



THE FUTURE OF ORCHESTRAS

AS PART OF A NEW SERIES, WE BROUGHT TOGETHER FOUR ORCHESTRA EXPERTS TO DISCUSS WHAT THE FUTURE MIGHT LOOK LIKE. HERE IS WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY

A concert hall goer using the ONSTAGE mobile app © ONSTAGE mobile app / Konrad Cwik

As 2020 began there were many issues facing orchestras all over the world, from the implications of tech to the age-old problem of finding new audiences. But while these problems were significant, they perhaps didn't feel too urgent.

Then came COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, and suddenly live streaming, audience development and the ecosystem of public funding were of critical importance. So what is next for orchestras, and which challenges and opportunities should they address first?

IAM brought together four experts to debate the issue: Aliena Haig, PR and communications manager at Piranha Arts; Anselm Rose, general manager at Rundfunk Orchester und Chöre gGmbH; Felix Heri, managing director of the Lucerne Festival Academy; and Jakub Fiebig, CEO of classical tech firm ONSTAGE.

IAM: CAN WE GO BACK TO BUSINESS AS USUAL AFTER COVID-19?

■ **Anselm Rose:** I hope so. But I have to say I don't think that will happen.

Most people, especially our customers, would really prefer to come back to what they had

before – the traditional classical concert experience as a social event. There is a need for the social event of concerts, but it will take at least a year or two before we can go back to that.

■ **Aliena Haig:** I think it is more a question of what we normalise. We have to set standards for how we proceed. We can't just keep making things freely available, because it is not sustainable.

I came across an idea through *Tales of Quarantine* blog on WOMEX: what would have happened if classical music had just stopped? If there was no music available for the first one or two months when lockdown began? I think that's such an interesting question because it would have forced everyone to reconsider the value behind the arts.

But what actually happened was a content overload. Everyone was spoiled for choice. I think it is very difficult to go back and undo these expectations – from now on, people will expect online content to be free.

I don't think we can go back to what was ordinary before, because we now need to take into consideration that a concert is both for people live in a hall but also someone on the other side of the world watching a livestream.

However, I don't think these are bad things at all; I think they are wonderful opportunities to breathe new life into the classical music industry and it is actually a very exciting time.

IAM: WHAT WILL THE LONG-TERM ROLE OF DIGITAL PERFORMANCES BE FOR ORCHESTRAS?

■ **Jakub Fiebig:** When the pandemic started we came up with this idea of the digital concert hall via the ONSTAGE app. Other companies tried something similar. None of them to my knowledge have been successful – and ours certainly wasn't.

The reason is that unless concert organisers and platforms are able to deliver something that is more than just the sound – something that makes a real concert experience with interaction, conversations, choosing the pieces, live interviews and so on – then it just isn't going to work. People go to concerts for a social experience, and without that element they aren't willing to pay for a ticket.

For example, a few weeks ago Melbourne Symphony Orchestra research found only 6% of the audience said they'd be willing to pay for an online experience. So I think that's proof that it will be super difficult to charge for online experiences.

■ **Anselm Rose:** We have four ensembles here that were originally broadcast ensembles. In the pandemic we were still holding the slots for broadcasts without audience, as we did 100 years ago. And people were listening. So this way of distributing still works well, but that's a privilege that broadcast orchestras like ours have that others do not.

Coming back to the question of digital broadcasts, my feeling is that customers are now looking for extra services around the live concerts – for example, with extra digital programme notes, talks

from musicians, at no cost.

■ **Felix Heri:** At the latest edition we tried making the programme booklet available as a free PDF. Despite the fact the audience did download and used it, we are currently looking into different options in order to find a way in making the booklet more accessible and user friendly.

Content cannot be given away for free. We're looking into whether we can put parts of our online content behind a paywall for future editions of the festival so that we can get some money back.

■ **Aliena Haig:** For Classical:NEXT and our sister event WOMEX, we will have to charge for the digital content just as a matter of staying alive.

