

What's Next for Orchestras?

2020 was a year like no other: the pandemic, America's long-overdue reckoning with race, financial downturns, starkly divided politics. Facing COVID-19 shutdowns and stringent health regulations, orchestras found innovative ways to keep the music playing—even while reexamining their roles in a changing society. As we head into a new year, 21 people in the classical music field share their thoughts on what's next for 2021.

by Janaya Greene

The future of live music is in limbo, with countless orchestras, artists, venues, musical institutions, and music lovers holding their breath that at some point in 2021, experiencing the power of live orchestral music can return, and hopefully ease the pain of 2020. In addition to hundreds of thousands of coronavirus deaths in the United States, there is the staggering loss of jobs and an economy that continues to struggle as a result of the virus. At the same time, anti-Black racism, an issue on the minds and spirits of many marginalized people far before COVID-19 hit America, has become an unavoidable topic as the police killing of George Floyd and several others have heightened Americans' consciousness.

Long before 2020, Black performers and composers, along with many others, pushed for the classical field to confront racism and prejudice within orchestral institutions, hoping to make classical music more widely accessible. According to the League of American Orchestras' *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field* study, Asian/Pacific Islander musicians represent most of the diversity increase in American orchestras, while

Black and Latinx musicians have not seen significant growth in the field during the past twelve years. Social inequity can no longer be ignored, and in order for American orchestras to move ahead in ways that make an impact, leaders in the field must get creative about whom they reach and how they reach them.

What's next is on the minds of many. From orchestra executive directors to composers to educators to activists and others, *Symphony* asked a spectrum of people in the field what they'd like to see classical music blossom into in America, and how they're working to make these hopes and visions a reality. We may not know what the future holds, but envisioning a better future is surely a first step.



As we spring ahead into this new year, I think the most pressing issues for orchestras of all kinds, adult as well as youth orchestras, are around how we do our work and with whom. I hope most orchestras have opted to see the field's recent challenges as opportunities—opportunities to innovate, unite, reexamine, and evolve.



As an eternal optimist, I believe we have been given this rare gift (albeit a forced one) to innovate and reinvent how we create and share our art, and how we approach music education. Most of us never would have found our way to digital media or virtual instruction without a catalyst like the pandemic. It's exciting to see which new ways of operating will endure post-pandemic and think about what we can forgo from the past.

Professional and youth orchestras alike also have an opportunity to heal using the profound beauty of our art form. Listening to music in isolation will never compare to experiencing a live performance in community. Think of what it will feel like to gather again!

In terms of gathering, I believe that each and every orchestra has this opportunity—and responsibility—to look closely at who is gathering with us and, more importantly, who is not. As we navigate our way through civil unrest and political strife, how can we use music to connect?

How can we create new seats in the audience, in the orchestra, and at the board table for those who have been suppressed due to systemic racism? How can we create authentic partnerships that elevate artists and communities of color? How are we breaking down barriers to create greater access to our programs?

My hope is that continued resiliency, hope, and empathy are setting the stage for our future selves and organizations to look back and realize that we are still experiencing many of the unexpected silver linings from this time.

—**Megen Balda**, executive director, Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies

The discussions around wider cultural arts programming among institutions greatly interest me. The music and arts narratives today are about powerful, thoughtful, and creative work moving forward, mechanized deeply by aesthetics that are relevant and embrace and allow all to believe in the value of glorious music, songs, dance, poetry, and images of positive uplift and human culture.

Given the focus of our conversations to think more critically about repertoire in an American school of music, about the very nature of the questions of *why* classical music, *by* and *for whom*, this challenges our notions of canon formality as we wrestle with being art-smart and culturally relevant.



I believe today's Black composers are wanting to dismantle our own and others' perceptions of victimization by focusing on how we are activating, programming through the distribution of our creative shares and spaces. My idea is that cultural programming and critical curation are the transformative mechanisms forward. Musical partnerships are about the whole mechanism, enterprise of education and programming cultural content.

