

Music

in the Present Tense



During the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person symphonic premieres are largely still off the table. That hasn't stopped orchestras and organizations from commissioning composers to connect listeners with new music that captures the turbulence of recent months. The benefits and lessons learned may last beyond the pandemic.

by Jeremy Reynolds

Aron Copland composed *Fanfare for the Common Man* at the behest of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in 1942. His work became the most famous in a series of eighteen patriotic fanfares by American composers commissioned to kick off CSO concerts with pride and gusto during World War II. With its title

inspired by a speech by Vice President Henry A. Wallace, Copland's now famous tribute premiered in 1943, when the world was embroiled in World War II.

Fast-forward to 77 years later: instead of a World War, the COVID-19 pandemic is raging through America, lockdown restrictions have halted orchestras from playing

premieres—or standard repertoire—and the nation is in the midst of protests and a national reckoning about racial inequality. In response, numerous ensembles have launched commissioning projects to respond to this historic time of pandemic and protest. These include the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, which in a nod to

Augusta Read Thomas, performed by musicians at home in a virtual video. The contemporary ensemble Alarm Will Sound partnered with composers including Meredith Monk, Tyshawn Sorey, and others to create a series of “Video Chat Variations” of virtual premieres. Violinist Jennifer Koh created the micro-composition project

their own historical inequities. The San Francisco Symphony, San Francisco Conservatory, Chicago Sinfonietta, and the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. have all announced plans to commission new works from Black composers. Other orchestras and music institutions have begun to implement new programs that bring forward Black voices and focus on issues of democracy and justice. The Curtis Institute for Music selected composer Alexis C. Lamb to write a new work in collaboration with designer Camilla Tassi to be performed and recorded by Ensemble 20/21, the conservatory’s new-music ensemble. Lamb’s music will draw on texts from past Supreme Court hearings and highlight



Courtesy, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

Above: Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra Principal Oboe Dwight Parry performs the live-streamed world premiere of CSO Creative Partner Matthias Pintscher’s *vitres (Fragment)* for solo oboe at Music Hall on May 16 as the first of many Fanfare Project premieres of works highlighting important issues of today. The project was named after Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*, premiered by the CSO during an equally tumultuous time, World War II. Left: An image from the CSO’s video announcing the Fanfare Project, juxtaposing images of Cincinnati’s cityscape as members of the orchestra’s brass and percussion sections perform *Fanfare for the Common Man*.



“As an artist you’re always responding to your current situation,” says composer Jonathan Bailey Holland. “Art is the one place you can go to work out what you’re experiencing.”

its history reinitiated its fanfares project by asking composers to write short, minute-long fanfares for solo instruments. “What’s a fanfare in a moment like this?” asks Nate Bachhuber, vice president of artistic planning at the orchestra. For him, the goal of the project is to use music to honor ideas and issues that are important during this time—issues such as public health, racial equality, and courage while standing up to injustice.

A burst of orchestral commissions launched this spring and summer is providing composers and musicians opportunities to engage directly with the realities and struggles of pandemic life with new works for soloists, small groups, and even full but socially distanced orchestras. Many of the compositions are deliberately short, with an eye to bringing them quickly to audiences eager to hear new music after months of lockdown. The Utah Symphony commissioned and premiered its own *Fanfare of Hope and Solidarity* by composer

“Alone Together” in April, commissioning 21 composers to write short works ranging from 30 seconds to three minutes. In New York State, the Albany Symphony’s eighteen-member new-music ensemble Dogs of Desire delivered ten new works online by emerging composers, in an initiative titled “Hot w/Mustard.” The Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra in Indiana opened its season in September with three performances for socially distanced musicians, performed before a smaller-than-usual live audience, featuring the world premiere of a fanfare by Paul Dooley, with brass musicians performing in a spaced-apart arrangement from the balcony of the Victory Theatre.

