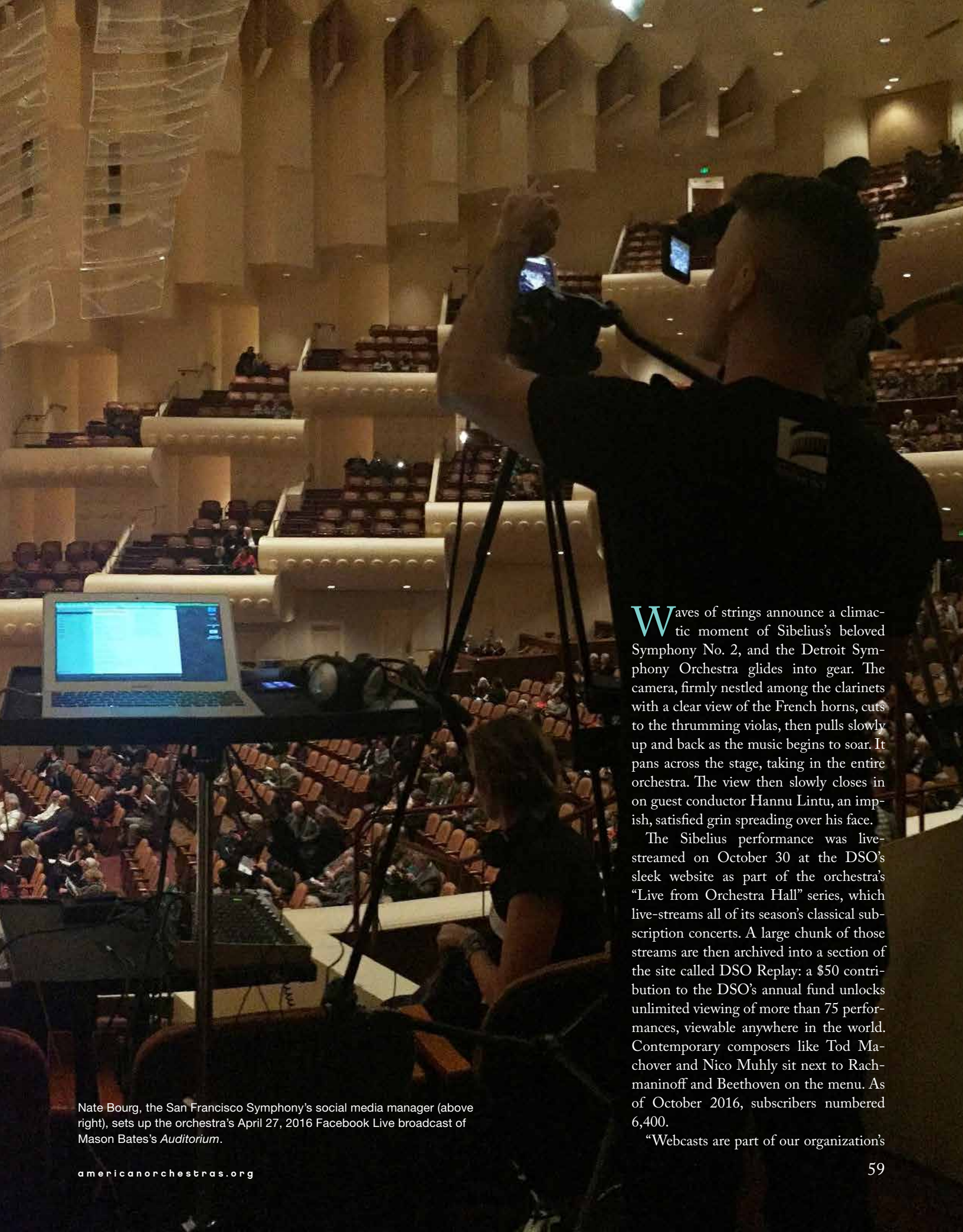


Streaming Symphonies



Orchestras embrace webcasts, and broaden their audiences in new ways. But are virtual concerts affecting the live experience?

