



Roger Kalia makes his debut as music director of the Evansville Philharmonic at the Victory Theatre, before a small audience restricted by COVID regulations.

Podium Launches

The pandemic has put significant speed bumps into launching a new music director, but orchestras are rising to the challenge. Despite constantly changing health protocols and travel restrictions, orchestras—and their incoming music directors—are staying connected by adopting new technology, experimenting with repertoire, and finding ways to make music while keeping everyone safe.

by Nancy Malitz

In early March 2020, just six months before assuming his music directorship of the Savannah Philharmonic, conductor Keitaro Harada, who was born in Japan and has homes in Savannah and Tokyo, undertook a quick trip with his wife to Japan for a concert engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic in Asia had already started. The moment they landed, they learned that America's outbreak was also underway.

Soon after arriving, Harada conducted the Tokyo Symphony, where he is associ-

ate conductor, in an all-Mozart concert that had no in-person audience but was streamed. Their flight back to the United States was supposed to happen the next day. But, says, Harada, "It was the week that Trump announced he was going to shut down air travel. Everybody who needed to travel went immediately to the airport—tons of people. We decided not to fly. It was just too crowded. And then we couldn't fly for six months, because the U.S. wasn't open."

The Savannah Philharmonic suddenly faced its own version of the question facing a broad assortment of American orchestras this season: How do you launch a music director during a pandemic?

Logistical hurdles also confronted the Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic, which named Mélisse Brunet as its music director in February 2020 after the orchestra emerged from a budget-driven hiatus, and the Evansville Philharmonic in Indiana, where conductor Roger Kalia became



Keitaro Harada was in Japan when the pandemic lockdowns began. During a stream of a pre-recorded Tokyo Symphony concert, he typed in “The conductor’s here, too!” into the chat and began interacting with viewers. He was stunned to see streams of 88888888888888888888s flowing across the screen—video lingo for applause.

by a top-flight orchestra through the end of the year—Tokyo Symphony, Yomiuri Nippon, Kyushu Symphony, Japan Century Orchestra, Japan Philharmonic, Orchestra Ensemble Kanazawa, NHK Symphony, New Japan Philharmonic, and

Executive Director Amy Williams says the Savannah Philharmonic has connected with new audiences via increased digital activities, including interactive video chats, quizzes, and other online segments by Keitaro Harada, who became music director in fall 2020.

Nagoya Philharmonic—conducting everything from Ennio Morricone hits and New Year’s concerts to heavy-duty blockbusters. Harada’s first time to lead the orchestra in person in that capacity will be in February, for an hour-long concert of Elgar and Dvořák string serenades, in the flexible 360-degree seating space of a restored historic landmark—the Kehoe Iron Works at Trustees’ Garden.

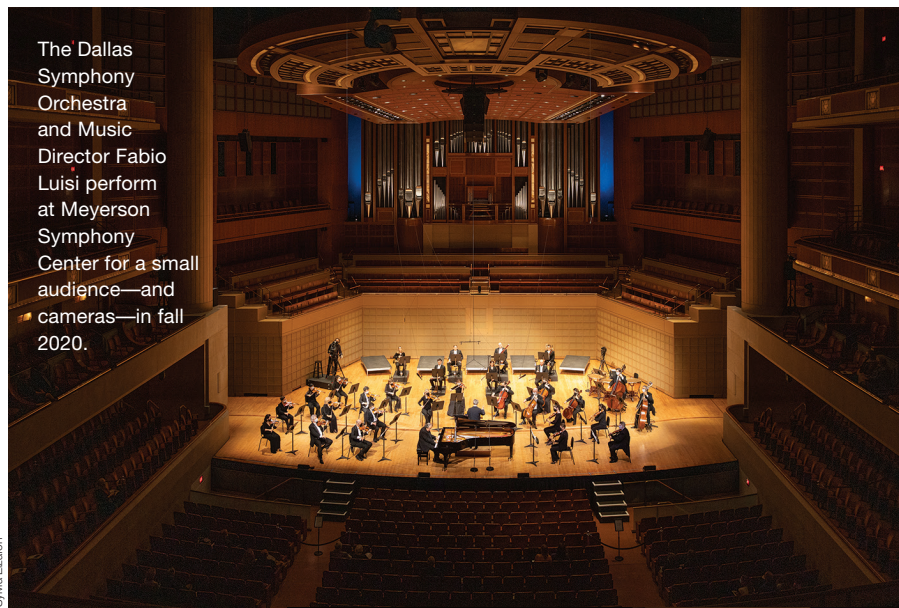
Meanwhile, Harada has been interacting digitally and crafting online segments for the Savannah Philharmonic’s YouTube channel. Savannah Philharmonic Executive Director Amy Williams, who had gone

