The Past, The Present, and The Future of Classical Music

by
Joshua Weilerstein

Joshua Weilerstein is the Artistic Director of the Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne. He also enjoys a flourishing guest conducting career throughout Europe and the USA and is known for his clarity of musical expression, boundless enthusiasm, and deep natural musicianship. His enthusiasm for a wide range of repertoire is combined with an ambition to bring new audiences into the concert hall.

As Artistic Director of the Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne(OCL), Weilerstein has brought a fresh programming perspective to the orchestra, performing a contemporary or rarely heard work on each one of his subscription concerts alongside the core classical repertoire. The OCL regularly commissions new works, and has launched a series of community initiatives resulting in the growth of new audiences while also retaining loyal subscribers. The orchestra has also released a critically acclaimed all Stravinsky recording under Weilerstein's direction, and has toured the major musical capitals of Europe.

Joshua Weilerstein believes passionately in programming both traditional and contemporary repertoire and whenever possible, presents a piece by a living composer in each of his concerts. He hosts a successful classical music podcast, Sticky Notes, for music lovers and newcomers alike.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Quarantine Classics (www.klassiskkarantene.no) and the Norwegian conducting program Dirigentløftet teamed up with leading conductors in sharing sessions to inspire young conductors and music students. American conductor Joshua Weilerstein here shares his thoughts on opportunities for change and the future of classical music.

If you are reading this while the pandemic is still on-going: do you agree with the thoughts of the author? Or if you are reading this in the post-pandemic world: how do you think the author's analysis corresponds with the present reality?

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Every time a musician has opened their email or picked up the phone over the last weeks, they've braced for the gut punch of yet another concert cancellation. Some ensembles and organisations were quick out of the gate to cancel everything, while many have valiantly held on until bowing to the inevitable. Now, with the emerging possibility that large gatherings of any kind could potentially be impossible until a vaccine is widely available, musicians and artists of all stripes have begun to panic, seeing their incomes, their livelihoods, and possibly their futures evaporating before their eyes. No one knows how or when this crisis will end, but all we can know now is that the performing arts face an existential crisis. The question remains: How can the classical music business cope with this threat? This article is meant to explore the past, present, and future of classical music through the prism of conducting and through orchestral life, and why this crisis, while devastating, presents an opportunity for change within a field that is desperate for it.

Part 1: The Recent Past

For many conductors that had established themselves in the field, conducting meant a series of guest engagements that would take them all over the world. These concerts were facilitated by artist management agencies and were planned often 1-2 years ahead of time. For opera engagements, these could be planned almost 5 years in advance. There was a certain glamour to these engagements, and the excitement at greeting a new orchestra could be compared to going on a blind date with anywhere from 40-100 different people all at once. A conductor(and the orchestra) could potentially know within one minute of the first rehearsal that this was either going to be a difficult week, or an experience they would remember for the rest of their lives. Established conductors racked up airline miles and hotel points, and spent weeks and months away from their homes and families. In my case, I have spent approximately 6 months out of every year on the road for the past 10 years. Music director or chief conductor jobs offer their own kinds of challenges, but there is always a feeling of coming home to "your" orchestra, even if you do not live in that city. In much more profound terms, the deepening of a musical relationship can make a good music director/orchestra something like a family, with all of the ups and downs of those kinds of relationships.

On the orchestral side, orchestras performed regular subscription concerts for a relatively elderly public. The average age of attendees to orchestral concerts all over the world is well over 60, and every orchestra had devoted hours of time and energy to attracting young people to come to concerts. Similar to the problems of getting young people to vote, these efforts have been only moderately successful. Orchestras of a certain echelon gained prestige from touring, taking the orchestra and an entourage of staff on tours that allowed the orchestra and their Music Director to plant their flag in another city and in another hall. Most orchestral players looked forward to these tours, and administrations, managements, the musicians, and critics assigned great importance to them. Additionally, a recording presence,

usually paid for in-house, was essential to project the strength of an orchestral institution. Some orchestras carved out funds to create an online platform, most notably the Berlin Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall. This content is often streamed free, though some orchestras operate a subscription model similar to that of Netflix. Resistance to change, the high cost and often net loss of maintaining such a platform, and complicated Collective Bargaining Agreements over streaming rights and payment in the United States have kept this from being a real possibility for many orchestras in the world.

