



December 2021

Top 30 Professionals

The Pandemic: Meeting the Moment of the year

musical
america
SPECIAL REPORTS



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Introduction



The MA Top 30 is the most personal of our Special Reports, because it singles out the individuals in the performing arts who are deemed, by their colleagues, the most worthy of a tip of the hat. This year, for *The Pandemic: Meeting the Moment*, we sought nominations for the leaders who have helped us navigate through and out of COVID-19 (the latter

journey admittedly ongoing). We received more submissions than ever, which made the final selections more difficult, but, more importantly, showcased the incredible creativity, dedication, and resilience of our field. Reading through these nominations has been downright inspiring.

There's the Orchestra League lobbyist who reached across genres and disciplines to make Congress recognize that people who work in arts are, in fact, "workers." And that, just like other workers, they are entitled to unemployment. There are the administrators and managers who, determined to keep their staffs employed and their patrons connected, invested in the technology and the tools to continue their organization's mission—whether on screen, in parking garages, or the local drive in.

A regional orchestra's concertmaster, frustrated by his March 20 concert's sudden cancellation, recorded a few solo Bach excerpts and put them on social media. That became the orchestra-wide "Bedtime with Bach" program, providing healing and solace for public and patrons, not to mention the musicians, throughout the lockdown.

Artists became skilled interviewers and videographers; CEOs picked up their phones and called patrons and subscribers just to check in, while others jumped into vast series of Zoom seminars. Music lessons continued online with an array of synchronization software hastened into development. Virtually everyone honored George Floyd and the movement his death has (re)ignited. Composers and producers responded with new work, musicians with online performances, HR officers with new diversity positions. Much remains to be done, but we are at least aware of the paths to be taken.

COVID-19 isn't done with us yet, of course, nor is racial injustice. Nonetheless, as the wit, grit, and determination of our Top 30 clearly indicate, ours is field of survivors. Kudos to all.

Regards,

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Top 30 Professionals

The Pandemic: Meeting the Moment of the year

As the performing arts continue their start-and-stop recovery, we asked the performing arts community to nominate the heroes who have brought us through this difficult time—who have kept the pulse of the arts beating. Here they are: the MA Top 30 Professionals of the Year, in a “year” like no other.



LORNA AIZLEWOOD

Chief Operating Officer and General Counsel

[HarrisonParrott](#)    

When Lorna Aizlewood assumed her top-level post with the venerable London-based artist management firm HarrisonParrott in 2018, she brought impressive experience as a corporate lawyer and executive with IMG Artists and EMI Classics. But nothing prepared her for what was to come two years later.

“Being trained as a lawyer, I’m always looking after risk management, and in the arts business, you always take into account the possible loss of income if something happens to a key artist,” Aizlewood said. “What you don’t consider is that the world will literally shut down. The zombie apocalypse kind of scenario was not one that anyone took seriously, and yet with the pandemic, it happened.”

HP has a large, starry lineup of artists and arts organizations under its management, but with no live, in-person performances, income vanished. “From a strategic point of view, the pandemic has really shown that a business cannot be reliant upon just one stream of income,” she said. “That really puts you in jeopardy.”

To protect HP in the shutdown, Aizlewood sought to diversify and broaden its business model, creating a livestreaming series called [Virtual Circle](#) on the eMusic Live platform. It launched

in December 2020 with a concert by the Oslo Philharmonic to celebrate the 155th anniversary of the birth of Sibelius. In its first year, the online service streamed 17 ticketed programs, primarily by the agency’s clients.

One of the Virtual Circle performances—Nico Muhly’s new violin concerto *Shrink* by the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra and conductor/soloist Pekka Kuusisto—made classical music cyberspace history as the first NFT (non-fungible tokens) transaction used alongside a ticket bundle.

“NFT transactions are big in the art world, and we think it could be a promising way for classical music organizations to engage with different audiences and raise funds,” Aizlewood said.

Aizlewood also led HP into a music publishing venture called [Birdsong](#), which was announced in September 2021 with six composers, including Jimmy López Bellido, Charlotte Bray, and Freya Waley-Cohen. “There was a real gap in the classical music market for what I call bespoke publishing, whereby HP can bring a holistic approach to guiding a composer’s career,” she said. “I think it has a massive future.” —John Fleming

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WAYNE S. BROWN

President and CEO

[Michigan Opera Theatre](#)

For Michigan Opera Theatre, the pandemic came during a long search for a successor to Founder and General Director David DiChiera, who died in 2018. “The lockdown triggered an opportunity for us to ask: If we had a blank slate and could reimagine the company, what might that look like?” said Detroit native Wayne S. Brown, MOT president and CEO.

The answer came in the form of Yuval Sharon, known for the innovative site-specific works done by the experimental opera company he founded in Los Angeles, [The Industry](#). Sharon was appointed MOT artistic director in September 2020 and promptly made a splash with [Twilight: Gods](#), his drive-through adaptation of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* in the Detroit Opera House parking garage. It was followed by more productions in alternative venues that allowed live, in-person performances that complied with pandemic public health protocol.

“The pandemic, for all its darkness, created a moment of light—and Yuval Sharon was our moment of light,” said Brown, a longtime Sharon admirer. Before becoming head of the opera company in 2014, he directed the music and opera program of the National Endowment for the Arts, one of many places where he was exposed to Sharon’s innovative work.

If the risk-taking director has turned a traditional opera company on its ear, it was the pandemic that moved Brown to take an even greater risk by hiring him. MOT has not performed in the opera house since March of 2020. Its 2021 offerings included an outdoor concert version of Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana*, featuring soprano Christine Goerke. *Blue*, an opera by Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson about a police murder of a young Black man, was performed in the Aretha Franklin Amphitheater, a covered, open-sided venue by the Detroit River.

Sharon staged a performance-art piece called *Bliss* in the historic Michigan Building Theater parking garage. Singers and orchestra repeated the finale of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* in half-hour segments over 12 hours on a Saturday. With “pay what you can” admission, more than 2,700 people dropped by at one point or another to take in the scene in which Count Almaviva asks the Countess for forgiveness.

In 2022, the Sharon-Brown team will originate two productions in partnership with other companies. Puccini’s *La Bohème*, with its acts in reverse order, is a co-production with Boston Lyric Opera and the Spoleto Festival; Anthony Davis’s *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* is a co-production with Opera Omaha, the Metropolitan Opera, and Seattle Opera. —John Fleming



CAMILLE DELANEY-MCNEIL

Director

[Beckmen YOLA Center at Los Angeles Philharmonic](#)

PHOTO: Los Angeles Philharmonic

Youth programming at the Los Angeles Philharmonic received a strong injection of new energy recently, in the form of Camille Delaney-McNeil. Last May, the one-time musician and committed youth music advocate was [appointed director](#) of the Judith and

Thomas L. Beckmen YOLA Center, the fifth, newest, and now primary facility housing the acclaimed Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, the 14-year-old training ensemble created by LA Phil Music Director Gustavo Dudamel. (The other four YOLA branches

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are in the Rampart District, Westlake/MacArthur Park, and South and East Los Angeles.)

Delaney-McNeil, who holds a Master’s degree in flute performance from the Peabody Institute, took charge of the Center in June, shortly before it was unveiled to the public. She presides over the [Frank Gehry-designed, 25,000-square-foot education and performance space](#), and oversees the El Sistema-modelled music and academic training program that supports some 1,300 students in Inglewood, CA, aged 5 to 18.

Before her appointment in L.A., Delaney-McNeil directed the famed [OrchKids program](#) at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, which regularly serves some 2,000 students in the city. While

there, she launched the OrchKids Green Festival, a celebration of young musicians in West Baltimore.

