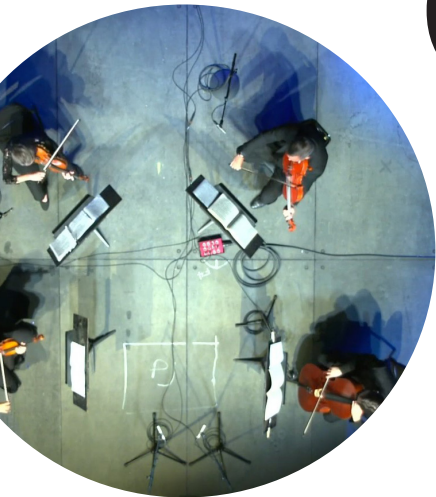




Seasons of Change



As we tentatively begin to emerge from the pandemic, what will the fall orchestra season look like? One thing is certain: It won't be business as usual. Orchestras have grappled with the pandemic and sought to confront racial injustice while adopting notably different approaches to the new season. Flexibility is key, given the unpredictable nature of the pandemic.



By Steven Brown



In a simpler, long-ago time—January 2020—the Columbus Symphony’s trustees ratified a new mission statement: “Inspiring and building a strong community through music is the core of everything we do.”

“At first blush, it doesn’t sound earth-shattering,” Executive Director Denise Rehg says. “But that is way different from all the mission statements we used to have, which were about the excellence of the music. It clearly placed us in the role of being a servant-leader of the community.”

The Ohio orchestra’s commitment faced an immediate test, of course, when COVID-19 upended everything. “I don’t want to use the word fortuitous in the midst of a pandemic,” Rehg adds, but “COVID offered us the perfect situation” to prove the group could live up to its credo. The orchestra reassigned part of its slender staff to create two educational websites and enlisted its musicians to make instructional videos. Thanks to everyone’s efforts, the orchestra’s educational reach expanded from 22,000 students pre-pandemic to 55,000. When gradual reopening made community concerts possible, the orchestra played 23 of them in nine days. “The good things we learned and achieved through COVID—we’re not planning to discontinue them. We’re adding on top of them,” Rehg says.

The Columbus Symphony is just one of the orchestras forging ahead with initiatives born during the pandemic and the societal reckoning that came on its heels: the demonstrations and soul-searching set off by the George Floyd killing and the alarming rise in violence against Asian Americans.

Orchestras are moving ahead with initiatives born during the pandemic and the societal reckoning with racial injustice.

Forced by the pandemic to stream concerts online, groups ranging from Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra to Houston Symphony to San Francisco’s Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and Chorale are now giving virtual performances a permanent place on their schedules. In Pennsylvania, the pandemic has influenced the Johns-

town Symphony’s live-concert plans: Audiences took so well to community concerts by a string quartet and other small ensembles—some of the group’s first performances as the shutdowns eased—that the orchestra is launching a chamber series to keep them in the spotlight.

After long neglecting music by women and composers of color, orchestras are embracing them like never before. The Atlanta Symphony’s 2021-22 classical series will include artists from underrepresented groups in every program as composers, performers, or both, says Executive Director Jennifer Barlament. The bounty includes 23 works by women and composers of color, including the world premieres of Conrad Tao’s Violin Concerto, Xavier Foley’s Double Bass Concerto, and the violin-concerto version of Missy Mazzoli’s *Dark With Excessive Bright*, plus pieces by a century’s worth of composers from Lili Boulanger and Tōru Takemitsu to Alvin Singleton and Jessie Montgomery. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra are among the many ensembles of every size that will also perform generous helpings of works from once-minimized groups in addition to “standard” repertoire.

Many orchestras are featuring artists from long-underrepresented groups as composers, performers, or both throughout the 2021-22 season.

