

The Beat Goes On



With many in-person concerts on hold due to pandemic, orchestras, pops presenters, and guest artists are adapting fresh approaches to pops by heading online, offering more intimate events, and following health protocols to keep the music going.

by Steven Brown



For the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra's Independence Day broadcast, musicians performed at the new Dickies Arena without an audience and observed health precautions, as shown in both photos on this page.



Bertuzzi Photography

The Houston Symphony opened its pops season last year with *Hamilton* star Renée Elise Goldsberry. This year, the Houston Symphony and Principal Pops Conductor Steven Reineke turned their outdoor July 4 pops concert into a television broadcast from Jones Hall, whose seats remained deliberately empty.

What better place for an Independence Day concert than a sports arena—a place with room enough for a full orchestra, a rousing stage production, and 14,000 flag-waving viewers? The Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra had something else in mind, though, when it took its “America Strong” program into its hometown’s new Dickies Arena. “We

thought it would be the perfect venue for a socially distant orchestra,” says Keith Cerny, the orchestra’s president and CEO.

Welcome to pops during the pandemic. The arena’s expanses of seats remained empty, and a television crew was the only audience in sight. Music Director Miguel Harth-Bedoya and the 55 Dallas Symphony musicians spread out across the

arena’s main floor, with six feet between string players and even more room separating the winds and brasses. Everyone who could wear a mask while playing did so. The other musicians—and their exhalations—were partitioned off with Plexiglas. When Dallas-Fort Worth’s WFAA-TV broadcast the festivities, the viewership set a station record for the 9 p.m. Saturday time slot. The concert gave the Fort Worth Symphony its first chance to play as an ensemble since the March coronavirus lockdown—and the July 4 holiday drew other orchestras back into action, too.

The Philly POPS, condensed to 38 players from its usual 65, live-streamed a July 3 concert led by new Music Director David Charles

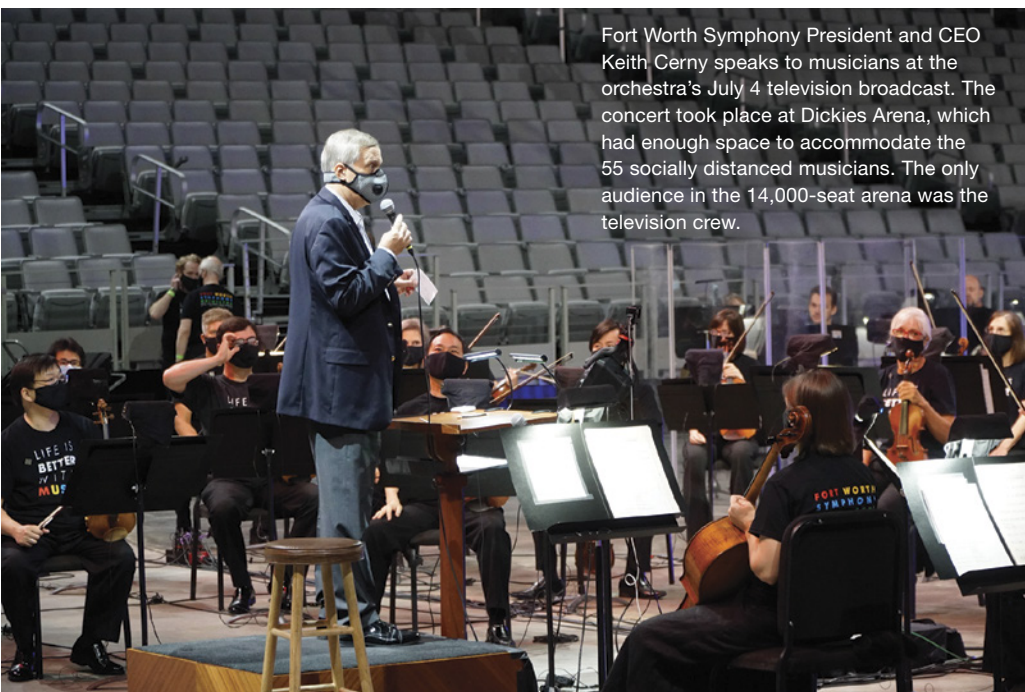
Abell; the group’s Philly POPS Jazz Orchestra followed with a televised concert

New approaches due to the pandemic may mark the start of a revolution in how orchestras present pops.

on July 4. The Houston Symphony and Principal Pops Conductor Steven Reineke turned their annual patriotic affair from an outdoor concert into a three-hour television broadcast from the orchestra’s Jones Hall home, whose seats remained deliberately empty.

