

Transfigured Nights

The pandemic may not be over, but this fall felt different, as fuller indoor concert schedules resumed. A recent concert road trip proved how much in-person concerts have been missed by audiences and musicians alike.

By Jennifer Melick



The Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra's September 11 concert at Hill Auditorium, led by music director candidate Lina Gonzalez-Granados.

Last spring, after the dark winter of 2020-21 when so many concerts were put on hold, moved outdoors, or presented virtually in order to stem the spread of COVID-19, something wondrous happened: orchestras began announcing returns to indoor concert stages for fall 2021. Could it really be: concerts with audiences sitting in actual seats, in the same room with the musicians, making and hearing music in real time, in an acoustic space designed specifically for that purpose? The prospect of an in-person 2021-22 season seemed nothing short of miraculous. Tantalizing choices included world premieres, Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*, Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, Jessie Montgomery's *Starburst*, Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony, Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, and even Handel's *Messiah* and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, with chorus and vocal soloists. As vaccines became widely available in the U.S., and scientists gained more knowledge of which safety protocols best prevent the transmission and spread of COVID in

indoor concert spaces, it seemed realistic that these announced concerts might really happen.

What was it like to return to concert halls this fall? Fantastic—and weird.

Given what the past year and a half taught everyone—that nothing is ever 100 percent certain, and plans can change in an instant during a pandemic—getting to as many indoor concerts as quickly as possible suddenly seemed urgent. Outdoor events have been a fantastic stopgap option, and I had already traveled to several of those, but what I had in mind was an ambitious, monthlong Auto Grand Concert Tour of indoor orchestra season-opening concerts. Then the Delta variant arrived, and with it the realization that it might not be the smartest idea to tour as many as ten states. So the Grand Tour became a safer, scaled-down, two-part tour: a Detroit-Ann Arbor-Toledo loop, followed by a closer-to-home

loop in New York City and Princeton and Newark, New Jersey.

So what was it like to return to concert halls this fall? Fantastic—and weird. Audiences are notably attentive and appreciative, and everyone is wearing masks. There is very little coughing, compared with the Before Times, for obvious reasons. Concerts are well-attended by and large, but not packed to the gills, sometimes due to pandemic capacity restrictions. Audience members and musicians I spoke to all expressed a newfound appreciation for a concert experience they say they may have previously taken for granted. The social element of concert-going has returned, however difficult it can be to connect while masked. At many concerts, printed paper programs are replaced by digital programs accessed by QR codes. There are often temperature and vaccine-card checks at the door. By the time this is published, these concert protocols may already have changed. But here's a snapshot of what it was like at the beginning of the first season since the pandemic that approached anything we used to think of as "normal."



The Toledo Symphony opened its 2021-22 season with "An Evening with Rhiannon Giddens," featuring the orchestra performing with Giddens and multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi in a program led by Music Director Alain Trudel.

Toledo, Ohio

The season-opening concert by the Toledo Symphony Orchestra in Ohio, led by Music Director Alain Trudel, featured the orchestra with singer/songwriter/banjoist/violist Rhiannon Giddens and multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi. The combined forces performed music by Copland as well as orchestrated versions of songs from Giddens and Turrisi's recent recordings of jazz, blues, country, Gospel, and Celtic music. At the September program at Toledo's Peristyle Theater, Zak Vassar, president and CEO of the Toledo Alliance for the Performing Arts (the orchestra's umbrella organization), welcomed the audience to "40 weeks of music and dance celebrating beauty. We can use beauty more than ever after the year we've had."

It was readily apparent how much the orchestra loves its music director: they played with passion and precision, and I was sorry not to be in town for the orchestra's concerts later that month, featuring the orchestra and pianist Sara Davis Buechner in music by J.S. Bach, Florence Price, and Edward Elgar. Giddens seemed almost giddy as she announced selections from the stage; she said it was her first time singing with an orchestra since the pandemic began.

September was not the Toledo Symphony's first performance with an in-person audience since the pandemic, says Vanessa Gardner, director of marketing and communications at Toledo Alliance for the Performing Arts: "We had already been performing for live audiences for much of last season. We started off

performing to 15 percent capacity from September to early November of 2020, at which point we started livestreaming only. We welcomed live audiences back (again around 15 percent) in early March of 2021 and played to limited audiences through the end of last season, as well as livestreamed."