By premiering commissioned works and spotlighting existing ones, orchestras nationwide will highlight the rich diversity of today’s composers. The creators on season lineups include Xi Wang, Leanna Primiani, Roberto Sierra, Viet Cuong, Caroline Shaw, Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate, Gabriela Lena Frank, Vivian Fung, Joel Thompson, Unsuik Chin, Clarice Assad, Kaoru Ishibashi (also known as Kishi Bashi), and even a young undergraduate at Indiana University, KiMani Bridges. The Las Vegas Philharmonic will devote its season to pairing Beethoven symphonies with modern-day pieces, including Anna Clyne’s Beethoven-inspired *Stride* and a new work by Mexico’s Juan Pablo Contreras.

Meanwhile, orchestras are rediscovering works by long-neglected Black composers such as William Grant Still, George

Walker, and Florence Price. One example: William Levi Dawson’s *Negro Folk Symphony*, premiered by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934, will be performed by the Baltimore Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, and Seattle Symphony. New attention is also going to women from the past—such as Louise Farrenc, a French contemporary of Hector Berlioz, and Ida Moberg, a Finnish contemporary of Jean Sibelius.



The Columbus Symphony is expanding its programs for local schools, Executive Director Denise Rehg says, and will start giving free tickets to people ages 6 to 16 to win them over to the live-music experience.

Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society, in keeping with its emphasis on the Baroque and Classical periods, has enlisted an artistic partner to help it seek out underrepresented composers from the past; it also recently livestreamed the premiere of a work by today’s Jonathan Woody that incorporates themes by Charles Ignatius Sancho, a Black composer of the 18th century who was enslaved. The Cincinnati Symphony, investing in a new staff position, has hired a chief diversity officer to orient it toward equity, diversity, and inclusion onstage and off.

All this activity does not mean that orchestras’ social-justice work is finished.



“The pandemic forced us to fast-forward some of these future-oriented and equity-oriented endeavors, which might have taken years to develop,” says Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Executive Director Jennifer Barlament. “It’s really important.”

Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra



The Cincinnati Symphony recently hired Harold Brown as its first chief diversity and inclusion officer, a senior-management position reporting directly to the orchestra's president and CEO.

But the increased presence of women and Black, Indigenous, and other artists of color in programming is a tangible shift as part of ongoing efforts to effect real, lasting change.

The past year's storms have had "a silver lining," the Atlanta Symphony's Barlament says. Orchestras had long been aware of technology's possibilities and diversity's value, she continues. But they needed a push, and it finally came. "The pandemic forced us to fast-forward some of these future-oriented and equity-oriented endeavors, which might have taken years or decades to develop," Barlament points out. "I think it's a renaissance for American orchestras, to come to terms with what it means to be an American orchestra. What does it mean to be the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, when people have become so much more aware of how differences and identities—including race and ethnicity—affect everything in our world? It's been a long time coming, and it's really important."

Roger Mastroianni



"Orchestras, like most arts organizations, tended to approach their work from the view that 'We know what's best.' There wasn't much give or take," says Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra President and CEO Jonathan Martin. "We have discarded that whole, ineffective way of doing things."

Planning Ahead

Amid the constantly changing situation of the pandemic, many orchestras have had to plan and re-plan their seasons, postponing public announcements months past their usual timing. The Cincinnati Symphony penciled in a fall season for reduced orchestra and audiences, President and CEO Jonathan Martin says, then went back to the drawing board when it learned that everything could return to full-size.

The Houston Symphony in mid-June announced much of its classical season, but gaps remained here and there, such as weeks that showed the guest conductor but left the musical works to be announced. The orchestra may capitalize on the experience it gained last year, when it was one of the few ensembles that performed full classical and pops series in front of live audiences—albeit with social distancing limiting the sizes of both audience and orchestra. Because of shifting international travel restrictions and unexpected surges in the virus, artists sometimes had to drop out at the last minute. That forced the Houston Symphony to "constantly redo" its plans for repertoire and performers, Executive Director and CEO John Mangum recalls. "It was an ongoing process of continuous reinvention," and he thinks flexibility will remain the byword as the virus charts its own course.

Reinvention is in store for the Houston Symphony's concert formats, too, now that its audiences have experienced a season of compact programs: roughly 75 minutes of music without intermission. "We're not in a mad rush to go back

Wilson Parish Photography



"We're not in a mad rush to go back to business as usual," says Houston Symphony Executive Director and CEO John Mangum, shown preparing for the orchestra's livestream on August 22, 2020. "We want to take a lot of what we learned this year and bake it into what we do."

