

Leading orchestras and musicians move to free online performances in response to the coronavirus pandemic

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Over the past two weeks, in response to the coronavirus outbreak, cultural events—including theater, opera and concerts—have been shut down in country after country.

Musicians and other artists around the world, many of whom have little or no secure income and subsist on poverty wages at the best of times, have been hard hit by the impact of the closure of cultural venues and the cancellation of concerts.

Nevertheless, many of the world's leading musicians have responded to the coronavirus pandemic by making their music freely available online or performing for online audiences, or both.

In South Korea, one of the worst sites of the current outbreak, but where the further spread of the coronavirus might now be slowed through widespread testing and relatively decent medical care, the Seoul Philharmonic Concert put on a live broadcast on YouTube of Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 (the "Eroica" or Heroic Symphony), as a tribute to medical staff, officials and volunteers who are helping to fight the pandemic.

In Singapore, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) has launched its #DabaoSCO series, which makes available concerts to the public on a weekly basis on Facebook and YouTube. In a press release, the SCO explained, "We understand that during this period, it is best to stay home, adopt good personal hygiene practices and be socially responsible. Therefore, Singapore Chinese Orchestra has recently rolled out the digital concert series, to bring our music to everyone."

One of the first and most innovative responses to the spread of the coronavirus to Europe came from the Russian-German pianist Igor Levit, an outspoken critic of the far-right in Germany. Last Wednesday, he began offering "Twitter house concerts" livestreamed on his Twitter account on a daily basis. Levit introduced his first

performance by explaining: "It's a sad time, it's a weird time, but acting is better than doing nothing." On his Twitter feed, he has been urging solidarity and stated: "Let's bring the house concert into the 21st century!"

So far, he has played, among other pieces, Beethoven's Waldstein and Les Adieux piano sonatas, Bach's Chaconne and Frederic Rzewski's piece "The People United Will Never Be Defeated," a magnificent musical reckoning with the tragedy of the 1973 military coup in Chile. Although the sound quality has inevitably been limited, Levit's performances have been extremely passionate and moving. Within a few hours, his concert videos were viewed by hundreds of thousands of people. Hundreds commented on his performances and he has gained thousands of new followers within a few days.

The Berlin Philharmonic, one of the leading orchestras in the world, has now temporarily made freely available its full archive of the Digital Concert Hall. The archive includes outstanding performances from the last several decades featuring musicians and conductors such as Daniil Trifonov, the recently deceased Mariss Jansons, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Maurizio Pollini, Claudio Abbado, Mstislav Rostropovich, Herbert von Karajan and many more. The digital archive also includes interviews and discussions with some of these artists. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra has also made its archive freely available.

The Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich has begun to livestream concerts without audiences, including one on March 16 with Igor Levit playing Franz Liszt's First Piano Concerto under the baton of Joana Mallwitz. Livestreamed concerts without audiences have also been scheduled by the famed Wigmore Hall in London, the Budapest Festival Orchestra on Facebook, Y92 and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York

City, the Philadelphia Orchestra and many more. (For a more comprehensive list of upcoming of livestreams of concerts click here)

In the US, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, which has cancelled all performances through March 31, has begun streaming encore presentations from its Live in HD series on its website.

In Italy, the European country worst hit so far by the coronavirus outbreak, the spread and use of music to both lift the spirits of medical and other workers—and as a means of expressing solidarity—has been particularly moving and widespread. Videos of people singing on their balconies have been shared widely on social media.

The quarantined opera tenor Maurizio Marchini recorded himself singing the aria “Nessun Dorma” from Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Turandot* on his balcony and later shared it on Facebook. Similarly, the first violist of Milan’s La Scala opera house, Danilo Rossi, played music from his balcony where he also set up a banner reading “Let’s not give up, we will make it.” The Teatro la Fenice in Venice is making available a number of livestreams of operas and concerts.

The move toward making classical music accessible to virtually the entire global population that can get access to the Internet has undoubted significance.

It represents a step toward the further democratization of the access to culture. Some of the most important cultural achievements of humanity, previously locked behind paywalls or limited to local audiences, are now available to virtually everyone in the world who has access to the Internet.

Through platforms such as YouTube, which includes an enormous archive of classical and other music as well as various films, the Internet has long been a central vehicle for both the spread of and access to culture. However, the move by musicians and orchestras throughout the world toward free online concerts marks a new stage in this development and will have effects well beyond the crisis surrounding the coronavirus pandemic.

Decades of social and cultural reaction and stagnation have deprived workers of access to high culture in two critical ways: First, the vast social inequality and the privatization of much of the arts world have created conditions in which access to leading opera houses and concert halls has become financially and physically beyond the reach of the majority of the population. Even the poorest seats at the Metropolitan Opera cost well over \$50. Meanwhile, musicians performing for some of the finest orchestras in the world struggle to make a living on

their salaries.

Second, the general assault on public education has been accompanied by extremely severe cuts to music and art education in general. Thus, the appreciation of the so-called high arts and classical music in particular, which requires for their enjoyment and understanding a certain degree of training and exposure, has been made more difficult for broad layers of the population. This has significantly contributed to an artificial divide between so-called “high” culture and “popular” culture and to the perception of classical music as something “elitist.”

Now, with leading musicians performing online, it becomes apparent not only that this culture *can* be made available to everyone, but also that there is genuine interest in it among great numbers of people.

Those who are now being introduced to these remarkable works and performances will not easily accept being cut off again from access to this sphere of culture and social life. Many will begin to recognize that free and full access to culture is a fundamental right of the international working class.

Moreover, the altruistic attitude that finds expression in the various actions taken by musicians throughout the world is part of a growing sense among workers, intellectuals and youth that a collective response must be found to this enormous danger facing society all around the globe. It is an initial, elemental indication of what will become an enormous upsurge in international and class solidarity.

It is worth pointing out that one of the most popular composers being performed now by orchestras and musicians around the world is Ludwig van Beethoven, whose 250th anniversary is being celebrated this year. The music of Beethoven, profoundly shaped by the Enlightenment and the principal slogans of the French Revolution—liberty, equality and fraternity—strongly speaks to the tense, complex situation facing the global working class today. There is a growing sense of the inevitability of big struggles and a determination to take them up, renewed heroism and a strong belief in the democratic rights and equality of all people, a belief most famously given life in the Ode to Joy that concludes Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.



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