by Marke Bieschke

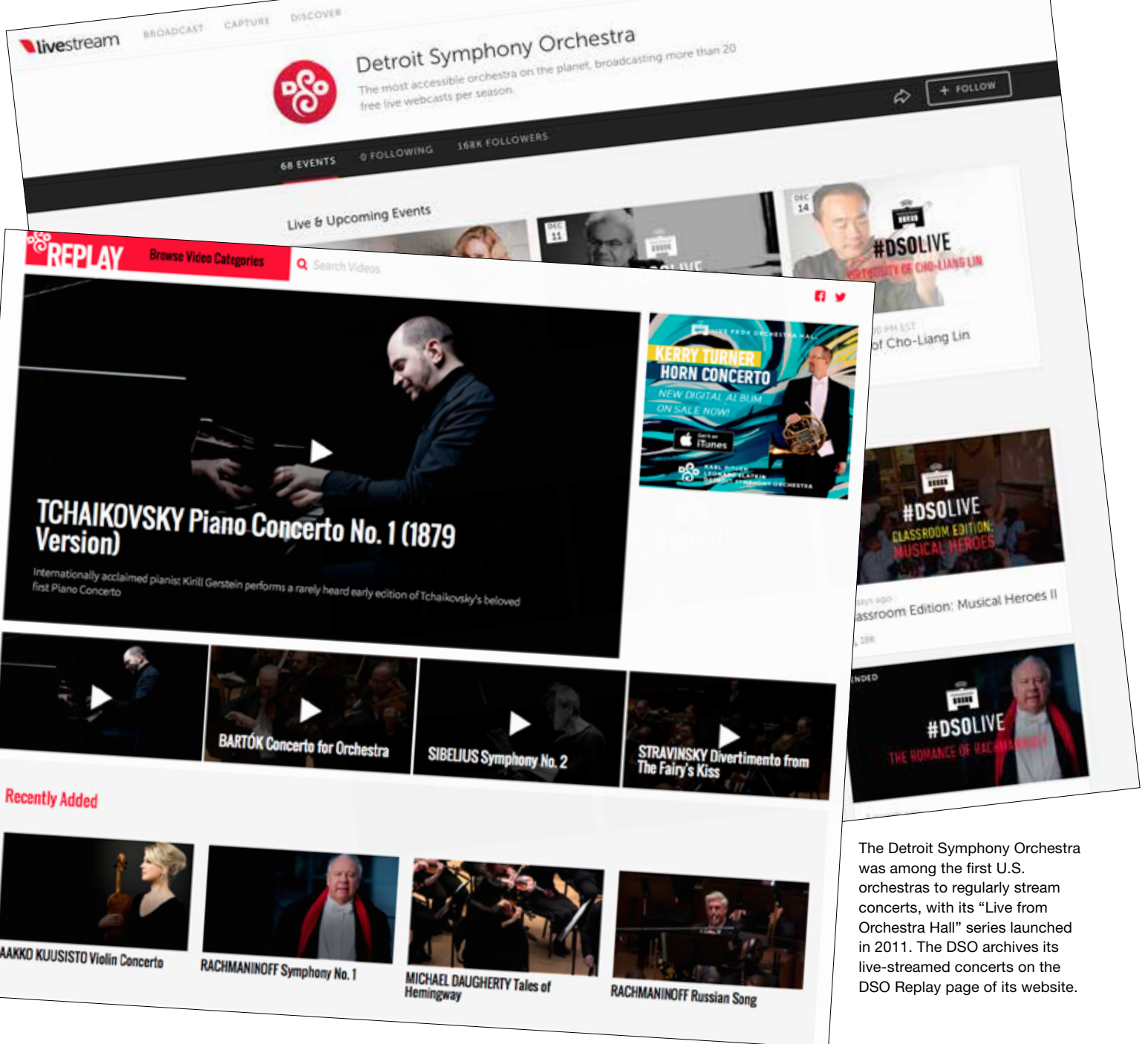


Nate Bourg, the San Francisco Symphony's social media manager (above right), sets up the orchestra's April 27, 2016 Facebook Live broadcast of Mason Bates's *Auditorium*.

Waves of strings announce a climactic moment of Sibelius's beloved Symphony No. 2, and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra glides into gear. The camera, firmly nestled among the clarinets with a clear view of the French horns, cuts to the thrumming violas, then pulls slowly up and back as the music begins to soar. It pans across the stage, taking in the entire orchestra. The view then slowly closes in on guest conductor Hannu Lintu, an impish, satisfied grin spreading over his face.