An inaugural graduate of Sphinx LEAD, a two-year leadership development program, Delaney-McNeil also sits on the board of El Sistema USA. She is a frequent speaker at arts education conferences and on public television and radio.

Said LA Phil President and CEO Chad Smith, “Camille’s commitment to connecting young minds with classical music, her dedication to social change and her experience in creating spaces in which communities can thrive make her the ideal leader for our first dedicated space for YOLA.” —Zachary Lewis



LARA DOWNES

Pianist

[Host and Resident Artist, USC Radio Group](#)

During the pandemic, Lara Downes put her itinerant life as a concert pianist on pause and largely stayed home in California. That shutdown spawned a [burst of new projects](#) by her.

They ranged from her record label Rising Sun Music, on which

Downes releases monthly digital EPs dedicated to music by Black American composers; to an interview series with Black artists for NPR Music called *Amplify with Lara Downes*; to a pair of albums, *Some of These Days* and *New Day Begun*. And if all that wasn’t enough, Downes in March began to host *Evening Music with Lara Downes* on the San Francisco classical station KDFC, for which she is also the station’s first-ever resident artist.

“I think the pandemic came at a time when so much of my work had come together and I was ready to do something with it,” said Downes, who lives in Sacramento. “Honestly, it was kind of a coincidence of timing. I had all of these ideas and all of this material and I did with them what I could when I was locked in my house.”

Downes, who is of mixed race, with a Jamaican father and Jewish mother, is a champion of relatively unknown Black composers. Rising Sun releases have in-

Congrats to **Lara Downes**
for a spectacular year!

Including her **new**
adventure on the radio as
Evening Host on KDFC
in San Francisco
&
Resident Artist at KDFC
and **KUSC** in Los Angeles.



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cluded works by Henry T. Burleigh, Nathaniel Dett, Justin Holland, Nora Douglas Holt, and Margaret Bonds. “It’s pretty shocking how little of this historic American music was well recorded,” said the pianist, who has edited new editions of works by Burleigh and Dett for publisher Theodore Presser. “This is music that should be played at piano recitals all over the place.”

In some ways, Downes’s quest to diversify American classical music began with Florence Price, who became the first Black

female composer to have a work performed by an American ensemble when the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered her *Symphony in E minor*, in 1934. “The piece that really blew my mind was her *Fantasia Negre 1*, which I started playing in 2009,” said Downes. “There was a collective gasp in the audience whenever I would play it.”

Next on the Downes agenda: A piano concerto commissioning initiative for Black composers, including Jon Batiste, Jessie Coleman, Adolphus Hailstork, Kathryn Bostic, Carlos Simon, and more. —John Fleming



LAWRENCE EDELSON

Artistic and General Director

[American Lyric Theater](#)

The pandemic and the racial reckoning spawned by the police murders of George Floyd and others came together for American Lyric Theater in an unexpected way. “We’ve always considered diversity a core value, and I’m proud that we were doing work around the issue before Black Lives Matter,” said Artistic and General Director Lawrence Edelson, who founded the company in 2005 to cultivate new work and its creators. “But we hadn’t been doing enough.”

Prior to the pandemic, New York City-based ALT was planning to launch an initiative to reinforce racial equity in its programs, but then the shutdown hit. The ultimate result was a dramatic enhancement in the diversity of its flagship [Composer Librettist Development Program](#) (CLDP), the only fulltime training program for opera writers in the U.S. Prominent alumni include librettist Royce Vavrek, composer Christopher Cerrone, and librettist Deborah Brevoort.

With in-person training still not possible in February, March, and April of this year, ALT offered the [Opera Writers Symposium](#), a free, eight-week online course led by Edelson, Associate

Artistic Director Kelly Kuo, Composer/Librettist Mark Adamo, Dramaturg Cori Ellison, and other mentors. Along with bringing together emerging artists to learn operatic skills, the symposium was intended to raise the profile of ALT and draw writers from underrepresented communities who might apply for the CLDP.

“The success of the symposium shocked us,” said Edelson, who is also artistic and general director of Opera Saratoga in upstate New York. “We had expected that we might get about 200 people to participate, but in the end, we had more than 700. It doubled the number of CLDP applicants who were Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Of the six we accepted into the program—three composers and three librettists—five are people of color, and three are women.” Each participant receives \$20,000 of annual support for two years. “That we attained such a diverse pool,” he continued, “was born out of the circumstances of having to change our strategy because of the pandemic. In terms of equity and access, online opened up an enormous amount of opportunity.” —John Fleming

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PHOTO: Laura Manariti

SOPHIE GALAISE

Managing Director

[Melbourne Symphony Orchestra](#)



In 2016, Sophie Galaise made history when she was appointed as the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra’s (MSO) first female managing director. When the pandemic hit and Melbourne endured some of the longest lockdowns in the world, Galaise managed to maintain the orchestra’s steady course, set from the time of her arrival.

“It quickly became obvious that one had to find new ways to work together to remain relevant,” Galaise said. Her first order of business was fundraising, launched with a “Keep the Music Going”

campaign. After demonstrating “significant efforts to survive” and upping communication and engagement with stakeholders, the MSO received \$5 million, among the government’s first sustainability grants for the arts. Meanwhile, the orchestra had launched its own streaming platform, [MSO.LIVE](#), whose pay-per-view and subscription income netted a small surplus with 80 programs streaming to some 2.8 million viewers in 56 countries. It’s now on track to hit a similar mark in 2021, with over 60 performances to date.

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Boulev'Art Inc.
Agence d'artistes • Artists' Management

Boulev'Art Artists Management would like to congratulate all the wonderful honourees who were selected as one of Musical America's 30 Professionals of the Year: The Movers & Shakers of the Performing Arts, especially our colleague and friend **Sophie Galaise** of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Thank you all for your invaluable contribution to the cultural community!

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MSO.LIVE also enabled the orchestra to continue its educational programming, even to remote areas. “At a time where the world went dark, we kept the music going,” said Galaise, once named one of Australia’s 100 Women of Influence. They also managed to make plans for an otherwise unpredictable future, an-

nouncing the appointments of Jaime Martin as chief conductor and Deborah Cheetham as MSO’s inaugural First Nations Creative Chair. Galaise said the two have “significantly reinforced our artistic vision” and stand as further evidence that the MSO is doing far more than merely surviving the pandemic. “I am hopeful and a bit optimistic that the pandemic will have changed us for the better,” she said. —Zachary Lewis



XIANG GAO

Distinguished Professor of Music, [University of Delaware](#) 

Artistic Director, [Master Players](#) 

Composer, *Shanghai Sonatas*

The rise in racially motivated violence during the COVID-19 pandemic moved University of Delaware Professor Xiang Gao to complete a work about another global tragedy: the Holocaust. With extra time on his hands, the violinist-composer began penning a musical called *Shanghai Sonatas*, which shines a light on the under-appreciated legacy of Jewish classical musicians in China. The show, completed with help from a diverse team of writers, directors, and historians, tells the story of a Chinese-American violinist whose musical roots trace back to the 1930s, when musicians fleeing Nazi Germany settled in Shanghai and began teaching, thereby laying the foundation for Western classical music in China.

So well received were early performances, *Shanghai Sonatas* is to be filmed as a documentary and its score adapted for symphony orchestra. “I am passionate about this project that focuses on equity and inclusion,” Gao said, noting that the show illustrates “how immigrants struggle to create a balance between two cul-

tures, and how they are empowered by the arts to find a sense of belonging in the community.”

