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Harpist Rachel O'Brien



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Violinist Ariel Horowitz

New Directions



Matt Dine

Flutist Anthony Trionfo

Emerging artists—the young musicians who burst onto the orchestra scene every year—face unprecedented challenges as they start careers at a time when most in-person performances are off the table. Simultaneously, the country’s reckoning with racism is resonating with these young musicians, who are re-envisioning their musical careers and their role as artists and activists.

by Heidi Waleson

In early 2020, Anthony Trionfo’s fledgling career was on the rise. He had won the Young Concert Artists Auditions in 2016, gaining a spot on the organization’s roster. By 2018, he had a busy performance calendar and a thriving teaching studio in Los Angeles. Then, in March of 2020, everything changed. “I was in New York for a performance on the day that the

city locked down,” the 25-year-old flutist recalls. “Fast forward, and all live concerts were cancelled for the foreseeable future. Some of my biggest venues yet were postponed, and then cancelled. It was not great for morale. I was not inspired to practice, that’s for sure. Then came the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, which for me closed the book on any self-promo-

tion. I had to come to terms with the question, how does my music affect the community? Does it matter?"

The pandemic shutdown has been cataclysmic for artists and arts organizations, with its sudden loss of livelihoods and, more existentially, reasons for being. For emerging performers just getting a toe-hold in the music business, momentum came to a screeching halt. Artists who had just gotten used to the idea that they could pay their bills were suddenly unemployed as not only live performances but teaching dried up, with parents unable to afford lessons for their children. On top of the shocks to daily life in the U.S. came political upheavals and a new spotlight on racial injustice.

Yet emerging artists like Trionfo, and the management companies that help them build their lives in music, have come

and commitment about what their lives ought to be once live performance becomes regularly possible again.

Monica Felkel, YCA's director of artist management, says, "These young artists, who have been looking at the model of

"I want to use art to propel deeper thinking, to be the champion of more composers—queer, non-binary, BIPOC, historically overlooked—and reflect social issues." —Flutist Anthony Trionfo

what a career is supposed to be—school, practicing, competitions, management—are actually the most flexible and adaptable. They understand technology and the expansion of social media. They are learning to shift to a new kind of career." The artists, she says, "are driving the conversations, and the programs that they are doing. With time on their hands, they

right into online performance. "It doesn't give me a sense of purpose; live performance is what I love," he says. However, participating in the YCA-hosted "Learning to Listen," an online roundtable about the Black experience in classical music,

helped him crystallize a new direction for his musical life. "Now, I'm coming to terms with what brings me joy, what I want to give to an audience, beyond executing flawlessly," he says. "I want to use art to propel deeper thinking, to be the champion of more composers—queer, non-binary, BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color], historically overlooked—and reflect social issues." Trionfo is working on creating his own music festival. And while he has started practicing again—"I'm nit-picking all my fundamentals, and really enjoying my long tones"—and working on some live performance projects, his view of the future is different from what it was pre-pandemic. "I see myself doing the performing, appearing in better and better venues," he says, "but I'm also seeing myself more as a leader, a person who is actively bringing the art forward. I don't think we can just go back to what we were doing, because people aren't going to care anymore. We need to embrace the mentality of premieres again, of music that is relevant to our time. That will enliven our audiences and touch new lives."

Music Education, Teaching, Social Media

When the pandemic hit, violinist Ariel Horowitz's short visit with her domestic partner in Colorado Springs turned into a four-month stay. Fortunately, she had brought her violin along. She finished up her Yale graduate degree remotely, livestreaming her (piano-less) graduation recital using her iPhone camera from the basement. The enforced lull also gave her time to work on grant-writing for the Heartbeat Music Project, the K-12 music education initiative on the Navajo Reservation that she founded in 2016 when she was an undergraduate at Juilliard; the effort paid



Ariel Horowitz works with students at the Heartbeat Music Project, the K-12 music education initiative on the Navajo Reservation that she founded in 2016 when she was an undergraduate at Juilliard.

up with strategies to adapt to this unprecedented time. Thanks to technology, collaboration, and innovation, musicians have found ways to work—and even get paid. New grant programs have replaced some lost income. And the soul-searching sparked by the enforced pause in the regular round of the music business has produced, for many young players, new ideas

can spend time with repertoire that they haven't had a moment to sit with. They can share more of their personality online in Zoom interviews or panel discussions. Their pre-recorded livestreams are reaching so many more people, growing their audience and fan base."

