

Classical musicians, orchestras and opera companies confront COVID-19 lockdown

By Fred Mazelis
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More than six weeks after the COVID-19 lockdown began forcing cancellations and closures affecting cultural institutions all over the world, museums, theaters and concert venues remain shuttered.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the unpreparedness and bankruptcy of the capitalist ruling elites, while it has had an especially severe impact on those sections of the working class forced to work and to live under unsafe conditions. Meanwhile, among the vast number of those who have lost their livelihoods amidst the economic collapse are millions of artists and musicians.

The status of the highest-profile institutions, including the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic and Carnegie Hall in New York City and their counterparts around the world, has attracted the most attention, but freelance musicians, recitalists and ensembles, struggling even before the pandemic, have seen long-planned engagements cancelled and face growing uncertainty about when they will be able to resume their careers and schedules.

Many of the larger, more establishment institutions, making a virtue of necessity, have used the internet and the digital technology that has become widely accessible in recent years to provide both livestreamed recitals by individual artists and presentations of full operas and orchestral programs from their musical archives.

The Metropolitan Opera's initiative along these lines has been one of the most ambitious. It is in the midst of its seventh consecutive week of free streaming of video recordings of live performances, part of its "Live in HD" series that began in movie theaters and other venues around the world in December 2006. The works are streamed from the opera's website each evening and are available for 23 hours.

Millions of listeners, both opera lovers and those newer to the form, have been able to watch a wide variety of productions, ranging from the most well-known and popular, such as Puccini's *La bohème* and *Tosca*, Bizet's *Carmen* and Verdi's *La Traviata* and *Aida*, to the less well known, such as Puccini's *La Rondine* and Dvořák's *Rusalka*, and to works of the early and late 20th century, including Richard Strauss' *Elektra*, Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, John Adams' *Nixon in China* and Nico Muhly's *Marnie*.

This week's program includes several famous examples of *bel canto* opera, the remarkable trilogy composed by Gaetano Donizetti almost two centuries ago—*Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux*—based on the Tudor period in English history.

The Met is not the only company providing free online performances. The long list includes the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the Philharmonie de Paris, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Melbourne Recital Centre in Australia and many others. The New York Philharmonic is also streaming past concerts. The Berlin Philharmonic is providing free 30-day

subscriptions to its *digital Concert Hall*.

The major musical companies, without any income during the lockdown, are of course seeking to keep themselves in the public eye. Events have been cancelled through the summer, and there are increasing doubts about the fall. Even if the ruling class achieves some of its aims in the "back-to-work" campaign in the US, supported in one way or another by every wing of the political establishment, it is hard to envision thousands of listeners filling Carnegie Hall or the opera house in New York before the outbreak is brought to an end or a vaccine developed.

Under these conditions, institutions are appealing for public support. The Met Opera conducted a virtual "At-Home Gala" on April 25, with more than 40 artists performing from their homes all over the globe, each appealing for financial support to the opera company. For example, baritone Peter Mattei appeared from Stockholm, René Fleming from Virginia, tenor Piotr Beczala from rural Poland, tenor Joseph Calleja from Malta and bass Ildar Abdrazakov from Moscow. Among the other performers participating were sopranos Anna Netrebko from Vienna, Golda Schultz from Bavaria and Sonya Yoncheva from Geneva, as well as the young soprano Angel Blue, who sang Bess in this past season's production of *Porgy and Bess*.

The nearly four-hour event, using smartphones and laptops, with singers dressed casually and with little of the polish associated with performances at the famed opera house, was nonetheless and perhaps for that very reason an expression of the power of music and the sincerity, dedication and talent of the singers and accompanists. The international collaboration was in sharp contrast to the whipping up of nationalism by capitalist regimes all over the world.

A few of the segments of the Gala were pre-recorded, using digital technology to create the work of a larger group, each working from his or her own home. One of the most noteworthy moments was the moving tribute to Met Orchestra violist Vincent Lioni, who died of COVID-19 earlier this month. Mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato sang Handel's immortal "Ombra mai fu," from his opera *Xerxes*, accompanied by the orchestra's violists.

The cornucopia of online classical music, however, should not obscure the broad and serious impact of the current crisis on the wider musical world and the musicians who make it possible. First and most obviously, there can be no future for opera and symphonic and chamber music without live performance. This is threatened, along with the lives and livelihoods of the entire population, by the criminal negligence of the official response to the pandemic.