The best way forward for today's art-music institutions is to have these institutions' boards seriously invest in contemporary composer residencies, where Black concert composers are there "in the house" with the musicians and connecting with local communities. That's how you make music meaningful, relevant and connect in

sustainable ways with your programming and arts outreach.

—**William Banfield**, composer, director of Africana Studies and professor in the Liberal Arts Department at Berkeley College of Music

The work of "Close Quarters" with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra has highlighted that there is not only a staggering global online audience for this music + original visual art series that continues to grow with each release, but also a wide range of hidden potential for re-thinking LACO's digital presence in media and cultural circles. We have found that instead of the organization's YouTube channel being an afterthought, there is a way to use it to strategically engage with thousands of new eyes and ears by offering new content that doesn't just simulate a traditional concert. "Close Quarters" is designed to be reactive to LACO's musical programs with digitally native offerings that align with the core mission and goals of the institution while simultaneously generating entirely new cinematic content. LACO has embarked on this fast-paced experiment with content always inspired by and conjured up by the music itself. As a result, LACO is now the driving force behind multiple new pieces of art film, sculptures, experimental video, animation, dance and actual paintings from prominent artists in the city—all inspired by LACO's musical artistry.



Simona Kessler

Whether die-hard chamber music fans understand the realm of visual art and film, or even like it, is not the battle ahead of us. Historical performance models of live orchestral concerts in concert halls should and will eventually continue to exist post-pandemic—but the current realities have highlighted immense interest in the chamber orchestra being seen more as a cultural curator. Can LACO be a place for collaboration that only this moment will offer? LACO isn't only programming music and sound in LA communities; it is now bridging into other artistic realms to offer these new forms of expression and test mergers of form without a fear of risk.

To have a new generation of artistic minds interact with a live orchestra as

fresh, welcome inspiration, to discover what the music has the capability of conjuring up in them, is the way to guarantee relevancy as well as real, truthful inclusion, sustained audiences, and impactful engagement with Gen Z heading into the next several decades.

—**James Darrah**, creative director of digital content at Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra

Imagine we'll be hearing a lot about how the orchestra of the 21st century needs to be more inclusive, more flexible, less wedded to a narrow canon, more technologically savvy, more open to new music. I agree, and I've been making versions of those arguments for many years. If I could choose just one form of adaptation it would be a dramatic cut in ticket prices, across the board. When attending live music is a once-a-year splurge or a habit available only to the affluent, it's difficult for the audience—and, consequently, the orchestra—to take risks. If I could choose a second change in practice, it would be to shorten most concerts and eliminate intermission.

But I'd also like to put in a word for the orchestra as a tool of cultural preservation, a bulwark against hectic tides. A year of deprivation has made me acutely aware that what I crave most about concerts is their communal ritual. For an hour or two, a group of (mostly) strangers comes together in a large room for the sole purpose of making music and listening—no multitasking, no distractions, and only very limited visual entertainment. We are asked to focus on one thing only: the product of an artist's sonic imagination. That makes orchestras custodians of an almost sacramental experience, a parenthesis in a life crammed with obligations, imagery, connectedness and screens. Repertoire, performance style, decorum, and dress all can and should be fluid. Personnel can and should be more diverse. And, sure, it's great to hear musicians form a flash mob in a public square or give a premiere on a factory floor. At the same time, let's renew our appreciation for the sense of occasion, separateness, and drama that clings to an orchestral performance in a purpose-built

concert hall. After this past year, those aren't things we can ever take for granted again.

—**Justin Davidson**, classical music and architecture of *New York* magazine. He won a Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2002 and was a finalist in 2019.

Like our colleagues across the arts and culture sector, the Mellon Foundation quickly pivoted to remote work when the pandemic hit last March. We engaged in our own version of scenario planning: first redeploying our current budget for urgent response, then converting restricted 2020 funds from existing grants into general operations so that our grantees could flexibly access funds that couldn't be used for normal activities. Our trustees then increased Mellon's overall 2020 grantmaking budget of \$300 million by another \$200 million, a welcome infusion but nonetheless a drop in the bucket of overall need as the pandemic raged on. Two other factors



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have shaped our activities: (1) we officially announced the Foundation's new strategic direction, toward which we'd been moving for some time, a “focus entirely on social justice,” and (2) the depths of racial injustice across America foregrounded following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others, accelerated calls to action and acknowledgement of culpability across the sector. Mellon's urgent-response grants, developed and implemented at an unprecedented pace, have accordingly focused on those historically underserved by philanthropy: individual artists, often without institutional affiliation, and small and mid-sized organizations serving communities of color and/or located outside major urban centers. We've also tended to organizations in our home city of New York.