Music for Uncertain Times

In the wake of the May 25 police killing of George Floyd, a Black man whose death ignited months of protests and a national discussion of racial injustice and police brutality, orchestras have grappled with

people who contributed to shaping democracy in the U.S., with a primary focus on voting campaigns and peaceful protests. This fall, four California orchestras—the Fresno Philharmonic, Monterey Symphony, Pacific Symphony, and San Jose Chamber Orchestra—co-commissioned John Wineglass to write *Alone Together*, a work for strings and percussion; the work lasts eight minutes and 46 seconds, the length of time a Minneapolis police officer held his knee on George Floyd’s neck before he died. This is just a partial list of new scores.

Many of the composers commissioned during recent months chose to process



In June, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and Montclair State University Singers performed the virtual world premiere of *Gratias Tibi* by José Luis Domínguez, conductor of the NJSO Youth Orchestras. Musicians and singers each recorded their individual parts at home—before Domínguez and symphony staff assembled the parts into a finished whole. The orchestra received a warm response to the piece, written as a thank-you to healthcare workers during the pandemic.

some of the pain of the times we are living in through their music. At the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, composer José Luis Domínguez, who is conductor of the

“After everything people have been through, it’s not enough to expect people to

come listen to some nice music. It’s got to be about more than that.”—Gabriel van Aalst, president and CEO, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra

NJSO Youth Orchestras, scored *Gratias Tibi*, a six-minute work thanking healthcare workers, for the NJSO and the Montclair State University Singers. “I wanted to do something to be of help,” Domínguez says. “The idea was to put the NJSO out there with a clear, simple message of gratitude for health workers.” The project wasn’t without its difficulties, as pivoting to the digital concert hall often required hundreds of hours to master a steep learning curve: “I’m 49 years old but a tech di-

nosaur,” says Domínguez, who composes solely with pencil and paper. Given the project’s tight deadlines, the composer called in his retired father, a former music director and bassoonist, for backup as a transcriptionist. “When I write with pencil it’s sweat and blood,” Domínguez says. He finished the piece in five days.

Next, the musicians and singers each recorded their individual parts at home—before Domínguez and symphony staff began assembling the parts into a finished whole. The response to the work from the community was overwhelming. “I got a

phone call from a doctor who called me in tears,” Domínguez says. “It’s beyond any explanation I might have. I hope every healthcare worker could see it at some point.” “I myself got a lot of phone calls and comments from people, and ‘moving’ was the word I heard repeatedly,” says NJSO President and CEO Gabriel van Aalst, who estimates that the video performance has reached upwards of 50,000 views since it premiered on June 22. The premiere was originally scheduled for June 8, but Domínguez and van Aalst decided that releasing the virtual recording during the protests against racial injustice and police brutality could appear to be insensitive. “After everything that we’ve seen this summer, and after everything people have been through,” van Aalst says, “it’s not enough to expect people to come listen to some nice music. It’s got to be about more than that moving forward.”

Lockdowns, George Floyd, and More

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra didn’t take as explicit a route in its Fanfares Project; that initiative was intended more broadly to explore music’s unifying powers in uncertain times. It kicked off in May, when the CSO and Cincinnati Pops announced that they were commissioning thirteen composers—and later an additional seven composers—to write one-minute fanfares for an instrumental musician of each composer’s choos-

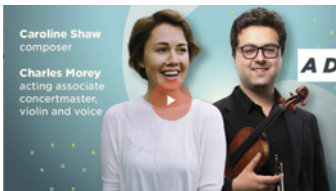
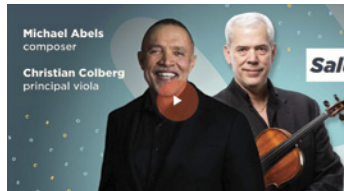
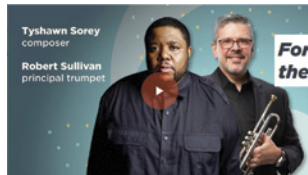
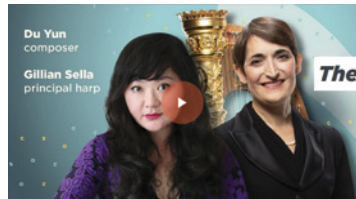
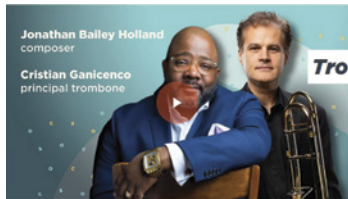


