

# The Virtual Gala

## 8:00PM | TANGLEWOOD VIRTUAL GALA

The Isaac Stern Centennial Celebration will feature archival footage of this legendary artist; one-time-only performances by violinists Vadim Gluzman, Midori, and Nancy Zhou; and messages from Emanuel Ax, Yo-Yo Ma, and John Williams, among many others.

*The event will last approximately 90 minutes.*



There are just two days left in Boston Baroque's Banchetto Musicale Virtuale online auction and Fund-a-Need—the time for you to participate is getting short!

We've still got some truly special opportunities for you to enjoy.

[Access the Online Auction](#)



Join Us for the POP Virtual Jubilee!

Each year, the Play On Philly community comes together at the end of the school year to celebrate the accomplishments and hear the musical growth of our students at our POP Jubilee concert. Though we are unable to gather in person this year, we are determined to give our students, families, staff, and entire community the recognition and celebration they deserve now more than ever before.

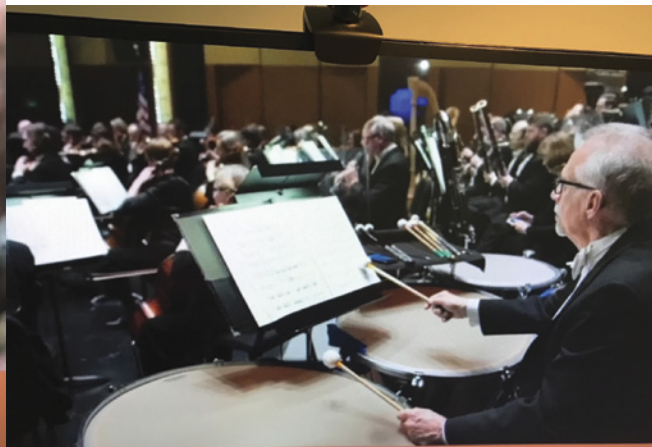
Orchestras of all kinds launched virtual galas and fundraisers in recent months.

by Rebecca Winzenried

When the pandemic shut down orchestra performances in March, concerts weren't the only loss. Gala concerts and fundraisers—the essential lifeblood of any nonprofit—had to be reconceived as well. Orchestras have adapted by pivoting to online galas during a time when we can't gather in person to raise money—and spirits.



Stay Tuned! The Gala will begin shortly!



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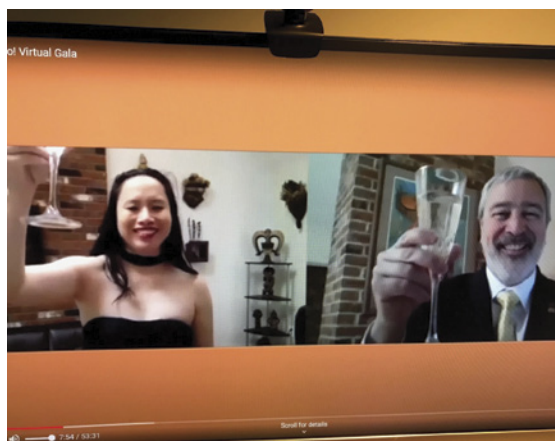
Images of Hartford Symphony musicians built anticipation just before the start of the orchestra's virtual gala in May.

Gauging the success or failure of an orchestra gala, that glitzy fundraising concert bookended by a cocktail reception and dinner, is usually pretty straightforward: a sum-total contribution to the coffers is calculated from ticket and table sales, auction bids, sponsorships, and a general sense of just how good a time was had by all.

But like everything else in the year 2020, the calculation has been upended, tossed out the window, thrown down the drain. With live performances curtailed and large-scale social gatherings verboten, galas, too, have gone virtual.

What's a party when no one can attend? Orchestras that had spent months planning major events for the spring and summer had to recalibrate, and fast. The Hartford Symphony Orchestra's Ignite Joy gala was set for May 2. Aligned to the season's Ode to Joy programmatic theme, invitations had been mailed just days before pandemic safety protocols were imposed statewide in Connecticut and the orchestra's operations ceased abruptly on March 12. Initial estimates of a two-week shutdown evaporated quickly, and organizers were faced with a decision about whether to postpone or cancel outright.