There were many positives to this life, and for the most part, orchestras and conductors operated relatively smoothly, though many orchestras operated on a razor-thin line between being in the black or in the red. But the pandemic and the total shutdown of orchestral life across the world has forced an abrupt stop to almost all concerts and almost all international travel. The popular phrase "the new normal" will be en vogue for as long as it takes for there to be a vaccine for the Coronavirus, but the question remains about what the post-COVID normal looks like, and whether the system that was in operation was truly in the best interests of all involved. Once the world starts moving as it did pre-COVID, should things also go back to normal in the orchestral world? There are things we will not be able to do for the near future. For example, a conductor will not be able to be in 4 time zones in 4 weeks and orchestras will not be able to hop between countries on a long tour. But thinking about the future, could it be more logical to re-appropriate the colossal financial and environmental costs of orchestral tours into building a streaming platform? And for conductors, is it possible to have a fulfilling and sustainable career while also spending less time on the road? Considering that our focus at the moment by definition must be local, should orchestras re-consider their investments in recordings, and spend more time building connections with their local communities? And for the moment, how should orchestras and conductors react to ever-changing social distancing regulations that will last an indeterminate amount of time? Should the model of planning years in advance be adjusted? How can a large institution that practically defines itself on preparation adjust rapidly and nimbly to current conditions?

The next section will focus on the current situation, and how orchestras and conductors can navigate their way through this crisis. I firmly believe that some institutions and conductors could potentially come out of this situation even stronger than they were than when we entered this long tunnel.

Part 2: The Current Situation

Reading friend's social media feeds over the past couple of months has been both inspiring and depressing. On the depressing side, some performers have now had their entire 2020 performance schedules wiped clean with cancellations, immediately thrusting them into potentially dire financial straits. Freelance musicians are especially vulnerable to this kind of situation since government aid is often very difficult to come by for professions like ours and involves miles of red tape and bureaucracy. In the United States, the system of almost exclusively private funding has left many orchestras, chamber music ensembles, and presenters gasping for air, as donors have pulled their funding due to sudden financial insecurity, and the cratering of ticket revenue has created massive budget shortfalls. It is the

unfortunate reality that a portion of arts organizations all over the world will not survive the economic recession to come. On the inspiring side, almost every musician I know has put out some sort of online performance, whether it is an archival recording or an “at-home” video recorded on a phone or tablet. Musicians have set up Artist Relief Funds, providing much needed support to musicians and freelancers out of work. Performers all over the world have played socially distanced concerts at nursing homes and other care facilities, bringing joy and comfort during this time. In some ways I do believe that this crisis has reminded musicians of our roles as servants to our communities and to each other, a role that I think will take on an outsize importance once the pandemic passes.

In terms of performing, the current situation has forced arts organizations and individual musicians to be flexible in unprecedented ways. Recently countries have started easing restrictions on gatherings, but with the caveat that the severe lockdown-like restrictions could begin at any time if Public Health authorities deem it necessary. One does not know if a concert that was scheduled and programmed 2 years in advance will be able to go ahead with the program originally planned, or at all. Ensembles are having to come up with programs that use no more than 5, 10, or 50 musicians, all at the same time, without knowing how many people will be allowed to be in the audience, if any. To learn and perform music like this at a high level is extremely taxing on musicians and on the audience, who quite literally are unable to know what to expect from day to day. With that said, this kind of artistic agility is a quality that has been sorely lacking in our business before, and it will certainly come in handy for musicians in the future. A Beethoven symphony might suddenly turn into the 13 instrument version of Appalachian Spring on a moment’s notice, and we need to be ready for that. One of the most popular ideas going around is the idea of performing two concerts in an evening, for a small and safely socially distanced audience. This concert would be relatively short and take place earlier in the evening. After a break of an hour for a deep cleaning and disinfecting of the hall, a second audience would be allowed in to hear the same performance. This presents real issues for performers in terms of exhaustion and also in terms of performing essentially two concerts for the price of one, but this kind of creativity and sacrifice will be necessary to create financial sustainability for concerts during this time period and could provide a model for shorter, more compact concerts in the future.