That’s not all that occupied Gao during the pandemic. As founding director of the university’s Master Players concert series, the violinist also worked to keep the presenting organization afloat and produce virtual content to sustain and develop its audience. When the university made a “substantial” cut to his operating budget and staff, Gao did his own fund raising and grant writing. Meanwhile, he and his remaining staff leveraged their technical and musical know-how to address the issue of climate change. *Burnt Ice and Kaitiaki* (Maori for “Guardians”), among other videos, feature him performing his own music against footage from U.S. National Parks and Iceland. Gao said the productions not only sustained the Master Players during the shutdown but helped the concert series broaden its audience. “I believe in innovation that attracts young audiences during this tough time in our industry,” Gao said. —Zachary Lewis

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PHOTO: Lauren Radack

MARTHA GILMER

Chief Executive Officer

[San Diego Symphony Orchestra](#)



When Martha Gilmer reflects on how the San Diego Symphony Orchestra met the challenges of COVID, she points to two sources of inspiration: Music Director Rafael Payare and construction of the [Rady Shell](#), the orchestra’s open-air venue on the shore of San Diego Bay. “There were two constants,” said Gilmer, who became chief executive in 2014. “Rafael was here, and the Shell was emerging into a completed venue.”

Payare was off to an exciting start in his first season as music director in 2019–20, and when pandemic lockdowns threatened international travel, Gilmer recommended that he be in San Diego all the time. After all, he and the musicians had only just begun developing their partnership. The Venezuelan conductor, his American wife, cellist Alisa Weilerstein, and their daughter were residents of Berlin.

“We had an incredible feeling of momentum in the orchestra with Rafael, and if that had stopped for 18 months, it would

have been a lost opportunity,” Gilmer said. “He and his family arrived on March 13, 2020, and they have basically stayed here since then. That decision for him to come to San Diego changed everything in terms of what we could accomplish artistically, in spite of the pandemic.”

Payare was able to work closely with the orchestra (whose 82 musicians were compensated at a reduced level and kept their health insurance) as it performed under public health restrictions. Then, as construction on the Rady Shell came to completion, the orchestra became one of the first to perform together live and onstage, in August. Payare presided over a program of Mozart, Stravinsky, Gershwin, and Mason Bates in the gala opening for a sold-out audience of 3,500. Weilerstein was the soloist in the Saint-Saëns Cello Concerto No. 1.

Through the fall, the orchestra has played a mix of master-works and pops concerts in the Shell, while its regular venue, the 91-year-old Copley Symphony Hall, goes through a structural upgrade. SDSO returns to indoor performances in January, at various local venues, and plans a return to the Shell in May.

The \$85 million Shell has received rave reviews for its dazzling design and marvelous setting by the bay. “I’ve always said the most dramatic moments in music come in the soft intensity of pianissimo, and we can hear that in this venue,” said Gilmer of the state-of-the-art sound system. “The dynamics are not compressed just because you’re outdoors.” —John Fleming



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SASHA GUTIÉRREZ

Soprano, Impresaria

When the pandemic closed everything down, Sasha Gutiérrez opened her art form to the world. Unfulfilled by merely practicing in her Brooklyn apartment, the Colombian soprano and graduate student at the Manhattan School of Music stepped outside her Brooklyn brownstone and, together with her fiancé, a drummer, and their bass-playing roommate, performed an al fresco concert of jazz and opera excerpts for the neighborhood. “It is essential,” Gutiérrez said in an interview, “to have someone receive the music we perform in order for it to fulfill its purpose.”

What began as a whim turned into a 13-concert series over the summer of 2020. Brooklyn families and visitors from other boroughs started showing up, picnics and other accoutrements in tow. For many in the crowd, Gutiérrez realized, her performances were their first exposure to opera.

“What we do is rarer than we imagine,” said the singer. “It belongs to a certain niche. . . I believe that it should be shared with a broader and more diverse audience.”

Finding that audience became her pandemic project. Using the work she’d been studying before the shutdown, Gutiérrez set about mounting an adaptation of Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*. Tapping her network, she gathered singers, musicians, and support staff and raised enough money through a [crowdfunding](#) campaign titled “Help Us Put Opera on Our Block” to pay them for two performances. Police closed down her street and hundreds of people showed up. Best of all, she got the audience she wanted. “The greatest impact was seeing the people who have never considered going to an opera be completely mesmerized by the experience,” Gutiérrez said. She plans to continue mounting operas in unconventional spaces with her new company, [The Opera Next Door](#). “This experience has taught me that the music we love performing. . . serves a bigger purpose. . . when it is used to create and unite a community.” —Zachary Lewis

PHOTO: Cody York

In a normal year, Playhouse Square in Cleveland serves about 40,000 students with live, in-person programming. Last year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it reached over 95,000, with virtual programming. For that, one of the nation’s largest performing arts centers can thank Daniel Hahn, vice president of education. He and a consortium of education executives at centers around the country pooled their resources to produce and deliver new, high-quality “virtual field-trips” on topics that teachers everywhere could easily work into their remote learning schedules. Over weeks of long Zoom sessions and phone calls, Hahn and his peers, which

DANIEL HAHN

Vice President of Education
 [Playhouse Square](#)



included theater artists and performers, settled on what proved to be a winning formula: short, 20-minute video segments, along with pre-recorded Q&A sessions and interactive tutorials for schoolchildren, all licensable for multiple weeks.

Over a dozen presenters chipped in with \$3,000 each to produce the first project, [Five Days with Step Afrika!](#) “The barriers between artist and executives came down, and we really worked together,” Hahn said. “By pooling our resources, we were able to commission a new work. . . It was a win-win for everyone.” And that was just the beginning. After his success with *Step Afrika!*, Hahn came up with

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Grimmz Fairy Tales, a hip-hop musical for children that, in Cleveland alone, was viewed by some 10,000 students and has since been licensed in Florida, Nevada, and New Jersey. “[We] are shaping the lives of our children by stimulating their feelings, curiosity, and creativity,” said *Grimmz* sales agent Robin Klinger, adding that

while in-person theaters were closed, Hahn “opened the doors back up again with virtual programming.”

For Hahn, an educator, it was all in a day’s work. But he’s also proud of the effect his efforts had on the artists themselves. By developing paid, rewarding projects during the pandemic, he said, “[We] were able to do just enough to help some of our friends in the industry...get through those extremely difficult months.” —Zachary Lewis



NEETA HELMS

President

[Classical Movements](#)    

Specialists in travel for the performing arts, Classical Movements was doubly impacted by the pandemic. The agency had to cancel or postpone 200 concerts on 42 tours.

But if the shutdown was broader than most, the reaction was quicker. By a combination of sheer determination and ingenuity, President Neeta Helms not only kept her firm intact but managed to present some of the first live concerts since the shutdown. “I refused to surrender to the challenges of the pandemic,” she said. “I was determined to use our resources and experience to continue to do good...all with the intent of keeping musicians engaged.”

When Virginia Governor Ralph Northam raised gathering capacity to 50 people in June of 2020, Helms planned an [outdoor, socially distanced concert](#) on the company’s Alexandria property. That soon mushroomed into a full season of “Secret Garden” concerts, a diverse series of hour-long performances spanning chamber, jazz, Baroque, and even vocal music. As of November 2021, the series had offered 95 concerts, a model for presenters everywhere. “[We] are no strangers to unique, substantial challenges,” Helms said. “However, this was the first time we had produced [concerts] literally in our back yard.”

Classical Movements also jumped into the digital arena, co-presenting the Vox Virtual a cappella festival and organizing online master classes through its new “[Ossia! Orchestral Academy](#).” It even offered an online “Concert for India” in response to that country’s pandemic plight and a multi-orchestra digital collaboration celebrating the inaugurations of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. “[We] turned the necessity of virtual performance...into an opportunity to assemble a group of musicians who would have been unlikely to have ever come together, even under normal circumstances,” Helms said.