Looking back at that first pandemic year, Merwin Siu, the Toledo Symphony's principal second violin and artistic administrator, describes the 2020-21 season as "a huge test of our flexibility and adaptability, as players, as a staff, and as a musical community. We performed a full season, with concerts every week"—sometimes with audience, sometimes without—"but every program was altered, often just days in advance of the concert, to be responsive to the COVID concerns of the moment. Losing live audiences [last] Thanksgiving was definitely a blow. In early March, we presented a program that began with Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*. We hadn't played in front of a live audience for nearly four months at that point. I remember feeling relatively normal through the warm-up. But that first upbeat, the first breath—all of a sudden, that presence went through my body like an electric shock. That first C-major chord was palpably different and more vital. I almost dropped my bow. I am immensely proud of our organization's resilience, adaptability, and responsiveness. But that's the one sensation that I can still feel, viscerally, months later."

Ann Arbor and Detroit, Michigan

The same weekend as the Toledo Sym-



Merwin Siu, the Toledo Symphony's principal second violin and artistic administrator, in a recent performance at the Peristyle Theater.

phony's season opening was also the beginning of the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra's fall season. When the pandemic hit, the A²SO (as the Ann Arbor Symphony styles itself) had been about to begin a music director search, after longtime Music Director Arie Lipsky stepped down in 2019. September's concert was led by Colombian-American conductor Lina Gonzalez-Granados, the first of seven finalists set to lead concerts this season (the others are Perry So, Jacob Joyce, Kazem Abdullah, Oriol Sans, Morihiko Nakahara, and Earl Lee). The search committee plans to announce the next music director in the summer of 2022.

The Ann Arbor Symphony performs at the 3,500-seat Hill Auditorium and at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor. During the pandemic, the orchestra offered digital presentations, but Sep-

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The Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra and soloist Zlatomir Fung in Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*, September 11, 2021.



The audience applauds the Ann Arbor Symphony's season-opening concert at Hill Auditorium in September, led by music director candidate Lina Gonzalez-Granados.



A sign in the lobby of the Hill Auditorium, where the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra returned to the stage in September.



Courtesy Daniëla Candillari

Michigan Opera Theatre rehearses for September performances of Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson's 2019 opera *Blue* at the Aretha Franklin Amphitheatre, on the Detroit River. The company returns indoors later this season.



At the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, a poster spotlights Jader Bignamini's first full season as music director in 2021-22.

Audience members and musicians expressed a newfound appreciation for a concert experience they say they may have previously taken for granted.

September 11 represented the ensemble's first concert together since the start of the pandemic. Seats in Hill Auditorium were deliberately left empty for additional audience spacing, masks were required, and vaccine cards and negative PCR tests were checked at the door. As audience members greeted one another, the atmosphere was one of quiet expectation. Board President Carol Sewell stepped onstage and welcomed the audience "on the occasion of the return to live music." Musicians—all masked except winds and brass when playing their instruments—tuned up, and then Gonzalez-Granados bounded onstage and launched into the 2019 tone poem *Personas Invisibles* by

Mexican composer Alejandro Basulto. The 13-minute work was inspired by the testimony of a Salvadorian transgender woman living in the U.S. as a refugee. In Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*, with cello soloist Zlatomir Fung, the audience seemed to lean in with extra attention; you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. During the concert, which also featured Brahms's *Symphony No. 2*, I noticed the second oboist put her mask back on during long rests in the music.

September was too early to catch the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's season-opening program in October, led by Jader Bignamini in his first full season as music director. However, I was

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able to catch one of the Michigan Opera Theatre's performances of Jeanine Tesori/Tazewell Thompson's searing opera *Blue*, which premiered at Glimmerglass in 2019 and is about a Black police officer's family whose son is killed by a White police officer. This was one of several pandemic-delayed performances this season of the opera, including dates this season in Seattle, Toledo, and Pittsburgh. Daniela Candillari conducted at the 6,000-seat outdoor Aretha Franklin Amphitheatre, which faces the Detroit River, to a constantly moving backdrop of speedboats and ferries. It was a deeply moving performance, on a beautiful September evening in a scenic venue. (The Michigan Opera Theatre moves indoors for the rest of its 2021-22 season.)

Princeton, New Jersey
The Princeton Symphony Orchestra has been performing throughout the pandemic, often in small groups, outdoors, or virtually, but not all together as a group, indoors, until this fall. Normally,

the orchestra performs at the 900-seat Richardson Auditorium at Princeton University, but Richardson was not open to outside groups this fall, so concerts were moved to the McCarter Theatre Center's 1,100-seat Matthews Theatre, "a natural fallback, being located just around the corner," says Carolyn Dwyer, the orchestra's manager of marketing and communications. The orchestra hopes to return to Richardson in February 2022. I caught the orchestra's second fall program in November, with Music Director Rossen Milanov conducting Evan Williams's sharp, wistful *The Dream Deferred* (inspired by the Langston Hughes poem "Harlem," and premiered in 2017 by the New York City-based orchestra The Dream Unfinished), and two less frequently performed works from the standard repertoire: Schubert's Symphony No. 4 ("Tragic") and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 15, with pianist Shai Wosner. Vaccine cards/negative PCR test results were checked at the door, tickets were scanned electronically, QR codes accessed program notes, and everyone was masked in the audience and onstage.