The Sibelius performance was live-streamed on October 30 at the DSO's sleek website as part of the orchestra's "Live from Orchestra Hall" series, which live-streams all of its season's classical subscription concerts. A large chunk of those streams are then archived into a section of the site called DSO Replay: a \$50 contribution to the DSO's annual fund unlocks unlimited viewing of more than 75 performances, viewable anywhere in the world. Contemporary composers like Tod Machover and Nico Muhly sit next to Rachmaninoff and Beethoven on the menu. As of October 2016, subscribers numbered 6,400.

"Webcasts are part of our organization's



The Detroit Symphony Orchestra was among the first U.S. orchestras to regularly stream concerts, with its “Live from Orchestra Hall” series launched in 2011. The DSO archives its live-streamed concerts on the DSO Replay page of its website.

identity now,” Marc Geelhoed, DSO’s director of digital initiatives, told *Symphony* in an email interview. “We begin with the orchestra and program for the live audience, and the webcast follows from there.”

The phenomenon of webcasting orchestral performances—live-streaming them through an organization’s website, a third-party partner like Livestream, or, more recently, Facebook Live—has exploded recently, drawing millions of viewers to online symphonic performances, watched from laptop computers and mobile devices. More and more, orchestra fans have

More and more, orchestra fans have the ability to plug their earbuds into their iPads or hook up their immersive home entertainment system, and enjoy the sights and sounds of a full performance in the venue of their choosing.

the ability to plug their earbuds into their iPads or hook up their immersive home entertainment system, and—depending on the strength of their wi-fi connection—enjoy the sights and sounds of a full performance in the venue of their choosing. Many orchestras have been quick to jump on the opportunity, adding a dramatic visual dimension to the now familiar audio-streaming, and yielding an exciting diversity of experiences that helps broaden their organization’s audience and brand. With instant feedback via comments and demographic analysis, live-streaming offers



"Webcasts are part of our organization's identity now," says Marc Geelhoed, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's director of digital initiatives.

more direct interaction with an audience than radio, television, or live-streamed events in movie theaters.

This November, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra tried its hand at webcasting a concert for the first time. In June, the Seventh Annual Cliburn Amateur Piano Competition was live-streamed over a period of 40 hours. Carnegie Hall now streams concerts and other activity via four

performances and educational and community activities of Carnegie's Ensemble Connect fellows; and now Facebook Live, through which Carnegie live-streams the same concerts that are live-streamed at medici.tv, on their own Facebook page.

In March 2016, the New World Symphony hosted and streamed a tech conference, its 2016 Network Performing Arts and Production Workshop, on YouTube. Yamaha sponsors streaming masterclasses with global reach, and new orchestra partnerships are being forged—like that between the Cleveland Orchestra and Ideastream, an Ohio-based nonprofit broadcast company, which launched a webcast last August. When Oberlin Conservatory of Music faculty approved support for juniors and seniors to stream recitals, webcasts jumped from 70 in 2015 to 350 in 2016.

Expanding Accessibility

Orchestra on Demand programs, such as the one the Philadelphia Orchestra launched in October, have become more common—and expected—and orchestras



In 2014, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra installed mini-cameras at various offstage locations in Orchestra Hall, for a relatively inexpensive \$200,000.

ic's Digital Concert Hall, launched in late 2008, streaming concerts that could be purchased as individual concerts or by monthly or annual subscriptions. With its user-friendliness and embrace of emerging streaming technology, the Digital Concert Hall set the bar high. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's "Live from Orchestra Hall" soon followed, inspired by Berlin, and is the streaming program many U.S. orchestras aim to emulate. "Around 2010, the DSO put together a technology task force looking at how we could position ourselves in the technology area," Geelhoed says. "We explored a wide range of ideas, from our website to audience use of devices in the concert hall. Everyone got behind webcasting concerts." The goal? As the orchestra states, to become the "most accessible orchestra on the planet."

Enjoying orchestra broadcasts outside the concert hall is nothing new, of course. The Boston Symphony Orchestra, for example, has been broadcasting live on the radio since 1926; the NBC Symphony Orchestra went live on television, with Arturo Toscanini conducting, in 1937. As listeners moved from traditional radio and TV formats to subscription satellite radio and online streaming, classical music has kept up: SiriusXM Radio offers an abundance of classical channels, and YouTube is a treasure chest of uploaded and archived orchestral performances. Most classical radio stations now offer online streaming options—many beat the rock and pop radio stations in their market to the punch as early adopters of technological innovation.

