

IN THE MAIN STREAM

Digital efforts are part of the “new normal” for orchestras. Even as in-person concerts have mostly resumed, orchestras continue to adapt and expand their virtual offerings with online subscriptions, proprietary streaming platforms, and other tech. What’s the right balance between virtual and in-person music-making? And how does an orchestra turn a concert stream into an income stream?

By Vivien Schweitzer

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 forced orchestras to hurriedly explore streaming options to reach audiences stuck at home, but pioneers such as the Berlin Philharmonic and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra were already far ahead of the pandemic pack. Now, according to Nico Muhly, who composed the digital *Through-line* for the San Francisco Symphony’s Hall to Home series, the question is how “technology factors into a traditional symphonic or operatic environment, both artistically and physically.”

As COVID restrictions have mostly been lifted, orchestras nationwide are taking varying approaches to this broad question. The San Francisco Symphony, says Interim CEO Matthew Spivey, has long had “an experimental mindset.” Before the pandemic it had fo-

cused on small-scale online experiments, then shifted to larger-scale, rapidly produced projects during the lockdowns. Now “the biggest shift is volume,” Spivey says. “Digital will be a smaller percent-

IN ADDITION TO PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY CONTENT FOR LOCAL AUDIENCES, STREAMING HAS DRAMATICALLY EXPANDED THE GLOBAL REACH OF MANY ORCHESTRAS.

age of what we do but the experimental mindset still applies.”

Some of the San Francisco Symphony’s most successful recent digital

projects examine local culture. The four-part video and podcast series *CURRENTS* features stories with a Bay Area connection, such as “Enter the Pipa,” which highlights the traditions of San Francisco’s Chinese community. The most important takeaway from these pandemic projects, says Spivey, is “the power of story and narrative in digital formats.” Audiences are eager for storytelling, he says, adding, “The end-user experiences are much better when there’s some kind of contextual framing, because a media experience can become very flat very quickly to today’s audiences without other dimensions to it.” Audienc-

es also gravitate towards projects that feature collaborations between artists in different disciplines, he points out, an idea that resonates strongly when Spivey

and his colleagues plan both live and digital programs. On June 1 the orchestra will release an hour-long concert film of Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale*, conceived by the British director and designer Netia Jones.

Narrative arcs are also propelling the Cleveland Orchestra's digital endeavors. During the pandemic "the full potential of storytelling revealed itself," said President and CEO André Gremillet. "Everyone knows that Cleveland is one of the world's best orchestras. But what is behind this excellence? There's a hunger for more of the story about the people making music as well as the music itself, which this platform allows us to give people. That's

very exciting because that's something we've never really tackled and can't tackle in the concert hall."

Cleveland's In Focus series, hosted

experience. Programs include features about how the conductor Herbert Blomstedt elicits memorable performances, conversations with John Adams about his own music and those of his contemporaries, and a program with Music Director Franz Welser-Möst discussing something unexpected: the experience and importance of silence. However, no matter how high-quality the content, says Cleveland's Chief Brand Officer Ross Binnie, it's always a challenge to compete for attention in the Netflix era.

During the height of the pandemic, the New York Philharmonic used streaming as a marketing, public relations, subscriber, donor, and board

WHILE DIGITAL MEDIA HAS UNDOUBTEDLY ATTRACTED NEW LISTENERS FROM BOTH LOCAL AND FAR-FLUNG LOCATIONS, WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL TO MONETIZE THESE PLATFORMS?

on the orchestra's proprietary Adella website and app (named after the orchestra's founder, Adella Prentiss Hughes) is designed to enhance the live concert



Kristen Loken

San Francisco Symphony bassist Scott Pingel gets ready to perform Nico Muhly's *Throughline* during the filming of the new work for the San Francisco Symphony's Hall to Home digital series.



Roger Mastroianni/The Cleveland Orchestra

Cleveland Orchestra Music Director Franz Welser-Möst leads a program of music by Respighi, Walker, and Tchaikovsky for one of the orchestra's digital streams.



Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects

In addition to online concerts and events, the New York Philharmonic plans to stream live concerts for free on a 50-foot digital wall in the public lobby of the renovated David Geffen Hall this fall.



Composer Nico Muhly leads his *Throughline* for the San Francisco Symphony's Hall to Home digital series. Muhly says that with online content now a part of life at orchestras, the question is how "technology factors into a traditional symphonic or operatic environment, both artistically and physically."



