

# Flex Seasons

**How do you plan an orchestra season during a global pandemic, when planning is impossible? By having more than one script. As government agencies revise pandemic projections and health authorities issue new safety guidance, fixed plans are out, and flexible plans that outline multiple scenarios offering ways to move forward are in.**



Jeff Goldberg

Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium, seen from the Perelman Stage. In late June, Carnegie Hall announced that it would not reopen in fall 2020 due to the pandemic.

by Heidi Waleson

In late February 2020, American performing arts organizations were in the final months of their 2019-20 seasons, working on plans for future seasons and, in many cases, gearing up for fundraising galas. Then, in mid-March, the sudden total shutdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic upended everything, with performances cancelled, no ticket revenue, administrators working from home, and artists thrown out of work.

Any hopes that this would be a short-term emergency were quickly dashed as the virus raged on; temporary stay-at-home orders and prohibitions on large gatherings were extended for weeks, and then months. What began as a few postponed concerts gave way to the cancellation of the remainders of seasons and

tours. Next came the cascade of summer cancellations; by mid-May, much of the U.S. summer festival scene was off. In the performing arts world as in so many other arenas, the extent of the catastrophe was unprecedented. A study from Southern Methodist University's DataArts and the management consulting firm TRG, released in May, calculated that the average U.S. arts and culture nonprofit faces a 26 percent deficit as a result of the pandemic, and estimated the total loss in the sector at \$6.8 billion.

Three months after the initial shutdown, with no clear end in sight, arts administrators have shifted their focus from managing the immediate emergency to considering how to move forward. Future planning in an environment where

the picture shifts almost daily represents a strategic challenge that few, if any, managers have had to confront before. Information about the virus and how it spreads is constantly evolving. With no consistent federal direction, health guidelines vary from state to state and from city to city, with some areas lifting lockdowns and some not. The consequences of loosening movement and gathering restrictions, in the absence of a vaccine or a cure, are also unknown: will areas that had controlled their infection and death rates see a second wave? Most critically, if restrictions ease—and arts performances are, in any case, relegated to later reopening phases—will artists, production support personnel, and audiences feel that it is safe to come together, even masked and socially distanced, when there is still a risk of illness?

In a webinar for the League of American Orchestras' National Conference in May, Susan Nelson, executive vice president of the nonprofit management consulting and research firm TDC, spelled

**“Social distancing for the audience—in David Geffen Hall, we could get 380 to 390 people into a 2,700-seat hall—is not economically viable or emotionally viable,” says New York Philharmonic President and CEO Deborah Borda.**

out the three-dimensional chess nature of scenario planning for an uncertain future. Of the three phases of the crisis—Emergency, Recovery, and Rebuild/Reposition—Emergency has now passed. Orchestras tackled their sudden loss of revenue through furloughs of staff and musicians and pay cuts; federal Payment Protection Program loans; and donations of the value of unused tickets helped many to stabilize their finances. The PPP funds currently last only through June 30, however, and orchestras and others are now into the Recovery phase, the time before full return, as well as planning for Rebuild/Reposition, the actual full return.

The process, Nelson says, will be longer and slower than anyone initially anticipat-

**Alabama Symphony Orchestra Updated Response to COVID-19**

(Birmingham, AL – April 27, 2020) – In the interest of public health, the Alabama Symphony Orchestra has made the decision to extend previously announced event cancellations and postponements to June 7, 2020.

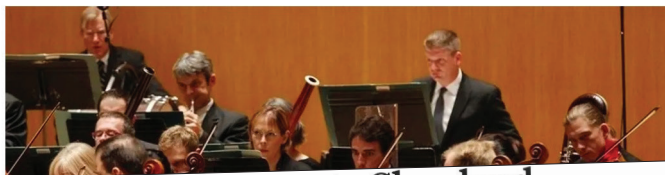
Over the past 10 years, the ASO has been delighted to share music with over 120,000 people at our Symphony in the Summer series at Railroad Park. To continue to ensure the health and safety of our state, its citizens, and our musicians, the ASO has

**The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Announces Cancellation of Remaining Performances of the Classical Subscription Season, Announces Expansion of ASO Virtual Stage**

*Stability Fund Created to Raise Funds*

**ATLANTA** -- COVID-19 has created unique challenges for arts and culture institutions across the country. Responding to the public health and financial impacts of the crisis, today the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra announced the cancellation of the remaining performances in its 75<sup>th</sup> classical subscription season, which was scheduled to conclude on June 14.