Online visual simulcasting of orchestra performances has lagged behind theater and opera, possibly because of the art form's more subtle visual drama. Potential



The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's DSOLive webcast crew during a concert stream.

different channels. There are "Carnegie Hall Live" radio and digital audio streams, about a dozen concerts a year in partnership with radio station WQXR; live concert streams at commercial enterprises like medici.tv that include events such as this season's opening-night concert with the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela and masterclasses, viewable for 90 days after each event; a new collaboration with ABC News Digital, featuring

are finding innovative ways of addressing issues of technology, cost, outreach, staffing, and branding. And despite a few initial reservations, none of the organizations *Symphony* talked to for this article reported live-streaming as a drain on ticket sales. In fact, all of them were extremely enthusiastic about how many more listeners they were now able to reach.

First out of the gate for orchestral online offerings was the Berlin Philharmon-

broadcasters may not have confidence that people will sit and watch an orchestral live stream rather than simply listen to it. Another barrier could simply be cost: sophisticated cameras (and their professional operators) are expensive, and properly directing and streaming a high-quality performance takes more resources than many organizations may have.

But now, as orchestra audiences adopt devices like iPads and smartphones, orchestras are quickly catching up. The millennial generation expects to find everything online, all the time, and usually for free, so orchestras are bridging the resource gap as live-streaming apps and



Charleston Symphony Orchestra Executive Director Michael Smith produced the orchestra's April 2016 Tchaikovsky concert. The goal: to "get more awareness out there, beyond Charleston, beyond the people who usually come, and make it easier for them to hear how great the orchestra sounds."

technologies become cheaper and more widely available. Meanwhile, for a company like Facebook, which has directly approached orchestras to utilize its Facebook Live feature, live-streaming draws a more diverse audience to its website and increases user engagement, which then translates directly into more advertising revenue. (Facebook is currently devoting resources to virtual reality and 3-D immersive environment technology, which are considered to be live-streaming's next innovative steps. Imagine, possibly very soon, being able to virtually walk among the members of an orchestra as it launches into a work.)



As orchestral live-streaming just begins to take off, however, it's natural for orchestras to be focused on the impact of home-viewing on ticket revenue, as well as the potential for broad outreach and global brand expansion offered by live webcasts to translate into lasting online popularity. As this all continues to evolve, it's worth examining the myriad ways orchestras are adopting new technology, and how, in turn, the technology is influencing the

programming and marketing approaches of the orchestras themselves.

Getting Started

For the DSO's first webcast in 2011, says the DSO's Geelhoed, "Detroit Public TV helped us get started, and for the first few years they provided the onstage cameras, camera operators, and production staff. We knew eventually we would have to switch to remote-operated cam-

eras, which we did in 2014 by installing mini-cameras at various offstage locations in the hall.” Now, productions are handled remotely from a control room in the basement of Orchestra Hall with a contracted crew and an in-house webcast manager position. “Initial costs were not that high,” says Geelhoed. “We paid about \$200,000 for the new remote-operated cameras, and our annual production budget is also \$200,000, which covers costs for about 26 webcasts per season.” (Not every live stream is archived.)

Organizations with more modest budgets or technological support may balk at those start-up numbers, but Facebook Live, launched in April 2016, has enabled a do-it-yourself approach to streaming performances over the Web. Essentially, anyone can broadcast anytime from a mobile device through their Facebook page. For an orchestra that wants to set up a rudimentary Facebook Live stream, it’s as simple as opening the Facebook app on a phone, pointing the camera toward the players, and pressing the “Live” icon. One example of how an organization can harness Facebook Live to produce a low-cost, high-quality webcast is the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, where Executive Director Michael Smith applied an ingenious approach last season.

After a \$50 million renovation in 2015 of the CSO’s performance hall, the Gaillard Center, Smith noticed “a whole bunch more young people attending. It’s become a place to be in Charleston,” he says. “So ostensibly my mission with live-streaming was to show off this spectacular hall even more—like, ‘Hey, here’s the brass section, and if the camera happens to swoop around the hall, [the audience can] look at that, too.’ But I also wanted to get more awareness out there, beyond Charleston, beyond the people who usually come, and make it easier for them to hear how great the orchestra sounds.”

