

MUSIC

What will become of Boston's fall classical music season?

By [Jeremy Eichler](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 18, 2020, 1:35 p.m.



The BSO has not ruled out the possibility of performing in Symphony Hall without an audience.
DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

On the grounds of Tanglewood, the maps are being removed because they are potential hot spots for contagion. In Boston, the BSO is considering performing without seats in Symphony Hall and the Boston Lyric Opera has assembled a new Health Task Force for Opera Artists. In New York, temperature stations have already been set up outside the Metropolitan Opera, even though there will not be a live performance there until New Year's Eve at the earliest. In Vienna, the musicians of the Vienna Philharmonic have

submitted to experiments in which they play while inhaling saline vapor through nebulizers in a darkened room. In Leipzig, the general director of the Gewandhaus recently drew laughs from a gathered crowd when he told them, accurately, that they were attending a “sold-out concert” with 87 audience members in a 500-seat hall.

Welcome to the surreal classical landscape of the moment, as organizations across the US and Europe contemplate emerging from quarantines, assessing the financial and artistic damage, and plotting out the months ahead in a radically altered field.

For US audiences, the drumbeat of cancellations has been steady. First came what remained of the spring season. Then came the wave of summer festivals falling silent across the land. And now, even as the country as a whole begins opening up, very little has changed for orchestras and opera companies. While crowds begin returning to restaurants [and, soon, to museums](#), local performance stages remain dark — with no sign of that changing anytime soon.

Faced with the seemingly irreconcilable requirements of keeping musicians and audiences safe while keeping their organizations financially viable, many American groups have already thrown in the towel on their fall seasons. The New York Philharmonic [did so this month](#). The [Nashville Symphony](#) recently canceled the entirety of its 2020-21 season. And in Boston, while the BSO’s upcoming season is still officially on the books, the orchestra is reckoning with an autumn return to Symphony Hall unlike any in its history, if it happens at all.

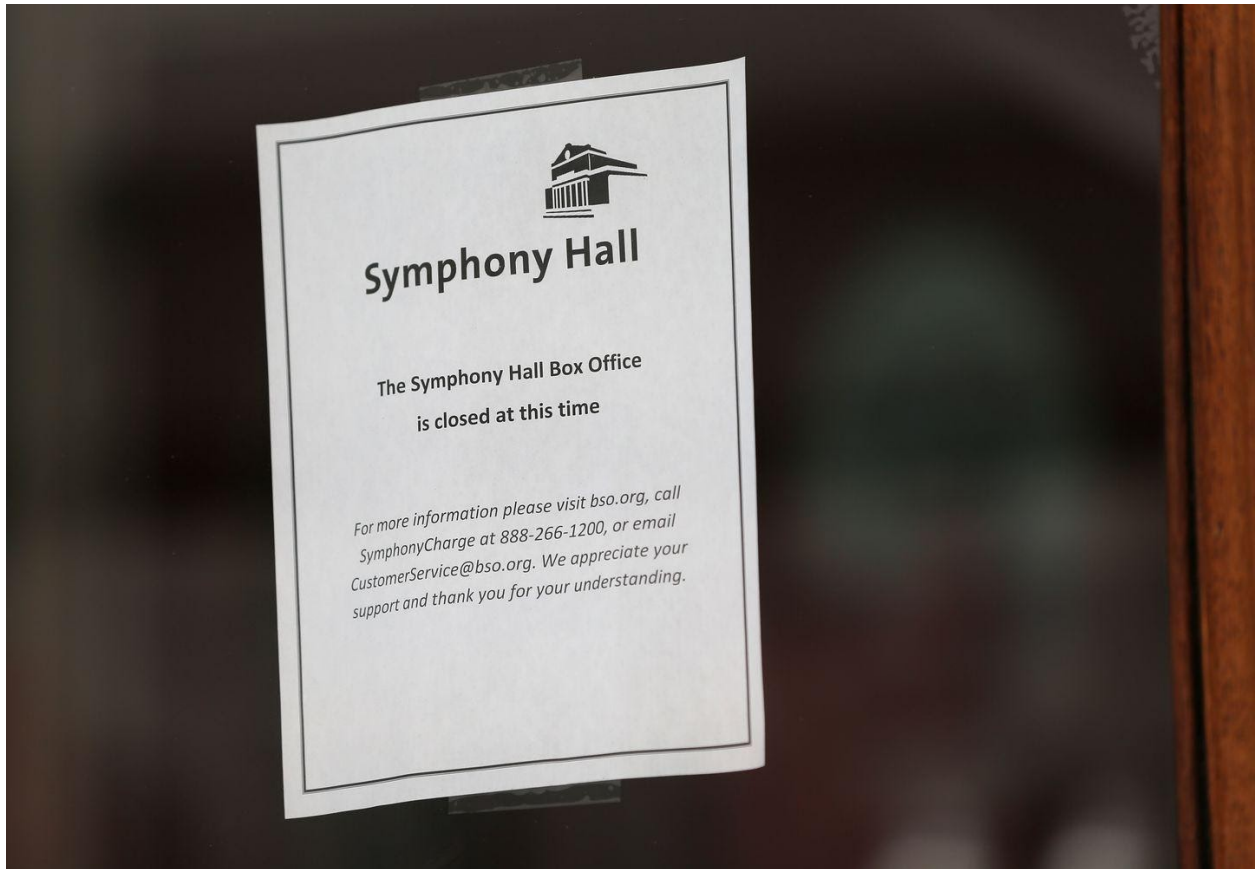
“I think it’s a moment of national anxiety and if you look at the very direct impact on the performing arts and the fact that we have organizations and employees whose livelihood and entire focus is on providing live music, it’s a very difficult time,” Deborah Borda, executive director of the New York Philharmonic, said in a phone interview. “People feel untethered and anxious. They wonder what the future holds.”