The orchestras could hardly declare their independence from the virus, but the concerts marked the start of a revolution in how they present concerts—beginning with the groups that are able to restart their pops programs this season. Some, like the Philly POPS and Cincinnati Pops, at first will limit themselves to livestreams. The Fort Worth and Houston orchestras are taking a hybrid approach: they will stream their concerts and admit much-reduced in-person audiences into their concert halls.

Nobody expects to return to the pre-virus status quo any time soon. The Pitts-



Fort Worth Symphony President and CEO Keith Cerny speaks to musicians at the orchestra’s July 4 television broadcast. The concert took place at Dickies Arena, which had enough space to accommodate the 55 socially distanced musicians. The only audience in the 14,000-seat arena was the television crew.



The Philly POPS gave a livestreamed July 3 concert—minus audience—at The Met, an old theater with generous space for socially distanced musicians. Music Director David Charles Abell and the musicians had not previously performed in such a spread-out arrangement.



Philly POPS Music Director David Charles Abell wore a patriotic mask for the orchestra's July 3 livestreamed concert.

burgh Symphony Orchestra indicated as much in September, when its musicians agreed to pay cuts including a 25 percent reduction in their base salary due to the loss of box office and related income. Staff pay took a major hit, too.

"We are going through a horrendous time, on every level," says artist manager Marilyn Rosen, founder of Marilyn Rosen Presents. But Rosen has found an upside. Orchestras, which have long lamented



Marilyn Rosen Presents

Vocalist Ann Hampton Callaway, who in typical seasons performs often with orchestras, recently began producing a livestream concert series that she calls "my at-home speakeasy."

was. We can go to something better—or something more."

Pandemic Protocols for Pops

When the Philly POPS decided to livestream its July 3 concert, Chief Operating Officer Karen Corbin had to reach

back to knowledge from her past. "My background was in television for decades," Corbin recalls. "I never thought I was going to use these skills again." Meanwhile, the orchestra had to plan a social-distance setup in The Met Philadelphia, a century-old theater that offered generous space. "Of course, we were anxious about the whole thing: the safety issue, the first stream we ever did," Corbin says. "But these adaptations were part of a new reality."

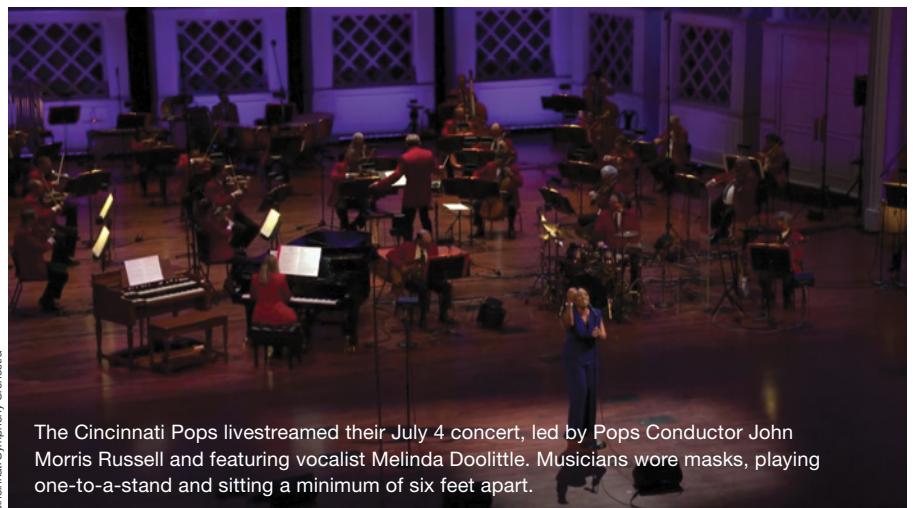
Each concert's rehearsals took place the day of the performance, so that no one had to leave The Met in between, she explains. Besides relying on now-typical protocols such as checking temperatures and spreading out the orchestra's seating, the orchestra assigned a number to each of the 38 musicians, so they could enter and leave the stage in sequence—without crowding. For obvious reasons, conductor Abell and