**BPO postpones Beethoven Festival concerts, suspends concerts through May 16**



**Coronavirus spread prompts Cleveland Orchestra to cancel tour of Europe and Middle East**

Updated Mar 09, 2020; Posted Mar 09, 2020

**DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC,  
CHICAGO'S GRANT PARK MUSIC FESTIVAL  
ANNOUNCES THE CANCELLATION OF ITS 2020  
SEASON  
JUNE 10--AUGUST 15 IN MILLENNIUM PARK**

**Kansas City Symphony cancels remainder of 19/20 season due to COVID-19**

Cancellation includes 'Celebration at the Station' Union Station concert

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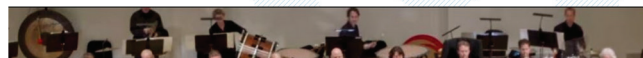
Updated: 7:15 AM CDT Apr 23, 2020

KMBC 9 News Staff



**St. Louis Symphony Orchestra announces schedule changes, postponements due to COVID-19**

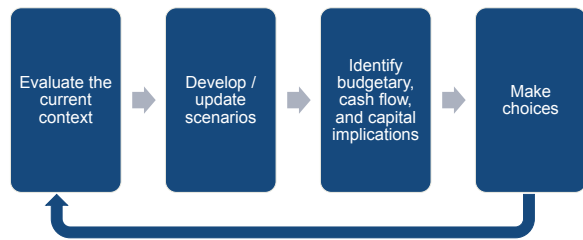
The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra calendar is getting an update due to the COVID-19 pandemic



Press releases and news stories from this spring document the continuing stream of orchestra and festival cancellations and postponements caused by the coronavirus pandemic.



## Decision-making in each phase



5/6/2020

TDC / League of American Orchestras

## Budgetary and operational implications

	Emergency response	Recovery	Rebuilding/repositioning
Public health	Incremental costs associated with artist, audience, and staff safety	Incremental costs associated with artist, audience, and staff safety	Cost of continued necessary safety measures
Audience demand	Potential response to digital programming	Potential response to alternative programming	Potential long-term audience response
Programming	Revenue and expense implications of digital programming <b>How skinny can you get while ensuring safety and delivering programming?</b>	Revenue and expense implications of potential alternative programming <b>How skinny can you get while ensuring safety and delivering programming?</b>	Business model implications of long-term programming changes

5/6/2020

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## Programmatic revenue and expense

Emergency response Digital programming	Recovery Alternative programming	Rebuilding/repositioning Lasting program shifts
<b>Earned revenue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pricing models and monetization strategies</li> <li>Number of offerings</li> <li>Competitive market for digital offerings</li> </ul> <b>Contributed revenue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How much is programmatically driven?</li> </ul> <b>Expense</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incremental costs of digital programming</li> </ul>	<b>Earned revenue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pricing models and monetization strategies</li> <li>Number of offerings</li> <li>Competitive market for similar offerings</li> </ul> <b>Contributed revenue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How much is programmatically driven?</li> </ul> <b>Expense</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cost of signaling a safe environment for audience members</li> <li>Incremental costs of programming</li> </ul>	<b>Earned revenue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential structural shift (new program types, pricing, etc.)</li> <li>Shifts in the competitive market</li> </ul> <b>Contributed revenue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impact of program change on donor behavior</li> </ul> <b>Expense</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cost of ongoing need to ensure audience safety</li> <li>Potential shift to programmatic cost structure</li> </ul>
<b>Do the costs merit the benefits?</b>		

5/6/2020

TDC / League of American Orchestras

## What would it mean to reimagine?

- What could it look like?
  - Building relevance to broader, more diverse audiences
  - Creating stronger connections with communities
  - Evaluating common practices that are frustrating and barely sufficient
  - Developing more equitable relationships with artists and creatives
  - Forging new kinds of partnerships and collaborations
  - Reflecting on the long-term role of digital
- What would you need to know?
  - How would you need to change your organizational culture or structure?
  - How would you differentiate yourself in the market?
  - How would you monetize?
  - Where would you need to invest?
  - How much more change capital would you need?**

