

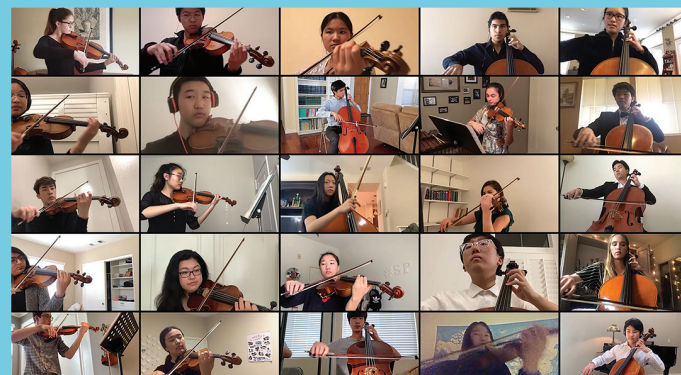


The Santa Fe Youth Symphony performs before the pandemic with musicians from the orchestra's mariachi program, which provides mariachi music instruction for students aged 12 to 18 in Santa Fe.

Lockdown Learning

Though in-person instruction has been mostly shut down since the pandemic began in 2020, youth orchestras have been finding myriad ways to rehearse and perform, socially distanced. And some of the changes will likely be lasting, informing music education in the future.

by Rebecca Winzenried



Above left, the San Diego Youth Symphony and Music Director Jeff Edmons in a performance photo taken before the pandemic. Above right: Since last year, the San Diego Youth Symphony has been operating virtually for most activities, including this Zoom-based performance featuring the ensemble's string section. The youth orchestra is postponing planned 75th-anniversary celebrations and instead preparing for the virtual premiere of a new work entitled *You Are Amazing*, in collaboration with several other youth orchestras.

This May, the Santa Fe Youth Symphony Association will debut a new video on its virtual spring concert, a performance of Soon Hee Newbold's *American Landscape* featuring its two orchestras, along with members of twelve other youth orchestras from eight states. Meanwhile, the San Diego Youth Symphony plans to go international with a similar concept, collaborating with Mexico's Tijuana Youth Symphony, plus several other youth orchestras from the San Diego area, for the premiere of *You Are Amazing* by Brian Balmages. Each is a sweeping, socially distanced project with the potential to involve as many as 800 student musicians, connecting them in a way that none could have anticipated just a year ago.

Back in early 2020, the youth orchestras involved, like their youth orchestra counterparts around the country, were struggling to deal with the pandemic shutdown that had forced them to become virtual entities overnight. They had little online experience to guide them, because a digital presence had never mattered much. Youth orchestras, after all, were schooled in the idea that in-person learning and performances are paramount to music education.

That thinking has changed as youth orchestras have weathered more than a full academic year in various stages of lockdown and emerged energized, in unexpected ways. In Santa Fe, the *American Landscape* project has meant expanding outreach in a very literal way. The Santa Fe Youth Symphony's program has always incorporated regional influences, with mariachi and jazz ensembles alongside its orchestras. "Our organization, at its core, is based on inclusivity," says Executive Director Andrea Cassutt. "We're in a place that has many different cultures represented, so we're pretty regularly looking at, how do we connect?" The question now facing Cassutt: How does her orchestra make a connection in the middle of a pandemic?

For the *American Landscape* project, Santa Fe Youth Orchestra conductors William Reece Waag and Ryan Finn began reaching out to colleagues at youth orchestras across the country. The project combated some of the isolation of social distancing by taking students beyond the

confines of their usual practice routines. Conductors from participating orchestras offered video instruction on different aspects of the piece, giving students insight into new perspectives and learning styles. (In addition to Santa Fe Youth Orchestra, the other twelve youth orchestras in the

In some ways, the project was a natural extension for the Santa Fe Youth Symphony, which often collaborates with ensembles around the region—although in this case, the normal concerns of how and where to get students together were not factors. "We were taking advantage



"When we were in-person it was, baton up ... instruments up ... go," says Santa Fe Youth Symphony Executive Director Andrea Cassutt. Now conductors reserve time at the beginning and end of online rehearsals for students to talk.