While many ensembles have gone back to live performance and Classical Movements is back to running choral and youth orchestra tours, “normalcy is a long way off,” Helms said. In the meantime, there is much to be done. “All of us...remain busy on future tours and the other projects we have introduced to keep us going,” she said. “In times of struggle and isolation...live music can provide an essential sense of comfort and community.” —Zachary Lewis

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ANDREW IRVIN

Concertmaster

   [Arkansas Symphony Orchestra](#)

March 13, 2020 is a date violinist Andrew Irvin will never forget. On that day, the veteran concertmaster of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra (ASO) planted the seed for “[Bedtime with Bach](#),” an online offering that ended up sustaining him, his colleagues, and listeners everywhere through the pandemic to come. An orchestra concert that evening had been canceled, and Irvin and his colleagues were struggling to fill the void. “I could see the brains of the staff spinning. . . [and] my own brain was spinning,” he recently recalled.

In the end, he performed after all—alone and online. He spent the evening recording for social media what he called “an underprepared but heartfelt” movement of Bach, a “rough, poorly lit” performance that nonetheless soothed his nerves on a shocking day. Thus was born “Bedtime with Bach.” Irvin’s idea took root among his ASO colleagues, and before long, like Scheherazade telling her tales, there were similar, equally intimate offerings every night at 9 p.m. from players across the ensemble, representing every family of instrument and a huge range of styles and composers. There were solos, duos, trios—even an appearance by a Great Dane. For 80 consecutive nights, they “gave us music...when we were missing each other, our concertgoers, and live music,” Irvin said. “It brought us and our audiences comfort.”

And many more listeners as well. After reports of the project appeared in *The Washington Post*, CNN, and *The Kelly Clarkson Show*, viewership of “Bedtime with Bach” exploded to over one million

people in 30 countries. “Our feisty band. . . might not be able to compete with the likes of the Chicago Symphony or the New York Phil,” Irvin said, “but our music still touched hearts, and we hope, made a difference in the crazy days we all experienced during COVID.”

“Bedtime with Bach,” along with the ASO’s virtual education programs and outreach efforts, helped keep the orchestra afloat during the pandemic. It also made an artistic difference. When the ASO reunited in person for the first time, at the Robinson Center

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CONGRATULATIONS TO DREW IRVIN

ONE OF MUSICAL AMERICA'S TOP 30 PROFESSIONALS OF THE YEAR 2021

CONCERTMASTER OF

 **ARKANSAS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**

ASO Concertmaster, Drew Irvin responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a new performance series called *Bedtime with Bach*. The goal was to bring peace and comfort during a hard time. Over the past year, ASO musicians and friends have created more than 150 videos, garnering local and international press and providing a much-needed bright spot for Little Rock, Arkansas, and over one million people from over thirty countries around the world.

[ArkansasSymphony.org](#)

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in Little Rock, “something had changed,” Irvin said. “I heard depth and growth [from] the journey we had been on.” In his mind, there

was only one conclusion to be drawn. “Missing each other and live performing made us even more committed to the amazing music we are so fortunate to play every day.” —Zachary Lewis



CERISE LIM JACOBS

Founder, Executive Producer, Librettist

[White Snake Projects](#)    

As head of the opera company White Snake Projects, Cerise Lim Jacobs addressed the COVID crisis by creating what came to be known as the Pandemic Trilogy. “To think that I produced three operas in less than a year is just frightening,” said Jacobs, a lawyer turned librettist who founded the Boston-based company in 2005. “It became clear to me when the pandemic first set in that the choice for us was either to go dark or seize the moment and artistically confront this terrible situation. And I knew that we would need to produce work quickly for it to be relevant.”

The trilogy’s first online opera, which premiered in October 2020, was [Alice in the Pandemic](#), about a nurse whose mother is hospitalized with the virus (materials from the opera, which has a score by Jorge Sosa, were acquired by the Library of Congress

for its [Performing Arts COVID-19 Response Collection](#)). Then came *Death by Life* (May 2021), in response to the police murder of George Floyd; and *A Survivor’s Odyssey* (September 2021), which explores the “shadow” pandemic, a surge in intimate partner violence, by evoking the women of Homer’s *Odyssey*.

“We are the only opera company doing virtual productions live,” Jacobs said. “We’re not a movie company. We don’t have the resources to compete with Netflix. And pre-recorded videos are just not interesting to me. The challenge for opera is how to retain its essential liveness whether it’s virtual or on stage.”

Innovative technology allowed the Pandemic Trilogy to be streamed live. Each opera was produced remotely, with cast members singing together in real time from their respective homes around the country. Audio software called Tutti Remote, fostered by Jacobs’s company, made it possible for singers and their accompaniment to perform in synch. Producers used video-game software to create the imagery in which singers and animated characters were embedded.

Coordinating all that complex video and audio technology live can be tricky. Glitches are bound to occur. “Oh, absolutely,” said Jacobs, “but isn’t that kind of the point? We have singers and musicians who are trained to perform live. They make artistic choices in the moment. That’s the beauty of live opera.” —John Fleming

CONGRATULATIONS

**CERISE JACOBS
and the WSP Team**

**For White Snake Projects’
innovative activist operas,
presented LIVE in Cyberspace**



**Named one of Musical America’s
TOP PROFESSIONALS IN THE ARTS
DURING THE PANDEMIC**

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LISA JAEHNIG

Managing Director

[Shuman Associates Inc](#)

When first hired by Shuman Associates public relations, Lisa Jaehnig worked as a part-time publicity assistant while pursuing a career as an opera singer. When President Constance Shuman suggested she could be a full-fledged publicist, and to try it with just one client, “I said, okay, fine, as long it’s someone in opera,” Jaehnig remembered. “It was James Conlon, around the time he was named music director of LA Opera. And I still work with him to this day, and that’s amazing.” She took on other projects as well. “I did a little bit here, a little bit there, put singing on the back burner, and now here we are.”

It was 21 years ago that Jaehnig joined New York-based Shuman, whose boutique roster includes conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, the Minnesota Orchestra, pianist Jonathan Biss, and others of their stature. “What the pandemic did was to open up our wonderful artists’ minds to work in different ways, and that pushed us to do the same,” she says. “We brainstormed with clients and used a virtual space to make sure their creativity

caught the public’s eye and didn’t go unnoticed even though they were not on stage.”

Early in the lockdown, Jaehnig coordinated with the 92nd Street Y to transform Biss’s COVID-canceled Beethoven recital into a major classical music event. The pianist filmed himself playing the program in his apartment, it was streamed on Facebook, and, after some strong promotion, the performance drew 283,000 views.

Other virtual projects that Jaehnig collaborated on with clients that made significant impacts were violinist Jennifer Koh’s “Alone Together” recitals of newly commissioned solo works livestreamed from the violinist’s home; a dozen episodes of “Pop-Up Pipa with Wu Man”; pianist Lara Downes’s digital record label Rising Sun Music; and bass-baritone Davóne Tines’s video *VIGIL*, dedicated to the memory of Breonna Taylor.

Jaehnig was also instrumental in adapting Shuman’s operations to the new realities of the pandemic. “I do so much more than publicity,” she says. “I do the payroll. Tax reports. All those PPP forms. Revamping our information systems into a shared workplace in the cloud. Things like that. I’m a jack-of-all-trades in the small business of publicity.” —John Fleming



TERELL JOHNSON

Executive Director

[Chicago Philharmonic](#)

One day after his [appointment as executive director](#) of the Chicago Philharmonic on July 1, Terell Johnson attended a recording session by his new band in its home venue, the Harris Theater. Coming on the heels of the double pandemic of the last year-and-a-half—COVID-19 and a heightened awareness, with cause, of social injustice—the relevance of the repertoire was stunning. Recorded for streaming from the Harris Theater website, [Redemption](#), as it

is titled, is a collection of spirituals and gospel songs by singer/composer Adrian Dunn in memory of George Floyd and other Black men killed by police.