A different approach became evident fairly quickly to Director of Development Ruth Sovronsky: the show would go on, virtually, as an online gala. "People asked me, what does that mean? What will it look like?" she recalls. "My answer was, 'We don't know.'" It was a bluntly honest



Hartford Symphony Music Director Carolyn Kuan and Executive Director Steve Collins offer a toast at the orchestra's May 2 virtual gala.

response. The Hartford Symphony had no experience in presenting major digital fundraising events to draw upon, aside from gala-related auctions conducted through an online portal in recent years, but it was

### Orchestras are demonstrating that they can adapt quickly in constrained and ever-changing circumstances.

one of the first orchestras to attempt such a pivot during what had become an unprecedented, industry-wide shutdown.

The gala was rebranded as Reimagine Joy, a name that aptly describes behind-the-scenes maneuvers, from wrestling with new technologies to recrafting the evening's program. A crucial first decision was to forgo a live-streamed event in fa-

vor of pre-recorded segments. "People expect that it might have a home-made quality in terms of production values," says Sovronsky, but in her view they would be less tolerant of technical glitches, buffering or freezing of live feeds. At-home viewers would also need a more tightly focused and visual story. Efforts turned to creating a somewhat cinematic experience, with a narrative arc that would entertain, capture the joy of experiencing live music performance, and yet convey the urgent message that

financial support from the community was more important than ever. Speakers' notes were rescripted as more of a one-on-one conversation; orchestra musicians were recruited for greetings from their homes; Music Director Carolyn Kuan suggested music to underscore the presentation; and staff pulled together archival images to illustrate the orchestra's education program, which the gala benefits.

Sovronsky reminded all involved that potential viewers needed a sense of uplift (pre-recorded performances allowed Concertmaster Leonid Sigal to duet with himself on Mozart's *Turkish March* and Principal Harp Susan Knapp Thomas to become her own trio for music from *Wicked*) and that humor was not only okay, but welcome: a "How to Attend a Virtual Gala" promo adopted the perky tone of a vintage training film.

The event was offered for free via YouTube and Facebook, with the gala team on board to respond to comments in real time and offer thanks for donations. Expectations had been low, but final results came in 20 percent over goal. Sovronsky acknowledges that the gala may have benefitted from the moment, shortly after the shutdown started, when sponsors were able to stay on board and the audience was cheering on any performance efforts.

### Galas from Your Couch

The Hartford Symphony's Reimagine Joy event offered some trappings of a traditional gala, with speakers dressed in evening attire and remarks from gala chairs. A cozier attitude was baked into the California Symphony's UnGala on June 13. Playing on the fact that loungewear was the most dressed-up anyone was getting in late spring, the Symphony in Slippers (Pants Optional) marketing tagline promised "No tickets. No auction. No paddle raises. No



Hartford Symphony

Hartford Symphony Director of Development Ruth Sovronsky's advice for online fundraisers: make sure the sound is excellent; find a video editor who understands live performance; keep it short; keep it moving.

pressure." The orchestra has moved away from using the term "gala" for its annual fundraiser in recent years anyway, according to Theresa Madeira, director of marketing and patron loyalty. "We felt it was important to convey fun and positivity in the title of the event," she says. Still, with the name UnGala, Madeira points out, "We felt we needed to set expectations. Adding the tagline said it all up front in a straightforward way that fit with our mission to make the event—and the symphony—more accessible." A checklist for making the at-home event fun was not that different from what patrons of this orchestra, which prides itself on doing things a little differently, might experience in its concert hall at the Leshar Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek, where they are allowed to bring a drink or ice cream to their seats, keep their cell phones on (silenced),

and clap when they are so moved.

Music Director Donato Cabrera served as host for the free streamed event and also for a paid, pre-show virtual wine tasting and cook-along. Those pre-show participants received a package with wine selections paired to a recipe they could prep together during a Zoom call, with assistance from experts of the participating local vineyard. Once the gala got underway, Cabrera drew viewers into the musical experience in a pre-recorded Zoom chat with solo pianist Andrew Armstrong and Assistant Principal Clarinet Stephen Zielinski about the technical challenges of their distanced *Rhapsody in Blue* performance—in this case, the famous clarinet slide intro segued into a solo piano performance of the work, with the musicians recording in separate locations.