project are Albuquerque Youth Symphony, Boise Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestra, Greater Boulder Youth Symphony, Houston Youth Symphony, Huntsville Youth Orchestras, Loudoun Symphony Youth Orchestra, Mid-Columbia Youth Orchestras, Rowan Youth Orchestra, San Juan Symphony Youth Orchestra, Yakima Youth Symphony Orchestra, and Yakima Ensemble for Strings.)

of something we wouldn't have thought of before, because we would have focused on being together in person and what that might have involved with travel, etc.," said Cassutt. "The reduction in all of those logistics makes the connections easier."

Reaching across the border was not that much of a stretch for the San Diego Youth Symphony. It had planned a joint performance with the Tijuana Youth Symphony—based in Mexico, just 20 miles



The New York Youth Symphony reconvened in December to record a concert of music by Jessie Montgomery, Valerie Coleman, and Florence Price at Manhattan's DiMenna Center for Classical Music.



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away—as part of its 75th anniversary in the 2020–21 season. The celebration was also set to include a new work from Balmages, a composer known for creating music for young musicians. The title of his new work, *You Are Amazing*, comes from an inspiration the composer had early in the pandemic shutdown, a time when he was questioning the place of music education and his own role in it. While out for a walk, he came across a message chalked on the sidewalk: *You are amazing*. He took it as a new starting point. Balmages’ story, in turn, sparked an idea for San Diego

debut of their collaborative music video with the partner youth orchestras: All About Music, Civic Youth Orchestra, East County Youth Orchestra, Fortissimo, La Jolla Music Society’s Community Music Center, the Tijuana Youth Symphony, and Villa Musica.

The timing of shutdowns nationwide in March of 2020 was particularly bad for youth orchestras that were on the verge of presenting celebratory festivals, end-of-year showcases, and major fundraising events. The New Jersey Youth Symphony, based in New Providence, was two weeks



Before the pandemic, the New Jersey Youth Symphony commissioned composer Aferdian (also known as Aferdian Stephens) to write a symphonic piece to premiere in May and then perform on tour in Italy. Instead, the orchestra performed the work virtually.

Youth Symphony President and CEO Michael Remson. Why not use the new piece to go ahead with the joint Tijuana performance, and ask the half-dozen other youth orchestras around San Diego to join in? Planned anniversary events could be postponed, but this would signal to young musicians that their individual contributions were important, and that youth orchestras were central to the community. “That you are amazing,” says Remson. “As a way to say, we’re still here, we still matter.” They are shooting for a mid-April

away from its annual Playathon, a popular fundraiser involving dozens of students performing over several hours at a nearby mall. The organization quickly assembled a virtual event, with video clips of individual musicians, that ended up surpassing its fundraising goal. “It was really kind of a remarkable day, looking back,” says Artistic Director and Conductor Helen Cha-Pyo. “I’m still feeling that whiplash in my neck, from going from zero to 100. We had no time to figure it out.”

The NJYS performed its second virtual

Playathon in March 2021. It was not a scenario that anyone would have hoped for, but this time around the event was heralded more than a month in advance with a web page including a countdown clock, a fundraising goal tracker, video of a remotely coordinated performance of Sibelius’s *Finlandia*, and a virtual practice challenge.

Like many other youth orchestra programs, the NJYS did not drop a beat following the shutdown, conducting rehearsals online within a week, even though it had no experience doing so. Cha-Pyo soon realized that adjustments had to be made to keep young musicians engaged. Instead of three-hour rehearsal blocks, Zoom sessions became one hour of rehearsal coupled with new offerings such as master classes and music theory instruction. Students received one hour of credit acknowledging their participation for each hour of engagement in the program, a requirement that parents said provided some needed structure.

