerings, plus the highly anticipated world premiere of *Omar*, a new opera by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels. Instead, archived chamber music concerts were broadcast on South Carolina Public Radio and made available as podcasts.

Some festivals went all-virtual. Usually, 200 musicians from the United States and abroad come to Wyoming’s Grand Teton Music Festival, but not last summer. Instead, a handful of performers who live in adjoining states drove to Jackson Hole to perform chamber music in the empty Walk Festival Hall for a digital festival of seven concerts. The Ravinia Festival, in suburban Chicago, is normally home to a



Emma Kail is executive director of the Grand Teton Music Festival, which is constructing an outdoor stage for two weeks of socially distanced orchestra concerts this summer. Musicians will also perform indoor

concerts in their 700-seat theater, with a top capacity of 200.

summer series of concerts by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, as well as pop and jazz performances. Last summer Ravinia cancelled the entire 2020 season and created Ravinia TV, a series of fourteen mini-documentaries on YouTube, with different guests talking and performing.

Meanwhile, in San Diego, “The day when I realized we were going to lose the summer was not a good day last year,” recalls Martha Gilmer, chief executive officer of the San Diego Symphony. In July 2020, the orchestra was gearing up to open The Shell, a new 10,000-seat open-air venue on the San Diego Bay, with a series of gala concerts. The eagerly anticipated opening was postponed until this summer. In the interim, the San Diego Symphony has been streaming concerts with its musicians during its regular season.

So, what will summer music festivals look like in 2021? In a word: different. Tickets will be on smartphones, program booklets will be digital. Audiences will be



J. Kail Photography

A Mainly Mozart Festival performance at the Del Mar Fairgrounds, where the Mainly Mozart festival began performing in July 2020. Audience members listen from their cars on FM radios.



Patrons at one of the Mainly Mozart festival's Valentine's Day concerts at Del Mar Fairgrounds in Del Mar, California. MET Orchestra Concertmaster David Chan served as conductor for the February 13 and 14 concerts.

smaller, as will orchestra sizes. Of course, there will be strict safety protocols for performers and audiences, with the latter

tage of summer festivals is their open-air aspect. Many in the classical industry are feeling cautiously hopeful about the return of in-person music festivals this summer, in whatever form they are offered.



Courtesy Mainly Mozart

The Mainly Mozart festival's first drive-in chamber concert in a parking lot at the Del Mar

Fairgrounds last summer "was the most emotional concert I have ever attended," says Nancy Laturno, Mainly Mozart's chief executive officer.

masked and socially distanced, whether in seats or lawn areas. And concerts will be shorter—many presenters are eliminating intermissions altogether. Because of the uncertainty of the timing of the vaccine rollout and the continued spread of the disease, announcements of programs and performers were not yet finalized at press time. With scientists consistently pointing to the outdoors as one of the safer places to be during these times, one big advan-



J Kati Photography

Music Director Michael Francis conducts the Mainly Mozart Festival Orchestra, which since last summer has been performing at the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

Parks, Pavilions, and Pods

The Cleveland Orchestra, which has been giving online concerts from Severance Hall during the 2020-21 main season, plans to present ten in-person concerts at its summer home, the Blossom Music Center in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, "with a Classical-size orchestra on stage," says President and CEO André Gremillet. On the advice of the Cleveland Clinic, the orchestra will be spread out onstage, requiring a smaller ensemble. "We're not going to play Mahler," says Gremillet. "It's going to be mostly Classical and early Romantic repertoire. You can have some 20th-century works, but you're much more limited. So it's going to be a little more mainstream repertoire than we would normally have." The orchestra is projecting a considerably reduced audience capacity—30 per-



Courtesy San Diego Symphony

In San Diego, finishing touches are being put on the San Diego Symphony's new performance venue, The Shell, a permanent structure at Embarcadero Marina Park South. The venue offers panoramic views and state-of-the-art sound and light systems and is now set to open in July 2021.