5/6/2020

TDC / League of American Orchestras

On May 6, the League of American Orchestras' online National Conference presented *Scenario Planning in the Time of COVID-19*, in which Susan Nelson, executive vice president of TDC, and Bailey Hoar, project manager of TDC, examined the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the performing arts and discussed how arts organizations must respond to the pandemic's immediate challenges even while planning ahead. Slides from their presentation offer approaches to understanding scenario planning and suggest ways to support long-term recovery and repositioning.

ed. Multiple scenarios, with different timelines, in which each organization's mission, public health considerations, audience demand, and programming are considered, must all be budgeted, evaluated, and updated according to changing circumstances and information. Perhaps the most important element to consider, Nelson says, is cash: "You have to think ahead to what you will need in the next phase." Burning through reserves in the short term, and spending on interim performance solutions, be they digital or modified live events, which have low or nonexistent revenue streams, may leave an organization ill-equipped to fully reopen when it is safe to do so. Interviewed in mid-May, Nelson said that the tenor of her conversations with arts organizations had changed. "Four weeks ago, most insisted that it was

New York Philharmonic President and CEO Deborah Borda is working on four or five different scenarios, as the orchestra navigates how to proceed during the pandemic. In June, the orchestra announced that it was cancelling its fall 2020 season and hoped to resume performances in January 2021.



Dario Acosta

imperative to come back no matter what," she recalls. "In the last two weeks, people have started having real conversations about the costs of coming back in a partial way and asking what they are actually trying to accomplish in doing that. These

are complex questions—about the role of art in the recovery, the organization's role in the community, brand awareness, habit. But unless you have the dollars to do that, it may be better to hibernate."

The situation has also forced arts organizations to stare down worst-case scenarios, which, Nelson said, is not how they typically proceed. "We are used to the optimal case, to 'we can make this happen,'" she says. Now, she says, board and staff need to embrace what they are worried about together. "There needs to be shared risk at leadership level. It's also important to share the risks with the people who are investing with you—your institutional funders and major donors. The moment calls for transparency. We're not alone in this. Many other sectors, like retail and restaurants, can't forecast their way out."



Chris Lee

Clive Gillinson, executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall, says the organization is planning for multiple scenarios for 2021, including opening in winter, spring, or fall.

### Views from New York, Chicago, Orlando, Houston, L.A.

Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the New York Philharmonic, has taken a practical approach. Alarmed at the news of the virus's spread, she and other major New York City arts presenters agreed to close their theaters on Thursday, March 12, hours before New York Governor Andrew Cuomo instituted a ban on large gatherings. With an estimated loss of \$10 million for the fiscal year, the Philharmonic staff has taken pay cuts and, as the closures continue through the summer, orchestra musicians are receiving a decreasing percentage of their base salary. The New York

“In the absence of any coherent national policy about testing, the availability of rapid tests, or any program for contact tracing in the U.S., we can't put our orchestra back onstage for the proximity in which they sit,” she says. “Also, social distancing for the audience—in David Geffen Hall, we could get 380 to 390 people into a 2,700-seat hall—is not economically viable or emotionally viable. Would you want to sit in this cavernous hall, without people around you, listening to a reduced ensemble? You would also have to test the entire house staff—the ushers, the back-of-house people. You couldn't have printed programs; you would have to control ingress and egress. Look at major league sports. They have huge staffs and billions of dollars. They could play for no audience, since most of their revenue is from media—and *they* can't figure it out.” The Philharmonic prepared four or five different scenarios for return, but on June 10 the orchestra announced that it was cancelling its fall 2020 season and hoped to resume performances in January 2021. (The Metropolitan Opera announced similar cancellations and postponements the same week as the Philharmonic.) Borda's worst-case scenario is the loss of two seasons.