A strange new calculus is also haunting arts administrators, as every ensemble with a regular home calculates what percentage of its seating might still be viable with social distancing requirements in place. According to Borda, the New York Philharmonic’s David Geffen Hall could now seat only 380 people

instead of 2,700. The Met's general manager Peter Gelb told me that the company's 3,800-seat house would now max out at just 400 to 500 people. But don't expect that kind of crowd in either venue; both leaders point out that such options are a financial nonstarter.

"Social distancing and grand opera cannot coexist," Gelb stated plainly. "It's impossible." Even if such a model could somehow be made financially viable for an orchestra, Borda added, she fears "it might provide a kind of emotionally damaged product." In other words, the fully communal experience is so close to the heart of live performance that to have one without the other is perhaps to have neither at all.

In Boston, looking ahead to the fall, the orchestra is gaming out many different scenarios while knowing that, in all likelihood, it will be impossible to convene an audience safely in Symphony Hall. On the other hand, falling completely silent is an option the orchestra would very much like to avoid. "We're trying not to hibernate," Mark Volpe, the BSO's president, said in a phone interview. "We think people want something that's absolutely fresh."



The Symphony Hall box office remained closed last week. DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Toward that end, the BSO has not ruled out the possibility of performing in Symphony Hall without an audience. Whether it does so will depend on the availability of coronavirus testing as well as on the musicians' willingness to participate. Smaller forces may be arrayed on the Symphony Hall stage, but the BSO is also considering removing the hall's seating in order to distribute musicians across the length and breadth of the space.

Even in this scenario, any repertoire requiring vast instrumental forces seems increasingly unlikely, and though Volpe did not discuss specifics, the orchestra's Shostakovich cycle would seem impossible to continue under these conditions. That said, the ensemble is now scheduled to open its season with a cycle of the more modestly proportioned Beethoven symphonies — a project that *might* still be able to move forward, if in some kind of digital incarnation. "There are so many factors we don't control," Volpe added. "We have the next four to six weeks to sort this all out."

Prospects for opera in Boston this fall are not much brighter. Odyssey Opera has not yet announced a fall season, but BLO still has productions of works by Puccini and Philip Glass on the official schedule for October and November, respectively, but with the outlook so uncertain, the company has for now suspended all subscription sales. It has also assembled an 18-member health task force headed by Dr. Susan Bennett, who told me that the capacity for testing artists remains the key factor. “Whether it’s a sports team, an opera, or a symphony, testing frequently is extremely important. Currently it costs \$120 per test — and you have to wait a day or two for the result. We need a test with a rapid turnaround time, one that’s efficient in making diagnoses. The sensitivity needs to be high. And it needs to be cheap.”

Esther Nelson, BLO’s general and artistic director, anticipates the company will have a clearer picture of fall details by mid-July. In search of silver linings, she noted that what has been a very challenging facet of the company’s recent history now looks to become an asset: While other groups may be tethered to aging venues with limited ventilation and cramped backstage facilities, BLO has not had a permanent home in years, a situation that has forced it to develop a capacity for flexibility, installing productions in venues as varied as an ice skating rink, a university gymnasium, and the JFK library. “It’s like we’ve been training for this for years,” she joked.