Outside of the live performance space, innovative solutions have been found already to questions of streaming online performances, with ensembles like the Phoenix Orchestra of Boston putting out high quality, well-produced content on a weekly basis. The sheer number of performances, video clips, audio content, and creativity shown over the past two months is astonishing and deeply heartening. Music will continue to be shared, as it should and needs to be. But now that the initial flood of online content has slightly subsided, we must now ask questions as to how this kind of content can be both musically and financially sustainable for the uncertain months ahead. How can an orchestra get together and play a full concert with absolutely zero ticket revenue? Many models have been proposed, including a required donation, a virtual ticket, or a suggested donation model. To me, the suggested donation model has the highest possibility of succeeding. In a way, arts organisations have the chance to perform for more people than they ever have before. Jonathan Biss, the wonderful pianist, recently performed a house concert for the 92nd Street Y that was viewed nearly 300,000 times. At a suggested donation of $5, if even 20% of that public had donated that amount the concert would have made $300,000. Now, not every concert will be viewed by nearly so

many people, but the opportunity to reach audiences around the world during this time period allows for the possibility of earning at least a portion of lost ticket revenue back.

There are many other solutions being batted around by some of the top minds of this profession, but the key is that musicians want to perform, they want to put their music out into the world, and they are refusing to be handcuffed by the current situation. Smart organizations will be able to navigate through this lean year and come out on the other side with perhaps a streaming service and a loyal global audience that they never thought they could have. Of course, this brings up the question of what the classical music world needs to do AFTER the pandemic is over and the world returns to normal. Are there things that we could be doing differently, even now, that will allow us to not only survive, but thrive, in the world after coronavirus? That will be the subject of the next section.

Part 3: The Future

An imagined scenario, sometime in the (hopefully) near future: The lights come down. An A is given by the first oboe. The anticipation in the hall is unlike anything we've witnessed in decades. I walk out on stage, and I, the orchestra, and the audience, experience applause for the first time in a concert hall in months. I bow to the audience, taking in just how extraordinary this privilege is. I turn back to the orchestra, and after a summer(and perhaps longer) of silence, music fills the hall for the first time. This will undoubtedly be an extremely emotional experience for every single person in that hall, and everything else aside, this is the feeling that every musician and audience member should be looking forward to when social distancing regulations are able to be relaxed. In the meantime though, we should understand that, no matter what happens, certain things are going to change. Today I will lay out my predictions of some of those changes, and then try to find opportunities within each one of these changes. None of this is meant to take lightly the enormous burden this crisis has placed on organizations and musicians all over the world. As I wrote in Part 1, it is inevitable that some organizations will not survive this crisis, and it will certainly drive some musicians to pursue other fields in the name of their own survival. One major caveat is that I am by no means an administrator, and what I'm writing here is based on my own observations and on conversations with colleagues. With that said, let's go into some of the changes that I believe will be made after the COVID-19 Pandemic is over.

After the pandemic ends, orchestra budgets, which have been severely impacted by the crisis, will have to be cut to shoestring levels. Large-scale works like Mahler symphonies with chorus and other gigantic 20th century scores will be put on the shelf for the time being due to the resources they require. Touring will dry up, as many orchestras will be unable to spend the vast sums of money to take a group of musicians around the world. A digital footprint will be an even more vital part of an orchestra's life than it was before. Fees for guest artists will go down, and freelancers will likely not be invited to travel to far-flung regions as much as they were before due to high travel costs. It is also possible that both new music and neglected music from the past will be even more de-platformed than it was previously due to a desire to play it safe and bring audiences back with standard classics and recognizable names. Every one of these changes, plus the innumerable changes that cannot

be predicted, will have a real impact on every musician. But if we can in some sense take advantage of these changes, I do think it is possible for orchestras and musicians to become even stronger. Let's now take each of these changes one by one and try to find the opportunities within.

1. Large Scale works will be put on the shelf:

While it will undoubtedly be sad not to hear big Mahler symphonies or gigantic Wagner operas for the time being, it is also a chance to explore works by composers who did not write for such large orchestras. Large symphonic orchestras have long now eschewed performing the music of baroque composers thanks to a ridiculous turf war between Historical Performance Ensembles and Modern Performance Ensembles. This argument has led to a Balkanising of the repertoire that is completely unproductive and deprives people from hearing great music. Orchestras that can't play Mahler for a while could easily put on performances of works of Bach, Monteverdi, Corelli, Biber, Rameau, and other great Baroque composers who are almost completely neglected by modern performance ensembles. It is also a chance to explore some of the incredible arrangements that have been made of large-scale works by composers from Schoenberg(Mahler 4) to Klaus Simon(Mahler 1 and 9) to Ian Farringdon(too many works to count). These arrangements can shed new light on these pieces and are a way to get unusual instruments onto the stage(aka hiring freelancers). In essence, it is a chance to have a rebirth of the orchestral repertoire and to inject freshness onto the stage. This re-birth, ironically enough, could happen by looking back into the past to find inspiration.