With regard to orchestras, we expect to continue our current strategy designed to

break down seemingly intractable barriers to diversifying the classical music professions, including intensive training programs for high-talent, high-potential musicians; the National Alliance for Audition Support; and the League of American Orchestras' work to help foster more inclusive environments within orchestras. We've been heartened by the recent momentum in the field but recognize these are long-term efforts. On occasion, we will also continue to support individual orchestras modeling transformational change that aligns with our social-justice priorities.

—**Susan Feder**, program officer, Arts and Culture program at The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

In the words of leadership coach Marla Teyloia, 2020 is a year of no return. As each of us comes face to face with the current racial reckoning, political transition, and the devastating impact of COVID-19 on BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] communities, each of us must answer the call to action. Transformational change must happen on all levels and will involve taking bold steps; far beyond posting black squares on Instagram. As we work to shift the realities of our overwhelmingly White and male-dominated field of classical music, we must remember that this revolution will not be built on anti-racism trainings alone. Shifting our consciousness involves the daily action of questioning our individual biases, disrupting and challenging oppressive systems in our organizations, centering and fairly compensating BIPOC leaders for their time, insight, and emotional energy, and continuing the collective push toward sustainable change.



As the executive director of Challenge the Stats (CTS), an Atlanta-based organization that empowers BIPOC artists and uses music as a tool for justice, I am excited about new partnerships that will shift the narrative in our field. First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta will serve as a host for the inaugural CTS Collective in Residence, a partnership that will expand our impact through virtual and hybrid (in-person) experiences grounded in community leadership and connection. As

the global pandemic continues, CTS has partnered with Project: Music Heals Us to bring livestream concerts directly to children and healthcare workers at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, in an area with the highest number of coronavirus cases in Georgia. Through the Vital Sounds Initiative Partnership Grant, CTS will continue to provide these livestreams in the 2021 calendar year, with the aim of normalizing classical BIPOC musicians for young children and using music as a tool for healing.

—**Angelica Hairston**, harpist, executive director of Challenge the Stats: Empowering Artists of Color

From loss can come new beginnings. When the first stay-at-home orders were issued last spring, the San Francisco Symphony was forced to cancel everything we had on our concert calendar. Lost revenue led to a shared-sacrifice plan that was painful for all to absorb. Never before had we been so at the mercy of outside forces. At almost the same time, we needed to acknowledge exclusionary practices, completely within our control, that were causing great harm to others and stunting our institutional growth. From this powerful combination of existential threats, however, have emerged ideas that are fundamentally changing the San Francisco Symphony and our relationship with our community. Born out of necessity, strategies that we have pursued amidst this loss and internal reckoning are making the SFS more flexible, inclusive, dynamic, open-minded, accessible, and relevant. At the core of these new ideas is bespoke digital content that is designed specifically with virtual audiences in mind (and will remain a permanent part of future seasons even after live concerts have resumed). This type of digital programming doesn't try to replicate the live concert experience, but instead introduces a whole new way of curating experiences that showcase both the talents of our musicians and an expanded array of composers and collaborators, including new Music Director Esa-Pekka Salonen and eight new Collaborative Partners.

As we continue on a long journey to deeply examine historic practices and achieve internal change, we have invited



Brandon Palocz

Bay Area artists, including hip hop artist Kev Choice and jazz pianist Tammy Hall among many others, to co-create digital experiences that amplify voices new to our organization. We've also come to treasure our outdoor "One-to-One" concerts that allow for an intimate musical experience and unique human connection. These personal interactions between just one or two

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performers and tiny groups of audience members have opened up a new kind of relationship that will be fostered for years to come. Taken as a whole, the strategies we've developed in this challenging year will enable us to more quickly achieve our vision of reimagining how people everywhere engage with music in deep and meaningful ways. Amidst such unprecedented loss, we have found a brighter future.