Also featuring an arrangement of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” by Dunn and the Adrian Dunn Singers, and the 2019 violin concerto *Glory*, by Marcus Norris, the performance epitomized for Johnson the projects he had in mind for the orchestra’s future. “It was a

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remarkable experience and a testament to the Philharmonic's ambition to transform the classical music landscape into an ever-expanding inclusive space," Johnson said, noting that the concert was the first he'd seen in which all participants "looked like me."

Not that Johnson is new to pushing for change in classical music. Before his appointment, he chaired the equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging committee at Miami's New World Symphony (NWS), also serving as director of business development and community engagement. Last April, he moderated "Being Black in America," a panel discussion with pianist Awadagin Pratt and Human Rights Watch U.S. Executive Director Nicole Austin-Hillery, joined by NWS fellows.

Now Johnson leads a group that stands apart in a different way: The Chicago Philharmonic, with origins that date to 1979, is a self-governed orchestra that operates without a union contract

and holds no formal auditions. Instead, Artistic Director and Principal Conductor Scott Speck maintains a group of some 200 professionals to contact as needed. Johnson called this unique governance model, along with the group's eclectic musical vision, "our super power. . . it's what inspired me to join the team."

Life during the pandemic got even more interesting for Johnson when he was accepted into the LEAD fellowship, a two-year program grooming leaders of color offered by the Sphinx Organization. Said Donna Milanovich, who preceded Johnson as the Chicago Philharmonic's executive director, "I can think of no better leader," for the orchestra. "His business acumen and love of the transformative power of music is sure to take [it] to new heights." —Zachary Lewis


JENNIFER KOH
Violinist

PHOTO: Juergen Frank

Alone Together is violinist Jennifer Koh's contribution to understanding what it meant to experience the pandemic

crisis. The digital album, released in August on the Cedille label, is a record of Koh's project of the same name for which she

[commissioned dozens of short works](#) from as many composers for solo violin. She gave their premieres in livestreamed performances every Saturday night for 10 weeks from her New York City apartment.

"It was incredibly intense," said Koh, who began the series on April 4, 2020, during a period when an average of more than 700 people a day were dying from COVID in the city. "The pieces were being written when New York was at the epicenter of the pandemic, when we were sheltering in place. *Alone Together* is a musical archive of that difficult time."

The project was also a way for Koh to support emerging composers who needed a financial boost during the lockdown.

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She asked 20 established composers to donate a new 30-second “micro” work, and then each in turn recommended a lesser-known composer to receive a paid commission from her nonprofit, Arco Collaborative. The fee was \$500 for 30 seconds of music (all 39 pieces on the album run longer).

The established composers included Du Yun, Vijay Iyer, George Lewis, Missy Mazzoli, Ellen Reid, Anthony Cheung, and Wang Lu. Among the emerging composers, all but one are women, people of color, or both, or nonbinary; they included Katherine Balch, Nina

Shekhar, Lester St. Louis, Adelia Faizullina, and Sugar Vendil.

“You hear what was happening during COVID in this music,” said Koh, who has played some of the new works in her return to live, in-person performance. “For example, Wang Lu’s *Hover and Recede* has a melody like sirens running through it.”

Looking back on *Alone Together*, Koh finds it hard to revisit the emotions of that painful time. “Most of all, the pandemic distilled what is important to me as a person and an artist,” she said. “And that is really to help others, to help the next generation of artists, and to further the mission of inclusivity and hearing from multiple voices. That has always been important in my work, but it has become even more clear to me now.” —John Fleming



DAVID LAMARCHE

Conductor and Music Administrator

American Ballet Theatre

PHOTO: Matthew Dine

David LaMarche came up with the idea of giving hospital concerts remotely as a way for members of the American Ballet Theatre Orchestra to continue playing during the pandemic, when the company was shut down. “You never know,” said LaMarche, a conductor and music administrator in his 21st season with ABT. “You do something out of necessity, and then all of a sudden it turns into a trademark.”

The program of livestreamed performances by the ABT Orchestra—“accompanied” by dancers on video—has come to be called ABT Heals. Twice a week in May, June, and July 2020, during some of the darkest days of the pandemic in New York City, orchestra members performed on Zoom from their homes for patients and staff at Mount Sinai Kravis Children’s Hospital and other locations in the hospital’s system. The program was dedicated to the memory of Dr. Barry Webber, a Mount Sinai surgeon who died from COVID. He was married to Harriet Clark, a former dancer with the company who is on the faculty of the ABT Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School.

Pieces from the company’s repertoire put orchestra members front and center: Principal cellist Jonathan Spitz played a big solo

from the third act of *La Bayadère*. There was a lively performance by piano, percussion, and trombone of the famous “Sabre Dance” from the four-movement Aram Khachaturian ballet score *Gayane*, now the music for *Of Love and Rage*, a new work in the ABT repertory. Principal clarinet Jon Manasse and principal bassoon Marc Goldberg played chamber music with family members who also are musicians.

“We featured at least one dancer from the company every week,” LaMarche said. “We’d have a video clip of the dancer performing to the music we were playing, and the dancer would talk about his or her role in the ballet. The streaming went into all the patients’ rooms as well as the staff rooms and lounges where they have big TVs. Everyone said that the staff really enjoyed having a distraction from what their days were like, which at that point was pretty intense. Mount Sinai was overwhelmed with COVID patients.”

Mount Sinai and the ballet company plan to resume ABT Heals in February 2022. —John Fleming

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NANCY LATURNO

Chief Executive Officer





[Mainly Mozart](#)

Early in the pandemic lockdown, Mainly Mozart CEO Nancy Laturno made a bold commitment. “I started saying publicly that we were going to dig in our heels and commit to live performances for live audiences—whatever that meant,” said Laturno, a co-founder of the San Diego-based company, in 1988.

At first, what Laturno’s commitment meant was a [series of drive-in concerts](#) in the parking lot of the Del Mar Fairgrounds, starting with a Saturday afternoon performance in July 2020

by eight musicians from the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the San Diego Symphony. *Newsweek* called it “the first concert for a live audience given by a major classical music organization during the pandemic.”

Pre-pandemic, Mainly Mozart was built around one orchestral festival in June, primarily in the Balboa Theater in downtown San Diego. But over the 12-month period from October 2020 to this past September, it put on five outdoor orchestral festivals.

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American Ballet Theatre
Congratulates
David LaMarche,
ABT Conductor and
Music Administrator,
One of *Musical America's*
2021 Movers & Shakers
of the Performing Arts.

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE

David LaMarche. Photo: Matt Dine.

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They featured an all-star orchestra of concertmasters and first-chair players from top-level orchestras that were largely shut down, including the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, and more.

By September, performances had moved to Del Mar Surf Cup Sports Park, where audience members were no longer confined to cars and could show their appreciation by applauding rather than honking horns. Concerts sold out, with attendance up to 1,300; the audience was younger and more diverse than in the past.



CHARLOTTE LEE

President and Founder, [Primo Artists](#)   

Founder, [Performing Arts Managers and Agents Coalition](#)

Soon after the world went into pandemic lockdown, Charlotte Lee, president and founder of New York-based Primo Artists, decided that she had to do something to help her segment of the performing arts industry. In May 2020, Lee founded the Performing Arts Managers and Agents Coalition (PAMAC), which quickly grew to a membership of more than 250 artist managers, booking agents, and independent producers.

