

Metropolitan Opera announces cancellation of entire 2020–2021 season

Fred Mazelis**26 September 2020**

The New York Metropolitan Opera's announcement that it is cancelling its entire 2020–2021 season is the latest and most dramatic indication of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on live opera and concert performance.

The Met, with an annual budget of more than \$300 million, is the largest performing arts organization of any kind in the United States. If it has seen the need for this drastic measure, it is very likely that other major venues and organizations will soon announce similar cutbacks or cancellations.

The Met's move means that the opera house, located at New York's Lincoln Center, will remain dark for at least another 12 months. The current house, with its 3,800 seats and widely praised acoustics, is only the second home of the opera company, which was founded in 1883.

With this historically unprecedented shutdown, the management of the Met is acknowledging that the vast majority of its audience will not return under present conditions. Even though coronavirus infection rates have remained relatively low in New York over the summer, they are still totaling about 500 new cases daily. In addition, colder weather is coming, and a renewed wave of illness and death is forecast. It is being fueled by the policy of "herd immunity" that the ruling elite and its political representatives have been pushing—even if not calling it by that name—as demonstrated above all by the drive to force teachers and students to resume in-school classes.

The mortal danger of the back-to-school drive is indirectly highlighted by the very different approach of the Met. The older audience at the Met is quite aware of the dangers, but the de Blasio city administration continues to demand that students return to their classes, exposing themselves, their teachers and their older relatives to the danger that Met audiences wisely resist.

The pandemic's impact on the classical music world has been relentless. Less than a month ago, Columbia Artists Management, the international music talent agency which has managed the careers of such eminent past figures as Leontyne Price, Paul Robeson, Jussi Bjorling, Vladimir Horowitz, Van Cliburn and many others, as well as current performers like conductor Valery Gergiev and pianist Maurizio Pollini, announced that it was shutting down.

Carnegie Hall's website still includes a reference to the

coming season on its website, but it is considering its next steps, according to a report in the *New York Times*. The New York Philharmonic, also at Lincoln Center, continues to list an abbreviated season, beginning next January with a concert featuring Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony, but the Philharmonic has said that it expects to announce its future plans sometime in the next two weeks.

In Europe, there have been some live performances, with "socially distanced" and therefore smaller audiences at such London locations as Wigmore and Cadogan Halls, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. The Berlin Festspiele included a series of eight extraordinary live performances of the full cycle of 32 Beethoven piano sonatas by pianist Igor Levit, which were also streamed online. Two of the most famous opera houses in the world, Milan's La Scala and the Vienna State Opera, have also opened for socially distanced audiences.

The situation in Europe, however, is not expected to last, even with various precautions against the virus. New COVID-19 cases have been multiplying in Britain, Spain, Germany and elsewhere.

Meanwhile major opera companies and orchestras in the US and internationally are attempting to retain an audience online. The Met is about to begin week 29 of its consecutive nightly presentations of past recorded performances, most of them in HD format. The coming week will be devoted to Mozart operas, to be followed a week later by seven nights of Wagner.

In addition, the Met has begun pay-per-view online recitals. These have begun with sopranos Lise Davidsen and Renee Fleming and mezzo-soprano Joyce di Donato. Upcoming recitals will feature such stars as Jonas Kaufmann, Anna Netrebko, Joseph Calleja, Angel Blue and others. Carnegie Hall, meanwhile, is presenting a free "Digital Online Opening Night Gala" on October 7 with performers from popular, jazz and classical music, including Rhiannon Giddens, Gustavo Dudamel, Michael Feinstein, Wynton Marsalis and many others.

The online options are a boon for listeners, but they are no substitute for live performance. Just as important, the musicians, singers and staff have already gone six months without regular income. The Met has put 1,000 staff on unpaid

furlough since March. The soloists, including those with a global reputation who are generally well-compensated, only get paid for performances and have also been without income, although some have continued to teach or have appeared online.