—**Mark C. Hanson**, chief executive officer, San Francisco Symphony

Since March 2020, the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra has actively kept close contact with all of our stakeholders. Our staff, board, and volunteers have engaged in a phone-calling campaign to patrons and donors, both to thank them for their support and to check on their well-being. We swiftly reached an agreement with the AFM that guarantees our per-service musicians 60% of their average earnings during the 2020-21 season. We dove into online programming, available at little or no cost. All of these efforts have bound us even closer together and, we hope, have laid the foundation for a bright future.



While we continue recording concerts for on-demand viewing, we have found that our audience also welcomes and enjoys non-musical content. In August, we debuted "A Conversation with the Maestro," a series of interviews on our YouTube channel that provides a unique look at the

people behind the HSO and gives viewers a chance to get to know our musicians on a more personal level. This series is planned to continue beyond the 2020-21 season.

Patrons of all ages have ably made the shift to online content and we know that entire households are engaging with us online. While nothing can replace the experience of live music in the concert hall, online viewing can break down barriers of cost, transportation, and fear of the unknown. We see this as a viable new offering that should continue.

This time of physical separation has actually deepened our connections. So what's next? Following Dr. Anthony Fauci's remarks, I hope it's a full house at a live concert this fall, with lots of first-time concertgoers, but no one can see exactly what 2021-22 will look like. Still, we look ahead optimistically. If we continue to commit ourselves to taking care of all members of our artistic family, and listening, this great art and the artists who bring it to life will remain connected, and we will thrive.

—**Matthew Herren**, executive director, Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra

In the 1992 comedy *A League of Their Own*, a star baseball player breaks down in tears and an exasperated Tom Hanks iconically tells her, "There's no crying in baseball!" This memorable advice stuck with me. Recently, when asked by a prospective graduate student whether I would advise a gap year, I was inspired to quip, "There are no gap years in music!" Training to be an elite classical musician is different from other areas of study. One cannot simply "take time off" and expect to remain competitive, to continue to develop, and to make progress as an artist. There are no gap years in music!



I've learned a tremendous amount these past eight months from our distinguished faculty and inspiring students. They have reinforced the value of being nimble and of being tenacious—qualities we always said were valued in Cleveland but which I have now experienced being played out.

I've also learned from the deconstruction of sacred cows. On March 1, we were steadfast in our belief that synchronous, in-person learning was the only way to ap-

proach liberal arts general education. We have observed in the intervening months that high-performing students, given the opportunity to curate their own schedules, are not only more committed to those schedules but they are actually better managers of their time. Their music, personal health, and well-being have truly come first.

Many friends who work at America's most celebrated orchestras have confided in me that there is a tidal wave of retirements coming among the top ensembles. If their prediction is correct, we are facing as many as 500 openings in America's largest orchestras in less than a decade. This presents our graduates with unprecedented opportunity...if they are prepared.

In the words of Ayn Rand: "Every man builds his world in his own image. He has the power to choose, but no power to escape the necessity of choice." We must all choose wisely.

—Paul Hogle, president and chief executive officer, Cleveland Institute of Music

From my perspective, professional orchestras during these days could play an important social role by connecting with a wide range of education, time, and culture, in addition to their routine performances.

In education, orchestras may collaborate with schools and communities, demonstrate, workshop, and mentor students in various levels. For example, readings and demonstrations of instrumentation, orchestration, composition, musicianship, music history, and music appreciation; workshops and mentorship for score reading, rehearsal techniques, conducting, ear training, and so on. It would be a very treasurable experience for students to bring that textbook knowledge about music to life by interacting with professional ensembles. These kinds of educational activities also provide a model for how junior musicians might connect and keep contributing to their communities after school.