Clive Gillinson, executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall, sees three key elements when planning in uncertain times. “You get every single piece of information you can—you talk to peer organizations and try to work together,” he says. “Second, you plan for multiple scenarios. We have budget and operational plans for starting on October 7, as well as for January 1, April 1, or not at all this season. None of those things will be dictated by us, but by the Governor and the health authorities. The

third piece is timing. Some organizations think that they will need to cancel through December relatively soon. Our view is different, because there are things we won't know until they happen: a vaccine, medicines, things that could mitigate the situ-



Gregory L. Moore

Charles Dickerson III, executive director and conductor of Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles, at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles.

ation, could be available in three months or six months. I think our audiences would be upset were we to cancel [prematurely]. Speed has no value.”

Though Gillinson was initially waiting until late summer to make a decision about

**“We are a community used to being under-resourced and used to making the best cherry pie out of the worst cherries,” says Charles Dickerson III, executive director and conductor of Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles.**

the fall 2020 season, in late June Carnegie Hall announced that it would not reopen this fall, due to the coronavirus pandemic, and was instead hoping for a January 2021 start. The Carnegie Hall staff continues to stay in regular contact with all the scheduled artists and ensembles to ascertain whether financial or other circumstances would prevent their travel to New York. For the 2021-22 season, which had been “virtually settled,” Carnegie Hall is now looking at paring down its concerts, as well as activities by the Weill Music Institute, its educational and social-impact arm. Across the board, Gillinson says, “We have to reduce the budget for that year, and possibly even the year after. We can't be optimistic about any of the revenue sources.”

Some orchestras are making plans for partial reopenings. The Chicago Sinfonietta



Courtesy Chicago Sinfonietta



Gary Barragan

Above left: Jim Hirsch, who stepped down as Chicago Sinfonietta's CEO in June. Above right: Blake-Anthony Johnson, who became the Chicago Sinfonietta's CEO this spring, worked with Hirsch to plan three different scenarios for the 2020-21 season. The orchestra's postponed annual gala from this season may become a virtual gala this fall.

Philharmonic's current musicians' contract expires on September 20, and negotiations about future compensation are ongoing.

Borda's view of the near future, particularly in New York City, the epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S., is bluntly realistic.





Chris Lee

Music Director Jaap van Zweden and the New York Philharmonic at David Geffen Hall. The orchestra last performed there in early March, before New York City's pandemic lockdown.

ta has rescheduled its spring gala, a major revenue source, to this fall, though outgoing CEO Jim Hirsch thinks it is unlikely to take place as a live event and may instead be a virtual gala. Sinfonietta staff is working on three financial scenarios for the 2020-21 season: one as originally planned, with the 65-member orchestra, beginning in October; a second, with a 40-45-musician ensemble playing in a different, less expensive venue, for a socially distanced

Paul Helfrich, executive director of Florida's Orlando Philharmonic. With no concerts, Helfrich organized staff into five task teams: venue and safety; patron relations and communication; digital content and streaming; education and community engagement; and programs and content. Board members, musicians, and some supporters have joined the teams.



audience, with some livestreamed or pre-recorded digital content. The most likely scenario, Hirsch believes, is the third: a much smaller chamber ensemble doing a mix of live and virtual events. For the next fiscal year, Hirsch is doing the orchestra's first-ever zero-based budget—projecting expenses based on the income that it can reasonably expect—which will likely be a

decrease of close to 50 percent of the organization's typical budget of about \$2.3 million. "It's a good approach, but we will have to build in a lot of ability to pivot," he points out. Hirsch is retiring from the orchestra at the end of June; his successor, Blake-Anthony Johnson, who has been collaborating on the plans, will be tasked with the next phases.

Florida's Orlando Philharmonic also had a leadership transition: Paul Helfrich, the executive director, started in February, and has been forging his new partnership with the orchestra's music director, Eric Jacobsen, who is quarantining in New York City, by phone and Zoom. The orchestra, which usually has an annual budget of \$5 million, furloughed half its staff at the end of March, but when it received PPP funds in April, it brought everyone back. With no concerts, Helfrich engaged the entire staff by breaking them into five task teams: venue and safety; patron relations and communication; digital content and streaming; education and community engagement; and programs and content. Board members, musicians, and some supporters have also joined the teams. "We've used it as a way to be very representative," Helfrich says. The education committee, for example, is rethinking how the orchestra's large in-school education programs might proceed. The patron relations committee created an audience survey to "test the waters" with questions about patron

comfort with returning to live performances and what alternative programming might interest them. The survey went out in May and will be repeated in July. "This is a fluid situation, changing on a daily basis," Helfrich says. "We have to have all these different scenarios. If anyone tells you with certainty where we'll be in mid-August—we don't know."

