

# Classical: Performers, others try to accentuate the positive amid pandemic

By Steve Siegel

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With the dire situation the COVID-19 crisis has placed on the performing arts, it's hard to keep one's spirits up these days. Still, there are ways to share the therapeutic, restorative power of the arts in lieu of the personal performer/audience interaction.

Perhaps this would be a good time to take a clue from Johnny Mercer's 1944 hit, "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive," with its lines "You've got to accentuate the positive/Eliminate the negative/And latch on to the affirmative."

Since the Metropolitan Opera began broadcasting performances over the radio in the 1930s, the ways in which music can be disseminated have grown far more sophisticated. Many local classical music organizations and musicians have turned to video conferencing tools such as Zoom to keep students engaged, and there are plans in the works for streaming both archived and live performances.

The ASO has announced it will launch a new initiative, entitled Miller Symphony Hall@Home, consisting of a series of online recordings of past performances and other content that will be shared as it becomes available. The Bach Choir is planning its own streaming programs, and the Allentown Band has already made several selections from its "Our Band's Heritage" recordings available on its webpage, with more to come.

The Williams Center at Lafayette College is working on ways to push out its own online programs, which includes free access to National Theatre Live

broadcasts and “sneak peaks” at its coming season. NT Live has announced “National Theatre Live at Home,” which will make HD films from NT's extensive library available for free on a dedicated YouTube channel. Each program is broadcast from London’s West End, and will be available on demand for one week.

The series kicked off last Thursday with Richard Bean's “One Man, Two Guvnors,” starring Tony Award-winning actor James Corden. This week’s broadcast begins Thursday, April 9 and features Sally Cookson's adaptation of “Jane Eyre.” On April 16 NT Live will broadcast Bryony Lavery's reimagining of Robert Louis Stevenson's “Treasure Island,” and on April 23 it’s Shakespeare's classic comedy “Twelfth Night,” featuring Tamsin Greig. The upcoming Raritan River Music Festival is looking into streaming its entire four-concert series, or at least parts of it, in May. More details on all these streaming initiatives and more will be the subject of a forthcoming column.

## The arts and the economy

Ironically, one positive aspect of this crisis is the increased awareness of just how crucial the business of the performing arts is to the economy. “I think when we bounce back, the arts are going to play a big role in the new normal,” says Hollis Ashby, artistic and executive director of the Williams Center Performance Series at Lafayette College.

“What makes this particular crisis so difficult is that we can’t contribute the concert hall experience that connects humanity in a way nothing else can. The Williams Center is especially well-positioned to do that because of the depth and multinational variety of what we do. It’s intangible – you can’t put a price on that,” Ashby says.

What you can put a price on, Ashby says, is the impact the loss of performing arts is having on our economy. “The arts contribute \$763 billion to the US

economy, more than agriculture, transportation, or warehousing. Tax-exempt organizations producing arts like us, Miller Symphony Hall, and the Bach Choir, and those presenting arts like Zoellner contribute \$9 billion to the economy and employ almost 100,000 workers who earn \$5.6 billion in total compensation,” she says.

Presenting-arts organizations include theater companies, chamber music groups, and symphony orchestras, which combined contribute the largest value in the tax-exempt category, Ashby says.

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The Williams Center has had to suspend three live performances and two National Theatre performances, which basically conclude its season. “We’re giving the option to ticket holders to donate the cost of those tickets to the Williams Center,” says Ashby. “At this time every donation we receive from now until the end of May will go directly to replacing some of the artists’ losses whose concerts we had to cancel. So we’re compensating the artists to the extent that we can.”

Ashby says the Williams Center is also offering ticket holders a voucher so that they can apply the cost of their tickets to any show in the coming season, or they can request a refund. “As of now, no decision has been made to change next season, which is still in place and in the process of being finalized,” she says.



The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, shown here performing in Packer Memorial Church, is planning to present selections from its 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival later this year. (Contributed photo/Ryan Hulvat)

Bridget George, executive director of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, is similarly distressed, but is doing things to help keep the Choir connected to its audiences. “It’s difficult – we’re all trying to keep each other’s spirits up and send things out to cheer people up. For performing arts organizations what you’re all about is being together, making music together, and sharing it with audiences,” she says.

Last week the Bach Choir made the painful decision to cancel its 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival, originally scheduled for May 8-9 and May 15-17. Both its spring concert, originally scheduled for March 29, and the April Bach at Noon have been cancelled. The Bel Canto Youth Chorus is also waiting to make a final announcement on its May 2 concert.