Most poignantly, their conversation revealed just how much musicians missed performing together in person, and how much they relied on the energy of a live audience. Their heartfelt comments helped demonstrate the importance of all those at-home viewers. They also underscored the orchestra's commitment to connecting with its community, as described in segments about programs and activities interspersed throughout the hour-long broadcast. The orchestra was able to convert many pre-existing table and



Hartford Symphony

ticket purchases for the originally scheduled fundraiser, which had been promoted since January, into donations; net results for the UnGala exceeded projections for the live event, which would have been limited to attendance of 150 to 200 people. It also saw a surge in donations through its presence on the Patreon artist-support app. Monthly videos from the orchestra's Young American Composer-in-Residence pro-



The Hartford Symphony's tongue-in-cheek "How to Attend a Virtual Gala" promo evoked a vintage training film, complete with a very up-to-date computer.

gram, which was highlighted in a gala conversation between the current composer in residence, Viet Cuong, and his immediate predecessor, Katherine Balch, are a perk for donors through Patreon.

### Musicians Step Up

An unexpected side effect of virtual galas has been the more direct involvement of orchestra musicians, whose participation



Those attending the Hartford Symphony's virtual fundraiser in May were invited to show off their gala-wear from home.



At the California Symphony's virtual gala, pianist Andrew Armstrong and Assistant Principal Clarinet Stephen Zielinski performed selections from *Rhapsody in Blue* from separate locations. The performance remains on the orchestra's website for on-demand viewing.

in fundraising events is generally limited to onstage performances and dinner appearances. For its virtual 80th-birthday celebration on May 19 the Utah Symphony took advantage of the state's wide-



Art Garcia

"We felt it was important to convey fun and positivity in the title" of the California Symphony's June 13 online UnGala, says Theresa Madeira, the orchestra's director of marketing and patron loyalty.

open spaces to film orchestra members playing in locations ranging from a hilltop overlooking Salt Lake City to the region's vast salt flats. The sweeping drone footage created a sense of place that became an important signature for the online event. Concertmaster Madeline Adkins suggested taking musicians out of their homes and their little Zoom boxes, and at the last moment a videographer filmed Adkins and Principal Keyboard Jason Hardink in a socially distanced performance of Massenet's *Méditation* from *Thaïs* in the orchestra's home at Abravanel Hall. It was the first music heard in the space since the shutdown, providing a bittersweet moment for the musicians and viewers alike, as judged from online comments.

A virtual event seemed likely to dampen the symphony's big anniversary celebra-

tion. Instead, the presentation allowed the orchestra to draw parallels between current circumstances and its founding in 1940, as an offshoot of a New Deal-era music

### At the California Symphony's virtual gala, Music Director Donato Cabrera took part in a Zoom chat with California Symphony musicians.

project under the Works Progress Administration. Host Jeff Counts, who also helms the orchestra's *Ghost Light* podcast, pointed out that the orchestra debuted in the shadow of the Great Depression and



Promotional material for the California Symphony's June 13 online event.



California Symphony Executive Director Lisa Dell and Music Director Donato Cabrera welcome viewers to the orchestra's June "UnGala."

the onset of global conflict in World War II. Harkening back to the orchestra's very first program in May of 1940, the musical segments with outdoor footage were set to portions of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which was also performed at the inaugural concert. Virtual guests were invited to tune in early for a "lobby fest," to show off their best at-home birthday attire and possibly win tickets to a future (not virtual) performance. Those who stuck around through the broadcast's end credits got to see musicians remotely blowing out the candles on their slices of birthday cake—or trying to, through the requisite face mask.