Melissa Taylor Photography



The Houston Symphony regularly performed full concerts for live audiences during the pandemic—albeit with social distancing and capacity limits. In photo, David Robertson leads the Houston Symphony in works of Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Weber on May 14, 2021.

to business as usual," Mangum says. The orchestra has gotten copious feedback from its patrons, and "we want to take a lot of what we learned this year and bake it into what we do. Some patrons, especially the weeknight patrons, really like when concerts are over before 9:30 p.m. Some people want the traditional concert experience, where the bars are open and they can have a drink at intermission. It may be that on Friday night, you get your 70 minutes of music with no intermission. It may be that on Saturday, there's an encore—or there's an overture or something that we didn't announce—and there's an intermission between the concerto and the symphony."

After streaming its Saturday concerts last season, treating the virtual performances as an either/or option with the live ones, the Houston Symphony will experiment in the coming season with subscription and ticket packages that combine live and virtual events. The orchestra will offer "a sort of hybrid, where you have an opportunity to attend in person or watch the livestream, or attend in person and watch the livestream on a different night," Mangum explains. "We're looking at how that can become more integrated into the ecosystem of the Houston Symphony, and integrated into how our audience experiences the concerts. If you were blown away by a performance and want you want to show it to a friend, you have that available."

Orchestras that relied on virtual performances last year as their only option are now reevaluating their strategies as they go back before their audiences. At press time, the Minnesota Orchestra hadn't

decided how many of its performances it will livestream, Director of Communications Gwen Pappas says. Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, which last season streamed videotaped performances that it packaged with interviews and other material, will switch to livestreaming the Sunday afternoon performance of each subscription program, President and CEO David Snead says.

The Atlanta Symphony, another orchestra that offered prerecorded and packaged performances last season, will stick with that, Barlament says. Rather than trying to evoke full-length concerts, their online programs will encompass music, interviews, and other material in one hour. That's no seat-of-the-pants decision: It sprang from viewers' behavior. "We can tell exactly how long they watch," Barlament says. "The data shows that after about an hour, the viewership falls off pretty significantly. So we're focusing on that time window to create something that's engaging throughout the program."

Streaming has served the Atlanta Symphony well. Not only did the orchestra reach more than 250,000 people online over the past year, Barlament says, the streaming platform has brought in single-ticket and subscription revenue. It also qualifies the orchestra for State of Georgia film-production tax credits, which the orchestra resells to individuals or businesses who are facing Georgia taxes—thus generating income for the orchestra.

While streaming has brought in ticket revenue for San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and Chorale, it has



Handel and Haydn Society

This spring, the Handel and Haydn Society livestreamed the premiere of *Suite for String Orchestra After the Works of Charles Ignatius Sancho*, by composer Jonathan Woody (in photo). Sancho (c. 1729–December 14, 1780) was born on a ship carrying enslaved people, escaped slavery, and later composed and published classical music. The orchestra will give Woody's work an in-person premiere at its 2021-22 season-opening concert.



Atlanta Symphony Orchestra



Caroline Tompkins



Brantley Gutierrez

In November 2020, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Concertmaster David Coucheron and bassist and composer Xavier Foley performed Foley's *For Justice and Peace* for Violin, Bass, and String Orchestra with the Atlanta Symphony (top photo). Premieres in the orchestra's coming season will be by Foley, Missy Mazzoli (bottom left), Conrad Tao (bottom right), and more.