“This was a first for the artist management community to come together,” said Lee, whose firm has an elite roster, including Itzhak Perlman, Joshua Bell, and Wynton Marsalis. “Agents are known more for our independence and competitiveness, but it became very clear in the pandemic that the only way we were going to survive was to work together.”

The shutdown “was existential for talent agencies,” Lee said. “None of us had the cash to survive since our revenue is based on commissions. As for-profit companies, we don’t have access to the donations, grants, and endowments that support the nonprofit sector. Without a bailout, many agencies would be forced to close, and that would leave the entire industry vulnerable, because

“The pandemic forced us to innovate in a way that would have been considered too risky during normal times,” Laturno said. “It repositioned the organization to shift its emphasis to the all-star orchestra. We don’t plan to go back to just doing a single orchestral festival per year. In the longer term, our plan is for three orchestral festivals a year.”

Mainly Mozart may be the only arts organization in the world whose budget increased during the pandemic—by 30 percent, in fact, to \$2.8 million, with a modest deficit. “It wasn’t a financial decision that caused us to keep producing concerts,” Laturno says. “It was what we believed was the right thing to do for everybody during COVID—for the community, for the musicians, for the artform.” —John Fleming

artists and presenters can’t do their work without us.” There were casualties, notably [Columbia Artists Management Inc.](#), which folded several months into the pandemic.

Lee led PAMAC to join the Save Our Stages lobbying effort that ultimately evolved into the Shuttered Venue Operators Grants program, passed into law in December of 2020. Distributed through the Small Business Administration, the fund would provide \$16.5 billion in relief to the arts and culture industry. “This was historic, and the artist management sector needed to be part of it,” she said.

SBA’s online [portal crashed](#) on the day it was supposed to open, and disbursements didn’t commence [until June](#), but in the end the program came through. “One hundred percent of the agencies in our coalition that applied for SVOG were funded,” Lee said. “Initial grants are up to 45 percent of an applicant’s 2019 revenue, and supplemental grants are up to 50 percent of initial grants. It took a while, but we stuck together, and 18 months after performances stopped, we were back. And stronger than ever.” —John Fleming

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PHOTO: Kate Raines

FRANK LUZI

Vice President of Marketing & Digital Strategy


[Opera Philadelphia](#)


Frank Luzi's background as a critic for *TV Guide* came in especially handy at Opera Philadelphia during the pandemic. When the company saw the need to transition online, he already knew how to evaluate digital content and which digital platforms to use.

Rather than offer Zoom interviews or archived vocal recitals, Luzi urged the company to adhere to its mission, to tell meaningful stories and connect viewers to great art. The initial result, in late spring and summer of 2020, was "Digital Festival O," a five-part series that included several recent premieres: *Denis & Katya*, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, *Sky on Wings*, and *Breaking the Waves*.

As the pandemic settled in for the long haul, the company launched an entire subscription season of made-for-digital performances on its own [Opera Philadelphia Channel](#) (OPC). These productions of works by Tyshawn Sorey, Angélica Negrón, Courtney Bryan, and Caroline Shaw brought singers, designers, and producers safely back to work and challenged them in new and unusual ways.

"Opera Philadelphia became a film production and distribution company seemingly overnight," Luzi says, noting that OPC has since evolved into "an authentic extension of our company."

"Digital Festival O" garnered some 70,000 views, Luzi says, and the first OPC season reached nearly 3,000 households, a third of them new to the company and half from outside Philadelphia.

"I don't think it's too much of an exaggeration to say that it saved us," Luzi says. "Producing opera for the screen and creating a distribution platform... opened new sources of philanthropy, sustaining us both spiritually and financially."

As live performances return, Opera Philadelphia has planned a hybrid season integrating digital and live stage productions, and likely will do the same next year. "With every project that comes up we consider it for stage or for screen, and sometimes for both a stage and screen," says Luzi. Opera Philadelphia is also exploring a collaborative opera channel to be developed and distributed by multiple companies.

"We were not wired to sit on the sidelines for 18 months and wait to get back to the way things were," Luzi says. "We had to keep working. We had to keep experimenting and trying new things." —Zachary Lewis

**ANTHONY MCGILL**

Principal Clarinet

[New York Philharmonic](#)


PHOTO: Eric Rudd Photography

On May 27, 2020, Anthony McGill woke up about 5 a.m. and wrote down in his phone thoughts and emotions he had about the police murder of George Floyd two days earlier. McGill, principal clarinet with the New York Philharmonic—the first African American to hold a first-chair position in the orchestra—was in lockdown at his home in the Bronx. Later that day, he filmed himself playing a

ghostly minor-key rendition of *America the Beautiful* and posted the 93-second video to Facebook.

"I didn't know the music by heart, and as I was transposing it from a piano part, I played a wrong note or two and had the idea that it would be really compelling to communicate the pain I was feeling by putting the melody into a minor key," he said.

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McGill's sorrowful yet lyrical solo, which ended with him dropping to both knees, clarinet held behind his back, was a seminal moment in the Black Lives Matter protests amid the pandemic. The video, titled [Take Two Knees](#), went viral, generating more than 50,000 views in less than two days and inspiring heartfelt responses.

"Every video by other musicians that I watched brought me to tears," McGill said. "Even in isolation, the responses showed how passionate the music community could be in speaking out against racial violence and injustice. The only way a lot of us know how to communicate profoundly with the world is through our instruments and our art."

In October, McGill [gave a performance with the Philharmonic](#) that strongly evoked his George Floyd video and the issue of police brutality against people of color. He was the soloist in Anthony Davis's *You Have the Right to Remain Silent*, a 2011 work whose title is from the Miranda warning police deliver to suspects. It stemmed from a tense traffic stop of the Black composer by a white policeman, with the clarinet as the protagonist and the orchestra as the cop interrogating him. "It was so meaningful to experience this piece," said McGill, who had previously played it with the Cincinnati Symphony. "Once again, I was using music to heal myself but also to communicate with the world." —John Fleming



HEATHER NOONAN

Vice President, Advocacy



[League of American Orchestras](#)

As the League of American Orchestras' longtime advocate in Washington, D.C., Heather Noonan has been an indispensable guide through the maze of federal COVID-related emergency funding initiatives, most of which she was instrumental in convincing Congress to pass in the first place. These included the [SBA Paycheck Protection Program](#), [Shuttered Venues Operating Grants](#), and the [IRS Employee Retention Tax Credits](#) program. She also argued for and instructed would-be recipients through expanded unemployment benefits for gig workers and the universal charitable deduction that encourages those who don't itemize tax returns to give more. Noonan's efforts for the League—in coalition with the Performing Arts Alliance, the National Council of Nonprofits, and other arts advocacy groups—provided a lifeline to artists, presenters, orchestras, opera companies, etc., at a time when earned income vanished.

Federal support for the arts in the pandemic was unprecedented. "This has been the most substantial direct federal assistance that the arts community has ever seen," said Noonan, who joined the League in 1996. "When you take into account all the sources of support, it adds up to be a massive

amount of federal intervention." The value of assistance received by orchestras so far is estimated at more than \$200 million.

"Our goal was to make sure that the arts were recognized and eligible," said Noonan, who credits League colleague Najean Lee as her invaluable partner in representing orchestras on Capitol Hill. "We needed to make the case not just that the arts had unique and specific needs but that they also needed full access to forms of support that were being developed for the wider employment sector."

Beginning on March 13, 2020, Noonan worked remotely from her home near Annapolis. The job was 24/7 when pressure was on to influence the crafting of bills. "Legislation often comes together in the middle of the night, and the fine print really matters," she said. [Once passed into law, it was Noonan's job to explain](#) to the League's 700 orchestra members what their options were, help them negotiate tight deadlines, and explain how often-complex online portals worked so they could apply for relief.