to Savannah from Santa Barbara’s Camerata Pacifica in the fall, observed connections with many new audience members that could be credited to the ensemble’s increased digital activities: “The orchestra normally reaches 30,000 members of the Savannah community each season,” she said in November. “But with the current season barely underway we are already at 82 percent of that.” The orchestra tried charging \$10 to watch online productions at first, but determined they gained far better exposure by making them free.

Zurich to Dallas

On September 10, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra officially launched Fabio Luisi as music director, with an all-Beethoven concert streamed as a free video. It was performed with no intermission and a reduced orchestra of socially distanced musicians, for an in-house audience of only 75 at Meyerson Symphony Center. Musicians have taken COVID tests on a regular basis.

Shuttling Luisi back and forth to Dallas wasn’t going to be easy. He lives in Zurich, where he is general director of the Zurich Opera. “Because of COVID we had to apply for a special international waiver to get him into the country, among the kinds of complications you never dream of,” says President and CEO Kim Noltemy. Her professional experience prior to her arrival in Dallas included several years at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, where



The Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Fabio Luisi perform at Meyerson Symphony Center for a small audience—and cameras—in fall 2020.

Sylvia Elzafon

The Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Fabio Luisi performed a scaled-back 80-minute Verdi concert at Meyerson Symphony Center in October 2020. Also performing were soprano Angela Meade (standing with back to camera), mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton (to her right), and tenor Bryan Hymel (not shown).



Sylvia Elzafon

she launched media projects including a digital download service, internet TV podcasts, and modernized Boston Symphony websites. That experience came in handy. At press time, the Dallas Symphony has been performing continuously throughout the 2020-21 season with streamed concerts played, for the most part, before limited in-person audiences.

Reached by phone in Zurich while on his way to a rehearsal of *Simon Boccanegra*, Luisi explained that the Zurich Opera had managed to keep going despite COVID, and he thought Dallas should also: “I fought a lot to keep performing (in both places),” Luisi says. “The general tendency is to cancel everything. My idea is not only to keep going, but to send a signal that culture and music are still very important and that we should try not to stop, rather to do everything we can.”



SyWa Elzaton

Dallas Symphony Orchestra Music Director Fabio Luisi

Meyerson Symphony Center was built for the Dallas Symphony in 1989, but even such a relatively new hall was behind the technological curve when it came to creating a pandemic tech strategy. “Before the season opened, we added robotic cameras in the control room and fiber-optic cabling so that we would be able to record and broadcast concerts without a TV truck,” Noltemy says. “At the time the COVID crisis hit, we had begun planning for a website redesign. But we sped up everything as a result of this crisis.” Major website redesign was needed to better manage now-critical multimedia content in a more elegant manner, says Noltemy, describing a widespread industry challenge. “We had been retrofitting the old site, and that meant the videos weren’t that easy to find. We just weren’t set up for much of that.” Luisi’s programming was drastically modified to allow for fewer performers. “Verdi’s *Otello* became the ‘Best of Verdi’ excerpts,” Noltemy says. “The Verdi Requiem instead became opera excerpts with three singers. Beautiful, but not what we had planned.”

“Programming is my core activity as mu-

sic director,” Luisi says. “We tried to keep what we could, including all our soloists, and we have also tried to keep the line—the logic—originally intended.” Luisi insists, “It is possible to do certain high level works for reduced orchestra while retaining their character. For example, in October we did Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* in Schoenberg’s arrangement for chamber orchestra.” Later in the winter season, Luisi plans to do Klaus Simon’s chamber reduction of Mahler’s Fourth Symphony. As for the empty concert-hall acoustic, Luisi says he was encouraged. “I was a little bit

Roger Kalia’s inaugural concert as music director of the Evansville Philharmonic included the world premiere of a fanfare by Paul Dooley called *River City*. “We adapted it for COVID and put four brass musicians in the theater balcony,” Kalia says. “It was antiphonal, beautiful, almost Gabrieli-like.”

afraid because of the distancing that there should be a difference in the color or with the musicians being able to hear properly, but everything worked just fine.”