2. Touring:

Orchestras have built prestige by long tours that bring the musicians to a big Central European, Asian, or American capital to perform repertoire that the local orchestra already plays every week. The financial cost of touring is well known; as well as flight or other transportation costs, orchestras must pay for visa applications, instrument insurance, an entourage of staff, the conductor(who is usually paid a higher fee for touring concerts), the soloist, and sometimes even for promotional materials. All of this cost is almost never offset by the fee offered by the concert promoter. There is of course another cost to touring, which is environmental. I have long thought that touring in the age of climate change is a moral quandary, and I would certainly not be opposed to orchestras pledging to only tour to places they can reach by train or bus. One additional cost to touring is that the orchestra leaves its local community. An orchestra could take the astronomical cost of touring and divert that money to local initiatives, like performing in schools, performing outdoor concerts in warm seasons, to expanding education and outreach departments, and more. A reduction in touring is a chance to dial up local engagement and to truly become an ensemble known and adored by every local, not just those who come to concerts on a weekly basis.

3. Digital Footprint:

Classical music has always been wary of the internet, and for some good reasons. Live performance is our bread and butter, and it is utterly irreplaceable. But that doesn't mean that the internet doesn't give us a chance to rethink the way we perform concerts. The most successful live streams of the COVID era have not necessarily been rehashes of archival material, but streams from within peoples homes, or in socially distanced concert halls with no audience. The most creative ensembles have turned their streams into chances to engage with people around the world, using tactics as simple as having a chat function enabled with a member of the orchestra answering questions. I say over and over that classical musicians are often woefully unaware of the lack of detailed knowledge of classical music by the general public. This lack of knowledge becomes a barrier when entering the intimidating world of classical music. Streaming is not solely a means of reaching our existing audience, but a way of grabbing the listener who just randomly clicks on an orchestra's Facebook Page, or Twitch.tv profile. A kind musician answering questions like, "how does an oboe make a sound" in the chat on a live stream can do wonders to open the eyes of that potential future audience member. Remember that we are selling tickets to future concerts with live streams, not merely keeping our names out there. Turning digital performances into interactive experiences is an absolute must, and post-pandemic, some of these innovations can be put into our live performances to make a modern performance feel like a modern performance, not a relic of 100 years ago.

4. Decline in travel for guest artists:

This can be a chance for guest artists to more deeply embed themselves in their communities. Visual artists travel around their home city, discovering new ideas and creating art that reflects the place that they call home. Classical musicians can do the same, partly by embracing digital media, but also by creating initiatives to positively affect the lives of those who live around them. The videos of front yard performances for quarantined residents have been profoundly moving, and those should not stop in the future. There are ways of making these kinds of performances financially viable, whether it's a donate button on a live stream, a virtual tip jar, or even a solicitation of donations or a ticket for an impromptu outdoor performance.

5. Programming more safely:

This final change is one that I hope will not happen. Orchestras and ensembles that take risks in this period will be rewarded, and while the goal should always be to perform music that the audience likes, we must be willing to take risks and to perform music that we believe in. An orchestra should not be subject only to the whims of the audience. The orchestra should defend its programming, even when it is challenging, and bring something new to the audience every time, whether it is a piece from the Baroque era, an unheard romantic work by an underrepresented composer, or a piece from today.

The future is going to be uncertain, that is the only thing we can be sure of. But when we perform, we are expected to be spontaneous, to take risks, and to fully dive into the music

we are playing, with all of our hearts. We can do the same thing with new business models, new ideas, and new spirit. None of this is meant to discount the financial burden that is now on everyone, and it is certainly a scary time to be a musician. And of course, these regulations are not simply an inconvenience. They are meant to save lives, and even with them, we have all experienced a trauma in the hundreds of thousands of lives lost to this pandemic. But if we are to come through this stronger on the other side, if we are going to become servants to our communities, we must be willing to dive in wholeheartedly, just as we would when we take out our instruments, open the score, and tear into one of our favorite works.