a season like no other

In mid-September 2019, the Minnesota Orchestra launched its 117th concert season—in an Orchestra Hall auditorium filled with 2,000 listeners, and a full complement of musicians onstage. Halfway through the season, the Hall went dark as the COVID-19 pandemic reached Minnesota, the world changed, and the Orchestra adapted to new ways of making and sharing music. From musicians’ at-home videos to virtual collaborations with local and international performers to safely distanced chamber concerts in Peavey Plaza, the ensemble’s connections with audiences and followers around the world strengthened in profound and creative ways.
In the six months before the pandemic, Music Director Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra’s flagship classical series featured performances of Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Dona Nobis Pacem* with singers from South Africa and the U.S. (left), a highly varied New Year’s Eve concert inspired by the BBC Proms festival finale, and a program of music by top young composers capping the Orchestra’s annual Composer Institute.

The Live at Orchestra Hall series included popular Movies & Music concerts, most conducted by Sarah Hicks. An expanded focus on mindfulness and well-being included yoga classes and a partnership with the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality and Healing, as well as a Music and the Mind concert led by Hicks and host-violist Sam Bergman. Pianist Jon Kimura Parker was announced as creative partner for the reimagined Summer at Orchestra Hall season—which will debut in July 2021.

Engagements with the next generation were highlighted by Young People’s Concerts, Relaxed Family Concerts and Sensory-Friendly Concerts. A weekend of concerts in collaboration with performers from Minneapolis’ North Community High School included the first performances of writer-narrator Aaron Dworkin’s *The American Rhapsody*.

The Orchestra toured to Indiana University and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, playing concerts and working with students. A Side-by-Side performance brought the MMEA All-State Orchestra and the University of Minnesota Symphony Orchestra onstage alongside their Minnesota Orchestra counterparts, while “Hall Pass,” a new initiative funded by Orchestra musicians, distributed more than 1,500 free concert tickets to students under age 18.

In mid-March, during the week the pandemic forced shutdowns in Minnesota, the Orchestra performed one final concert without an in-person audience, broadcast live by Classical Minnesota Public Radio. The concert was “such an emotional evening for all parties involved that it sounded like they were playing as though their lives depended on it,” stated MPR’s Melissa Ousley.
After Orchestra Hall went dark in mid-March, the Minnesota Orchestra remained vibrant as musical activities moved swiftly to online formats. A brass quintet of Orchestra musicians playing *This Little Light of Mine* outdoors from their safely distanced cars was the first of dozens of Minnesota Orchestra At Home videos, recorded from locales ranging from musicians’ kitchens to front yards to dance studios.

Creative video and audio editing allowed Orchestra musicians to perform with each other, sometimes from separate homes—or even accompany themselves—in works ranging from Jean Sibelius’ *Finlandia* to the Beatles’ *When I’m 64* to original compositions by Osmo Vänskä and by Orchestra violinist Pamela Arnstein.

Three signature video projects brought the Orchestra’s musicians together in large-scale performances recorded from their individual homes: a “Lockdown Edition” performance of singer-rapper Dessa’s *Skeleton Key*; a rendition of the famous graduation march from Edward Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance*, tailored for schools to download and use in virtual commencement ceremonies in Minnesota and beyond; and a performance of a movement from another Elgar work, the *Enigma Variations*, for which the Orchestra joined forces with the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, of which Vänskä is music director.

In the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd in May, the Orchestra joined the world in anguish and calling for justice, as musicians honored Floyd with video performances of a Dmitri Shostakovich string quartet as well as the traditional melody *Song of the Birds*, arranged for cello ensemble by Associate Principal Cello Silver Ainomäe.

The Orchestra provided numerous online experiences for students from elementary to university levels, including “let’s play a duet” videos, an interactive virtual guide to the Orchestra, and a series of creative household projects such as instructions on making your own instruments.

Moving beyond performances, Principal Cello Anthony Ross and Principal Clarinet Gabriel Campos Zamora hosted live interactive video conversations with audiences and guests, and several musicians worked with local trivia host Brian Ward to present online trivia nights.

The Orchestra’s many volunteers stayed engaged by initiating a letter-writing campaign to bond with residents of the Lyngblomsten senior housing community in St. Paul, who have been isolated during the pandemic. In August, a group of volunteers, as well as a brass quintet of Orchestra musicians, visited Lyngblomsten and connected with residents from a safe outdoor distance.

“Your music continues to bring us all together, even when we have to stay apart for awhile.”

—ORCHESTRA SUPPORTER
During August, the Minnesota Orchestra returned to live in-person performances with nightly chamber music concerts outside Orchestra Hall on Peavey Plaza as a thank-you to the Orchestra’s dedicated supporters. Small groups of musicians played repertoire ranging from Mozart to modern, showcasing a diverse lineup of composers, and audiences of up to 250 attended using rigorous safety and physical distancing procedures.

Throughout the pandemic, the Orchestra has done extensive work to determine how musicians can once again play safely together, and when audiences can be welcomed back to Orchestra Hall. A safety study brought University of Minnesota researchers into the Hall as they worked with Orchestra musicians to determine the concentration and flow of aerosols emitted by wind and brass instruments. The results of the study have allowed the Orchestra to present This Is Minnesota Orchestra, a series of twice-monthly concerts hosted by Sarah Hicks for TV, radio and streaming audiences, presented in partnership with Twin Cities PBS and Classical Minnesota Public Radio.

As the calendar turns to 2021, the Minnesota Orchestra’s music-making continues, both in the Hall and through at-home videos, as optimism builds for a waning of the pandemic and a return of in-person audiences.

“The concert on Peavey Plaza was wonderful! We are being very cautious and essentially have not gone anywhere other than [store] parking lots to pick up groceries and supplies for the past five months...The musicians were fantastic and the entire performance was a delight. We feel human again!”

—PEAVEY PLAZA CONCERT AUDIENCE MEMBER

16 free chamber music performances on Peavey Plaza in August attended by 2,300 people

6 This Is Minnesota Orchestra performances as of December 31, 2020, viewed by over 140,000 people
“The circumstances of life in 2020 are so unusual, and I am so grateful that the Orchestra is doing everything that we can do to be present and to perform. I’m proud to be part of an institution that is finding ways to live out its mission in a really hard circumstance. It will help hold us all through until the time when we can be back together in Orchestra Hall.”

—ACTING ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL BASS KATHRYN NETTLEMAN