Trionfo, who moved back to his family home in Ohio in August, did not leap



Paul Shinn

Anthony Trionfo performs the Ibert Flute Concerto with the Orchestra of St. Luke's on Young Concert Artists' 2019 Gala at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, with Teddy Abrams conducting.

off in the form of a large new donation to the project.

During the summer months, Horowitz went into “tunnel vision” on her application for Concert Artists Guild. She worked hard on upgrading her technology skills for the organization’s newly all-vir-

Monica Felkel, director of artist management at Young Concert Artists, says that today’s young musicians “understand technology and the expansion of social media. They are learning to shift to a new kind of career.”



Matt Dine

tual competition. “It was a joyful process,” she says. “In pedagogy, you usually want the student to master the skill before they have to do it on deadline, but sometimes a deadline gives you the push to learn it.” Her work with Heartbeat put her into contention for CAG’s new Ambassador Awards, which recognize artists who are already committed to community building, and in October, she was chosen, along with three other artists and one ensemble, to join CAG’s roster.

At 24, Horowitz already had a raft of prestigious competition wins and solo performances under her belt, but winning CAG has been special, especially since the organization will help support Heartbeat in addition to representing her for con-

cert work. “I put my heart and soul into the application; it’s kind of amazing how it worked out,” she says. “There’s a lot of privilege in being able to say that I learned

“Being reminded of what is truly important forced me to reassess my values as an artist and an activist.”—Violinist Ariel Horowitz

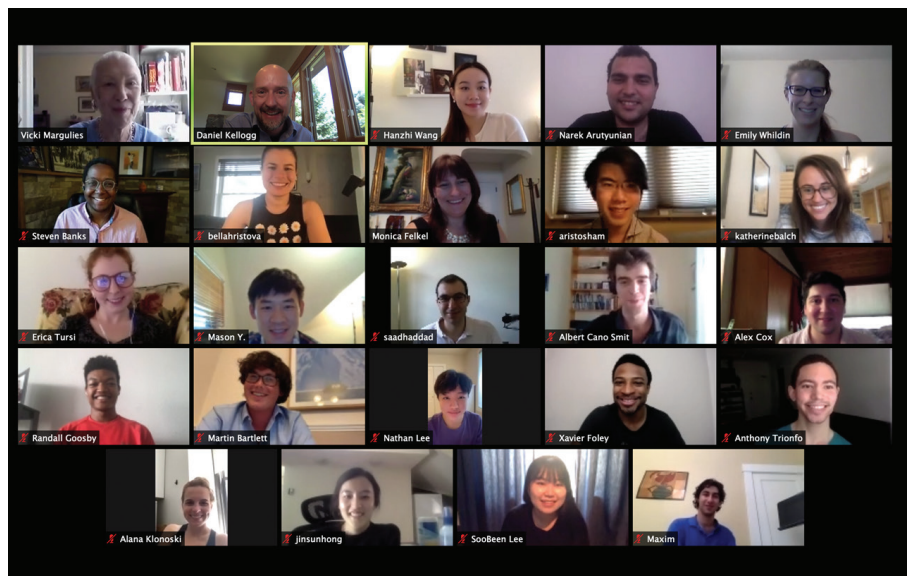
something from a global pandemic. But being faced with our societal interconnectedness in a way I haven’t experienced before, and being reminded of what is

truly important, forced me to reassess my values as an artist and an activist.” In addition to teaching violin at Mount Holyoke College, Horowitz has also used her online skills to make a living, running social media efforts part-time for various organizations. “A lot of musicians in this time have a day job,” she says.