"We've never been very interested in just taking the typical concert experience and replicating it online," says San Francisco Symphony Interim CEO Matthew Spivey, "but are interested in things we could create in a digital media space that can only exist in that environment."

cultivation tool, says Vice President for External Affairs Adam Crane. The orchestra currently offers a \$4.99 monthly subscription to livestreams of recent concerts on its own NYPhil+ channel, such as cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason performing the Dvořák concerto, as well as historic performances including a 1982 concert of Leontyne Price singing Mozart and Strauss led by then-Music Director Zubin Mehta. But the Philharmonic hasn't been able to record much new content, adds Crane, because of its peripatetic status during the extensive renovation of its home, David Geffen Hall (scheduled to re-open on October 12). The orchestra is re-evaluating its strategy for the refurbished and updated hall, which will have a 50-foot digital wall in the lobby where the orchestra will stream live concerts to the public for free.

The Seattle Symphony charges \$12.99 a month (or \$129 annually) for its Seattle Symphony Live platform, which launched in 2020 and features on-demand livestreams. Its educational programming, such as the Meet the Instruments series, as well as family concerts, are available for free. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's Replay platform includes many archival concerts, as well as programs dedicated to women composers (all of them are free). The DSO's Paradise Jazz Series in the 2021-22 season is free for DSO subscribers and donors of \$125 or more; other listeners



A graphic from the New York Philharmonic shows the multiple devices that can access its streaming platforms, which offer recorded programs and historic performances on-demand.

can buy single tickets for \$12. CSOtv, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's on-demand platform of livestreams and educational features, is free.

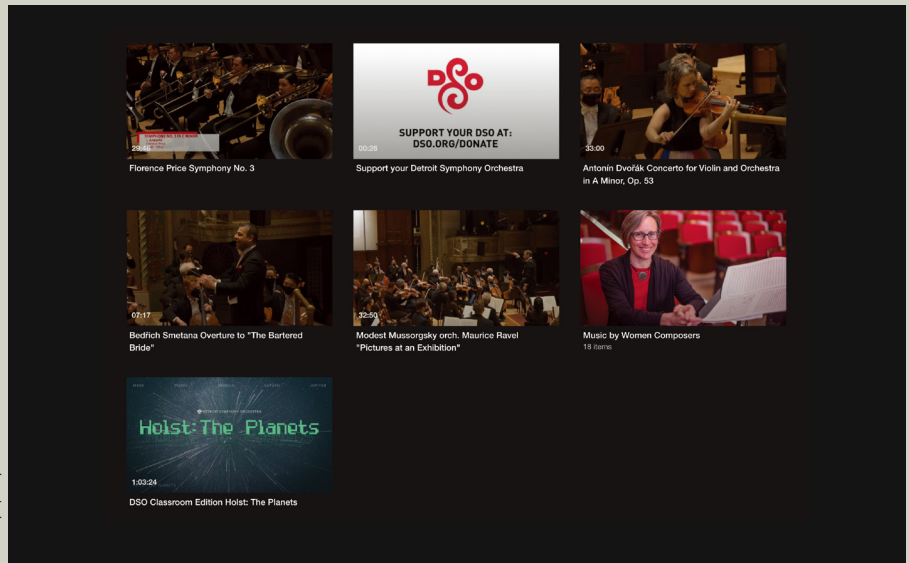
Orchestras without the budget for proprietary streaming platforms have continued to rely on YouTube, Facebook Live, and other outlets, while experimenting with content. The Canton Symphony Orchestra in Ohio, for example, produces "Orchestrating Change," a podcast exploring diversity, equity, and inclusion in the orchestra field. Three

recent episodes include interviews with conductor Jeri Lynne Johnson (founder and artistic director of the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra in Philadelphia), composer Angelica Negrón, and Jazmín Morales, founder of Fortissima, a leadership program for women of color in classical music.