Marilyn Rosen Presents

"We are going through a horrendous time, on every level," artist manager Marilyn Rosen says of the pandemic. Nevertheless, she adds, the field has "an opportunity to think outside the box." Rosen is shown here with client Dave Bennett, who performs several programs with orchestras.

that public tastes in entertainment have gravitated away from them, now "have an opportunity unlike any other time—an opportunity to think outside the box," she says. "We don't have to go back to what



Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

The Cincinnati Pops livestreamed their July 4 concert, led by Pops Conductor John Morris Russell and featuring vocalist Melinda Doolittle. Musicians wore masks, playing one-to-a-stand and sitting a minimum of six feet apart.



Houston Symphony Executive Director and CEO John Mangum says that the orchestra's concert streams attract viewers from far beyond Houston and engage a wider pool of donors, too.

the musicians had never rehearsed or performed in so spread-out an arrangement. "One of our saxophone players," Corbin recalls, "said to me that for the first 20 minutes, it was odd. But he was so thrilled to be performing again that, at the end of 20 minutes, it was like he had been doing it forever. And by the performance, he didn't even notice it."

Conductor Abell and the musicians had never rehearsed or performed in such a spread-out arrangement. The strings could hear one another despite the spacing, Abell recalls, but the winds and brasses—despite wearing earphone monitors—faced a challenge hearing one another. Nevertheless, he adds, "it was wonderful to be back together after months of inactivity. The distancing didn't make much of a difference, once we got used to it; we could hear each other, thanks to the technical wizardry of

With orchestras using fewer musicians onstage due to safety protocols, Brent Havens, who conducts and produces classic-rock shows for orchestras—homages to Led Zeppelin, Queen, the Rolling Stones, and others—says that pops scores are being re-orchestrated for smaller ensembles.



the POPS staff and our sound engineers. Many of the musicians said how happy they were to be playing again with their colleagues."

The Philly POPS expects to rely on livestreams until state and city officials give the okay for at least limited live audiences. But the Fort Worth Symphony and Houston Symphony will welcome scaled-down live audiences at pops concerts that will also be streamed. With the closure of its home, Bass Performance Hall, through the end of 2020, the Fort Worth Symphony will move its pops and other concerts from Bass Hall, where social distancing would allow about 500 listeners, to the larger Will Rogers Auditorium, which has room for about 800. The move to the larger

venue has an added benefit: a boost at the box office. Since the spread-out orchestra will take up the entire stage, the orchestra will add an extension to accommodate guest artists, such as the singers for a soul-music program in late October. The live audience, of course, will trigger a fresh set of protocols and formats, many of them spelled out in advance on the Fort Worth Symphony's website. Concertgoers will enter the hall at assigned times, and they'll have to wear masks. Tickets will be electronic, not paper; ditto for program books. Concerts, at around an hour long, will dispense with intermission and

its worries about audience traffic flow between hall and lobbies. Free bottled water will make up for the shuttered concession stands, although income from concessions will take a hit.

"This has taken a complete redesign of the patron experience," Cerny says. "I've got to tell you, this has been one of the busiest summers of my life. It feels in many ways like we have been building the symphony from scratch, even though we've been in business more than 100 years."

New Audience Connections

As long as access to in-person concerts is limited at best, streaming will give orchestras their main—and in some cases, their only—link to their audiences. But there's a hitch. "The challenge is always the revenue side," Fort Worth's Cerny says. The Philly POPS, COO Corbin explains, will depend mainly on donations from businesses, foundations, and music lovers until it starts selling tickets again. So will other orchestras focused

The pandemic has precipitated "a complete redesign of the patron experience," says Fort Worth Symphony President and CEO Keith Cerny.

on free livestreams—such as the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, which will include three Cincinnati Pops programs in its new Live from Music Hall series this fall. "It's more important than ever for us to be a resource for and accessible to our entire community, which is why we made the decision to make our seven Live from Music Hall digital events free," Cincinnati Symphony President Jonathan Martin said in a statement announcing the series. The orchestra, he added, relies on "unwavering support from our sponsors and donors."