Fred Stucker



Fred Stucker

José Luis Domínguez, pictured in pre-pandemic photo conducting the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, wrote and conducted *Gratias Tibi* as a thank-you to healthcare workers. He conducted the NJSO and Montclair State University Singers in the virtual premiere of *Gratias Tibi* in June.



The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra has paired composers and performers in its new fanfares project commissioning short works.

ing. The orchestra approached a variety of composers; some had worked with the CSO before, some hadn't, and still others don't often write for full orchestra. To get the digital project started, Bachhuber says symphony staff dropped off recording equipment on musicians' porches when

As spring moved into summer, composers pivoted from the pandemic to the Black Lives Matter movement.

needed and helped with editing, but that musicians largely completed the projects on their own.

Fanfare composers initially focused on aspects of life in the quarantine. Composer Matthias Pintscher, the orchestra's creative partner for the 2020-21 season, found inspiration in stained-glass windows, choosing to focus on something beautiful yet keeping in mind the thousands or millions of Americans trapped behind windows in their own homes. Gabriel Kahane composed a work entitled *Kiivetä Kotiin* (fanfare for the trees), inspired by lengthy walks he took during the pandemic. Shanghai-born and New York-based composer Du Yun found inspiration for her fanfare during the height of the quarantine in New York, when residents took a few minutes each day at 7 p.m. to thank and cheer for front-line workers by banging pots and pans on their balconies and at their windows. She remembers a day when at the end of

the applause, she and her neighbors could hear Frank Sinatra's rendition of "New York, New York" in the distance and everyone listened, spellbound. "When I heard about this project, I knew it would be lots of brass and strings and percussion, so I was thinking about what the quietest instrument in the orchestra is," she says. "The harp comes to my mind." She scored her piece for Cincinnati

Symphony Orchestra Principal Harp Gillian Benet Sella and Sella's son Mischa, a budding singer—specifying that it was to be played outdoors. The pair recorded the piece at 7 a.m. to capture the right ambience of nature sounds and lighting. "When you're really confined in space you want to get out," Du Yun says. "I didn't want another Zoom performance in a living room. We've seen that enough." Du Yun adds that the pandemic has reminded musicians and composers of the importance of connection, and that the nationwide reckoning with race is teaching people about the importance of listening to each other's stories.

"There was a shift over the summer from focusing on public health to the murder of George Floyd, and themes of social justice emerged in the pieces," Bachhuber says. "Courtney Bryan wrote her fanfare thinking of seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier, who filmed George Floyd's murder. The composer was inspired by that act of courage." He also highlights Jonathan Bailey Holland's fanfare, "Trouble." Holland, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's 2018-19 composer-in-residence and chair of the composition department at the Boston Conservatory at Berklee, says the title is a nod to civil rights leader John Lewis, who died in July. The work is "a little bit manic, and I

Commissioned works in the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's solo-fanfares project include Du Yun's *The Rest Is Our World* (for CSO Principal Harp Gillian Sella), Georgia Stitt's *Fanfare For the Ups and Downs* (for CSO Principal Clarinet Christopher Pell), Peter Boyer's *Fanfare for Tomorrow* (for Principal French Horn Elizabeth Freimuth), Tyshawn Sorey's *For Peter Evans (Apologies for the Brevity)* (for Principal Trumpet Robert Sullivan), and Jonathan Bailey Holland's *Trouble* (for CSO Principal Trombone Cristian Ganicenco).