Indiana Bound

International travel is one complication that Indian American conductor Roger Kalia doesn’t have to deal with as he launches his music directorship of the 87-year-old Evansville Philharmonic in Indiana this season. He maintains a home base in Bloomington, home of Indiana University, where his wife is based, an easy driving distance. And no visa is required for Kalia to commute to his music directorships at the Symphony NH in Nashua, New Hampshire and the Lake George Music Festival in upstate New York.

Kalia had planned a single performance of Mahler’s monumental Symphony No. 1 for his inaugural concert in September in Evansville’s Victory Theatre, which seats 1,800. The musicians awaited it keenly, as did Kalia. But COVID-dictated capacity restrictions drastically reduced the seating



Dena Ross

Evansville Philharmonic Music Director Roger Kalia

limit. So Kalia went for three performances in the big hall with smaller audiences, a serendipitous triple-dip for the musicians, who were thrilled. Kalia’s inaugural concert, which included music

by J.S. Bach, George Walker, and Mozart, also featured the world premiere of a fanfare by Paul Dooley called *River City*, to celebrate the city of Evansville. “We adapted it for COVID and put four brass musicians in the theater balcony,” Kalia says. “It was antiphonal, beautiful, almost Gabrieli-like.”

The orchestra played to an audience capacity of 250 for several months after the season opener, but this, too, was further reduced as COVID cases rose this fall around the nation. Kalia did manage performances of Milhaud’s ballet suite *La Création du monde* in November, with strings arrayed behind him and winds in front. As COVID restrictions tightened, Kalia



Poster for a September 2020 concert by the Evansville Philharmonic featuring big-band music, patriotic tunes, and other music from the World War II era.



Roger Kalia announces the Evansville Philharmonic's 2020-21 season during a live Zoom event.

connected with the community through online chats in which the musicians shared stories about their upbringing. In so doing, he learned about the area's strong marching-band tradition, and Evansville's history as a center of tank manufacturing in the Second World War. The regional history became Kalia's inspiration for places and pieces to perform. "We did an entire concert based around World War II, the big bands, patriotic tunes, soldiers' letters, and music of the era," he says. "I think the orchestra has connected so well to the community because of the collaborative element. At this point everybody in Evansville is trying to discover new places for performances. Bosse Field, where they

filmed *A League of Their Own*, is a great place for a future concert and there are beautiful parks and gardens."

Paris to Pennsylvania

French-born Mélisse Brunet was an assistant conductor of the Northeast-

ern Pennsylvania Philharmonic, based in Wilkes-Barre, when Executive Director Nancy Sanderson announced in August 2017 that a gap in finances meant that the orchestra needed to reorganize. "We needed to pay down our debt and do the responsible thing," Sanderson says. As the

former music director, Lawrence Loh, was moving on to another post, Brunet assumed responsibilities as interim music director beginning in 2018-19, while the

drawn to Mélisse—she is so remarkable on the podium," Sanderson says. "She was creating quite a buzz, and the musicians in the orchestra were giving us incredible feedback. When we started to talk in earnest about a conductor search, two things kept surfacing. One, we didn't want to see Mélisse leave us, and two, we would never know as much about another conductor as we do about her. So we surveyed the musicians and patrons and they decided she was the one. It has been a great decision." Brunet, a protégée of the late Pierre Boulez, was announced in February 2020 as the orchestra's new music director, just a month before the U.S. shut down during the pandemic.

Luckily, Brunet's second love is orchestration. She dove into new digital techniques aggressively as the orchestra put live concerts on hold for the rest of the season while holding out hope for resumption in



Toko Shiki Santos

Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic Music Director Mélisse Brunet



