

Prelude

There is nothing like hearing an orchestra live and in person. Okay, that's not a novel insight, but the return of in-person concerts this fall was a stark reminder of what we have missed—and a revelation. Hearing an orchestra in full throttle after all this time was almost too much. A kind of synesthesia kicked in. You didn't so much hear the tympani as sense their rumbles tsunami-ing from the stage and into your mind. Plangent inner voices emerged from plush textures. Strings in extremis had the urgency of an ice pick. And a single horn felt like heart-break—or a burst of sonic joy.

Orchestras have been deploying virtual concerts, Zoom concertos, and related digital media to make more music available in more ways—it's a trend that's here to stay. The pivot to digital means that pressing issues in classical music, such as racial inequity and underrepresentation, are being addressed with immediacy. Conductors chat from home on YouTube; musicians share their artistry and their lives online. All the same, watching a concert on a phone or laptop—well, there ain't nothing like the real thing.

In this issue, we report on how orchestras are coping with vaccination and masking mandates, personal distancing, and even ventilation systems. This is happening as orchestras are reckoning with social injustice, centering voices that were long ignored. And while musicians of Asian descent are often highly visible on orchestra stages, that representation has not translated into equitable roles behind the scenes or at the creative level.

And this issue looks at the myriad, sometimes unexpected new roles that orchestra musicians are adopting—not merely adopting but embracing.

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EDITOR IN CHIEF **Robert Sandla**

MANAGING EDITOR **Jennifer Melick**

PRODUCTION AND DESIGN **Ginger Dolden**

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR **Stephen Alter**

ADVERTISING ASSOCIATE **Danielle Clarke-Newell**

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EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING OFFICES

520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, 20th Floor
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E-mail (editorial): editor@americanorchestras.org

E-mail (advertising): salter@americanorchestras.org

Phone (advertising): 646-822-4051

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ABOUT THE COVER

In Texas, ROCO—formerly the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra—performs a gala concert at POST Houston, a just-opened commercial and cultural space that was previously the Barbara Jordan Post Office. Mei-Ann Chen led the in-person performance, the first for ROCO after more than a year of virtual concerts. The orchestra launched its 2021-22 in-person season, which takes place at multiple venues, a few days later.

Photo: Daniel Ortiz

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