Including Underrepresented Voices

The New Jersey Youth Symphony also had to rethink commissions that were in the pipeline from four composers. All the commissioned composers are from New Jersey, and their diverse back-



French horn players from the New Jersey Youth Symphony perform at an outdoor concert in Centennial Park in New Providence, New Jersey, wearing specially designed masks to guard against the spread of COVID-19.

grounds—Chilean, Peruvian, Lebanese, and Black—intentionally reflect the state’s rich immigrant and cultural communities. Recognizing that social-distancing guidelines would hinder the number of musicians even if a live, in-person performance

were to become possible, “We had to go back to the drawing board and make all the instrumentation different, instead of being a full orchestra,” says Cha-Pyo. One composer was asked to focus on percussion, another on strings and piano, and a third on winds and brass.

Another piece, by Mesia Austin—a Black composer who is an NJYS conduc-



A socially distanced New Jersey Youth Symphony rehearsal in the parking lot of the Wharton Institute for the Performing Arts in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey.

tor as well as its director of percussion—posed a different challenge. It involved a collaboration with New Jersey-based Nokia Bell Labs to develop a system that would transform audience members’ cell phones into speakers, immersing them in the sound and essentially making them part of the performance. Austin and NJYS musicians continued to work on the process with engineers at the lab’s campus in Murray Hill, but there was no getting around the fact that the work depended on a live performance with an audience. This winter, Cha-Pyo was keeping her fingers crossed that it could be performed by the end of this academic year, perhaps in an outdoor performance.

Last summer, the NJYS also collaborated with the New York Youth Symphony on *Artist Stories*, a series of video conversations with influential artists of color. Among them was oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, an Imani Winds founder, who spoke of how her perspective was shaped as a member of the DC Youth Orchestra Program, where she says she was surrounded by people who looked like her. Also part of the conversation was Metropolitan Opera Orchestra Trombonist Weston Sprott (he also is dean of the Juilliard School’s preparatory division), who recalled his par-

ents’ hesitancy about his choice of a career path that seemed atypical for a Black teen. The casual, frank conversations offered young viewers a window into the lives of successful musicians, and a chance to pose questions about more nitty-gritty music challenges such as technique, performance, and motivation.

Another New York Youth Symphony video series, *The Unsung*, focused on figures historically underrepresented in classical music: South American, Asian, African American, and women composers. The orchestra had planned to spotlight music by Black women on its 2020–21 concerts, accompanied by the release of its first recording, featuring works by Jessie Montgomery, Valerie Coleman, and Florence Price. With its Carnegie Hall venue still shuttered, those concerts were scrubbed, but the NYYS was able to capture the recording in December, live and in-person, without an in-person audience, at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music in Manhattan.

It was preceded by months of study on the safest size of ensembles, seating arrangements, use of personal protective equipment, logistics of moving young mu-



By keeping the music going and connecting with young musicians about their own lives, says New Jersey Youth Symphony Artistic Director and Conductor Helen Cha-Pyo, “We are frontline workers for the mental health of our students.”

sicians in and out, and studies of air flow in the building. For all of the recognized advantages of working remotely—safety and the possibility to reach more people—a return to in-person rehearsals and performances remains the goal. The NYYS began with small group repertoire readings at the DiMenna Center in late fall.

Roads to Return

The PYO Music Institute (formerly the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra) moved a little farther down that road in Febru-

ary when it began welcoming a limited number of students back to in-person rehearsals. Music Director and Conductor Louis Scaglione led the first session, with 48 students in attendance and others participating from home via Zoom. A laptop



A virtual chamber music concert featuring the clarinet section of the New York Youth Symphony.

and webcam were set up in front of him, so he could see and be seen, and new microphones placed to make sure students at home could hear clearly. It was weird. And it was an important step, Scaglione says, just to see the joy on the students’ faces. “They were seeing friends they had only been seeing on Zoom for ten months. It was really quite emotional for me. It’s been my quest over many months to get us to this point.”

Scaglione had been consulting regularly with his “medicine cabinet” from

the board’s COVID response committee. Led by Lydia Ogden, a physician who has specialized in global vaccine policy (and a parent of recent PYO graduates), the committee created a 50-page manual outlining safety protocols and procedures. The effort was especially tricky for an organization that draws young musicians from Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey, from multiple cities, counties, and school districts that were all operating under different safety standards.