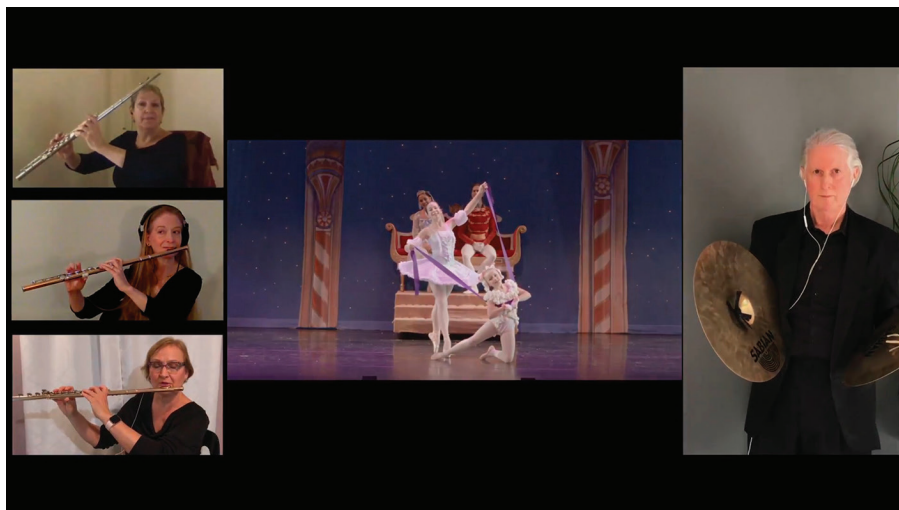
Darren Elias

Mélisse Brunet speaks to the audience at a Northeastern Pennsylvania concert in a photo taken before the pandemic. She served as the orchestra's assistant conductor and then as interim music director prior to becoming music director in 2020.

orchestra recalibrated its financial picture and planned for a new music director. Her appointment as interim music director became part of the orchestra's relaunch of its mainstage concerts in 2018, following a scaled-back 2017-18 season.

"Our audiences and patrons were really

July. Brunet polished her skills with the widely used Sibelius music-notation software to create instrumental parts for four excerpts from *The Nutcracker*, which were choreographed for a local school's young ballet dancers and filmed onstage at a drive-in theater, then recombined digitally



The Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic worked with a local ballet school on a video of selections from *The Nutcracker*. A screengrab from the production shows the young dancers, who were filmed separately, surrounded by Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic musicians. Music Director Mélisse Brunet created instrumental parts for the musical excerpts.

in post-production. The videos were released over the holidays. Among the other digital techniques she has learned during the pandemic are Adobe Premiere Pro, Zoom, GarageBand, and TikTok. Brunet also led the charge in the orchestra's social-media and tech activities, producing Zoom happy hours with patrons and live video demonstrations for elementary school students so that individual musicians could talk about their instruments, play a little, and answer questions. Sanderson sees two-fold benefits: "It's really great to be able

8,000 per video," says Sanderson.

Brunet, an advocate of contemporary music and a native of Paris, holds degrees from the University of the Sorbonne and the Paris Conservatoire. She says that the experience of learning new technology while creating fresh approaches to repertoire "made me think of Boulez, who even in his eighties was still learning. I try to anticipate what the future will be like after COVID passes, as we are experiencing deep changes in the society that will change the way we approach things forever. The orchestra needs to keep its social presence and its technological presence, which during the COVID crisis improved very quickly because we were forced to make it so. I truly believe we cannot go back."

The Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic draws its freelance musicians from both Manhattan and Philadelphia. "These are high-level musicians," says Brunet. "I have an approach for

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony which is not in the mainstream. My stylistic models for that are more like Boulez and Abbado, and the musicians were really willing to go

with it. There is that level of intellectuality and musicality and flexibility among them."

San Francisco Boost

Following a November 2020 conference call with leaders of 25 of America's largest orchestras who were all coping with COVID-related issues, San Francisco Symphony Chief Executive Officer Mark C. Hanson says he found himself "focused on the gnarly challenge of how you create something for people that will have a strong impact without reminding them once again just how miserable it is to be missing live concerts."

The orchestra's new music director, Esa-Pekka Salonen, told Hanson he had been thinking from the get-go about home audiences and the possibilities for digital distribution.

The last thing either of them wanted, Hanson says, was "a streamed version of anything one typically had the opportunity to experience live and in person, but which one is now being forced to settle for in some ex-



Esa-Pekka Salonen, the San Francisco Symphony's new music director.

perience at home." Salonen wanted the San Francisco Symphony to produce what Hanson describes as "unique to this moment in time, and unique to the digital platform, in which there might be a kernel of an idea for a digital strategy they might even want to stick with even after normal concerts resume."