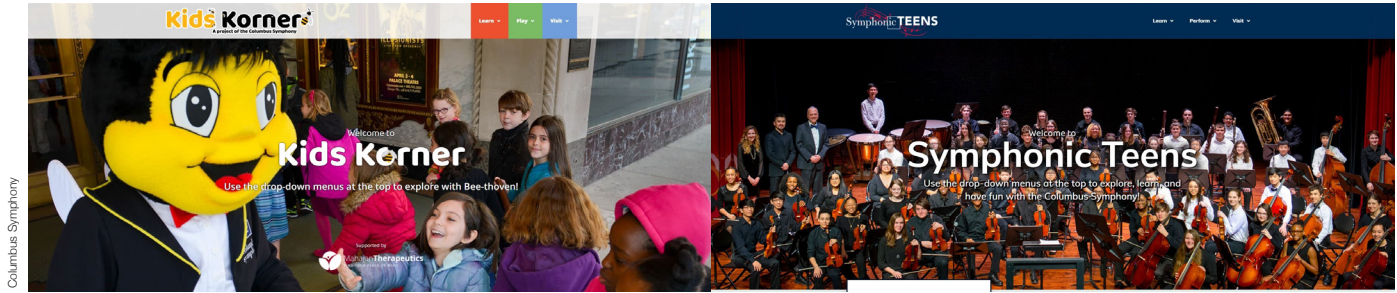
served mainly to "ensure connection with our wonderful and generous community," Executive Director Courtney Beck says. The group—which, despite its name's focus on Baroque music, also commissions new works—has injected its online programming with a flavor of its own. The PBO/Virtual portal goes well beyond performances, making a place for recurring features starring Music Director Richard Egarr and others.

In the monthly "Live from Amsterdam," Egarr performs in sites throughout the Dutch city that's his home. In "What's New & H.I.P.," Egarr and composer Tarik O'Regan, PBO's artistic partner, chat with composers who create new music for old instruments. "Up on the Downbeat" is a series of virtual dance classes illustrating the original steps that dovetailed with the music of centuries ago. Beck particularly admires "Live from Amsterdam," in which Egarr "found unique sacred and secular spaces to perform" in the historic city. The orchestra's goal in creating the varied menu, she adds, is "to be unique and to offer to the public something they couldn't get elsewhere at a horrible time when everyone was trying to connect."

Online Learning

Virtual programming has opened new horizons for orchestras' educational programs. The Atlanta Symphony's Talent Development Program—which provides instrumental instruction and other guidance for Black and Latinx young people—couldn't open student recitals to live audiences during the pandemic, Barlament says. When concerts that would have been limited to live audiences of 600 or so moved onto the internet, "thousands of people logged in. It was wonderful to get that exposure for those kids," Barlament says. "And it allowed us to make the production values cooler—all these great interviews with the kids. You heard where they're going to college, what they're excited about, and what they like about music. It allowed us to shine the spotlight on them and elevate their voices."

Not only will the ASO continue that, it will keep beefing up a statewide educational program it launched in tandem with the Georgia Music Educators Association. Based on suggestions from teachers and students, "Level-Up with the ASO" features orchestra members in short videos that focus on finer points of instru-



Columbus Symphony

The Columbus Symphony created two new websites for young people and expanded its online education offerings during the pandemic, reaching 55,000 students, up from the previous 22,000. The orchestra will continue to expand online and in-person education efforts in the coming season.



Johnstown Symphony Orchestra

“By putting out digital content, we’re reaching people who never had access to our work before,” says Johnstown Symphony Orchestra Executive Director Jessica Satava, shown here at the orchestra’s April “Horns in the Hills” performance at the Roxbury Bandshell. “Of course, there’s no substitute for the experience of live orchestral music.”



Johnstown Symphony Orchestra

The Johnstown Symphony’s first pandemic-era performance as a full orchestra came this March at the Kovalchick Convention and Athletic Complex on the campus of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, when it gave an educational concert for the cameras. The space was large enough for the Johnstown Symphony Youth Orchestra to join the adult musicians for a side-by-side performance. Johnstown Symphony Music Director James Blachly conducted.