The year had already been unsettling in



The first rehearsal with students in attendance since the pandemic began “was really quite emotional for me. It’s been my quest over many months to get us to this point,” says Louis Scaglione, director/conductor of the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra.

major ways for the organization, which had been set to relaunch under the PYO Music Institute brand. An official unveiling had been set to take place at its March 2020 gala. Posters with the new logo were printed; gift bags were readied. Gala activities had to be delayed to a scheduled 80th-anniversary concert in May 2020. When that, too, was cancelled, Plan C became a virtual gala in mid-June. But that was also cancelled in the wake of the racial-justice protests gripping Philadelphia and the nation. A festive event, even virtual, seemed inappropriate.

Instead, Scaglione, who had been preparing students for a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, used rehearsal time to reflect on the “Ode to Joy” text before turning the virtual discussion over to special guests from Philadelphia’s Black community. “Students were able to connect with a segment of our community that was profoundly impacted and hear directly from them,” he says. “It became a beautiful moment of reflection in

a very tragic time.” An “Evening of Harmony” event on June 19—Juneteenth, a holiday marking the emancipation of those who had been enslaved in the United States—replaced the virtual gala and the PYO Music Institute was formally introduced.

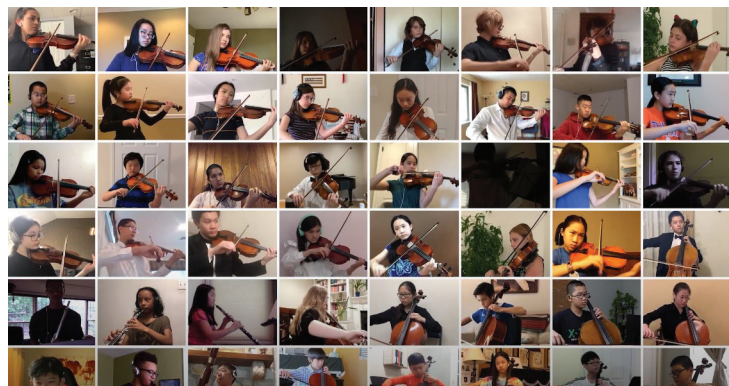
A need to connect with students on an emotional and intellectual level beyond the repetition of lessons and rehearsals has become increasingly apparent. Like educators everywhere, youth orchestra directors, conductors, and teaching artists have kept an eye on the toll that being locked down at home, away from peers, and often without clear direction, has taken. Virtual rehearsals, like those at the Santa Fe Youth Symphony, now include a social check-in. “When we were in-person it was, baton up ... instruments up ... go,”

says Cassutt. Now conductors reserve a bit of time at the beginning and end of online rehearsals to allow students to talk. Breakout rooms may be kept open so students can share things they are working on among themselves, or just see how their friends are dressed. At the NJYS, Cha-Pyo has become accustomed to hearing from students, via text, about little issues or with apologies for not being focused in rehearsal because of distractions in their home environment. “We are frontline workers, let’s not forget that,” she

says. “We are frontline workers for the mental health of our students.”

Community Classes, Yoga Warm-Ups

When Richmond Symphony Orchestra musicians were recruited during the shutdown for online sessions with its affiliated Richmond Symphony Youth Orchestra program, Principal Viola Molly Sharp opted to lead a yoga practice. She



A Zoom performance by PYO Music Institute musicians.

introduced students to the warm-up she does before performances to stretch, concentrate on her breathing, and focus her attention, offering a glimpse into how professional musicians deal with stress in their lives and work. “Our musicians do teach sectionals regularly, but in those cases the



Bachrach Photography

Louis Scaglione, director/conductor of the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra and president of PYO Music Institute, leads a Philadelphia Youth Orchestra rehearsal, with musicians widely spread out for social distancing. Some musicians participate in person, while others join via Zoom.



