

Classical musicians face unprecedented challenges amid COVID-19 pandemic

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As the global coronavirus pandemic inches closer to the six-month mark, its devastating impact on the performing arts is becoming more and more evident. Concerts, theater and all large-scale performances face enormous obstacles before they will be able to resume programming.

In the classical music field, musicians and associated staff face not only long-term unemployment but also the prospect that their jobs and careers may never return. One survey of tens of thousands of musicians in Britain reported that at least one-fifth said they expect their careers will end because of the pandemic. Nearly half of these professional players are not covered by the inadequate government assistance program for those facing job losses because of COVID-19.

The challenge facing all musical ensembles and concert venues, large and small alike, was highlighted by the announcement this week that the New York Philharmonic Orchestra was canceling its programming, not just through the summer, but for the Fall 2020 season as well. The Philharmonic announcement came just days after a similar statement from the Metropolitan Opera. Deborah Borda, chief executive of the Philharmonic, said it was possible that the orchestra would have to cancel the rest of the 2020-2021 season as well.

The *Guardian* reports that such major British music venues as the Royal Albert Hall and the South Bank in London have warned of “imminent catastrophe.” The world-famous Royal Opera House, with “a hundred people on stage, a hundred in the pit and 2,700 in the audience,” can only last months, given that its public subsidy is merely 20 percent of expenses and it needed to sell 95 percent of its tickets, even before the pandemic, to break even. The director of London’s renowned Wigmore Hall is quoted as warning that

“[o]rchestras could be going to the wall in the next 12 weeks.”

Simon Rattle, currently the conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra and previously the principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, said, about his own musicians, “I’m desperately worried for my orchestra in London. I’m so scared for the financial hardship that they will be going through.”

Ludwig Van, a music website in Canada, reported recently on a survey of classical music listeners that indicated the seriousness of the challenges facing live musical performance. More than 60 percent of concertgoers said they would wait for as much as an additional six months after government restrictions are lifted against large-audience performances, before they returned to the concert hall. Most would wait until an effective treatment for the coronavirus is discovered, or a vaccine is developed, proven effective and publicly distributed. The well-founded reluctance of this audience, including a high proportion of older people at higher risk for COVID-19, only highlights the criminal negligence of governments everywhere in reopening economies and forcing workers back to their jobs without effective safety precautions.

Some sources hold out hope for outdoor performances during the summer months, where social distancing is possible and the open air makes disease transmission less likely. There have been suggestions of “socially distanced” orchestral concerts, in which seats are spaced six feet apart. Numerous complications and difficulties have been pointed out, however, including crowding in lobbies, the use of lavatories, lining up to purchase tickets and enter the hall and the possible need to screen concertgoers for signs of illness. In addition, concerts with audiences of 20-30 percent capacity are sure to lose money.

Just as difficult is the question of ensuring the safety of the performers themselves. The local public radio station serving the small city of Asheville, North Carolina recently interviewed the conductor of the Asheville Symphony, Darko Butorac. “String sections, for example, if we need to, we can wear masks,” he said. “That provides a layer of protection and we distance fairly easily from each other. But woodwinds and brass sections generate more aerosol than breathing. It’s like sneezing continuously. And if that’s an environment where we don’t feel safe, we cannot have a large orchestra performing.”

These considerations apply equally to vocalists, both soloists and chorus. Choral concerts, from local amateur groups to the more famous professional choruses, will not be performing while the pandemic continues. All of these factors make large-scale live performances unlikely before the development of an effective vaccine. It is increasingly being suggested that it will be 2022 before major concert seasons resume.

The Asheville conductor suggests that future programs can lean toward smaller-scale works, from the Baroque as well as from the 20th century. The basic repertoire from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century would, however, be extremely difficult if not possible to perform live. Works of Brahms, Dvorak and Tchaikovsky, not to mention Mahler, Bruckner and Strauss, will be the last to reappear.

As in every other sphere of life, the coronavirus pandemic has triggered and exposed an underlying crisis in the classical music world. The business model on which music performance is based relies increasingly on high ticket prices and especially on the patronage of a section of the super-rich, the same class whose control of the economy led to the criminal unpreparedness for COVID-19 and has since led to economic collapse.

Moreover, the current state of cultural life as a whole is untenable. The sharp divide between “high” and “low” culture and the widespread degradation of the popular arts are the inevitable product of unprecedented social inequality. The pandemic has accelerated and brought to the fore processes long at work.

While classical music companies in Germany and elsewhere in Europe receive far greater subsidies than in Britain, in the US the situation is even worse. Orchestras and opera companies plaster the names of

wealthy patrons on programs, seats and even the titles of the orchestral positions themselves. One could not ask for a more vivid illustration of the bankruptcy and irrationality of 21st century capitalism, where the oligarchs indulge their vanity while creating the conditions that lead to the disappearance of music and other live performance.

Musicians face the same problems as the working class as a whole. The solution lies not in various schemes to tweak the failed status quo, but a united struggle to defend culture along with jobs, education, health and every other basic right and achievement of civilization. The crisis of cultural organizations is bound up with the challenges of the many millions who have lost their jobs or are being forced to return under unsafe conditions.

The revival of musical life requires, first of all, a massively funded and internationally coordinated campaign to eradicate COVID-19 and to prepare for similar pandemic threats in the future.

Musicians, like all workers, must fight for full compensation for lost earnings for the duration of the pandemic. This must be accompanied by the struggle for full public funding for arts and arts education, massively expanding the audience for music and other performing arts, along with education and career opportunities for all. This is possible, however, only as part of the socialist reorganization of economic life, placing the resources of society under the control of the vast working class majority.



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