Johnstown Symphony Orchestra

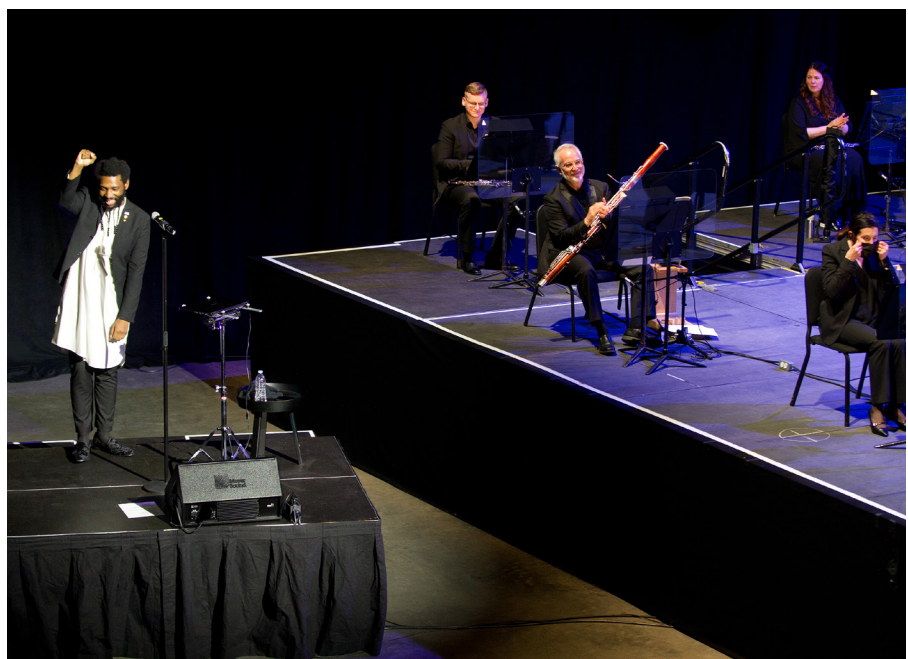
Johnstown Symphony Chorus Director Jeffrey L. Webb hosted virtual sessions for young music students that spotlighted people of color who have leadership roles in the region’s classical-music ensembles. Next season, the orchestra plans to bring the students to in-person concerts and for members of the orchestra to work with them.

mental playing, from scales to spiccato. The orchestra aims to build the archive to 150 videos, which tens of thousands of student musicians across Georgia will have at their fingertips.

The Columbus Symphony, after creating its online program for the Columbus City Schools, now wants to take it to other school districts, Executive Director Rehg says. Hoping to win over young people to the live-music experience, the orchestra will start giving free tickets to its subscription concerts to people ages six to sixteen. And the group is brainstorming a program to introduce children from underserved groups to music.

The Johnstown Symphony’s first pandemic-era performance as a full orchestra came this March, when musicians spread out in a basketball arena to play an

educational concert for the cameras. The copious floor space allowed Johnstown Symphony Youth Orchestra to join the adult musicians for a side-by-side performance, Executive Director Jessica Satava recalls, and “the response to the livestream was phenomenal. We had thousands and thousands of kids—many school districts—experience that with us. By putting out digital content, we’re reaching new and different audiences—people who never had access to our work before.” School districts benefited, too, because they saved the time and expense of bus trips. “Of course, we all know that there’s no substitute for the experience of live orchestral music,” Satava says, “but adding this as an additional component really makes a difference for the schools, to have that option.”



O’Neil Arnold

The Louisville Orchestra performed “Ravel and the Power of Black Music” on March 27, 2021, which featured musician and Louisville city councilman Jecorey Arthur (at left) and his education program on the history of Black music from spirituals through jazz into the 1980s. In the first half of the concert, Louisville Orchestra Music Director Teddy Abrams was piano soloist and conducted the orchestra in the Ravel Piano Concerto, which was influenced by jazz.

Chris Witzke



Next April, the Louisville Orchestra will launch a multi-season series pairing Black composers with Jewish ones. "Freedom is obviously a historically Jewish theme, and that resonates with Black culture in America from the earliest times," Music Director Teddy Abrams says.

O'Neil Arnold



The Louisville Orchestra opened its virtual season on October 3, 2020 with bass-baritone Davóne Tines singing Samuel Barber's *Dover Beach*, excerpts from Caroline Shaw's *By and By*, and his own work *Vigil*, written in honor of Louisville native Breonna Taylor, who was slain by police officers in 2020.