Smith dove headfirst into live-streaming last April by setting up and producing a webcast himself, including directing and live-editing a three-camera feed. “The main piece was Tchaikovsky’s

San Francisco Symphony was live.
Published by Nate Bourg | 71 · April 27 at 8:22pm · e

We're LIVE at Davies Symphony Hall, performing the world premiere of Mason Bates' "Auditorium," conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado. Say hello and tell us where you're watching from! #FacebookLive #NewMusic



Facebook Live has enabled a do-it-yourself approach to streaming performances over the Web. Last April, the San Francisco Symphony (above) became the first ensemble to broadcast an orchestral piece on Facebook Live.

Fourth Symphony, which is one I know very well from my history as a trumpet player in the orchestra,” says Smith. “When we did the live stream, we did it on relatively short notice and a shoe-string budget. We needed someone in the control booth who was really familiar with this repertoire. So I spent two weeks marking up the score and planning the shots.

“I’m not sure I’ll do it all again, since you can guess how unbelievably stressful it is,” Smith recalls with a laugh. Still, the webcast reached thousands, including patients at Charleston’s Medical University of South Carolina Hospital and many people who hadn’t attended the symphony in years for reasons such as distance and budget. “It was a tremendous success,” says Smith, “even though it was

a complete blur while I was doing it.” The cost? \$2,000 out of pocket. But the effect has been invaluable in terms of outreach and branding. “It got so many more people talking about us,” Smith says. “It feels like our base is expanding beyond our core longtime patron audience into new, exciting territory.”

Silicon Valley

Facebook Live also ushered in webcasting at the San Francisco Symphony, with the added bonus that Facebook itself is a close neighbor. Last April, with guidance from Facebook headquarters in Silicon Valley, SFS was the very first ensemble to broadcast an orchestral piece on Facebook Live: *Auditorium* by Bay Area composer Mason Bates, guest-conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado. Although just a year old, the archived webcast looks charmingly rudimentary by today’s standards—Facebook Live had not yet opened up its platform to integrate with professional equipment and a suite of advanced editing software tools. Yet even with this no-frills setup—an iPhone fixed on a tripod, hooked up with a wi-fi audio feed—viewers witnessed something new and immediate happening with the SFS webcast.

The choice of *Auditorium* was inspired. The piece electronically samples Baroque instruments, played alongside live musicians using modern instruments to create a techno-acoustical landscape, a good metaphor for digitizing the canon. You can watch, from your laptop, the composer working behind his own Macbook among the SFS musicians. Bates had been part of an early streaming experiment, writing for the YouTube Symphony Orchestra in 2011. (That orchestra existed only as a webcast entity, with mostly amateur players from around the world.) “I like to think of the disruptive possibilities of technology on music,” Bates says. “But I was actually more concerned about finishing *Auditorium* before the premiere than about any implications of it being streamed live. When the San Francisco Symphony told me that it would be streamed around the world, I thought, ‘Big deal.’ I thought it was a novelty. But



For “A Day in the Life” Facebook Live webcast last October, Lincoln Center’s Senior Vice President of Brand and Marketing Peter Duffin says, “We ran ads on Facebook for the day, as well as running a campaign to boost the number of page likes on our FB page prior to the day’s live-streaming.”

when it happened, my opinion turned 180 degrees.”

Ninety thousand users from more than 50 countries tuned in to the *Auditorium* broadcast, and the SFS tied the Facebook Live hoopla into its marketing strategy. Working with Bates was ideal, because “We knew he was always up for new ideas,” SFS Director of Communications Oliver Thiel wrote in an email. “Plus he was active on social media, as was his fan base. Around the time of the world premiere, we were releasing the first CD of his large-scale orchestral works on our in-house record label, and thought this would be a great way to galvanize energy around both his music and our artistic partnership.”

Going Behind the Scenes

At a wholly different order of technological and operational magnitude was “A Day in the Life,” a daylong uninterrupted Facebook Live stream on October 7 from Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and its resident organizations, plus special guests. As the day unfolded, viewers could watch a costume fitting at the Metropolitan Opera, witness rehearsals of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and American Ballet Theatre, catch a performance at Jazz at Lincoln Center, attend a Juilliard School morning drama class, see a production of *Falsettos*



Hugh Siva/Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

Juilliard School faculty member Moni Yakim leads a movement class with third-year drama students during “A Day in the Life,” a daylong Facebook Live stream on October 7, 2016 from Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

at Broadway’s Walter Kerr Theatre, and more. Among the highlights was an evening outdoor solo performance by Lang Lang, backstage access before a New York Philharmonic concert, and an interview with filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. Just a few weeks before “A Day in the Life,” the New York Philharmonic also live-streamed its opening-night concert.