Regional ensembles are also providing online content via lectures and innovative concerts. In Indiana, the South Bend Symphony Orchestra and St. Joseph Public Library jointly host-

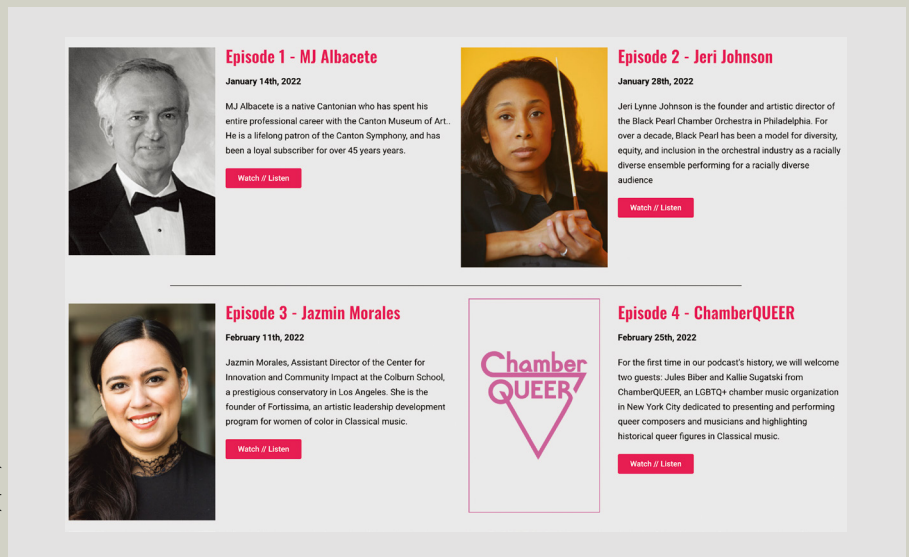


"We believe that what we are producing for this digital platform has value. We're very careful with the concept of free content," says Cleveland Orchestra President and CEO André Gremillet.



The Detroit Symphony Orchestra, an early adopter of digital media, posted concerts and other content online well before other orchestras moved into the virtual realm during the pandemic. The DSO Replay platform features videos of past and current performances, interviews with conductors and musicians, and a "Classroom Edition" for young people.

ed a three-week, live-streamed book club symposium to address the lack of diversity in orchestral repertoire. Pennsylvania's Erie Philharmonic performed a free concert on April 13 that explored how jazz, blues, work songs, and spirituals influenced and blended with the European classical tradition to create a uniquely American sound, featuring works by Black composers Duke Ellington, William Grant Still, and Adolphus Hailstork. And talk about a multi-media approach: the in-person event was recorded the following day for broadcast and streaming on local television, radio, and Facebook Live. Footage from the April 13 concert will also be used in an episode of the Philharmonic's free virtual youth concerts, which will explore the life of Black composer and Erie native Harry T. Burleigh.



The Canton Symphony Orchestra's "Orchestrating Change" podcasts, posted on YouTube, feature conversations about making the concert hall a more welcome place for previously ignored communities and creating greater equity, diversity, and inclusion at orchestras.

Global Expansion

There's no question that in addition to providing high-quality content for local audiences, streaming has dramatically expanded the global reach of many orchestras. Over 22 percent of the Cleveland Orchestra's digital audience is outside the U.S., which Ross says is "terrifically gratifying, especially as we haven't really done any marketing and it's all been organic." As of April 2021, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Sessions series on CSOtv had garnered audiences in 27 countries and 52 U.S. states and

territories, as CSO President Jeff Alexander told the *Chicago Tribune*.

While digital media has undoubtedly attracted new listeners from both local and far-flung locations, is there really any potential to monetize these platforms? According to Spivey, the pandemic presented an opportunity for the San Francisco Symphony to experiment with monetization of streaming platforms—but while "there is some revenue attached to it," he says, "that's never been the primary driver." The orchestra has

shifted towards free content in order "to reach new and different audiences, have a deeper connection with existing audiences, and expand the range of what the art form can be. We've never been very interested in just taking the typical concert experience and replicating it online, but are interested in things we could create in a digital media space that can only exist in that environment. That will be a big part of our strategy moving forward."

Nico Muhly describes the process of writing *Throughline* as "exhilarating and

thrilling.” During the production of the piece, pandemic precautions meant that a maximum of six orchestral players, and no winds or brass, were on stage at one time. Each of the score’s 13 movements is a mini concerto and soloists were recorded remotely. “It feels like we’re being scrappy and resourceful and all the things that musicians can be, but there was also an element of mild despair to it,” he says, speaking about the experience in light of the lockdowns that necessitated such compositions. “To make work at that time was simultaneously amazing, but also reinforced a certain distance.”