Afterward, I spoke with Concertmaster Basia Danilow. For her, the "we're back" moment happened at the first orchestra rehearsal: "I was just happy to see everyone. In this concert particularly, there were some beautiful moments in the Mozart with the soloist and the orchestra that were so intimate. It felt very beautiful. It was great to get our bearings again, and be together and have that extensive group interaction." During the pandemic, Danilow says she did "a lot of chamber music, some remote things. We played Shostakovich 8th as a chamber orchestra, and we played the

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Tchaikovsky Serenade. This orchestra has done a phenomenal job of not just maintaining but finding innovative ways to reach audiences. In the Morven Museum [where chamber concerts were presented beginning in 2020], people could sit on the lawn; it was a way to keep connected, to keep that thread of continuity. It's a wonderful group of dedicated people: music director, musicians, administration. Everybody was safe and healthy, and they kept it going. I had work the whole year, because of them."

Danilow describes the pandemic period as "a learning experience in the string sound; when you're a smaller orchestra, and distanced, this is very difficult. But it was a good exercise, in that it strengthened the bonds within the section. This year is going to shift the way we look at things. I'm very happy for the return to live music and being on the stage, but we really did learn a lot with all these Zoom performances, and recording yourself, and so on. You're more appreciative of what you took for granted."

Newark, New Jersey

The night after the Princeton Symphony concert, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performed a program at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark featuring Jessie Montgomery's *Starburst*, the "Moldau," "Sarka," and "Blanik" movements from Bedrich Smetana's *Má Vlast*, and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2, with soloist Daniil Trifonov. Tong Chen conducted *Starburst* in her NJSO subscription debut as the orchestra's new assistant conductor. Under Music Director Xian Zhang, Smetana's *Má Vlast* was astonishingly vibrant—I have never heard this orchestra make such a full sound in this hall. The musicians played as one, and they played their hearts out. There was not a dry eye in the house after Trifonov's encore, the Hess transcription of Bach's "Jesu, joy of man's desiring," a performance so quiet that it was almost devotional. Its message seemed to be: listen, listen closely.

During intermission I spoke to Principal Horn Chris Komer, who echoed what many musicians have said about being grateful for return to in-person performances. "The first time we got together and played together, spread out, it was very emotional to see everybody, I'm

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not going to lie," Komer says. "We hadn't seen each other for like 8 to 10 months, and finally we got all together to play music again. It was really great, but hard, because there was plexiglass between everybody, it was hard to hear, so it wasn't quite the same experience."

Komer also occasionally plays with the Charleston Symphony in South Carolina, and he has a vivid memory of a moment in Charleston, his first time after the pandemic began when "an orchestra got to sit next to each other, and play like a normal orchestra. The first rehearsal was so moving. I was literally bawling the whole time. It was the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony, which is not my favorite piece, but that day, it sounded like the most beautiful piece I had ever heard in my entire life. It was so cathartic and moving. And I was like, 'Oh my god, this what we get to do, and we kind of take this for granted a lot of the time, and it's an amazing thing.'"

At the New Jersey Symphony, Komer feels that with Zhang as music director the orchestra has "taken that step, like a major-orchestra sound. She is so musical, and she puts out so much energy, there's no way you cannot give back to her, because she is so passionate about every single moment. I am thrilled to be a part of this orchestra, and I love coming to work right now. It's so great to be back, and it's starting to feel like we're back in the swing. Everyone was trying their best to stay in shape, but it's hard! It's a different kind of playing when you're practicing at home and when you're playing in a full group, really having a lot of power."

New York, New York

New York City was hit hard by the pandemic early on, and returns to live, in-person concerts this fall have been



Princeton Symphony Orchestra Music Director Rossen Milanov and Executive Director Marc Uys greet the audience on opening night of the 2021-22 season in October.



Princeton Symphony Orchestra Music Director Rossen Milanov shakes hands with Concertmaster Basia Danilow at the orchestra's season-opening concert in October.



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Pianist Daniil Trifonov with the New Jersey Orchestra and Music Director Xian Zhang at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, November 5, 2021.

well-attended—and pretty emotional—affairs. The Metropolitan Opera had been closed since the start of the pandemic, and it was hard not to get choked up even just listening to the audio webcast of the Met's first public performance since the pandemic, Terence Blanchard's history-making *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. The city has an all-vaccinated mandate for indoor concerts, so when the Philadelphia Orchestra performed in Carnegie Hall's gala season opening this October, instead of audiences walking the red carpet into the hall, they first had to stop at one of the vaccine-check tents outside. Clive Gillinson, Carnegie Hall's executive and artistic director, addressed the audience from the stage. "After 572 days, it gives me the greatest of joy to say welcome to Carnegie Hall," he said, with a catch in his throat; the audience responded with prolonged clapping and stomping. Carnegie Board Chair Robert Smith said the evening was "a joyous and emotional homecoming," and Philadel-

phia Orchestra Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin told the audience that not performing concerts onstage had been like being "deprived of circulation of energy together."