Our research shows that people would be willing to pay for digital educational activities – such as mentoring or online talks – so that is an option for us. We have an idea of developing an online academy, and the feedback we've had is that people would be happy to pay for it.

■ **Jakub Fiebig:** I think the future will actually look like what has happened in the film industry. Every individual film producer hasn't created a platform to make things available as paid content for whatever they are producing. Instead, what happened is large platforms came that give you access to so many things. Netflix charges around €10 a month and at the same time they are offering collections that are worth millions and millions of euros, with great quality.

So my thinking is that a platform that will have to be created that does something similar for classical concerts – or perhaps the performing arts in general. Some platforms already exist



Far left: Rundfunkchor Berlin rehearsing in a socially distanced format
© Rundfunkchor Berlin

Left: Audience members at a socially distanced Basel Sinfonietta concert
© Zlatko Mičić

that are bit like this, but they don't have enough content to take them to that Netflix level.

IAM: WHAT OTHER CHANGES HAS COVID-19 ACCELERATED?

■ **Anselm Rose:** Concert planning has always been two or three years ahead, and we tried to sell subscriptions for an entire season or even the whole year. But things have totally changed – now we're selling tickets for concerts in September that we only just announced, and we're telling our audience 'we don't know what will happen in October, simply wait for the announcement'. Now people are used to making quick decisions about what they want to consume.

"I think the future will actually look like what has happened in the film industry"

■ **Felix Heri:** We have tried something similar over the past few months with the Abo Surprise series, which allowed us to adjust quickly to COVID changes. The audience didn't know what the concert would be in advance when they purchased the ticket, but they did know that their safety would be our top priority. We were not sure how the concept would be received, but actually we broke our sales record.

■ **Aliena Haig:** Transparency is now very important in a way that it wasn't before. We might say 'we're trying this, it's an experiment, we hope that you like it, please give us feedback'. I think that's massively important.

■ **Anselm Rose:** We also figured out that marketing and distribution will change totally. In earlier years we always had the box office on the night of a concert – and we still have a service centre where you can go and buy a ticket – but already we were down to 2% of people buying tickets this way, and now it is down to 0%. People buy them online, and COVID has accelerated this transition.

IAM: WHAT IDEAS DO ORCHESTRAS NEED TO EXPLORE NOW?

■ **Aliena Haig:** This is the moment to act on all the ideas we've had in the industry over the last few years, whether that means creating a corner in the foyer that is educational and shows a 3D demonstration of how a violin is made, or creating

new safe spaces for people with mental health issues to listen to music. We can almost treat concert halls like an interactive museum.

There is a fascination about the musicians, the people who have mastered this art. How do their fingers move so fast, how to you tune a timpani? We've not tapped in to the potential of each different part of an orchestra, and that's something I'd like to see explored.

Maybe we want to look at having business class seats, like you have in cinemas – and I think concert hall design needs to be addressed.

Then of course there is inclusivity. We must look at more diverse ensembles, diverse orchestras, conductors, soloists, and we must start looking towards classical music practices that don't originate in Europe. There's so much out there that hasn't been explored or brought to the stage.

■ **Jakub Fiebig:** Concerts might need to be shorter now – for example, the format people have been trying, with two one-hour performances. I think you can build around that with backstage experience. As an industry we struggle with showing who we are as human beings and how it is all produced, but we need to embrace that side of ourselves.

■ **Anselm Rose:** I think we need to view our customers in a completely different way from now on. Take Mercedes, which used to make two kinds of cars. Now there is a huge variety, from small smart city cars to huge luxury vehicles, because people expect to have a very individualised consumer product.

There will be lots of people who pass by the Philharmonie in Berlin and decide to drop in and watch a concert for one hour and that's it. There will be a group that loves to have a concert of two or three hours. Our job will be to offer hybrid programming and hybrid formats.

We have to act. We're talking about what is happening right now.

■ **Felix Heri:** The biggest risk is to do nothing, to just celebrate the last decade and not create new experiences. We have to find new ways of working so that we stay relevant.