### Rethinking Celebrations in Tumultuous Times

Long-planned anniversaries rethought. Locations rejiggered. Orchestras are demonstrating that they can adapt quickly



The Philadelphia Orchestra gave the world premiere of Valerie Coleman's *Seven O'Clock Shout* at the orchestra's June 6 online discussion of racial injustice, which replaced the orchestra's planned virtual gala.

in constrained and ever-changing circumstances, facing the moment head on. "The shift to virtual galas clearly shows orchestras' ability to be agile and innovative in engagement and fundraising during these challenging times," says Marlah Bonner-McDuffie, Vice President for Development at the League of American Orchestras. "Orchestras are seeing positive responses from their strategic efforts. Support from donors is ever more critical, and has quickly become the primary source of new revenue for orchestras. COVID-19 has caused a seismic shift in how we think about reaching audiences—and it is my hope that this kind of thinking will continue even beyond the pandemic. I'm also hoping that increased visibility on a broader range of platforms will support efforts

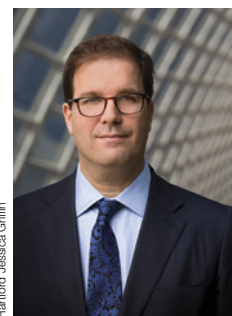


The Philadelphia Orchestra replaced its June 6 virtual gala with a public online conversation about race, equity, and social justice among (in photo) President and CEO Matias Tarnopolosky (top), Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin (left), and musician, composer and educator Wynton Marsalis (right). Composer Valerie Coleman also participated, and her *Seven O'Clock Shout* was given its world premiere. The orchestra presented its online gala later that month.

to expand audiences, and ultimately new sources of support, across a more diverse demographic."

The Philadelphia Orchestra had a number of musical segments and greetings from heavy hitters around the world, including Steve Martin, Renée Fleming, and Yo-Yo Ma, readied for its HearNOW virtual gala on June 6. However, by the beginning of that week such a celebratory event, even online, seemed inappropriate as the nation erupted in protests following the killing of George Floyd. The virtual

gala was postponed and that evening the orchestra offered HearTOGETHER: A Conversation in Music and Words, an online discussion and contemplation of racial injustice that included Wynton Marsalis and composer Valerie Coleman. "There

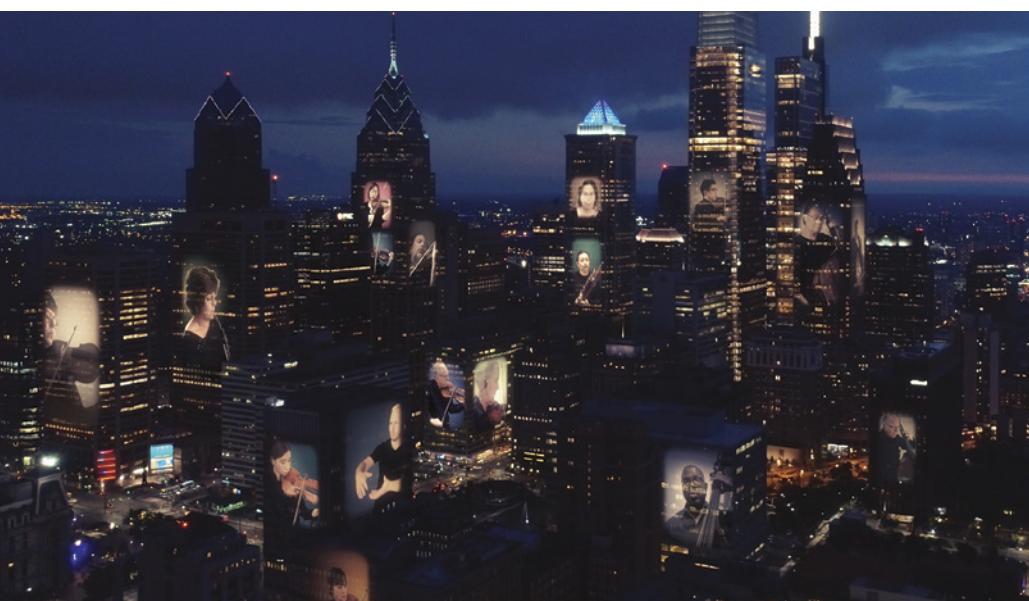


Harford Jessica Griffin

"The conversation felt very immediate, vulnerable, and honest," says Philadelphia Orchestra President and CEO Matias Tarnopolosky of the orchestra's online discussion of social justice, which replaced the planned virtual gala in June.