Composer Karena Ingram (above) was commissioned to write a new work for bassoonist Monica Ellis as part of the American Composers Orchestra's ACO Connecting Community initiative.

From her home, bassoonist Monica Ellis (below) performs Karena Ingram's *No Air*, commissioned as part of the American Composers Orchestra's ACO Connecting Community initiative. The work's title is a reference to the manner in which George Floyd died.



think that's how we all feel right now from being cooped up," Holland says. A self-proclaimed "reformed trumpet player," he worked closely with CSO Principal Trombone Cristian Ganicenco, noting that the piece shows off the variety of timbres possible with the trombone. "As an artist you're always responding to your current

situation," Holland says. "Art is the one place you can go to work out what you're experiencing in a space where you can be free to express what you want in whatever way you want."

Connecting Musicians and Listeners

When live, in-person performances resume, the American Composers Orchestra has a backlog of works awaiting their debuts. Until then, the New York City-based organization commissioned short compositions of five to ten minutes in length, premiered

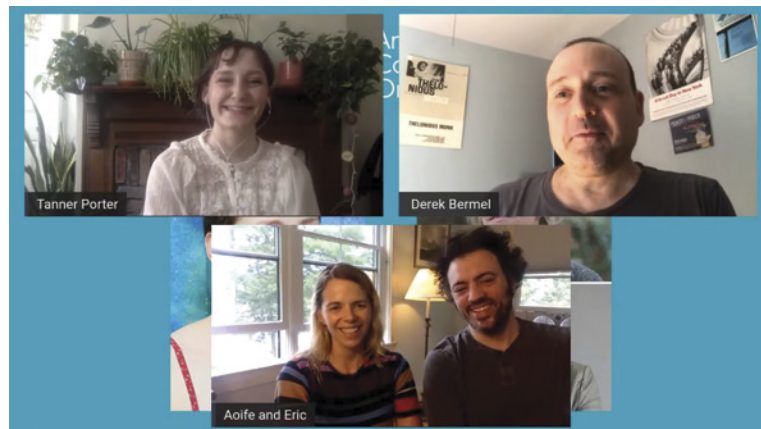
online, in part to uphold its mission of supporting American composers. "The work that results from the project—Connecting ACO Community—will continue after COVID-19 is gone," says Derek Bermel, artistic director of ACO. The project launched on April 19 with twelve compositions for solo performers and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. More commissions have followed, among them a composition by Guy Mintus for violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins and a piece by Brian Nabors for ACO musicians: violinist Debbie Wong, violist Sandy Robbins, cellist Gene Moye, bassoonist Harry Searing, flutist Diva Goodfriend-Koven, and harpist Susan Jolles. Each composer and performer receives \$500 apiece, thanks to a contribution from an ACO board member, with the rights to stream for six months; proceeds from tickets (sold at \$5 each) go directly to artists. "The project as a whole has been a sharing space, too; we've all had a peek into each other's homes," Bermel says, adding that many of the performances were live-streamed to achieve a rawer, "in the now" feeling.

The organization didn't ask for a pro-

grammatic element, and ensemble members themselves generally picked which composers they wanted to commission. Still, a number of pieces touched on the "philosophical and psychological states that emerged during the pandemic," says Bermel. "Whether they were celebrating simple joys in life or feeling loss and separation, anxiety. Depending on the composer, some chose more intellectual or emotional ways of bringing out those particular quirks," he adds. As in Cincinnati, Connecting ACO Community composers pivoted from the pandemic to focusing on the Black Lives Matter protests midway through the project. Composer Tanner Porter wrote *Lila You Are Not Alone* for cellist Eric Jacobsen and vocalist Aoife O'Donovan; the piece focuses on "caring for each other through difficult times, carrying each other, shouldering each other's burdens," as Bermel describes it. Baltimore-based composer Karena Ingram wrote a piece called *No Air* for bassoonist Monica Ellis, a founding member of the Imani Winds quintet, in reference to the manner in which George Floyd died. Ingram had been on ACO's radar since competing as a finalist in the organization's 2017 EarShot competition, so when Ellis requested to work with a composer of color, ACO was pleased to make the introduction. "The piece became a cathartic process at a time when



Derek Bermel is artistic director of American Composers Orchestra, which has commissioned scores for solo performers and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus to perform during the pandemic.