Virtual Young Artists

Artist managers who focus on emerging artists were quick to adapt their practices in response to the pandemic. Nonprofits like Young Concert Artists and the Sphinx Organization rolled out new grant programs to help musicians replace lost income and fund creative projects. They also moved much of their work online. Sphinx, a partner in the National Alliance for Audition Support, which helps Black and Latinx performers develop audition skills with the goal of increasing diversity in orchestras, usually runs a summer intensive in Miami Beach for 20 musicians (the other partners in NAAS are the League of American Orchestras and New

World Symphony). This year, the intensive was held online, with four times the usual number of participants; a second intensive was held in November.



Young Concert Artists moved discussions about topics that are useful to its musicians online, including a Zoom workshop on technology and streaming with members of the YCA roster and artist management staff (in photo), and another workshop on public relations and social media.

Sphinx has also been able to present digital performing opportunities for its artists. “This is America,” a digital tour package for the Sphinx Virtuosi, featuring music by BIPOC composers, was engineered from individually recorded tracks; presenters including the University Music Series and the Napa Valley Festival booked it for the fall, providing both exposure and paychecks for the players. Sphinx’s annual fundraising gala was also held online. “Sixty-seven of our artists performed for more than 50,000 people—instead of the 2,500 who would have heard them live in Carnegie Hall,” says Afa S. Dworkin, president and artistic director of Sphinx.

Astral Artists, the Philadelphia-based non-profit that supports young performers, has been able to continue its community and school-based education programs virtually, and thus continue paying its artists who serve as teachers, mentors, and performers. Its annual series of debut recitals were made virtual as well, and re-branded Astral Nova. “In June, since we had no idea what would be possible in the fall, we decided that planning a virtual season was safer and more practical,” says Vera Wilson, Astral’s founder and interim executive director. She adds that the creativity and technological savvy of young performers has been a great plus. The virtual events are “an opportunity for them to plan their own recitals, including other disciplines, such as poetry, dance, or paintings—anything that is inspirational to them.” The recitals vary in length and forces—one has five musicians—and may feature pieces from Astral’s commissioning programs. Once live performances are possible again, the artists will have live debut recitals. Astral usually keeps its artists for four or five years before placing them with a commercial management; Wilson expects that some will now be staying longer.

Adapting—and Finding New Ways

Rachel O’Brien’s Astral Nova recital is scheduled for February 13. The 27-year-old harpist (who was known until her recent marriage as Rachel Lee Hall) has had a busy performing schedule for several years; winning first prize in the Houston Symphony’s 2019 Ima Hogg Competition accelerated things even more. At the same time, O’Brien was working on building up her social media following on Instagram;



Rachel O’Brien performs with the Houston Symphony and conductor Daniel Hege.

her followers are younger musicians, many in high school or college, aspiring to classical music careers. With live performance at a standstill, O’Brien has developed that

about it in paid online speaking engagements and Q&A sessions at music camps, universities, and other forums. “I see it as encouraging people, keeping them moti-

The future “might be somewhat different, considering the way we have had to use technology this year. We will continue to use those avenues to reach people, with music.”—Harpist Rachel O’Brien

online presence still further with concerts and videos. She also published a book about practicing, with a corresponding practice journal, and she has been talking

vated and on track when stuck at home,” she says. “Think of this time as positive thing, a way to practice more, and push one’s self to next level. You can be getting



Concerts Artists Guild moved its “Connections: A Virtual Gala” 2020 fundraiser online; the event featured mezzo-soprano Naomi Louisa O’Connell (in screenshot) along with other emerging artists.

better, strategizing for when world gets back to normal.” O’Brien, who is based in Roanoke, Virginia, has continued teaching harp at Hollins University; one dream for the future is to start a chamber music

there’s still lots of uncertainty and caution, there’s also joy and gratitude when we get together. That engagement, and the commitment to talking to them, thinking of projects together, is so important.”

Anthony Trionfo concurs. “I’m so lucky to be with Young Concert Artists,” he says. “Even though presenters are not giving live concerts, YCA is keeping the connec-

and guest artists. “It gave a sense of community, treating the artists like family, instead of isolating them and leaving them in silence.”

Artists have met the financial, spiritual, and emotional challenges of getting through the pandemic in different ways. For many, it has offered an opportunity for a reset. But what will happen when there’s



Vera Wilson of Astral Artists says that the organization has continued to support its emerging musicians during the pandemic,

and moved its annual debut recitals, now rebranded as Astral Nova, online.

series in Virginia. The pause in live performance also made it easier for her to take some time out to get married.