"All this entailed an extremely patient family, because I have two kids who were doing school from home during that time,"

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Noonan said. “They were in the same room with me while I was having conversations with policy makers. I think my 12-year-old

might know more about employee retention tax credits than I do at this point.” —John Fleming

See Heather Noonan’s [One to One interview](#).



IVÁN ENRIQUE RODRÍGUEZ

Composer & Conductor [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [YouTube](#) [Instagram](#)

PHOTO: Alexander Sargent

For Bay area composer Iván Enrique Rodríguez, the pandemic provided the impetus to write about the experience of living in an adopted homeland during one of its most trying periods. A native of Puerto Rico currently finishing a doctoral degree at Juilliard, Rodríguez said the pandemic shutdown, along with its attendant surge in awareness for racial and social justice issues, gave him the “moment of introspection” he needed to address music topics that already had been weighing on his mind for years.

Unconscious of his skin color as a young man in Puerto Rico, Rodríguez said his move to the U.S. mainland forced him to learn “that I was also brown, and that I would never be able to forget that.” That feeling, he said, combined with the inspiration of the Black Lives Matter movement and his own acceptance of his identity as a gay man, gave him “the strength and the desire to share those things that are so important to me in music, with others.”

Since the start of the pandemic, Rodríguez has penned eight works ranging in scope from solo violin to large ensemble and chorus. In them, he unabashedly confronts racism, the modern relevance of the Statue of Liberty, and his own sense of isolation during the pandemic. *Latency Denouement*, written as a serenade for COVID patients, came to mean a whole lot more after he contracted the disease himself; for a time he feared for his life.

This winter, on a much happier note, comes *Christmas Realness Extravaganza*, a celebration of life using Afro-Caribbean rhythms and familiar tropes from Stateside holiday music. When he received the commission from the Pioneer Valley Symphony Chorus, said the composer, “[All] I could think of was bringing us together. . . It is something I just firmly believe needs to happen, to be together and to enjoy something after all these struggles.” —Zachary Lewis

CHRISTINA SCHEPPELMANN

General Director

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [YouTube](#) [Instagram](#) [Seattle Opera](#)



In January 2020, when Seattle Opera announced its next season, it was the first to be programmed by the company’s [new general director](#), Christina Scheppelmann. She had arrived eight months earlier as one of only a few women to lead a major opera company, but after the pandemic lockdown set in, the season might have been lost entirely if not for her determination,

“I don’t like to stick my head in the sand,” said Scheppelmann, previously artistic director of Barcelona’s Fundació del Gran Teatre del Liceu. “Doing nothing and waiting out the pandemic was not an option. I wanted to deliver the season we promised, and I saw an opportunity to get it done within public health restrictions we needed to follow.”

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And get it done Seattle did, filming five productions to stream: a double bill of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, *The Elixir of Love*, *Don Giovanni*, *Tosca*, and *Flight*, a contemporary opera by Jonathan Dove. “I’m not aware that anybody else in North America delivered the season they had announced in a digital form as we did,” Scheppelmann said. [The Dallas Symphony managed to do so—another exception to the rule. —Ed]

As a piece of filmmaking, *Flight* was especially impressive, set in the spectacular Museum of Flight, which has historic aircraft suspended in a six-story gallery. The score was recorded by musicians from the Seattle Symphony and 10 singers at the orchestra’s Benaroya Hall, the cast was filmed acting (and

lip-synching) their parts at the museum, and then music and video were edited into the final product. Of the season’s operas, accessed by subscribers on the company’s website, *Tosca*, set in St. James Cathedral, had the most views with 4,300, followed by *Don Giovanni* with 3,800, and *Flight* with 3,500.

“We learned skills that will be valuable for special projects, but streaming is no substitute for live performances,” Scheppelmann said. “Also, the income it generates is just too marginal. It’s not going to be another way to support your business.” In August, the company gave an outdoor concert of *Die Walküre* that drew paid attendance of 2,100. Two months later, live audiences returned to McCaw Hall for the first time in 19 months, with *La Bohème* playing eight performances to about 60 percent capacity. —John Fleming



DAVID SNEAD

President and CEO

[Handel and Haydn Society](#)

David Snead faced a huge challenge as chief executive of Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society in the summer of 2020. Because of COVID, Massachusetts officials had prohibited choral singing in the state, and Symphony Hall, the home venue of H+H, was not going to allow concerts with audiences for the foreseeable future.

“With the banning of singing—many of our concerts are with chorus—and the lack of any place to perform, it became clear that the upcoming season was going to be very different,” said Snead, who came to H+H in 2015, having previously been VP of marketing for the New York Philharmonic.

Founded in 1815, H+H is the longest-running performing arts organization in the United States, and that legacy was a powerful motivation to find a path through the pandemic. “The society has performed *Messiah* every year since 1854, and we didn’t want to stop that,” said Snead, who initiated a co-production with WGBH public television of [Handel’s Messiah for Our Time](#) in December 2020. Filmed under painstaking public health protocols, the period performance of the oratorio by masked orchestra, chorus,

and soloists intertwined music with imagery of first responders, hospitals, and city streets empty of people. It drew more than 160,000 broadcast and streaming views.

During the shutdown, H+H streamed 16 free concerts that had another 160,000 views and listeners. “With *Messiah* on WGBH plus the online performances we had a total audience of more than 300,000 for the 2020–21 season,” Snead said. “Typically, our live, paid attendance for a season is a little over 30,000. As it turned out, the pandemic pivot gave us the opportunity to accelerate our brand and reach a broader audience.”

H+H performed its first live, in-person concert in almost 18 months in August, when Marin Alsop conducted Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony at the Hatch Shell. The free outdoor event, which played to a crowd of 10,000, was funded from a federal pandemic relief grant. “The grant was for \$480,000, and we decided to use it do a concert for Boston,” Snead said. “We want to be a community resource, and this was a way to make good on that mission.” —John Fleming

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TITUS UNDERWOOD

Principal Oboe, [Nashville Symphony](#)
Associate Professor, [UC College-Conservatory of Music](#)
Music Video Producer

Musical life as Titus Underwood knew it came to a halt in June 2020. Citing an \$8 million loss to the pandemic, the Nashville Symphony, of which he is principal oboe, [suspended all activity for a year](#), putting musicians and staff on furlough.

Underwood, though, isn't the type to sit around. "I chose to use this difficult year to create art of my own," he said in an interview. He reached out to the Nashville Ballet, Nashville Metro Schools, the Voices of Vision Community Choir, and his Nashville Symphony colleagues, including their Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero, to produce [We Are Nashville](#), a video featuring dozens of local children remotely singing an original song by local composer Bryson Finney. The project, his first as executive producer, went on to win a regional Emmy award. "It went a lot further than we could have imagined," Underwood said.

His second pandemic project was a remotely recorded music video of [Lift Every Voice And Sing](#), in an arrangement for winds

by Fred Onovwerosuoke, featuring prominent Black musicians, including Underwood. The video, a gesture of solidarity with racial justice advocates, has garnered more than a million views. "This was our way of protesting through art," he said. "This was our way of saying something through art using all these voices and platforms combined together, unified, to inspire and move people forward in the right direction."