Composers and musicians have been collaborating online for the American Composers Orchestra's ACO Connecting Community commissioning program. Top left, composer Tanner Porter discusses *Lila You Are Not Alone*, written for cellist Eric Jacobsen and vocalist Aoife O'Donovan, bottom; the piece focuses on "caring for each other through difficult times, carrying each other, shouldering each other's burdens," says ACO Artistic Director Derek Bermel, top right.

I just couldn't think about anything else," Ingram says. The work begins with long, low tones in the bassoon, a lament for the lives lost due to racism and police brutality, before becoming more agitated to express the country's angst and frustration. Ingram, who has also scored video games, says that already more performers and presenters are contacting her about her work thanks to the ACO premiere. "When we go digital there's no barriers," she says, "and I hope this connection with listeners continues when we reach the new normal, whatever that may be."

The American Composers Orchestra is working to document and record all the commissions that came about through the Connecting ACO Community project and plans to perform them live in the future. Even in the current climate of uncertainty, ACO is far from the only organization to be looking ahead on the commissioning

While large commissions typically take years to reach the concert stage, many of these compositions are deliberately short, allowing for a more flexible and direct response to current unrest, connecting musicians and listeners in a visceral way.

project front. The CSO's Bachhuber says that the orchestra will incorporate some of the fanfares into its programming and is considering asking composers to take their one-minute fanfares and turn them into a full orchestral work. Among other groups that are commissioning new work to be performed in a future season are the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Metropolitan Opera, which recently announced a co-commission from composer Kevin Puts that will premiere in 2022. The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra has retained Cuban-born composer Tania León to create a work to be premiered during the orchestra's 2021-22 season; the commission is one of six to composers of color through grants from New Music USA's Amplifying Voices Program, supported by the Sphinx Venture Fund. Other orchestras in the Amplifying Voices Program include the



New York's Albany Symphony Orchestra, shown here with Music Director David Alan Miller, is among the orchestras commissioning new works during the pandemic. The ASO recently commissioned and premiered ten new works online by emerging composers for the ASO's new-music ensemble Dogs of Desire.

Las Vegas Philharmonic, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and Berkeley Symphony, the lead orchestras for new co-commissions by Juan Pablo Contreras, Shelley Washington, Tyshawn Sorey, and Brian Raphael Nabors.

Could all these new orchestral commissions be a silver lining, offering a key to the future even as the pandemic has forced orchestras to redesign seasons and strategies from the ground up? While large commissions typically take years to launch from drafting to performance, this more immediate model has allowed for a more flexible and direct response to current unrest, connecting musicians and listeners in a visceral way. "I embrace the change," says Du Yun. "I feel like for the first time, symphonies and operas are not in fear of opening up their archives and vaults. Our audience just wants connection in the moment, and that is such a valuable lesson that we have learned." Other composers echo her sentiments, agreeing that the immediacy of musicians' digital offerings add value to the role of orchestras and ensembles, and are hopeful that such efforts will continue even after the pandemic has passed. "The drive right now for commissions has me thinking about the role of symphonies and classical music," says the New Jersey



Four California orchestras—the Fresno Philharmonic, Monterey Symphony, Pacific Symphony, and San Jose Chamber Orchestra—have co-commissioned John Wineglass (above) to write *Alone Together*, a work for strings and percussion; the work lasts eight minutes and 46 seconds, the length of time a Minneapolis police officer held his knee on George Floyd's neck before he died.

Symphony Orchestra's van Aalst. "How do commissioning projects for composers reflect society today? We've been talking about relevance for a long time. This is that moment. Either we're going to do it or we're not." **S**

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