Chicago Sinfonietta has also made some operational changes. The staff meets together on Zoom three days a week, and the board chair is invited to sit in. "That has helped create an open line of communication," Hirsch says. The Sinfonietta has also hired a new employee to work on state-of-the-art video content. "Our online presence will have to be more robust, even after reopening," Hirsch says.

Alecia Lawyer, founder and artistic director of River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, says her ensemble plans to open in person or virtually, or using a combination of the two.



Lynn Lane

### Digital to the Fore

The digital space, once a peripheral area for orchestras, has now become central. However, no individual performing arts organization has yet figured out how to significantly monetize it, and with free, high-quality musical and educational content now flooding the web, it seems difficult to envision using it as a revenue stream that could replace that of live performance. Both the New York Philharmonic and Carnegie Hall have rolled out substantial free digital programs, using archival performances as well as new content. The New York Philharmonic's Borda says, "If we started to charge, that would limit the interactions people have with us. It's important work for reasons of relevancy, education, and connection. But not for meaningful revenue."

As to the possibility of using the internet for live performance, there have been hundreds, if not thousands, of at-home Zoom presentations, ranging from solo violinists





Music Director Eric Jacobsen and the Orlando Philharmonic in performance. Jacobsen sees the current moment as an artistic challenge.

in their bedrooms to the Metropolitan Opera's orchestra and chorus performing Verdi's "Va, pensiero." However, signal latency on the Zoom platform makes it impossible for musicians in different spaces to rehearse and perform together in the normal way. For "Va, pensiero," each musician in the Met performance recorded his or her own track, following a video of Yannick Nézet-Séguin's conducting and a piano line. Other musical organizations use click tracks to get everyone in sync online. (Launched this spring, the League of American Orchestras' [symphonyspot.org](https://www.symphonyspot.org) site is a centralized directory of hundreds of online performances, educational resources, and other

offerings from orchestras, conservatories, festivals, and musicians.)

The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra in Houston, founded by Alecia Lawyer, its artistic director, already has fifteen years' worth of digital content and began streaming video five years ago on multiple platforms—it claims a Facebook viewership of 6,500. "It's completely feasible and fine for us to livestream to an empty hall," says Lawyer, a self-described tech fan and the daughter of two video-game enthusiasts. "To me, it opens up massive possibilities of intimacy online. I'm looking forward to how this moment crafts the next wave of engagement in the arts." Lawyer



Indiana's Carmel Symphony and Music Director Janna Hymes at their regular performance venue, the Center for Performing Arts Palladium.

says ROCO plans to open in September, in whatever way the situation dictates. If not all of the 40 musicians can participate in person—in addition to any social-distancing rules, half of them live outside of Houston—she will add more Zoom content from individual musicians to the experience. "We are used to pivoting," she says. Since only 9 percent of the orchestra's \$1.2 million budget comes from ticket sales—the group has a donation-centered, relationship-based model—she is less concerned with the loss of earned revenue,

Janna Hymes, music director of Indiana's Carmel Symphony, is considering options for this fall that include performing in small groups, creating digital performances, partnering with restaurants to offer home concerts with takeout meals, and streaming content to retirement residences and hospitals



should ROCO have to operate primarily in the digital space for a while. "I think the future of orchestras could be that everyone has their own path and we come together sometimes," she asserts. "It might be the next wonderful way to operate, with individual musical personalities being valued instead of just the podium."

Eric Jacobsen, music director of the Orlando Philharmonic and co-artistic director of the Brooklyn chamber collective The Knights, also sees the current moment as an artistic challenge. Holed up with his family and his violinist brother Colin's family in their Brooklyn house, he recently recorded the Bach Double Violin Concerto with Colin and a small ensemble of fellow musicians—Gil Shaham, Adele Anthony, Tessa Lark, Chris Thile, and Michael Thurber—by sharing tracks back and forth. The finished product was posted online. "What we can do now is create great things," Jacobsen says. "We need to put out the quality, make the investment, dig deep, and create things that will have a lasting impression." With the Orlando Philharmonic, he hopes to use cancelled concert services to make a studio recording of the Jeremy Kittel Fiddle Concerto that the or-





Music Director Charles Dickerson III and Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

chestra premiered in January. The plan is to do three live broadcasts in late August and make the recording from that. Jacobsen is optimistic but realistic: “If it doesn’t happen then, it will happen some other time.”