For the time and culture, we all understand there are many contemporary issues of environment and humanity. Arts

cannot do alone without reflection of our time. This means that orchestras, as groups of contemporary musicians, should play a role that reflects, preserves, and speaks out contemporary voices. Orchestras in America have the potential to represent more voices that are diverse, multi-cultural, and transcend the symphonic and classical tradition in their repertoire. This part also has the potential to combine with those educational approaches to connect to our society, our time, and our world, with music.

—Chen-Hui Jen, composer

The uncertainty due to the pandemic has been very intense in the field of classical music and affected orchestras more than any other medium. However, orchestras have strived to adjust to the new situation and provide their audiences with opportunities to explore new musical

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adventures; the virtual performances, the publication of past performances, the performance of chamber works, etc.

Due to health issues and concert hall shutdowns, orchestras now organize limited performances, if any, and face restrictions to program works of various eras and genres. As a young composer, it made me feel very insecure about how and when my orchestral music would be delivered to the audience. It has always been very challenging for a young composer to have an orchestral work programmed by a professional orchestra and the current situation has made it even more difficult. Although it is understandable that orchestras now have to rethink and reconsider various factors to run their business at its maximum potential and still be a powerful artistic medium that successfully serves the community, I would like to advocate the mission of orchestras that continue to support, promote, and celebrate the music of young composers. This would enable

orchestras to showcase the fresh essence of creativity and play an influential role to reflect the ongoing social, cultural, and political issues represented in the works of young composers. Moreover, the promotion of works of young composers would advocate new voices and platforms which eventually enable orchestras to be seen and heard more broadly.

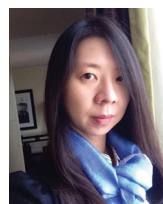
Finally, I believe that although the post-pandemic era looks very uncertain and unknown at this time, it will become an era of prosperity and innovation because orchestras will find out solutions on how to optimize and develop their performance and presence. For example, I think virtual performances will become an inseparable part of orchestral activities.

—Niloufar Irvani, composer

Cultural institutions by their nature are civic leaders, charged to model the ideal while leveraging the creativity and innovation that the arts provide to navigate the challenges that come along the way. The resurgence of social justice on the international stage, paired with the global pandemic during 2020, put a mainstream spotlight on the inequities in diversity, inclusion, health, education, social isolation, and more, and brought these issues to the forefront of our industry.



For Chicago Sinfonietta, these topics have never been on the fringes in our artistic planning and output. Our legacy and future as a cultural leader stem from the work our musicians, staff, board, and volunteers do offstage in addition to our symphonic offerings. We've further embraced technology, cyber concert halls, virtual galas, and out-of-the-box media engagement to much success. Our new subscription model was successful, with individuals from over 20 countries joining the Chicago Sinfonietta family due to our virtual offerings. We continue to create new programs like our Artist in Residence, continue to champion both female artists and composers of color, commission new symphonic works for the field while training tomorrow's future conductors, administrators, composers, and musicians in our flagship Project Inclusion Freeman Fellowship program.



I would like to see our field further embrace technology, improve audition practices, and develop stronger relationships with community partners. It is important that the field mirrors the world in which we live so that instead of Chicago Sinfonietta's board, staff, vendors, contractors, and musicians being held up as a beacon for the most diverse collective in country, we become the norm.

—**Blake-Anthony Johnson**, chief executive officer, Chicago Sinfonietta

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world forever: it has caused tremendous pain and despair for many, but also taught us how important it is to connect with one another and how precious to be able to see each other and hold each other's hands. We might have taken all of it for granted before, but we know very well now. Many of us have changed forever with more compassion for others and understood the true meaning of family and friends.

As a composer, I have been inspired by this surreal experience of total isolation, which leads to a state of meditative listening and thinking and my eagerness to communicate with people through my music: perhaps more expressive and thoughtful as I see and feel the suffering with my own eyes and heart.

In my personal view, I do not believe that the symphony orchestra should be resized to the minimum in order to fit the economic impact, which is only temporary. On the contrary, I see the future of grand orchestras, where massive groups of musicians play and sing together shoulder to shoulder, face to face, to reflect the unwavering power of humanity.

As a Chinese-American, I trust the words of my ancestors, 否pǐ极jí泰tài来lái (out of the depth of misfortune comes bliss).