Changing Perspectives

Reactions to the pandemic have evolved over its long months. “For our artists, the tenor was more alarming in the spring and summer,” Afa Dworkin recalls. “There was lots of frustration, pain, and fear. They didn’t know what was coming; what their paycheck situation would be. Now, while



Members of the Sphinx Virtuosi and EXIGENCE Vocal Ensemble perform during the Sphinx Organization’s virtual gala, *Lift Ev’ry Voice*, on October 15, 2020, which was viewed by 50,000 people.

tions alive, sending out videos, pushing presenters to evolve.” He was especially grateful for the regular online meetings and workshops that gathered the whole roster with the YCA leadership, managers,

a vaccine, and regular live performances can resume? Will things be different?

Rachel O’Brien believes that the future “might be somewhat different, considering the way we have had to use technology this year. It was unfortunate, but it opened up a lot of new avenues for us to reach one another. We will continue to use those avenues to reach people, with music.” Indeed, these young performers, more immediately comfortable with technology than some more established artists, have been well positioned to use and develop it during the pandemic, and will likely go on doing afterwards. Ariel Horowitz says, “I think our field was moving towards a mode that was more accessible; the pandemic has accelerated that by 20 years.” Her own dreams for herself, she says, are “so much more flexible” than they were prior to the pandemic. “I’m really invested in creating a classical music landscape that is more accessible and equitable.”

Young artists and managers are working on a future—and even a present—that includes live performance. In November, YCA violinist Randall Goosby made his debut with the Mobile Symphony, playing the Beethoven Violin Concerto four times in 24 hours, doubling his original contract, so that the orchestra could accommodate



“I don’t have anybody who is giving up,” says artist manager Marianne Sciolino, seen here with client Francisco Fullana following a September 2018 concerto performance with Connecticut’s Norwalk Symphony Orchestra. In October 2020, the violinist switched repertory to perform with the reduced, socially distanced musicians of the Heartland Festival Orchestra in Illinois.

Emerging artists have met the financial, spiritual, and emotional challenges of the pandemic in multiple ways.

more socially distanced audience members. “These younger artists are hungry and willing to be flexible and take risks,” Felkel says.

Marianne Sciolino, who heads the NYC-based Sciolino Artist Management,



Craig Gorkiewicz

Afa S. Dworkin, president and artistic director of the Sphinx Organization, which works to develop opportunities for classical musicians of color, says Sphinx has moved multiple programs online, drawing more participants and larger audiences.

has also been busy renegotiating her artists’ live concert engagements. In October, for example, violinist Francisco Fullana played with the Heartland Festival Orchestra in Illinois, switching the repertory to Max Richter’s *The Four Seasons Recomposed* in order to work with the reduced, socially distanced orchestra musicians. Sciolino is also working on rebooking all this year’s cancelled engagements for future seasons and sending out email blasts with her artists’ concertos for 2021-22 as well as 2022-23. “Orchestras are booking for next season,” she says. “We can’t just not do anything.” So far, she says, “I don’t have anybody who is giving up.”

Felkel sees a post-pandemic world in which artists are newly empowered. “What has come out of this is the value of the artists being true to themselves,” she says. “Down the road, when an orchestra

comes to me for a specific violinist for the Beethoven or Lalo concerto, that artist will want to know what else they can bring to the table for that engagement. I’ve had artists say, ‘When we have regular concerts again, I want to make sure I’m in the community a day before. I don’t want to just go to a school, I want to go to a soup kitchen or a senior facility.’ They are realizing who has been cut off from access to music during this pandemic.” The special projects that the artists have undertaken during this time, as well as their newfound openness to many kinds of audience engagement, are now integral aspects of their musician DNA and cannot help but have an effect on what the concert landscape becomes. Says Felkel, “I think artists will be leading the way.” **S**

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



Randall Goosby
Photo: Kaupo Kikkas



“These are the stars of the next generation.”

- THE WASHINGTON POST

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