The orchestral field is of course not the only industry to grapple with how to monetize online content: after initially offering content for free, newspapers and magazines struggled for years with figuring out how to coax consumers to pay. Orchestra consultant Audrey Bergauer has outlined two post-pandemic scenarios that orchestra administrators might consider: the first is to provide all online content as a free bonus to paid subscriptions, while allowing other users to enjoy some free livestreams before encountering a paywall. The other scenario would capture contact information about users and potential patrons as the primary goal. No doubt there are many other strategies, with even more emerging.

Whichever route orchestra executives might choose, “monetizing media is a tricky thing when media is so widely available. It’s not that it cannot be done, but the conditions have to be really just right,” says Spivey.

At the Cleveland Orchestra, the conditions are indeed just ripe to monetize. Leaders there point out that the



A scene from the San Francisco Symphony’s online CURRENTS: *Rhythm Spirits* program, which was curated by multi-instrumentalist and composer Zakir Hussain.

ORCHESTRAS WITHOUT THE BUDGET FOR PROPRIETARY PLATFORMS ARE POSTING INNOVATIVE CONTENT ON YOUTUBE AND FACEBOOK LIVE—AND ARE ALSO STREAMING CONCERTS AND DOCUMENTARIES VIA LOCAL RADIO AND TV STATIONS.

digital arena is still a work in progress and that financial success can be measured by both direct and indirect revenues. “One of the issues in our industry is that we don’t give enough time for major new initiatives to demonstrate their success, because we are so undercapitalized and resources are always such an issue. That’s sometimes why we give up too quickly as an industry on important new

initiatives for the future,” says Gremillet.

Cleveland’s Adella platform includes free content from the archive, plus a podcast and performance highlights. Premium content such as the In Focus series is available for \$15/month. In 2022-23, subscribers will receive Adella Premium for no additional fee. “As a principle,” says Gremillet, “we believe that what we are producing for this digital platform has value, which should be acknowledged. We’re very careful with the concept of free content.”

While exploring possible avenues for monetization, orchestras must adhere to contract stipulations with musicians about multimedia and possibly provide additional compensation, potentially a challenge if digital endeavors are producing no revenue. Early in the pandemic, branches of the American Federation of Musicians ratified a temporary modification of a national contract pertaining to multimedia compensation, which is scheduled to expire in June 2022.

Before the pandemic forced the

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Behind the scenes as the Cleveland Orchestra captures a performance for its streaming platforms.



JOHN ADAMS
COMPOSER



FRANZ WELSER-MÖST
Music Director



STEVEN BANKS
SAXOPHONIST

The Cleveland Orchestra's Adella platform and app (named for orchestra founder Adella Prentiss Hughes) include concerts as well as chats and interviews with Music Director Franz Welser-Möst and guest artists including composer and conductor John Adams and saxophonist Steven Banks, among others.

widespread adoption of streaming, an orchestra's financial standing impacted the scale of its innovation in other areas, such as commissioning new works or programming pieces with unusual instrumentation or other requirements. In the digital realm, as Muhly points out, "it literally does just come down to money and whether your hall has the infrastructure. Do you have enough videographers on staff to do this? Do you have people to direct it?"

As for the future of made-for-digital works, Muhly emphasizes that it's not something that anyone except composers with well-equipped studios can realistically be expected to do. Muhly, who has composed film scores as well as orchestral works and operas, recalls that when composing *Throughline* in 2020, he approached it as a film score with cues and sub cues. "It's really important to reiterate that at the beginning of the pandemic," he says, "there was this assumption that musicians were both totally happy to do this and digitally technically literate and had the equipment."

Going forward, digital media is a work in progress for artists, audiences, and administrators, with issues of content, financial structure, payment, and accessibility evolving. With predictions of COVID surges continuing to make headlines, it's also impossible to predict if and when orchestras might need to rely more heavily on digital content. "For me, the headline is: we haven't figured every-

thing out," says Gremillet. "And honestly, I would be very suspicious if anyone in our business tells you that they have." **S**

VIVIEN SCHWEITZER is a Jersey City-based journalist and pianist who writes about music for publications including *The Economist*. Her first book, *A Mad Love: An Introduction to Opera*, was selected as one of *w*'s "Best Books We Read in 2021."

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