—**Fang Man**, composer

My natural direction in life and in art is toward joy, beauty, and creation—but no one can deny the tragedy of 2020. We lost dear friends and loved ones to a mysterious virus; we saw clearly the disparity and injustice in society; performers

lost their livelihoods as seasons and events were canceled around the world. It is hard to imagine a path forward in a kind of isolation that none of us could have imagined a year ago.

The day the music stopped in early March was devastating, and for many of our artistic family it continues to be so. But for some, as we realized that this pause could last for months, a creative switch was flipped. We took the everyday technology of communications—Zoom, Skype, Facebook—and started making music. We couldn't gather in a concert hall or an opera house, but we could meet online. Early efforts in at-home programming made us feel connected at a moment when that was so desperately needed. The commitment to share music online is proof that music cannot be silenced.

In May, the death of George Floyd was a wake-up call to the world about the racism and injustice pervading our society, and—as we gained perspective on this inequality—there is much work to do in music, too.

In Philadelphia, as in many other places, tensions in the city were high. In response to these events, we transformed our planned virtual gala into an event more apt to the times: "HearTOGETHER: A Healing Conversation in Music and Words." This frank discussion with Wynton Marsalis, Valerie Coleman, and others about racial and creative equity in the world of classical music was streamed live, and the conversation continues through a new podcast series with many voices weighing in on a subject that must remain front and center.

Over the summer, I was so happy to begin making music with an orchestra again. The Orchestre Métropolitain and I were able to gather in Montreal to do all nine Beethoven symphonies through government-sponsored grants. In the fall, I conducted a series of concerts with the Philadelphia Orchestra (under strict health and safety protocols) for our newly conceived Digital Stage. But these are not in lieu of getting back to our audiences in person. Nothing can replace the live experience of the concert hall, opera house, or any shared space of art and music, and I can't wait for the moment when we can safely

gather together again.

As progress in public health continues, and as the conversation of racial and social justice becomes a collective commitment, we cannot afford to forget the experiences of 2020. Let us say, unequivocally, that our eyes are wide open—musically, artistically, intellectually, digitally, equitably, and justly. Let us look to 2021 as a stepping stone to a better future.

—**Yannick Nézet-Séguin**, music director, the Philadelphia Orchestra, Metropolitan Opera, and Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal

I believe that the new year brings immense opportunities for orchestras to be more creative and impactful. Diversity and inclusion had been longstanding issues in classical music well before the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests for social justice in 2020. These two words need to be at the forefront of everything the orchestra does. It's been wonderful to see orchestras present more pieces by women and composers of color. I hope that this is much more than a fleeting trend and instead, something that is a sustained, core tenet of orchestras' approach to programming. Orchestras also need to proactively champion the creative voices of today and work to encourage the younger generation of artists. I would love to see orchestras put together workshops not only for composers beginning their careers, but also for school-aged kids who have an interest in demonstrating their creativity to a wider audience.

Orchestras need to place education at the forefront of their mission, much beyond programs for young people in the concert hall. Access to high-quality instruction and instruments is severely lacking for those with less means. We will not have a new generation of musicians and audience members if we do the bare minimum when it comes to music education. Orchestras should make it a goal that every child in their community, regardless of socioeconomic status, has the opportunity to a fine musical education.

I would love to see more orchestras truly invest in and impact their communities. Orchestras should recognize what makes



also taught us how important it is to connect with one another and how precious to be able to see each other and hold each other's hands.



Chris Lee



Roger Mastroianni/Cleveland Orchestra

their community unique and reflect those special characteristics in their programming. They should also understand the challenges facing their cities, especially coming out of this tumultuous year, and really aim to be active in helping to find solutions.

I'm optimistic about the future of orchestras because this past year has forced all of us to reflect and think deeply about what comes next. I'm excited to help put these plans into action.