But the good news is that even if the Bach fest is cancelled, at least parts of it will be salvaged for performance at a later date. Says George, “That would include the events involving students – Zimmermann’s Coffee House and the Bach Chaconne Project. The latter, for instance, is planned for a Bach at Noon concert this fall, and selections from Zimmermann’s Coffee House might be incorporated into future Bach at Noon programs as well.

For the Chaconne project, mentored by Moravian College music faculty member Larry Lipkis, student musicians perform variations they have composed over the chord progressions heard in Bach’s famous Chaconne in D Minor. As a finale, renowned classical guitarist Eliot Fisk was to have performed the solo Chaconne.

Preparations for the Chaconne project are still going forward, due to the magic of video conferencing. “Larry is continuing online weekly sessions with the students using Zoom. I’ve sat in on some of the sessions, and you could see how grateful the kids are in still pursuing this,” George says. “I was thinking how great it would be if Eliot could join in on the Zoom sessions, and intend to contact him soon to see if that would be possible.” Fisk has confirmed he will be performing in the fall Bach at Noon which will feature the Chaconne project.

As to performances by the full choir and the Bach Festival Orchestra, George says that Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld is planning to incorporate Part Two of Handel’s “Messiah,” originally part of the cancelled Spring Concert, as part of the Spring Concert in 2021. The finals for the Young American Singer’s Competition, originally to take place during the May festival, has been rescheduled for this fall.

Even in the midst of all this uncertainty, the Bach Choir is still keeping the music coming, even if it has to be done remotely. Last week a video of

Funfgeld performing on the piano and making comments was recorded for future streaming and as an e-blast.

“One of the most important things is staying in touch with everybody – musicians, choir and audiences – and keep the music uplifting people,” George says. “Renee [Bach Choir marketing director Renee James] has been emailing ‘Moments of Comfort’ messages such as tenor Isaiah Bell performing arias from Part One of Handel’s ‘Messiah’ from our Christmas concert, and we’re planning new in-the-moment videos for the near future.

On Tuesday, April 14, the choir plans to stream a complete video of the January Bach at Noon in place of that day’s cancelled Bach at Noon performance. Looking forward, plans for next year’s Bethlehem Bach Festival remain intact. “That will be Greg’s last festival with the choir. It’s very special to him and I feel that it’s better to let people look forward to that then change it in any way,” George says.

### Musicians just want to play

Even freelance musicians faced by lost income from cancelled performance gigs are somehow managing to think positive. “We musicians are so sensitive to the calming effects of music and its ability to calm other people down,” says violinist Stephani Bell. “I’m so grateful that I play – when I don’t play for a long time I feel really strange. So we’re fortunate that we can somehow help people who are probably going to freak out more than they can imagine.”

Now living in Emmaus, Bell, a graduate of both the Eastman School of Music and Juilliard, led a busy freelance life pursuing her career in the New York metropolitan area before moving to the Lehigh Valley. She was a member of such groups as the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the American Composer’s

Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, the New Jersey Symphony, the New York Pops, and performed in several Broadway shows.

Locally, Bell had been active with the Pennsylvania Sinfonia, the Bach Choir, Satori, the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, and several other ensembles. She recently held a position at Lafayette College as music director of the Lafayette Chamber orchestra, chamber ensembles and violin professor. Now she teaches at The Conservatory in Doylestown and the Nazareth Music Center, in addition to giving private lessons.

Bell estimates that she's lost over two-thirds of her income from cancelled performances, and now depends on teaching to make ends meet. She considers herself lucky that almost all her students, both at the two schools at which she teaches and at her own, have continued their lessons online using Zoom.

“It's been good, although different. Teaching online is not the most ideal situation, but you can still maintain continuity — and you know what, using Zoom really seems to engage my students more. I have a few students who when I teach in person are not alert. With this new dimension, I can see them so much better. All they have to do is move the camera a little and I can see both the back of their hands and the front. They just seem more alert and willing to help. I've noticed that they play better for me too,” Bell says.

To kids engaged, the Doylestown Conservatory was suggesting to teachers that they have their students put “living room recitals” on video and post them on Instagram or something similar and send it to the conservatory. “You know, just trying to keep them going and hopeful,” says Bell. “So we haven't skipped a beat, but it's still been really hard. I don't like not being able to perform, but at least we know that as musicians we can use Zoom and things like it and

communicate in this way. So there are some things that are positive about this.”

Bell is even keeping the music sounding at home. “Sometimes I will just play in the hallway because there are some apartment dwelling people where I live — you know, just to make them feel better. A student of mine and her brother recently went to Kirkland Village and played on the outside balcony so that their grandmother could see them. She invited other residents to her window to watch. I sent them more music to play, including ‘Ode to Joy,’ Pachelbel’s ‘Canon,’ and ‘The Prayer.’ I think when the weather gets warmer I’ll just open my window and play.”

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