For some orchestra leaders, digital performance is a way to keep musicians working (and paid) and to maintain contact with their own audience rather than trying to capture some unspecified larger one. Janna

Hymes, music director and artistic director of the Carmel Symphony in Indiana, asked her players to record short videos of themselves playing and talking, and put them on the orchestra’s website to stay connected with audiences. Hymes also created a series of half-hour online concerts, using clips from recorded concerts, with musicians and guests, like the town’s mayor, talking between the pieces, and streamed them

for six weeks on Saturday evenings at the regular 7:30 concert time. “We got 1,200 hits on the first one,” she says. “Instead of laying low, we wanted to have a presence in the community. If you disappear and come back after six months, maybe people will feel that they didn’t need you.”

With the Carmel Symphony’s planned opening in the fall appearing unlikely, Hymes is thinking about options for live performance—in very small groups, if necessary. A larger orchestra performance might be created digitally, using click tracks and space at local TV stations where sections could rehearse together, and where professional video-recording equipment is available. As for monetizing digital content, she’s thinking about partnering with restaurants to offer a home concert along with takeout dinner and wine. Or performing without an audience and livestreaming the concert; the orchestra is also considering streaming content to retirement homes and hospitals. “It’s exciting to think that we can be creative and innovative while we wait for the next several months, maybe



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Photos: Timothy Chooi (Ryan Brandenberg), Chrystal E. Williams (Alex Kruchoski), Henry Kramer (Hugo De Pril)

even years, to be back at full capacity in the hall,” says Hymes. “The worst-case scenario is that we hold onto all the money in the bank, sit tight, and don’t pay anybody. Our board is not in favor of that.”

For Charles Dickerson III, executive director and conductor of Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (ICYOLA), technology has been helpful in keeping his 100-plus young players engaged: teachers who normally lead sectional rehearsals before the group’s Sunday evening full-orchestra rehearsals have been doing them online. Though timely and well intentioned, the approach revealed the digital divide: not all of the musicians have online access. However, a grant awarded in May is being used to purchase iPads and internet capability for ICYOLA musicians who need that. Due to the pandemic shutdown, ICYOLA lost its season-finale concert (its only concert that isn’t free) and with it, about \$75,000 of its \$350,000 budget. In addition, the orchestra is 70 percent African American and 20 percent Latinx, and “COVID-19 has hit communities of color more impactfully than others,” Dickerson says. “Our contributors have the kinds of jobs that were immediately cut. I am fearful that the reduction of contributions from our supporters will continue for a few years, even when the pandemic is over. But we are a community used to being under-resourced and used to making the best cherry pie out of the worst cherries.”

If there is a silver lining to the situation, it may be that total upheaval offers time and opportunity for orchestras to rethink some structures and programs, and to consider how well they serve their missions. For example, Susan Nelson says that one of her orchestra clients is looking at its substantial education program. “They are saying, ‘If we can’t do it in the fall in the usual way, is that such a bad thing? These are some very traditional programs. Let’s start from scratch, respond to current practices, and talk with teachers about what they would really like us to do.’ The team is very excited about this.” Nelson also thinks that this is the moment for the entire nonprofit sector to tackle its severe undercapitalization. With revenue sources suddenly stripped away, she says, the lack of working capital to make change is painfully evident: “We have to talk to donors about how to infuse real new capital into the system.”

Predicting the full scope of the new normal is impossible, but organizations need to imagine what it could be, and plan for it. Michael Kaiser, chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland, thinks it is important for organizations to stay focused on the future, and to communicate that to their audiences and their donors. “Embrace donors. Have town halls, tell them what you are doing,

and the exciting plans that you are making for the future,” he told *MusicalAmerica.com*. “We should be planning exciting things for the return, so that people are motivated to stay with us—and write a check.” **S**

HEIDI WALESON is opera critic of the *Wall Street Journal* and author of *Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America*.



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