In March 2020, just before the pandemic lockdowns, students from Richmond public elementary schools participated in the Richmond Symphony Orchestra’s workshop with electronic violinist Tracy Silverman.

students are only interacting with the orchestra musicians who are teaching their instrument. It’s usually very focused on the repertoire they are preparing for performance. So they got this opportunity to see



“Any community music school seeks to serve as many people as it can,” says **Walter Bitner**, the Richmond Symphony Orchestra’s director of education and community engagement. Bitner fully expects that some aspects of virtual learning will be part of the new normal.

musicians in a different context,” Walter Bitner, the Richmond Symphony’s director of education and community engagement, says of the digital sessions that venture beyond the music itself.

Richmond Youth Symphony Orchestra students also participated in a pilot program for a new community music school last summer. Bitner had been exploring the idea of creating a program that could fill the gaps he saw in a city without many options for music instruction outside of the schools. The concept was always for a brick-and-mortar facility, but when youth orchestra classes and rehearsals went virtual last spring, Bitner saw how the music school could be reformulated. The Richmond Symphony School of Music (RSSoM) launched in October with both youth and adult classes, after a three-week summer pilot program to smooth out technical issues and ready a dedicated website.

Response to RSSoM was so positive that the winter session grew from 17 to 25 classes, ranging from subjects geared to student musicians, such as improvisation and music theory, to broader offerings that could be offered to adults in the community, such as a class on the contributions of Black composers. “Any community music school seeks to serve as many people as it can,” says Bitner. “We hope that offering a variety of classes and topics would initiate interest from people who might not necessarily be drawn to something the symphony does.” The orchestra reports that strong evidence has already emerged, as RSSoM enrollees have come from across the country and Europe.



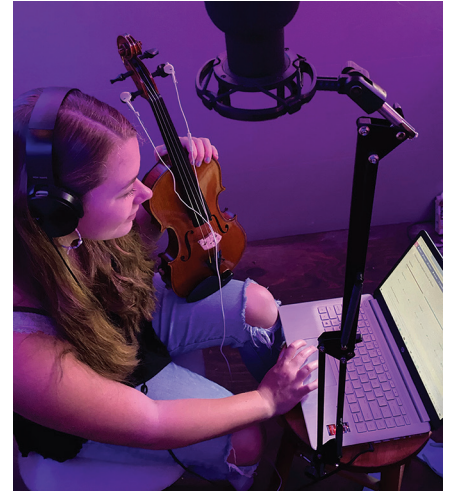
Richmond Symphony Orchestra Principal Percussion Cliff Hardison leads a virtual sectional rehearsal with Richmond Symphony Youth Orchestra percussionists in fall 2020.

Plans for eventual classes in an actual music school building in Richmond have not been abandoned. But Bitner, like his youth orchestra colleagues, fully expects



Richmond Symphony Youth Orchestra musicians rehearse, in a photo taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

that some aspects of virtual learning will be part of the new normal. The value of supplemental video instruction or rehearsals is being realized: a survey by the New Jersey Youth Symphony indicated that 97 percent of parents said they would sign their children up for online classes in the future.



A violinist in the Richmond Symphony Youth Orchestra, which has been providing instruction virtually since last spring, when classes and rehearsals went online.

“People are really focusing on the silver lining of what technology has brought us,” says San Diego’s Remson. He points to the library of videos that teaching artists have banked during the shutdown for their early-childhood education program. Best intentions had been to do so all along, but like so much in the realm of technology, there was just never enough time or resources. “Well, now we have the time,” says Remson. “Let’s put it to use and be ready. What have we learned that will let us do more for our kids?”

At the PYO Music Institute, Scaglione notes that upgrades to its rehearsal spaces will allow future students to log on for remote master classes or auditions; the online sectional rehearsals and score discussions being archived will be a ready source for closer study. Which is all in keeping with the organization’s new identity. “Was it part of the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra? Not at all,” says Scaglione, but goals have changed. New tools and technologies have been unboxed, and even when the PYO and other youth orchestras return to a normal pace of rehearsals and performances, he says, don’t expect them to be packed back up and stashed in the proverbial attic, never to be seen again. **S**

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