Courtesy, San Diego Symphony



The San Diego Symphony performs at its former outdoor venue at Embarcadero Marina Park South, which had to be set up and torn down each summer; it will be replaced by the permanent Shell this year.

cent inside the pavilion and 20 percent on the lawn, for a maximum of 4,000 people per concert—pending approval from state, county, and local government. “To be honest, I don’t know how the demand is going to be,” says Gremillet. He thinks the return of audiences—most of whom come from northern Ohio—is “going to be gradual, especially this summer. You know, a lot of

people will not be vaccinated. That’s the simple math right now.”

“Our team here has been spending a lot of time looking at what the sports leagues are doing,” says Jeffrey Haydon, the new president and CEO of the Ravinia Festival, “what the amusement parks are doing, what are our counterparts are doing in Europe and frankly, other orchestras

in the country.” Ravinia leaders are also consulting with local hospitals and health departments to make sure there’s a safe environment for audiences and musicians this summer. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which has an annual summer residency at Ravinia, will perform in a smaller configuration. As in past years, Ravinia will also present jazz and rock acts, though many of the bigger names aren’t touring until 2022. The smaller indoor Martin Theatre will be closed, and the festival is consulting with a civil engineer to work out plots for seating of pods of two, four, or six people in the pavilion and on the lawn. Performances will start later than usual this summer, beginning in early July

“The day when I realized we were going to lose the summer was not a good day last year,” says



Lauren Radtack

Martha Gilmer, chief executive officer of the San Diego Symphony. The opening of The Shell, the orchestra’s new 10,000-seat open-air venue on the San Diego Bay, has been postponed to this summer.

and ending in mid-September. Haydon says, “First, that gives us a little more time to plan, selfishly. Secondly, it gives us more time for the world to kind of figure itself out with the vaccine.”

After last summer’s season of chamber music, Bravo! Vail hopes to bring back its four resident orchestras this year. “That will look different than it normally would,” says Bravo! Vail’s Murray. “We’re fully anticipating that the orchestras will need to be socially distanced on stage.” Performing with smaller ensemble sizes, she says, “opens up an entirely new world of repertoire for us.” As for audiences, she says the festival expects to have capacity restrictions again this summer, though “that remains a moving target.”

Ravinia, Blossom, and Bravo! Vail have outdoor performance venues and the infrastructure that goes with them, but other

Denzel Washington



Cleveland Orchestra violinist Katherine Bormann, bassist Charles Carleton, and violist Lembi Veskimets perform at Cleveland’s UH Seidman Cancer Center in 2020, when the Blossom Festival was cancelled due to the pandemic. This summer, the festival plans to return to the Blossom Music Center, the orchestra’s summer home, to present ten in-person concerts.



A pre-pandemic photo of the Blossom Music Center, the summer home of the Cleveland Orchestra. The festival plans to return for ten concerts in 2021.



When the 2020 Blossom Festival was cancelled due to the pandemic, small ensembles from the Cleveland Orchestra performed at a variety of locations, such as this park concert by second-chair brass players Jack Sutte (trumpet), Jesse McCormick (horn), and Richard Stout (trombone). This summer, the orchestra plans to return to the Blossom Music Center, its summer home, to present ten in-person concerts.

festivals will need to build new outdoor stages. For the Grand Teton Music Festival, that means constructing an outdoor stage, where the organization will present two weeks of orchestra concerts for socially distanced audiences; the festival will

“The biggest mistake that anyone can make is to think that the world is going back to the way it was before,” says **André Gremillet**, president and CEO of the Cleveland Orchestra, which plans to return to the Blossom Festival this summer with health protocols in place.



Roger Mastroianni

doing things in the face of complex adversity. And, obviously, our audience is going to be much, much more limited than we’ve been used to in the past. But I think that if they come, when they come, those people who come should have an experience that they remember.”