Even as the Nashville Symphony has returned to live performances at the Schermerhorn Center, Underwood is at work on his next project, *A Tale of Two Tales*. A partnership with cellist and photographer Titilayo Ayangade, it explores what he calls his "dual experience in classical music" through music, clothing, and visual art. His proudest pandemic achievement, though, may be winning the [2021 Medal of Excellence](#) from the Sphinx Organization, the group's highest honor. It was especially important to him, he said, because it was his late sister, a violinist, who introduced him to the organization 15 years ago. —Zachary Lewis



B.C. VERMEERSCH

Executive Director
[Musicians Foundation, Inc.](#)

At the outset of the pandemic, when theaters, concert halls, and nightclubs shut their doors, B.C. Vermeersch and his New York-based colleagues at the Musicians Foundation developed a COVID-19 Emergency Grant Program (EGP). Virtually overnight, a resource designed to help musicians through medical pinches, natural disasters, and housing troubles transitioned smoothly into a lifeline for a group of performing artists whose livelihoods

had suddenly vanished altogether. Vermeersch "immediately understood and had compassion for the biggest questions facing the lives of musicians," recalled Jeremy Morrow, director of outreach and development at the foundation.

So great was the need for aid that, not long after the EGP went live, the online portal had to be shut down, temporarily, while Vermeersch and his colleagues sought additional support

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for a profession in crisis. By April 2021, the Foundation had distributed over \$300,000 to musicians all over the country, often within a week of receiving applications.

The Emergency Grant Program has since been suspended, but the Foundation continues to support struggling artists, as it always has. Morrow calls it “the go-to place for professional musicians in crisis.”

Vermeersch, meanwhile, is looking at the bigger picture. In October, he won a grant to organize a national conference in 2023

where arts organizations will share pandemic best practices and other lessons learned, and together plan for the next emergency. As for Vermeersch himself, he’s playing it modest. He gives most of the credit to his colleagues and the foundation. “Being able in this pandemic to respond quickly and efficiently to the needs of musicians meant that the Foundation lived up to its mission,” Vermeersch said. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s the ultimate satisfaction.” —Zachary Lewis

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B.C. VERMEERSCH

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PHOTO: Shenandoah Conservatory

ROD VESTER

Director of Contemporary Music; Assistant Professor

[Shenandoah University Conservatory](#)

Rod Vester made a tough but sound decision during the pandemic summer of 2020. In the name of safety, the former director of the Memphis nonprofit [PRIZM Ensemble](#) called off the group's in-person Summer Music Camp and International Chamber Music Festival, its biggest event of the year.

He wasn't about to let the musical youth of Memphis flounder, however, especially since many, from diverse backgrounds, had been counting on the camp and were newcomers to classical music. Instead, and in response to the growing awareness of social justice issues, Vester launched a remote course in musical activism, technology, and production called "Music Video Recording for Social Media."

The course, which covered the basics of recording and sharing music on social media and other platforms, now appears destined for a life far beyond the pandemic. Though Vester has since moved on from PRIZM, "Music Video Recording..." is now embedded in the curriculum. He also hosts a YouTube channel dedicated to music and technology and has published *A Musician's Guide to Creating Multiple Streams of Income* on his website.

**PHILIP WILDER**

President & General Director

[Chanticleer](#)

PHOTO: Griffin

When Philip Wilder assumed his position with Chanticleer in August 2020, the pandemic was in full swing and San Francisco, the venerable group's home base, was at the height of its lockdown. But Wilder, a member of the all-male ensemble himself 30 years earlier, was resolved that there would be no layoffs, and that

"Musicians just did not know how to navigate technology, in a sense," Vester said when he launched his YouTube channel. "So many people in general are wanting to know, how can I use music to enact positive change in some type of way. . . I see that as being something that we will continue."

The keyboard artist and gospel scholar was recently named director of contemporary music and assistant professor of music at Shenandoah University Conservatory in Virginia.

The shift isn't as dramatic as it sounds. At PRIZM, which seeks to fill the music gap in public schools, Vester applied his degrees in music education, psychology, and counseling. At Shenandoah, he'll add his degree in musicology and his long experience as a piano accompanist, producer, and arranger on over 30 albums. He's also since joined Sphinx LEAD, a two-year fellowship program for aspiring arts leaders organized by the Detroit-based Sphinx Organization.

Vester's push for a diverse, equitable world of classical music will always be a priority. "If you choose to ignore diversity and inclusion," he wrote in a recent issue of *Chamber Music* magazine, "you will squander your competitive stance in the world. You will stand idly by as the world moves forward without you." —Zachary Lewis

Chanticleer would keep singing, even though vocalizing in groups at the time was, in his words, "one of the most discouraged and feared activities in the world."

For Wilder, the first order of business was to get out of San Francisco. He quickly moved artistic operations outside the city

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to a former factory, where abundant open windows and 42,000 square feet, coupled with strict protocols, enabled the group to rehearse safely. He also hired a new music director, Tim Keeler, former conductor of the Men's Chorus at the University of Maryland, who he said proved "incredibly creative and brave" under the circumstances. Wilder, fresh off a fruitful seven-year executive tenure at the New Century Chamber Orchestra, then set about finding new ways of reaching listeners at home during the shutdown. In partnership with Stanford Live, Chanticleer created [A Chanticleer Christmas: From Darkness to Light](#), which was viewed by thousands worldwide and generated much-needed revenue at a critical moment.



TOMER ZVULUN

General & Artistic Director

[Atlanta Opera](#)    

PHOTO: Atlanta Opera

Taking his inspiration from the book by Nassim Taleb, *Black Swan*, which posits that, during unpredictable events, history advances in leaps, not steps, Tomer Zvulun made a series of bold decisions with what he now realizes was very little information. After cancelling its season, the Atlanta Opera's general and artistic director started thinking outside the box, literally. Where could the company perform outside its home base at the suburban Cobb Energy Performing Arts Center?

In what can best be described as a true leap, Zvulun and his staff came up with the idea of a [giant circus tent](#), a vast open-air space that would allow the company to perform for both live and virtual audiences. Working with epidemiologists and other health experts, staff members developed an intensive safety protocol manual, which called not only for strict cleaning but also for assigned hall entry times, designated artist zones, virtual coaching, and outdoor rehearsals. Patrons would sit in socially distanced pods no less than 12 feet from the stage, while an orchestra would be in a separate tent, accompanying the performance remotely.

There were challenges. Strong winds toppled the tent, and all too often, bugs and loud trains were part of the show. The hassles

A second video, [Chanticleer: Live from London](#), went on to receive a Silver Telly Award, and a virtual concert and fundraiser in October 2020 outperformed all past Chanticleer galas, with fans tuning in from 42 states and 14 countries. Chanticleer also continued its education programs, working remotely with some 3,000 students over the course of the pandemic. If keeping its singers artistically engaged during the shutdown was a priority for Wilder, so was keeping the organization afloat and all 12 members and staff fully employed during a period of "unthinkable" duress. But Wilder declines to take credit. He points instead to the group's board and the "extraordinary" generosity of donors and other Chanticleer family members around the world. "I am indebted to [their] strong support and leadership," Wilder said, noting that without them, "we would be in a very different place." —Zachary Lewis

were beyond count. Still, the Big Tent, along with virtual projects on the company's new [Spotlight Media platform](#), kept some 300 crew members, artists, and staff employed. Working together under these conditions "created a camaraderie and sense of pride in every level of the company," Zvulun said. "A new ethos was formed. One of grit and perseverance."

The effort was also worthwhile artistically. During the pandemic, Atlanta Opera managed to develop four new productions and present 40 performances, which together reached some 5,000 live audience members, 35,000 remote students, and untold thousands of viewers online. At the same time, creating a film studio for Spotlight Media had moved a pre-pandemic plan for a virtual presence to the fast track.

Looking back, Zvulun said he's glad he took leaps, not steps, despite all the unforeseen challenges. Atlanta Opera, he says, has come back "stronger in the places [where] we were broken. This company [now] feels like it can tackle any challenge and overcome any obstacle." —Zachary Lewis

About THE AUTHORS



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