

London's Wigmore Hall leads the way in live-streaming music during the pandemic

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Despite the restrictions forced on live performance by the COVID-19 pandemic, there are some musical institutions that have successfully brought soloists and chamber music ensembles to worldwide audiences online.

London's Wigmore Hall stands out in this category. It is famous for its acoustics and, with 552 seats, ideal for chamber music. While larger venues such as New York's Carnegie Hall (capacity 2,800) and the Metropolitan Opera (3,800) have been forced to close their doors until at least the forthcoming fall 2021 season, Wigmore Hall has presented live performances on an almost daily basis since last June, on many occasions before smaller socially-distanced audiences, and sometimes with no live audience at all.

A report in the *Financial Times* last week highlighted the achievements of Wigmore Hall during the past year. Its ambitious programming has attracted a huge international audience, proving that there is a demand for classical music, and the potential for a vast increase in its audience, including among the young generation. The Wigmore's live streams, which began with a recital by pianist Steven Hough last June that has reached an audience of 800,000, are archived in its Video Library and can be viewed and listened to for 30 days after the performance.

Recitalists have included not only world famous artists like Hough and other pianists, including Igor Levit, Angela Hewitt and Paul Lewis, as well as cellist Steven Isserlis and tenor Ian Bostridge, but also younger and less well known artists, such as soprano Kitty Whately, cellist Leonard Elschenbroich, soprano Christine Rice and many others.

The Carducci, Elias, Schumann and Doric string quartets were among those that performed last year, in some cases highlighting Beethoven quartets to mark the

250th anniversary of his birth. The opportunity for close-up views, as with the Elias Quartet's performances of Beethoven's sublime late 13th and 14th quartets in a recital last fall, at least partly compensated for not being able to be physically present at the concert.

The regular recitals have also included music of the 20th century, including work by Benjamin Britten, Dmitri Shostakovich and others. They have also on occasion featured far less frequently performed music, such as that of the mid-20th century American composer Morton Feldman, in a recital that reached seven to eight times the number it would have held in the hall, according to the *Financial Times* report.

While the Wigmore has been forced to interrupt its live programming during the latest lockdown, as COVID-19 rages in London and throughout Britain, it has tentative plans to resume by the spring, with additional recitals by Levit once again, soprano Diana Damrau, pianist Mitsuko Uchida and others.

Wigmore Hall is by no means the only venue or organization that has continued to present programming during the pandemic. Indeed, the majority have done so, although for orchestras and opera companies this has taken the form of films of past performances. The Metropolitan Opera continues its online presentations of performances recorded in recent years, as well as from the more distant past. The company began video broadcasts in 1977.

While orchestras in Detroit, San Francisco and elsewhere have made recordings of past performances available online, many chamber music venues in the US have presented live streamed music. These include the venerable Peoples' Symphony Concerts in New York City, which is presenting almost a full lineup of its typical annual number of 18 concerts. Music

Mondays, another small but admirable effort in New York, is continuing with its monthly series of free concerts, online instead of at its usual Manhattan venue. In addition, some summer music festivals, such as Music Mountain, in northwest Connecticut, have put some programs online.

The Wigmore series, however, is by far the most large-scale and impressive of these efforts, as reflected in the international audience it has reached.

The success of this series, as well as other efforts, also highlights the financial pressures facing nonprofit venues that work to present classical music and expand its audience. The Wigmore has raised donations from listeners, and is on track to raise 1 million pounds [\$US1.4 million] by the time of the one-year anniversary of its first recital from last June. This compares to pre-pandemic annual revenue of 7 million pounds, 4.5 million in ticket sales and 2.5 million in grants and donations. Online performances are of course less costly to present, but are still estimated to cost 3,000 pounds per recital, plus artists' fees.

European musical presenters receive far more in public subsidies than their counterparts in the US, who in many cases receive virtually nothing. The top one-tenth of one percent, multimillionaires and billionaires, generally reserve their largess for the biggest companies like the opera, and there too, their "generosity" has strict limits, as shown by the Met Opera's demands for 30 percent pay cuts from its staff, and the lockout of its stagehands that began last month.

The success of Wigmore Hall shows all the more urgently the need for full public support for classical music and all of the arts, directing the resources of society away from profit and towards meeting the material, cultural and spiritual needs of all.



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