Streaming also let the orchestra tailor a program to Johnstown's central-area school district, which has the region's highest proportion of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) students—"those who are least likely to feel like they have access to what we do," Satava says. Johnstown Symphony Chorus Director Jeffrey L. Webb, who is Black, hosted a series of virtual sessions aimed at the young instrumentalists and singers in the school system's performing groups. Spotting people of color who have leadership roles in the region's classical-music ensembles, Webb invited them to discuss music and their journey in it.

To gauge the impact of the programs on the young viewers, the Johnstown orchestra took before-and-after surveys. "We asked the students at the beginning, 'What do you know about classical music? Have you heard classical music? Would you consider coming to a concert?' At the beginning, 3 percent of the students said yes," Satava recalls. "At the end, we asked, 'What would your interest be in coming to the concert hall or being part of a mu-

sic-making activity?' Eighty percent said, 'Absolutely yes. Give us the opportunity to experience classical music together.'" The orchestra is now working to bring the students to in-person concerts next season and to create a setup for members of the orchestra to teach or coach them.

Contemporary Correlatives

As the site of the Breonna Taylor

killing by police, the city of Louisville, Kentucky faced an eruption of anger and protests. The Louisville Orchestra opened the current season with *Vigil*, a tribute to Taylor by bass-baritone Davóne Tines and three collaborators, and the coming season's opener this October will turn to the other upheaval: The orchestra will premiere seven works by local composers looking back at the pandemic.

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Anthony Roth Costanzo (left) as Galatea and Davóne Tines (right) as Polifemo in Handel's *Acis, Galatea e Polifemo*, presented by Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and Chorale in February 2020.

"It's almost like commissioning a statue or plaza that commemorates an event," says Teddy Abrams, the Louisville Orchestra's music director. "We want to give the city a piece of public art that belongs to them." Or seven pieces, in this case. A single one might not suffice.

"Part of this experience of the last 18 months—as of October—is that it's not one thing," Abrams continues. "It's not a single, discrete emotion. Yes, there has been tragedy. But there also has been incredible resilience, incredible hope. This is so much broader, and we're still living it. I feel like the language of music might be the ideal platform to help us understand what we've all gone through."

Many orchestras are embracing diversity and inclusion by programming works by composers from too-long-ignored groups. The Louisville Orchestra is offering a particular perspective: Next

April, it will launch a multi-season series pairing Black composers with Jewish ones. Looking back across centuries of history, Abrams notes, Jews and Blacks have both suffered displacement, enslavement, and oppression. "Freedom is obviously a historically Jewish theme, and that resonates with Black culture in America from the earliest times," Abrams says. "That's why I thought this is subject matter we can really explore. As a Jewish American, I find personal resonance here." The Louisville series' opening installment will culminate in the oratorio *The Ordering of Moses* by Black composer R. Nathaniel Dett, whose portrait of the Old Testament prophet premiered at the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's May Festival in 1937.

The National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. will also seek musical kinships, putting works by George Walker and William Grant Still alongside Beethoven symphonies in a three-week festival in January. A program by Boston's Handel and Haydn Society will build a bridge from choruses by George Frideric Handel to early incarnations of Black spirituals. "The connective tissue is the Old Testament," Handel and Haydn President and CEO Snead says. Spirituals "came out of the pain of slavery, and enslaved people in America drew inspiration from the Old Testament, turning it into song," he explains. Handel drew on the same material "and turned it into beautiful music. We will talk about how both drew inspiration from that source, and how it

can inspire us." (That Handel himself can now be viewed as problematic, because he reportedly profited from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, illustrates the complexities of where we are today.)

Remaining Relevant

Philharmonia Baroque and the Handel and Haydn Society may anchor themselves in music created long ago, but both intend to stay relevant today. Philharmonia Baroque has tapped baritone Davóne Tines as creative partner. In that role he'll not only perform and curate programs, but work alongside the staff, board, and patrons to help the group define its 21st-century role.

When it comes to social justice, Handel and Haydn's bona fides date back at least



Philharmonia Baroque Executive Director Courtney Beck with baritone Davóne Tines, the organization's new creative partner. Tines will perform and curate programs and work with staff, board, and patrons to explore the organization's 21st-century role.



Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra's PBOVirtual portal includes performances, seminars, and masterclasses, as well as programs featuring Music Director Richard Egarr (in photo), who had been unable to travel to San Francisco from his home in Amsterdam due to the pandemic, in conversation with PBO Composer in Residence Tarik O'Regan and others.



The Handel and Haydn Society brought countertenor Reginald Mobley on board as its first-ever programming consultant to help diversify its repertoire. Mobley performed (at right in photo) in a February 16, 2021 Handel and Haydn Society streamed concert, “Glories of the Baroque Vivaldi,” at St. Cecilia Parish, Boston.

to Jan. 1, 1863, when the group took part in a Boston jubilee concert celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation on the very day it took effect. A concert every January now commemorates the occasion. Since 2016, a second annual program—dubbed “Every Voice”—has focused on composers from underrepresented groups. As the leader of the concerts, Black countertenor Reginald Mobley has uncovered little-known music. Snead says, “I turned to him after one of these events and said, ‘We should be doing this on a bigger stage. Can you help us find ways to bring these composers to our subscription concerts?’” That’s now part of Mobley’s mission as Handel and Haydn’s programming consultant. Among other pieces, Mobley led the group to Chevalier de Saint-Georges’ Violin Concerto in G Major, which opened the society’s 2020–21 season finale.

Mobley’s contribution shows that the breadth of a group’s programming depends on the vision of the people involved. Taking that idea to the organization-wide level, the Cincinnati Symphony recently hired its first chief diversity and inclusion officer: Harold Brown, a Cincinnati native with deep connections to the city’s multifaceted community. In a senior-management position reporting directly to President and CEO Martin, Brown “has not only the responsibility but the authority to push across the entire organization,” Martin says. “He has the ability to go from department to department and have conversations with his peer group—chief marketing officer, chief philanthropy offi-



Liz Lunder

Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society will continue to present virtual performances even after the pandemic, says President and CEO David Snead.

cer, chief operating officer—and say, “This needs to change. This needs to shift.”

As communities and their demographics evolve, orchestras say that learning to serve them is a moral and business imperative.

As communities and their demographics evolve, Martin says, learning to serve them is a moral and business imperative for orchestras. The past year may have delivered the long-needed catalyst. “In the old days, orchestras—like most arts organizations—tended to approach their work from the view that ‘We know what’s best, and we’re going to give you this, and you’re going to love it.’ There wasn’t much give or take,” Martin says. “We have discarded that whole, ineffective way of doing things. Look at it this way. How do we get funded? Ninety-nine percent of the funding that keeps us alive comes from the community—ticket sales, endowments, the annual fund, family foundations. If you allow yourself, as so many of

us have over the decades, to stray from the core needs of your community, you do so at your peril. We’ve got an opportunity to fundamentally change our approach, and we’ll have a better chance of survival if we’re responsive to it.”

The Louisville Symphony has its community in mind with the Latin American festival it will present next season. The orchestra’s hometown, conductor Abrams points out, has the second-largest Cuban American population in the United States, behind only Miami. The festival will include a commissioned work by Dafnis Prieto, the Cuban-born composer, bandleader, and MacArthur Fellow. “It’s a concerto grosso for orchestra and timba band,” Abrams says. “Everybody knows salsa. Timba is related, but it’s the energetic, percussion-driven version of it.” Abrams, who listened to Prieto’s first draft via MIDI technology, says he expects the piece to bring audiences to their feet—dancing. “That sounds like I’m being cheeky,” he says. “But I mean it quite literally. It will be hard not to.”

Abrams sees works like Prieto’s feeding into “a new American canon” of boundary-crossing works—a counterpoint to the longstanding European canon. And if the new classics occasionally stir up audiences to dance, maybe that’s everyone’s reward for making it through the past year. **S**

STEVEN BROWN is a Houston-based writer specializing in classical music and the arts. He previously served as classical music critic of the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Charlotte Observer*, and *Houston Chronicle*.