Broadway theaters and other large venues also remain closed and have no immediate plans to reopen. Museums, where social distancing is possible, have been the only exception to the ongoing shutdown involving culture and the performing arts. In New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art and other, smaller institutions have all opened their doors in the past month, requiring everyone to wear masks, and with timed admission to ensure social distancing inside.

It must be stressed that, even where museums are reopening, among artists, as among musicians and actors, there has been no revival. The Met Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic are the most well-known organizations, but in smaller cities everywhere the same shutdowns and lost income are the rule.

A recent report from Americans for the Arts, a non-profit advocacy group, details some of the devastation. Sixty-three percent of artists reported being fully unemployed. Not high-income to begin with, this layer of the working population reported an average of \$22,000 in lost income during the pandemic thus far. Seventy-eight percent had no post-pandemic recovery plan. The top three needs of these unemployed are reported as unemployment insurance, food and housing assistance, and forgivable business loans.

Of some 24,000 responses to a survey, 96 percent of arts organizations had cancelled performances. Ninety percent had been forced to announce closings, only 15 percent had since reopened, and 48 percent had no target date for reopening. An estimate of the jobs no longer supported because of these cuts was 725,000.

And now management at the Met is preparing to present to the laid-off musicians and staff a deal that amounts to huge concessions on pay and benefits, in exchange for a still vague suggestion that it may begin paying some salary in the coming year. No details have been reported, but some other companies appear to have led the way with concessions agreements under the present crisis conditions. Unquestionably, managements in various fields look upon the pandemic as a godsend, an opportunity to tear up existing conditions and/or eliminate staff.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra and the San Francisco Opera have signed three-year giveback deals with their musicians: a 37 percent pay cut in the first year in Boston, and 50 percent in San Francisco. Pay will increase when audiences return, but that apparently is conditional.

Met general manager Peter Gelb is combining his attack on the Met musicians and staff with an appeal to supporters of identity politics. The Met announced its 2021-22 season a year in advance, highlighting, as part of a total of six new productions and including three contemporary operas, its

opening night presentation of "Fire Shut Up in My Bones," a new opera by Terrence Blanchard, based on the memoir by *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow. The opera, which was staged last year by the Opera Theatre of St. Louis, will be the first by a black composer at the Met.

The new opera may be well worth seeing, but not for the reasons put forward by the Met and its multimillionaire board of trustees. Gelb's statement, with its typical corporate platitudes, declared, "We're trying to send a signal that the Met wants to meet the times in which we live head on. Given all the calls for greater social justice and diversity, we think it's appropriate, after being off for a year, to come back in a way that demonstrates the Met's social responsibility."

The unions representing Met musicians and choristers have responded to the concessions demands with pro forma objections. "Simply stating that labor costs must be cut is not a solution or plan for the future, especially in light of the fact that no labor costs have been paid by the Met over the last six months," according to a statement issued by the committee representing the musicians, as reported on the ClassicFM website.

"Great artistic institutions cannot cut their way to success," the orchestra continued. "This leadership approach only further jeopardizes the Met's credibility and artistic integrity with our audiences. With the Met at risk of artistic failure, we will insist on a contract that preserves the world-class status of the Met Orchestra so that when we are able to reopen, our audiences will be able to experience performances at the level that they expect and deserve."

The unions have no intention of fighting the concessions, however. That would require a political struggle, exposing the incompetence and callous indifference of the entire political establishment, including the Democrats. Instead, the union is appealing for the Met to find a way to "adapt" to the pandemic while engaging the orchestra in some way.

The responsibility for the devastation of cultural institutions and individual artists' lives, and the resulting, objective damage being done to popular awareness and consciousness, lies entirely with the ruling class, whose blindness, greed for profit and indifference have created the present disastrous conditions. The conflict between the artist and "the various social forms which are hostile to him" (in the words of the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," 1938) is assuming an unconcealed and universal character. The more thoughtful artists need to begin drawing conclusions about the capitalist system and the struggle against it.



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