It is difficult to feel much sympathy for the Metropolitan Opera's top administration, with its annual budget of more than \$300 million, board of trustees made up of billionaires and multimillionaires and

recent record of demanding and securing contract concessions from musicians and other staff.

It must not be forgotten, moreover, that the Met Opera musicians and staff themselves, along with the Met's whole company and chorus and its biggest stars, have seen their working lives put on hold. Met general manager Peter Gelb quickly raised \$11 million from the wealthy trustees of the opera company, which illustrates the class gulf between the ruling elite and most of the musicians who create the performances.

There is also another side to the crisis facing the classical music world, and that involves the tens of thousands of professional musicians who work in lesser-known ensembles or in smaller cities around the US, not to mention everywhere else. These performers are in even more difficult conditions than the orchestra musicians.

A recent report in the *New York Times* showed in some detail what the crisis means for the young and well-regarded Tesla Quartet. The headline of the article summed it up: "A string quartet is crushed by the coronavirus."

The Tesla Quartet was founded in 2008 (and named in honor of the renowned electrical engineer and inventor Nikola Tesla). Its members are now in their mid-30s. They have won prizes, recorded two CDs and won high praise and very positive reviews.

Even before the lockdown, however, the quartet's musicians, Ross Snyder (violin), Michelle Lie (violin), Edwin Kaplan (viola) and Serafim Smigelskiy (cello), like the members of many similar groups, were living what the news report calls a "hand-to-mouth" existence. Now they have seen their calendar of engagements, previously full, cancelled through June. Unlike pianists or other soloists, they cannot stream performances. They cannot even practice together because of social distancing requirements.

Another report, from the *Morning Call*, in the older industrial city of Allentown, Pennsylvania (population 121,000), demonstrates what the pandemic means to musicians in small cities. Linda Kistler, a violinist with the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, has been laid off. She is trying to continue to work, while observing social distancing, with a few private pupils in her home.

Other Allentown-area musicians, including Allentown Symphony concertmaster Eliezer Gutman and Robin Kani, principal flutist with the Bethlehem Bach Festival Orchestra and other groups, are facing the same grim situation, meanwhile continuing with online college teaching or private pupils.

There are more than 40,000 professional musicians in the US, and that number does not include the self-employed, like the Tesla Quartet and many other groups. These musicians are receiving little or no support. A virtual benefit was recently organized by a website called OurConcerts.live, with proceeds going to the recently formed Artists Relief Tree, but this can only represent a small drop in the bucket compared to the needs.

World-famous German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, who has herself recovered from COVID-19, issued a strong appeal on German national television for compensation for musicians whose concerts have been cancelled. The violinist angrily criticized the authorities' lack of respect for culture at this critical time. Mutter and baritone Matthias Goerne initiated an open letter calling for support for rank and file musicians. Conductor Christian Thielemann said, "We hear a lot from politicians that the economy needs to be supported so that, if possible, no company goes bankrupt. But no one speaks about the existential threat artists are facing."

Cultural workers deserve the same full compensation for all lost

income during the pandemic and the lockdown as every other section of the working class. Their future, like that of the entire population, is bound up with the demands for universal testing, international collaboration to fight the pandemic and the full mobilization of society's resources in the interests of the working class, not on the preparation for war and the defense of the plutocracy and its privileges.

The solution to the crisis will not come through appeals for a few crumbs from the wealthy or the governments responsible for the current state of affairs, but from the independent political resolve and struggle of the working class. Musicians have shown, in the orchestra strikes in recent years in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and elsewhere, that they are part of this battle.

The pandemic is ushering in a period of enormous social and political struggle. Cultural life, like every other sphere of society, cannot and will not remain unaffected. "It is silly, absurd, stupid to the highest degree, to pretend that art will remain indifferent to the convulsions of our epoch," as Leon Trotsky once pointed out.

The streaming of music has the potential for greatly expanding the audience for live performance, but the needs and demands of this expanded audience are in absolute conflict with the elitist and corporate model that now dominates the performing arts.

The full achievement of this potential, which includes greatly expanded opportunities for the talented musicians and all artists, is bound up with the need for a transformation of economic and cultural life. Massive public support is needed. Musical performance and production must be placed under the control of those who create it, and not the wealthy patrons and boards of trustees. The fate of musicians and classical music, and that of all artists, is linked to the fight for socialism.

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