Parking Lots, Contactless Ticketing, Few Intermissions

In San Diego, finishing touches are being put on the San Diego Symphony’s new performance venue, The Shell. Surround-

ed by water, the space offers panoramic views— a marina, the city of San Diego, the Bay, and the resort city of Coronado— plus state-of-the-art sound and light systems and a tiered lawn/concession area. But when it opens in July, audience capacity will be limited, food concessions will be closed, tickets will be contactless, and program booklets will be digital. At the moment, it looks like most concerts will be

also present indoor concerts in its 700-seat theater, with a top capacity of 200. The Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston will construct two outdoor stages, for a pared-down offering this year. (As with most festivals, details of Spoleto’s 2020 programming had not been announced at press time.) One stage will be built on the banks of the Ashley River, “where some of the beauty of Charleston will be on view,” says Spoleto’s Nigel Redden. “I want the festival this year to be remembered for beautiful moments; that we are



Julia Lynn

A Spoleto Festival USA chamber concert at the College of Charleston Cistern Yard, one of several outdoor spaces where the festival will present concerts this summer, including one being built on the banks of the Ashley River.



Hillary Scott

The string quartet Brooklyn Rider records a concert at the Linde Center for Music and Learning at Tanglewood in July 2020, when the Tanglewood Festival was closed to the public due to the pandemic. The Boston Symphony Orchestra anticipates a return this year to the Tanglewood Festival, its summer home.

presented without an intermission. Fortunately, San Diego’s warmer weather allows for concerts past the summer. “We are really gearing up that September, October, November, even some of our Christmas holiday programming would still be at the Shell because, as you know, we do have nice weather all year long,” says Chief Executive Officer Martha Gilmer.

Mainly Mozart, also in San Diego, plans to present a series of all-star orchestra concerts in June, drawing players from symphony orchestras all around the U.S. and abroad, pandemic-permitting. But the festival will have to find another venue—the parking lot at the Del Mar Fairgrounds is being converted into a COVID super vaccination site. And Chief Executive Director Nancy Laturno hopes that each concert can be repeated at an as yet-to-be announced site in Orange County.

Logistics, which are always a concern for summer festivals, have become exponentially more complex during the pandemic. These days, when musicians arrive in San Diego, “they go

straight to their hotel,” says Laturno. “We have a nurse and testing station at the hotel. So, they are tested immediately upon arrival. They are socially distanced onstage, which means we need a stage about three times larger than we would need, which is also a big expense. They all play in masks and the wind players have extra spacing.” At Bravo! Vail, Caitlin Murray says “backstage is going to look a lot different this year. There won’t be hospitality buffets, and



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Violinist Amy Sims and pianist Christi Zuniga perform in a Peninsula Music Festival chamber music concert in February 2021 at Kress Pavilion, Egg Harbor, Wisconsin. The Peninsula Music Festival’s annual summer concerts were cancelled last summer but are expected to return this summer.

musicians are going to probably be asked to come to the concerts dressed.” Ravinia’s Haydon says, “Basically it’s essential personnel only backstage. It may be that the orchestra members come dressed, ready to play, and they have a tent outside and just sort of pass through—an ‘in’ door and ‘out’ door for the stage. So, you don’t get that natural bunching that takes place backstage with the stagehands and the orchestra musicians.”

What’s it like being an arts administrator in the middle of a global pandemic? André Gremillet, of the Cleveland Orchestra, is blunt. “Listen. I mean, it’s been hell. But I choose to focus on the opportunities.” In addition to keeping his 103-year-old orchestra afloat, he’s thinking about what lessons the music industry has learned during the pandemic that can be applied after it’s over. “For example, are we going to have more concerts without intermission? You know, that might be a good thing. Are we going to have a digital world that’s going to be very different? It was part of our vision before the pandemic, which is why we were relatively quick in getting this set up. We just accelerated the implementation. The biggest mistake that anyone can make in my role is to just think that the world is going to be back to the way it was before. And to plan for that—I think that would be a big mistake and a lost opportunity.”

Bravo! Vail’s Caitlin Murray says even when the pandemic’s over, the festival’s mobile Music Box will continue to give free concerts throughout the community. “It’s been one of the one of the most incredible experiences of my life to get to do this—living through this horrible, challenging, difficult time. And getting to do work that gives people 30 minutes to block it all out and find joy. I’ve never believed in what we do more.” But, in the meantime, she adds: “I truly believe it’s our responsibility to keep music playing right now, as long as we can do so safely and responsibly. That’s the key if you have to find that balance. And I think we are fighting that path forward through this. And it’s completely inspiring and incredible to be a part of.” **S**

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