“Our research has shown that the more

people understand the breadth of activities at Lincoln Center, the more interested they are in attending the campus,” says Peter Duffin, Lincoln Center’s senior vice president of brand and marketing. “Live-streaming a complete day from the campus seemed like a fantastic way to share our story. I’ve worked at Lincoln Center for twenty years, and even I was stunned by everything that went on behind the

Streaming By Numbers

16 hours live-streamed from Lincoln Center during its “Day in the Life” webcast

6 million people reached by “Day in the Life”

450,000 people reached by Austin Symphony Orchestra’s “Mozart Speaks” program live-streamed on September 10, 2016

\$200,000 spent on new remote cameras for the inaugural live-streamed season of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s “Live from Orchestra Hall”

6,400 subscribers to the DSO Replay archive

2008 year the Berlin Philharmonic’s Digital Concert Hall, a high-definition orchestral live-streaming channel, was launched

90,000 users tuned in to Facebook Live’s first live stream of a complete orchestral work, San Francisco Symphony’s performance of Mason Bates’s *Auditorium*

\$2,000 spent on Charleston Symphony Orchestra’s first Facebook Live stream

50,000 viewers gathered online for the Seattle Symphony’s June 17 tribute to victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando

50,000 students reached on average annually by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s “Live From Orchestra Hall: Classroom Edition”



Heigh Sivad/Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

Director Timothy Durant at the controls during “A Day in the Life,” a daylong Facebook Live stream on October 7, 2016 from Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

travertine walls in one day. Facebook Live was the perfect vehicle—I haven’t heard of anyone else doing something this daunting on Facebook.

“We started working in earnest on this a month prior to the live-streaming day,” Duffin continues. “We didn’t bring the production company on board until two weeks beforehand. Neither of these were ideal timelines, but they were necessitat-

staff members on the day of the webcast.

“Our marketing goal was a reach goal,” Duffin says, referring to the organization’s efforts to broaden its reach beyond its dedicated ticket-buying base in New York City. “This was a front-of-the-funnel, brand-awareness exercise. The videos of the day have been watched over 3.1 million times, and reached over 6 million people from all over the world.” During

the webcast, comments poured in from viewers in countries ranging from Colombia and Serbia to the U.K.

A Matter of Scale

Lincoln Center’s sprawling “A Day in the Life” live stream was a built-in headline-grabber, and it’s worth pointing out that producing an event on this scale might not be possible for all arts groups. But more modest-sized organizations are finding ways to inject a sense of theatrical flair into their webcasts, switching things up from merely live-streaming straight performances. In September, the Austin Symphony Orchestra’s “Mozart Speaks” concert interspersed live recitation of Mozart’s letters (read by local actor Martin Burke) with performances of a selection of his works. The brainchild of ASO Music Director Peter Bay, the program aimed to draw out the cadences of Mozart’s speech and writing in his musical compositions. The resulting performance was described as sometimes charming, sometimes sublime, and, due to the often cloying writing style of the period, sometimes annoying—yet always fascinating. The “Mozart Speaks” program was streamed over Facebook Live, which allowed direct contact with viewers via comments, as well as the ability to analyze user demographics.

“The stream went off without a hitch,” says Austin Symphony Marketing Direc-

None of the organizations Symphony talked to for this article reported live-streaming as a drain on ticket sales.

ed by finding the perfect day that would have a broad range of activities going on. We ran ads on Facebook for the day, as well as running a page ‘like’ campaign”—getting more real-life Lincoln Center fans to become fans on Facebook—“to boost the number of page likes on our FB page prior to the day’s live-streaming.” Duffin’s team also mustered press coverage in major media outlets and released a YouTube preview “sizzle reel” that could easily be shared on social media platforms outside Facebook. Lincoln Center worked with a professional production company, Telescope, for “A Day in the Life,” but also added thirteen dedicated

In September, the Austin Symphony Orchestra live-streamed its “Mozart Speaks” program interspersing live recitation of Mozart’s letters with performances of his music, led by ASO Music Director Peter Bay.