Interestingly, in parts of Europe, the situation appears to be quite different. The Leipzig Gewandhaus for instance has made major adjustments to its summer schedule, but it is still proceeding with a festival stretching through June and July, for which audiences of 87 gather at each performance in its 500-seat Mendelssohn Hall. BSO music director Andris Nelsons, who is also music director of the Gewandhaus, will conduct the final four concerts of this festival. Fall schedules will also be adjusted in Leipzig, but live performance seems likely to proceed in some form.

The situation lays bare the stark differences in funding structures on either side of the Atlantic. While orchestras in the UK are suffering — the [conductors Simon Rattle and Mark Elder recently warned of a “devastated” musical landscape](#) — ensembles and opera companies in Germany and Austria often receive generous subsidies from local, state, or federal governments. In Leipzig, as dire as the situation may become, the Gewandhaus will not face its predicament alone. In a typical year the city provides a full half of the orchestra’s approximately \$50 million budget. According to Gewandhaus

general director Andreas Schulz, conversations have already begun about how the orchestra will cover its losses. “We don’t know the results in this moment, but we will find our way,” he told me. “We have the city behind us.”

In Vienna, meanwhile, members of the Vienna Philharmonic are speaking as if it’s practically business as usual. “On June 5th we had Daniel Barenboim conducting us. The next week we had Riccardo Muti. This week we have Franz Welser-Möst,” Daniel Froschauer, a violinist in the orchestra and its chairman, explained rather cheerfully. Soon the orchestra will be heading to its annual summer stint at the Salzburg Festival, which is also proceeding with modification this year. What’s more, concerts in Vienna are taking place with fewer precautions in place. “We refuse to play with more distance than usual,” Froschauer said simply. “Other orchestras keep more distance, but we are talking about tradition and sound. Our sound is what makes us special.”



Daniel Barenboim led the Vienna Philharmonic on June 5 at Vienna's Musikverein. DIETER NAGL FOR MUSIKVEREIN

How can the Vienna Philharmonic be speaking about subtleties of sound while other ensembles are speaking of survival? In a way, this storied orchestra has

been ahead of the curve for months, after possibly encountering the coronavirus before most of the world even knew it existed. As it happens, the orchestra was performing on tour in Wuhan last November, precisely as the first local cases were surfacing. Approximately one-third of the 90 musicians on tour came down with flu-like symptoms that proved extremely resistant to traditional treatments, according to Dr. Fritz Sterz, the physician traveling with the orchestra. Dr. Sterz strongly believes that at least some of them were early cases of COVID-19. None of them, fortunately, turned out to be severe.

These days, Dr. Sterz has been assisting the orchestra with a series of experiments, tracing the dispersion of aerosols that occurs when musicians play their instruments. Through these tests, he sought to dispel concerns that wind and brass instruments could potentially spew the virus in every direction. While Dr. Sterz stresses his experiments were not peer reviewed, he found that, with musicians playing while inhaling saline mist, none of the instruments in the orchestra were dispersing visible mist more than 1 meter. In addition, the Vienna Philharmonic now tests all its musicians once a week, and performs routine temperature checks. Audiences are still limited in size, but with Austria's swift pandemic response, the orchestra is hopeful it will be back playing for its normal crowds by Oct. 1.



A member of the Vienna Philharmonic participated in a recent study of how air currents and aerosols flow through instruments. MISCHA NAWRATA

It also helps that many European ensembles are unburdened by concerns of liability. When I mentioned to Froschauer and his colleague that arts administrators in the US worried about audience members filing suit if they got sick, the musicians could only laugh. “That’s an American way of thinking,” he said. “Nobody would do that here.”

What exactly audiences will — and won’t — do before there is a vaccine, and even after that, remains one of the most difficult questions to predict. LaPlaca Cohen, a cultural strategy consultancy, recently conducted a [large study](#) of performing arts audience members and discovered that 1 in 3 had lost income due to the pandemic, and more than 1 in 10 presently have no income at all. The survey also discovered that, while people may speak of a desire to return to concerts, the majority of respondents were making no real plans yet to do so.

In the meantime, perhaps not surprisingly, many organizations have seen an unprecedented surge in digital engagement. The BSO’s traffic has spiked,

according to Volpe. Gelb adds: “People are discovering opera while we’re closed, which is kind of crazy. We now have 30,000 new donors to the Met since we started our nightly streams.”

Exclusively digital listening remains, however, a kind of souvenir or promissory note — an encounter that derives its power in reference to experiences of the real thing. When exactly that real thing will be returning to Boston is still anyone’s guess. Surely, however, it won’t be this fall.

Jeremy Eichler can be reached at jeremy.eichler@globe.com, or follow him on Twitter [@Jeremy_Eichler](https://twitter.com/Jeremy_Eichler).