The Houston Symphony has charted a new course. Beginning in May, the orchestra charged \$10 a concert for weekly livestreams featuring musicians performing in their living rooms; later installments offered chamber and small-ensemble concerts from Jones Hall, the orchestra's home, at the same price. The next step



Casey Wood

Singer and pianist Tony DeSare in a pre-pandemic performance with the Omaha Symphony. In August DeSare gave a solo show—for a masked, socially distanced audience—sponsored by the Columbus Indiana Philharmonic. "It had been so long since I heard applause," DeSare says. "The masks don't get in the way of applause."



Courtesy Maui Pops

Vocalist Capathia Jenkins and singer-pianist Tony DeSare take a bow in a pre-pandemic performance with the Maui Pops Orchestra. Travel restrictions mean that far-flung concertizing is on hold for the time being.

came during the Labor Day weekend, when a Broadway program led by Steven Reineke launched Live from Jones Hall, a season-long series of classical and pops livestreams. Single concerts are \$20; a pops subscription comprising nine programs is \$135.

The response to the streams launched this summer has already revealed unexpected possibilities. “On any given week, at least half the people who buy a ticket also make a contribution. That’s been great,” says John Mangum, the Houston Symphony’s executive director and CEO. The benefits go beyond the revenue itself. “One of the things we’re seeing with the streaming audiences is that a lot of people are not necessarily our longtime subscribers,” Mangum points out. “They’re people who may have bought a single ticket a year or two ago, but they really became closer to us because of this big push we’ve made into digital since the lockdown.”

The streams, Mangum says, also attract viewers from far beyond Houston: typically, 35 to 40 states and a handful of other countries each week. So he thinks the livestreams are here to stay. “I wouldn’t want to lose that audience,” he says, “by turning off the streaming when everything goes back to quote-unquote normal—whenever that happens.”

Orchestras have found that streaming and the internet can pay still other dividends. After the Nashville Symphony suspended its concerts, Principal Pops Conductor Enrico Lopez-Yañez put together a weeklong virtual music camp for young

children. “We had people from as far away as San Diego signing on,” he says. “By being virtual, we had the potential to reach all over the country.” The Philly POPS turned its POPS in Schools series of master classes and other activities, which the lockdown squelched, into POPS in Schools@Home, a set of online videos and supporting material. “Normally, we reach about 3,000 students in the Philadelphia school district,” Corbin says. “We’ve reached over 18,000 online. So it was a happy transition.”

Rightsizing Repertoire

As complex as devising safety protocols and adopting fresh technology may be, yet another task stands at the very center of pandemic pops: conductors, orchestras, and soloists have to find scores that work with 30 or 40 musicians rather than 60 or 80. Brent Havens, who conducts and produces an array of classic-rock shows

for orchestras—homages to Led Zeppelin, Queen, the Rolling Stones, and others—just happened to be prepared for this. “The good news for us is, I had already reorchestrated all of my shows years ago for about 27 pieces,” Havens says. “We were getting calls, for example, from casinos that were interested in having us perform, but the casino stages were much too small to accommodate a full 50-, 60-, 70-piece orchestra. Now, as we do new shows, I write my charts in such a way that they’ll work both ways, without me having to re-orchestrate them.”

Others are scouring libraries, repertoire lists, and their own recollections. For a guest conducting appearance with the Utah Symphony, the Nashville Symphony’s Lopez-Yañez revamped a Latin American program to do without some of the orchestra’s wind instruments, which didn’t yet have safety clearance to play. “There’s not a lot of super-upbeat Latin American repertoire,” Lopez-Yañez says, “that doesn’t include winds and brass.” Or so he thought—until he investigated. “It’s been a fun, deep dive learning about all this repertoire. There actually is a fair amount” of Latin American repertoire that fits the bill.



Liz Ross Cruise

Conductor Enrico Lopez-Yañez has been investigating suitably scaled scores for pops concerts. “It’s been a fun, deep dive learning about all this repertoire,” he says.