John Gutierrez



During the Austin Symphony's recent live-streamed "Mozart Speaks" concert, the comments "came flooding in and I couldn't keep up. My fingers were tired after the performance," said Marketing Director Jason Nicholson.

tor Jason Nicholson. "What I wasn't prepared for were the numerous comments, like 'Absolutely stunning performance to-night! Had me weeping' and 'Chorus Austin and the 4 soloists were sublime. Magical performance.' 99 percent were positive. I wanted to personally type comments back because as a marketer, you want to know what people are saying about you, especially during a live stream, and you want to acknowledge them. The comments came flooding in and I couldn't keep up. My fingers were tired after the performance."

According to Austin Symphony Orchestra Marketing Director Jason Nicholson, their recent streamed "Mozart Speaks" program reached more than 450,000 people, with 25- to 35-year-olds making up the majority of the viewers.

According to Nicholson, the stream reached more than 450,000 people—but the big surprise was the number of 25- to 35-year-olds watching, who made up the majority of the viewers. "The only expense we had were camera operators, a score reader who cued the cameramen, and the software to stream it all on Facebook," Nicholson says.

Streaming with a Purpose

Community interaction and broadening its audience were also goals of the Seattle Symphony when it began live-streaming performances. The orchestra is no stranger to streaming audio: it has enjoyed a close relationship with radio and online station King FM for many years, and last year the orchestra launched its own Seattle Symphony Channel at the station, inaugurated with a 24-hour stream of performances of Sibelius, celebrating the composer's 150th birthday. (Sibelius lends himself well to streaming, apparently.)

Last June, Seattle's video live-streaming blossomed with purpose in a communal moment that brought people flocking to the internet, looking for solace in art. After the tragic attack on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, in which 49 people were killed, the orchestra quickly turned around and dedicated a streamed performance—of the



The Seattle Symphony live-streamed its “Music Beyond Borders” program on February 8, 2017, featuring music from Iran, Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria. Clarinetist/composer Kinan Azmeh performed his Suite for Improvisor and Orchestra with the Seattle Symphony.



final movement of Charles Ives’s *Orchestral Set No. 2*, “From Hanover Square North, At the End of a Tragic Day, The Voice of the People Again Arose”—to the victims. With little advance fanfare, the live stream was a cathartic sensation, reaching 50,000 people from across the country who came together to mourn.

Since then, the orchestra has become

particularly agile when streaming concerts, with recent successes including a sold-out February 8 concert entitled “Music Beyond Borders,” featuring music and musicians from Iran, Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria. The orchestra’s collective bargaining agreement with the union representing its musicians—the International Guild of Symphony, Opera and Ballet Musi-

cians—allows it to stream performances at the spur of the moment. (Often, a member of the marketing team will pull out an iPhone and run into the hall to stream a particularly compelling rehearsal or performance.) Several recent American Federation of Musicians contracts at orchestras around the country have also allowed greater leeway for streaming and other emerging technology.

Seattle Symphony Vice President of Marketing Rosalie Contreras balks at the notion that streaming may be encouraging people to stay home rather than ven-

Several recent American Federation of Musicians contracts at orchestras around the country have allowed greater leeway for streaming and other emerging technology.

ture to the concert hall. “I’m surprised that’s even a question,” she says. “One of our most important missions is to embrace every technological tool at our disposal, every channel of communication, every kind of experience to reach every kind of listener with our music. Otherwise, why would we do it?”

So far, the response to live-streaming from both orchestras and viewers has been encouraging. The physical orchestra is far from being completely absorbed into the virtual one, and both still offer unique, complementary experiences. As the recent explosion in the popularity of rock festivals has proved, free live-streaming options have hardly obliterated the communal live experience (or potential ticket sales). One day, a viewer may enter an immersive, live-streamed, 3-D orchestral environment and wander among a string section in full flight. Another day, that same viewer may fly with those strings into a world of imagination, from a seat among fellow music-lovers in the concert hall. **S**

MARKE BIESCHKE is publisher of *48 Hills*, an online nonprofit covering culture, politics, and nightlife in San Francisco. He was formerly publisher of the alternative weekly *San Francisco Bay Guardian*.