—**Vinay Parameswaran**, assistant conductor, the Cleveland Orchestra; music director, Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra

Imagine your love for the orchestral field as your child. Would you commit years of your life to your child? Would you provide a warm, welcoming home for your child? Would you protect them and ensure they were safe? Would you educate



your child and understand your child was your teacher, too? Would you welcome their friends into your life and want to know and love them? Would you listen and learn from all of them? Would you invest in your child's future over and over again? Would you want them to succeed and be seen and heard and respected and loved? Would you celebrate them over and over again? Would you adorn your walls with your child's pictures, know every facet of their history, proclaim with pride their story, and fight with every fiber of your body for your child's body, heart, mind, and soul? Would your love for your child be unconditional? Would you see them as wise and know they represent the best of you? Would there be a limit to what you would do for your child especially when they needed you most?

Now, imagine your child being hurt. Imagine your child being harmed over and over again. Imagine them ignored for their skin and hair and speech and body and blood. Imagine every opportunity and warm invitation for every other child, as an obstacle and cold rejection for your child, for your family and for you. Imagine your child physically attacked. Imagine your child emotionally scarred. Imagine your child as witness to their friend's attacks,

harm, and trauma. Imagine your child held captive to the past.

Imagine the impact racism would have on your child. Imagine your child murdered. Imagine your child gone. Would their life matter? Ask yourself: what are all the things you would do to stop that from happening to your child?

Then: do all of those things for the orchestral field.

—**Daniel Bernard Roumain**, composer, violinist, activist, educator

The impacts of the pandemic and extraordinary events of the past year make it clear that symphony orchestras will have to reemerge from this period substantively transformed. Online activities will need to be viewed as essential tools to enhance what happens on stages

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and deepen engagement, rather than additions to normal operations. This is the moment to examine existing operating practices to ensure that they can support the evolving digital needs of orchestras today, as they move bravely into the future.

Equally urgent, if not more so, is the question of diversity, representation, and access—a conundrum for a field that has strived to create fair but meritorious audition processes. Industry-wide collaboration on systemic solutions that address issues of equity and access at every point along the chain—from school districts to conservatories to music directors and across the organization's leadership—are imperative. But those efforts alone are not enough. In many communities throughout the country, the symphony orchestra is the dominant cultural institution, the central hub of performing arts that is emblematic of that community's culture sector. Orchestras must have the



courage to examine how cultural power is enshrined within their walls and engage in serious dialogue with civic leaders to determine how to transcend questions of access and become totally integrated in civic life. Each orchestra has a unique opportunity to use its platform to reflect the vibrancy of its community, forging paths and partnerships that have the potential to uplift and speak to all audiences.

—**Abhijit Sengupta**, director of artistic planning, Carnegie Hall

I finished an orchestral work for the New York Philharmonic's "Project 19" (created by their visionary CEO, Deborah Borda) titled "1920/2019" whose performance was postponed because of the virus. I am now working on a cello concerto for Alisa Weilerstein which will possibly be premiered at the Boulder Music Festival next summer with Peter Oundjian conducting and later performed by the National Symphony and the Detroit Symphony.



The future of orchestras has been discussed so much in so many ways and progress certainly has been made along several paths. But there still is a strong need to become much more "contemporary" in their choice of music.

Why is the classical orchestral world so dominated by the dead-white-European male tradition? I ask that lovingly because several of those same composers were *big* musical influences of mine. In this moment in history, we have a large group of diverse composers who write powerful and communicative music that any "traditional" audience member would love. There are so many choices of styles—for the first time in history—that it is easy to find one's particular taste.

The problem is that orchestral leadership needs to be more knowledgeable about living composers to make their best decisions, which takes time—which most do not seem to have—and *curiosity*, which a few conductors (and artistic administrators) do have.

When the Meet the Composer program was placing composers with orchestras (it was an important project that lasted ten years), they could do the legwork for the conductors and artistic administrators. They

could also design projects to bring new music to their environment, such as a new music series, outreach, composer visitors, commissions, etc.—in summary, all the things that MTC did at that time. As a byproduct, there was the *living* presence of a composer in their community, which turned out to be the most important part of that project. I wish that could happen again.