After the Nashville Symphony suspended its concerts, Principal Pops Conductor Enrico Lopez-Yañez (shown here conducting the Nashville Symphony) put together a weeklong virtual music camp for children.



Artist manager Randy Chaplin, seen here with client Marie Osmond, and Dennis Alves, director of artistic planning at the Boston Pops, says, “I’m seeing a lot of cooperation and a lot of empathy from the artists, saying, ‘We’ve got to keep these orchestras alive.’”

Singer-pianist Tony DeSare, whose specialties include songs linked to Frank Sinatra, thinks the iconic singer’s material—best known from Sinatra’s recordings—will lend itself to lighter orchestral sounds. “That’s the thing about the Sinatra music,” DeSare says. “It was written for everything to be miked and recorded in a studio,” rather than projected to the back row of a concert hall. When his performances with orchestras resume this fall, he says, “I’m actually looking forward to hearing the songs in a less grandiose way—a little more sensitive, a little more intimate.”



Chaplin Entertainment

Before the pandemic, pops acts like the Texas Tenors, seen here with the Phoenix Symphony, performed with the Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Nashville, Phoenix, Kansas City, and other orchestras.

Finding a Way

Even as silver linings appear, everyone realizes that the pandemic storm is far from finished buffeting orchestras. “The budgets are going to be tightened, and they’re not going to be able to afford certain things,” says artist manager Randy Chaplin, founder of Chaplin Entertainment. “The artists, if they want to keep performing, may have to adjust their way of thinking about fees. I think a lot of concessions are going to have to happen, in order to make music again.” As social distancing hits orchestras’ box offices, “I’m seeing a lot of cooperation and a lot of empathy from the artists, saying,

Some orchestras are limiting themselves to livestreams for pops concerts. Others are taking a hybrid virtual/in-person approach.


‘We’ve got to keep these orchestras alive,’” Chaplin adds. Soloists sometimes agree, for instance, to do two shorter, no-intermission shows in place of a single full-length one.

Like everyone else, pops musicians have to deal with the pandemic’s upheavals and stress. The lockdown cost Haven’s classic-rock shows and their performers about 50 dates, he says. Singer DeSare says he had no concerts for five months—“the longest I was home from the road in at least 15 years.” Conductors have gotten snagged, too. Byron Stripling was supposed to de-

but this October as the Pittsburgh Symphony’s principal pops conductor, but the orchestra’s cancellation of all its fall concerts put a stop to that; at press time, the orchestra hadn’t announced a Plan B. After Miguel Harth-Bedoya’s farewell program as the Fort Worth Symphony’s music director fell victim to the lockdown, the summer’s America Strong program became his de facto goodbye.

The pandemic has subjected all performing artists to “a real mental reckoning,” says artist manager Peter Throm, founder of Peter Throm Management, which represents Enrico Lopez-Yañez and Tony DeSare, among others. “I have experienced this in very real terms with everyone I work with. It’s one thing to say, ‘Oh my gosh, where’s my next paycheck coming from?’ The next thing is, ‘This is who I am. It’s how I exist.’”

Some artists respond by creating their own outlets on the internet. DeSare has produced more than 150 installments of his “Song Diaries,” for which he records, mixes, and posts a new performance of a classic number each day. Singer Ann Hampton Callaway, who performs often with orchestras in a typical season, now produces her own livestream concert series, *The Callaway Hideaway*. She calls it “my at-home speakeasy.” She adds, “I have had a very busy online presence doing private Zoom concerts, public shows, fundraisers, galas, and rolling with the innovations of technology. Fortunately, I am a pianist who can play for myself, and the intimacy of these offerings has been very captivating to people—thankfully.”

Everyone’s ideal is to return to the stage. DeSare managed it in Indiana in late August, when he stepped before a masked, socially distanced audience to do a solo show—sans orchestra or rhythm section—sponsored by the Columbus Indiana Philharmonic. “It had been so long since I heard applause,” DeSare says. “The masks don’t get in the way of applause. It was a little difficult to see everybody’s faces—you couldn’t see smiles or reads the faces as well. But it was great. I felt very energized by that performance.” 

STEVEN BROWN is a Houston writer specializing in classical music and the arts. He previously served as classical music critic of the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Charlotte Observer*, and *Houston Chronicle*.