The orchestra began with Valerie Coleman's 2020 *Seven O'Clock Shout*, which it had commissioned; the work includes the sound of people shouting and clanging pots and pans, distinctive features of New York City life during the height of the lockdowns in 2020. Carnegie's resonant floorboards vibrated once again, and the double basses dug in thunderously. In Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2, pianist Yuja Wang played the Andante movement at an exquisitely soft dynamic, and her transition to the third movement was magical, seemingly composed in the moment. The orchestra and Nézet-Séguin began Beethoven's Fifth Symphony at thrilling, breakneck tempo; throughout, the orchestra made the piece sound fresh, contemporary, revolutionary.

At Carnegie Hall, the Philadelphia Orchestra performed Valerie Coleman's *Seven O'Clock Shout*, which includes the sound of people shouting and clanging pots and pans, distinctive features of New York City life during the 2020 lockdowns. Carnegie's resonant floorboards vibrated once again.

The New York Philharmonic's home, Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center, is closed due to a big renovation set for completion in fall 2022. The orchestra's season this year is happening mostly at Jazz at Lincoln Center's venue and at Alice Tully Hall. At Tully, I caught an exciting October program of contemporary music by John Adams, Anthony Davis, and Missy



Chris Lee

The Philadelphia Orchestra and Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin greet the audience at Carnegie Hall, October 6, 2021.



Chris Lee

Carnegie Hall Executive and Artistic Director Clive Gillinson and Board Chair Robert Smith welcome the audience at the hall's gala reopening concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra.



Jennifer Melick

Outside Carnegie Hall on opening night, vaccine checks and masks were mandatory for audiences, as is required at all New York City entertainment venues.



Chris Lee

Guest conductor Dalia Stasevska leads the New York Philharmonic in works by John Adams, Anthony Davis, and Missy Mazzoli at Alice Tully Hall, October 21, 2021.



Chris Lee

New York Philharmonic Principal Bass Timothy Cobb was front and center in the orchestra's recent performance of John Adams's fiendishly difficult Chamber Symphony. He says it "feels great" to be back performing for audiences.

Mazzoli, performed to a capacity audience. Making her Philharmonic debut, Dalia Stasevska conducted Davis's *You Have the Right to Remain Silent* (2006; revised 2011)—a riveting depiction of “driving while Black” based on the composer’s encounter with the police in the 1970s; Philharmonic Principal Clarinet

“When I was still at my music stand on the stage, some folks were filing out, and several almost in unison stopped to say, ‘Thank you—we’re so glad to hear you play,’” says New York Philharmonic Principal Bass Timothy Cobb. “I said, ‘I’m so glad you’re here.’ They said, ‘We’re glad we’re here! We’re glad you’re here!’”

Anthony McGill was the soloist. Also on the program were Mazzoli’s mesmerizing, spacey *Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)*, and John Adams’s fiendishly difficult Chamber Symphony.

After the concert, I spoke with Principal Bass Timothy Cobb, who was front and center in the Adams work. He described performing the Adams piece for the first time as “exhilarating. It is a virtuoso piece—wow. John doesn’t write any easy bass parts! But it’s rewarding, and I enjoyed it immensely. It’s a big bass part.” Cobb says it “feels great” to be back performing for audiences. “Just today, when I was still at my music stand on the stage, some folks were filing out, and several almost in unison stopped to say, ‘Thank you—we’re so glad to hear you play.’ I thanked them for coming, and said, ‘I’m so glad you’re here.’ They said, ‘We’re glad we’re here! We’re glad you’re here!’”

During the pandemic lockdowns, Cobb says Zoom meetings and virtu-

al interactions with fellow musicians became a sort of lifeline. “You miss the people so much. Your orchestra is your universe, your world. In an orchestra like the Philharmonic, every single player contributes in his or her own way, and you in turn respond to any one of these individuals at any given time. The Phil is like this gigantic sort of chamber group.” Now, he says, there is a “momentum building. My mind is jumping back to these surreal episodes where we were playing over at the Shed, different places. They were necessary baby steps. Every single one, we were able to build upon it. When we began programs at Tully and at Jazz at Lincoln Center, this weekly or biweekly schedule, then it starts to feel like, the audiences are there, we are playing, you begin to think about ‘What’s happening next week?’ There’s been this sort of groundswell.” **S**

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