—**Joan Tower**, composer, conductor, educator

The coronavirus has initiated a change that the Billings Symphony has long pushed for but regrets not being more proactive about: live-streaming. Had the pandemic not happened, we would not be where we are today, and that is in a good way. During the third quarter of 2020, we



expanded our concert set-up to three socially distanced performances, and since then we have added live-stream and on-demand options for all of our scheduled concerts. An increased presence on the digital stage has allowed us to make our music more accessible to a more diverse demographic.

One of the biggest challenges for our symphony is finding a way to keep growing as well as restore the connection with our current audiences. Sports, arts, and entertainment organizations are the most affected by the pandemic, and, in particular, small- and medium-budget orchestras had to learn, adapt, and become music broadcasters and video producers in order to find creative ways to monetize digitally. Orchestras across the world need to stay strong, positive, and hopeful, and creatively connect with our patrons until we can host performances for live audiences.

The Billings Symphony is looking forward to a transformative 2021, with plenty of innovation and a focus on diversity in classical music. We will be specially focusing on equity, diversity, and inclusion projects to include Native Americans and combat anti-Native racism in Billings and the region by promoting greater understanding of the variety and richness of the indigenous culture. By showcasing traditional and contemporary Native American performing artists, we hope local students and under-represented audiences will be

impacted and that this alternative perspective on Native American culture will cause stigma towards Native Americans and lack of appreciation for their traditions and culture to be questioned and realigned. Performances will span from traditional dance to a hip-hop/pow-wow fusion, taking place throughout Yellowstone and Big Horn counties. Guest artists will include drummers, singers, dancers, and flutists as well as orchestra musicians. We hope to create a deeper appreciation of Native American culture—past, present, and future.

During the first two quarters of 2021, we will be assessing newfound skills acquired due to the pandemic and analyzing data collected since its arrival, allowing us to strategize for the next season. We expect the upcoming season to follow the hybrid model, with both a digital presence and live, socially-distanced audiences. We foresee many changes, which we will navigate and adjust to on a monthly basis. Our Health and Safety Taskforce will keep working to ensure all musicians, patrons, and staff have the most up-to-date safety measures in place so we can continue to share our music to diverse audiences.

—**Ignacio Barrón Viela**, executive director, Billings Symphony Orchestra and Chorale

The pandemic has brought extra challenges to today's symphony orchestras. Subscription concerts, premieres of new works, and many other related activities have taken a pause. We are facing one of the most difficult times to preserve this profound form of art developed over centuries.

As a living composer, I feel most fortunate to be able to finalize two commissions, with Philadelphia Orchestra and Dallas Symphony Orchestra, during the past few months, setting the premiere dates after 2022. Although the size of the orchestration is slightly reduced than initially planned, I expect the musical ideas to be carried through with no compromise. In fact, with more urge to express.



I believe the love and appetite for orchestral music are eternal, despite the ups and downs through the history. It is crucial to preserve this heritage. More important, the “next” for orchestras is to be *created*.

For example, by cultivating contemporary repertoire, investing in music education, and utilizing the rapidly developed technology, etc.—for instance, streaming concerts online may bring broader attendance.

—**Xi Wang**, composer

At least two windows have flung open and will never be closed again. First, as so many have pivoted into a digital space, the use of media and technology as a way to expand, deepen and add texture to the orchestral experience is obviously here to stay. This past year has been very “by the seat of our pants,” and orchestras that had already fully entered this space—like the Detroit Symphony Orchestra—were able to take the content to the next level; they had already figured out how to do it, so they were able to focus strategically on what they were going to put out. Orchestras must reassess why and what they are producing online; the time of online content for the sake of itself is going to end soon.



Second, the civil unrest recognizing the deep scars and trauma of the Black community—along with other BIPOC groups—force orchestras to accelerate their commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Who makes up our board, staff, musicians, and audience? How do we connect to a community that has for too long been excluded from the artform we love? What specific and measurable outcomes are we reaching for beyond a usually well-meaning but often unearned right to show solidarity with Black Lives Matter? If orchestras do not take up this work deeply, specifically and deliberately, we are compromising our relevance to the communities we claim to serve.

—**Ed Yim**, chief content officer and senior vice president, WQXR | New York Public Radio 

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