"We didn't know how it would play out. But the conversation felt very immediate, vulnerable, and honest." The Philadelphia Orchestra has continued HearTOGETHER as monthly livestreamed explorations of racial and social justice issues, and efforts toward equity and inclusion.

The June 6 HearTOGETHER online discussion included the world premiere



Philadelphia Orchestra

At the Philadelphia Orchestra's June 20 virtual gala, Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* accompanied a video flyover of the city showing images of Philadelphia Orchestra musicians on landmark buildings.



The Utah Symphony featured videos of its musicians giving physically distanced performances in some of the state's iconic wide-open spaces, including the Salt Flats, for its online 80th-birthday gala.

of Coleman's *Seven O'Clock Shout*, a Philadelphia Orchestra commission that had been set to debut on the virtual gala. The piece, written for distanced musicians, was named after the nightly cheer for frontline workers that became a ritual

September 30 virtual opening-night program.

Lessons learned from production of the HearNOW virtual gala, which was offered as a free, limited-time stream, were folded into the September 30 virtual opening night, which was a digitally ticketed program. The first virtual gala was viewed by an estimated 29,000 people on June 20, and it brought in a total of \$735,000. Fundraising, after all, remains the principal measure of gala events, regardless of how they are experienced. Yet, a truer gauge of success today may be an event's ability to engage and keep connections with audiences from afar. The Philadelphia Orchestra's virtual gala included a love letter to its hometown. An elegant performance of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* superimposed images of Philadelphia

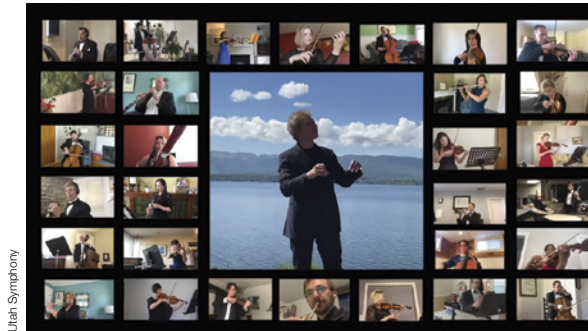


Utah Symphony

The Utah Symphony's virtual gala on May 19 featured video of Concertmaster Madeline Adkins and Principal Keyboard Jason Hardink in a socially distanced performance of Massenet's *Méditation* from *Thaïs* in Abravanel Hall—the first music in the space since the pandemic shutdown.

during the pandemic. But in the even newer context, Coleman described it as a celebration of shared humanity. The work was repeated when the virtual gala eventually did air on June 20, and its place as an anthem of the moment was cemented with its inclusion on the orchestra's Sep-

Orchestra musicians onto landmark buildings, as seen in a bird's-eye flyover of the city, poignantly demonstrating where the orchestra's heart lies. "It shows that in moments of deep crisis it is possible to find joy and beauty through music," says Tarnopolsky. "We are still here, still making



Utah Symphony

A screenshot from the Utah Symphony's May 19 virtual gala captures the orchestra's musicians in a distanced performance of the second movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, led by Music Director Thierry Fischer.

music, still an important part of your lives." Although, given the reach of the internet, he adds, "These are now global events. We have to keep that in mind."

Virtual galas streamed on websites, Facebook, and other social media platforms, and then living on past their original air date via YouTube, have the potential to reach audiences far beyond the confines

**Virtual galas on websites, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms have the potential to reach audiences far beyond an in-person event.**

of an in-person event, regardless of an orchestra's size or name recognition. Video segments can easily be pulled out and offered as stand-alone clips for social sites and media outlets: the California Symphony UnGala performance of *Rhapsody in Blue* remains on the orchestra's website as an on-demand "encore." At the Hartford Symphony, Ruth Sovronsky viewed the May virtual gala as institutional commercial, something that could be seen as easily in Seattle or Singapore as in Connecticut. Production values are key, and she's keeping her own advice in mind for future virtual events: make sure the sound is excellent; find a video editor who understands live performance; keep it short; and keep it moving. **S**

REBECCA WINZENRIED is a New York-based arts writer and a former editor in chief of *Symphony*.