A key part of Salonen's vision for the San Francisco Symphony is a group of eight artistic partners, a new artistic leadership model announced when the conductor became music director. Salonen put together a group of eight pathbreakers he admired, all relatively young, several of them composer-performers as the orchestra's collaborative partners. The first composition, which opened the 2020-21 season, was called *Throughline*, conceived and composed by Nico Muhly to be streamed on the San Francisco Symphony's website. Filmed all over the planet and assembled with multi-layered balletic grace, *Throughline* features



In the San Francisco Symphony's new artistic leadership model, Music Director Esa-Pekka Salonen works with eight artistic partners (clockwise from left): Julia Bullock, Claire Chase, Nicholas Britnell, Salonen, Bryce Dessner, Nico Muhly, Carol Reiley, Pekka Kuusisto, and Esperanza Spalding.

pay our musicians for these services, and we have definitely increased our presence in the community. The Google analytics have been just amazing. We're averaging



San Francisco Symphony CEO Mark C. Hanson says he and Esa-Pekka Salonen, the orchestra's new music director, are focusing on "the gnarly challenge of how you create something for people that will have a strong impact" when in-person concerts are sidelined.

in Cologne or Berlin, and Nick in LA, Claire in New York, and Carol on the internet. They did an unbelievable job. In so many ways it could have been quite clunky. It worked."

Throughline is only the beginning of San Francisco Symphony projects for Salonen's brain trust. His collaborators seem entirely open to the idea of exploring with him what a professional symphony orchestra can be in a community, drawing freely from dance, jazz, and film, along with artificial intelligence and improvisation. Yet the orchestra's COVID-era achievements were shadowed by the painful financial cost of not being able to do much business at all. The orchestra developed a shared sacrifice plan, with temporary reductions in pay that were extended into fall, ultimately affecting everyone. Hanson hopes to restore pre-pandemic compensation and revenue numbers by 2021-22.

"If we have to deal with a pandemic, then we are fortunate we have found someone [in Salonen] who is deeply collaborative," Hanson says. "He thinks about what the future should look like, and what it could look like, and how to reach audiences, and how to combine this centuries' old art form with cutting-edge technology. Hopefully this is a strategy we will stick with, even after normal concerts resume. If successful, we will attract many new audience members. And if we can figure out how to sustain it and grow, we will emerge from the pandemic period different, and strong." **S**

NANCY MALITZ is the founding music critic of *USA Today*, an editor at *ClassicalVoiceAmerica.org* and publisher of *ChicagoOnTheAisle.com*. She has written about the arts and technology for the *New York Times* and *Opera News*, among other publications.



Top: Esa-Pekka Salonen conducts San Francisco Symphony musicians in John Adams's *Shaker Loops* as part of the orchestra's streamed concert, November 2020. The program included Ellen Reid's *Fear / Release*, Kev Choice's *Movements*, and the "Allegro con brio" movement from Beethoven's String Quartet No. 11, and Nico Muhly (above) conducted the world premiere of his own *Throughline*.

various San Francisco orchestra members and all the collaborative partners: composer, pianist and film producer Nicholas Britnell; vocalist and program curator Julia Bullock; flutist and experimental music advocate Claire Chase; composer and guitarist Bryce Dessner; violinist Pekka Kuusisto; artificial intelligence entrepreneur and roboticist Carol Reiley; and jazz bassist and vocalist Esperanza Spalding.

As Muhly remembers it, the idea for *Throughline* came together when the San Francisco Symphony called him in Au-

gust 2020 to kick around the notion of his writing a group of 30-second miniatures for himself and the others, to be introduced between various elements of the orchestra's gala. "I didn't want to do that," Muhly says. "It felt so cosmetic. So I counter-proposed a single piece that would incorporate all of the different collaborative partners." Muhly says he "set out to make this really ambitious thing, to spotlight all the soloists with the exception of me, and to do it in different locations, Esa-Pekka in Helsinki or wherever he was, and Julia

Ford Musician Awards

for Excellence in Community Service

A Program of the League of American Orchestras
is made possible by



FORD MOTOR COMPANY FUND



Now in their fifth year, the Ford Musician Awards have recognized the commitment and extraordinary impact twenty orchestral musicians have made in service to their communities.



PAST
WINNERS

League
of American
Orchestras

Applications are being accepted until February 8, 2020.
For more information, visit www.americanorchestras.org/ford.