

Curating a Classical-Music Reset, After the Pandemic

Even as COVID-19 continues to present unprecedented challenges to orchestras, this is also a critical time to think deeply about the future of classical music. How might we rethink concert formats, pacing, expectations, and reimagine the orchestral experience for the “new normal”? Conductor **Tania Miller** offers her perspective from the podium.

Although we don't want to admit it, before COVID-19 changed our lives, classical music was ever-so-slowly receding into the din of modern-day culture. However, by searching and exploring, many committed orchestras found imaginative ways to slow the erosion and worked tirelessly to successfully build community and buzz around their endeavors.

And now here we are, in the quietness of the eye of the storm of COVID-19, with concerts cancelled and events postponed. There's much to say about the hardship of the moment; perhaps Stravinsky's *Firebird* is our symbol as we try to imagine the future. We know from music that darkness can sometimes create the greatest creativity and ultimately the most profound light. Maybe this is our chance, amid the stillness, to reset and to reflect on where we were going, and where we might change course for the future, post pandemic.

During this time, inspired online content has kept us connected to classical music when we needed it most. We have learned how much we need each other, to be close to each other. We have learned to differentiate between what it feels like to be physically close to someone vs. virtually close. Will we ever go back to packed concert halls? Surely yes, but when and how are still unknown.

In recent years, we have spent much time curating innovative music experiences for our audiences. Perhaps we hadn't fully valued the importance of physically

sharing those moments—the magic that music weaves by connecting an entire audience together (while, paradoxically, creating something meaningful for each of us individually). Concerts are also social events, a chance to get out and see people (when have we craved that more than now?), yet concerts have become long, formal, full-evening events with little time for discussion and social interaction.

Now is the time to think creatively about new performance models to add into our seasons. In one possibility, the familiar classical concert could open and close the evening, and a social activity could be expanded in the middle. Imagine starting

Perhaps Stravinsky's *Firebird* is our symbol as we try to imagine the future.

with a half-hour concerto, opening up into a new social experience—walking around an art installation with wine glass in hand, or experiencing, while standing, an edgy modern commission with a small ensemble in a different room—and then finishing with a sit-down experience of an extraordinary symphonic work.

We feel music in our bodies, responding to its tensions, climaxes, energy, and emotion. Our distracted and impatient audiences need to have an opportunity to interact and react physically to the music. Perhaps shorter modular concerts, and expansions into new kinds of pre-concert and post-concert artistic experiences, can provide some of this. As



Tania Miller

we deal with social distancing, perhaps a concert-hall facility can accommodate several experiences simultaneously, with audiences moving and rotating through these experiences. If we want people to leave the safety and

ease of their homes in this new future, the chance to connect with others will be a powerful motivation: emotionally through the music as well as physically.

The deep connection of modern society to classical music has eroded in part because people, young included, don't know classical music as a friend, up close, in their homes. As we wait for our full seasons to return, we have a chance to focus on the big picture of enriching our communities' connection to music. We can engage our musicians in creative initiatives around education and the building of deep relationships. We can engage philanthropists and governments to support meaningful projects to get us through to the next normal, among them chamber concerts, interactions with children, enriching engagements close to the music on every level, and collaborations with other arts organizations.

This is not the time for us to throw up our hands in despair. This is—if we can just sustain ourselves—a chance to reset. Orchestras can continue to show everyone that music has never been more needed, more vibrant, and more relevant to the core of humanity. We have an opportunity, as orchestras, to create a new era for the future of classical music. **S**

TANIA MILLER was music director of Canada's Victoria Symphony from 2003 to 2017, gaining acclaim for her innovations and commitment to the orchestra and community. She conducts orchestras throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe.