

What Happens to the Musicians When the Orchestra Music Stops? After years of music training, performers see jobs in classical venues and theaters suddenly dry up; 'no one expects an entire field to disappear'

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FULL TEXT

Julia McLean took decades of music lessons, spent thousands of hours practicing and coped with constant grueling competition, and in January it all paid off. She became a full-time viola player for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

She wasn't yet out of grad school, but "suddenly I was on the roster, playing with this wonderful orchestra that gets amazing conductors—good pay, beautiful hall and a beautiful following," she recalls. "It felt like this is it. I did it."

In March, "Poof," she says. "I achieved all of my career goals and then lost my entire career in five weeks."

She played just two of the orchestra's major concerts before the pandemic forced Indianapolis and other orchestras around the world to close their doors for what would become the rest of that season and the next. "No one expects an entire field to disappear," says the 24-year-old graduate of New York's prestigious Juilliard School. "It wasn't just my job or my orchestra. It was everything."

'No one expects an entire field to disappear,' says Ms. McLean. PHOTO: Kayana Szymczak for The Wall Street Journal

The pandemic has dealt a withering blow to the fine and performing arts in the U.S., according to Michael Seman, a professor at Colorado State University and co-author of a recent Brookings Institution study of the pandemic's impact on the arts. It has battered music. Before the pandemic, he calculates, there were about 630,000 jobs for musicians, DJs, composers and conductors in live performance, in genres from classical to rap. Now half of those have been wiped out, and it's unclear how much of the loss is permanent.

Classical music is in crisis as Covid-19 safety concerns have shut down live performances. Its audience has been gradually slipping for four decades, and now competition for audience time and attention from online pursuits has only accelerated during the pandemic. Hope for a timely return to the stage ended three weeks ago when the Metropolitan Opera, which had hoped to open on New Year's Eve, canceled the rest of its season until September 2021. Others have followed suit.

While the indefinite intermission has taken a toll on musicians of all ages, it is particularly tough on younger musicians who haven't yet established careers or teaching studios. Many of those with jobs have been furloughed or laid off as the nation's 1,600 orchestras have gone dark. Those who are close to graduating have nowhere to go. Auditions, usually in spring, have been canceled or delayed. Musical gigs with Broadway shows, regional symphonies, operas and ballets have vanished.

Pre-pandemic, about 160,000 musicians played for orchestras, according to the League of American Orchestras. "The thing that keeps me up at night is the individual hardship," says Simon Woods, CEO of the League of American Orchestras. "Musicians' lives are about playing music for people and communities, and they've been silenced. There's an emotional strain along with the financial hardship."

For some, classical music is not a choice but a calling. A science major at Tufts University, Ms. McLean had planned a more practical path, but became hooked one night playing in Boston Symphony Hall with her youth orchestra. "The rest of college was me doubling down on music," she says, fueled by the new conviction that "I love playing in an orchestra. I want to do it all the time, and I will do whatever it takes to do this as my job."

Hugo Valverde, a 26-year-old French horn player in the Metropolitan Opera orchestra, describes the shutdown as "devastating: "It feels something was ripped away from you." He'd landed his seat at the Met after a blind audition at the age of 22 and last year received tenure. His finances forced him to return to his family in Costa Rica. There he struggled to practice and lay staring at the ceiling thinking, "What am I going to do?"

Jon Carroll, 30, another French horn player in New York, was driving to Pittsburgh in March when he got word from another musician that New York's theaters were closing and the two of them wouldn't be able to play the Lion King. Since getting his master's from the Juilliard School four years ago, he'd built a freelance career that had packed his calendar with Broadway musicals, regional symphonies, his C Street Brass quintet. Mr. Carroll was on his way to play a concert for a full house in Pittsburgh. "Everyone on stage was giving it 120% because we all knew Covid was a ticking time bomb," he says. During the last piece, "Amazing Grace," he says, "Everyone was crying. We all knew it was the last performance until who knows when."

Soon after, he woke up in the middle of the night panicked about paying his rent. At 2 a.m., he got online and applied for 25 jobs—at grocery stores, the Home Depot and as a meat cutter at Stew Leonard's food store in Yonkers. "I got none of those jobs," he says. Recently, he has been working at a bike shop, making much less than the \$80 an hour he'd earn on Broadway.

Paris Myers, 24, was completing his master's degree at Juilliard and auditioning for orchestra jobs when the pandemic hit. He was preparing for the semi-finals for a job playing double bass in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Now, he's a merchandiser at Home Depot, dusting light fixtures and driving a fork lift. "I'm at a point I never thought I'd be—doing what I'm doing with a master's degree," he says.

He is paid about \$13 an hour—\$23,000 a year, he figures—compared with \$80,000 to \$90,000 he believes he would have made in an orchestra. His wife is a pharmacist, which alleviates some of the stress.

Mr. Myers continues to practice daily and is keeping his options open. When asked, he told his boss he would be interested in becoming a supervisor. He still wants to join an orchestra. "I'm in a position to wait this out," he says. "But I don't want to wait ten years and still be waiting to land."

Many young musicians have no safety net. When the Indianapolis symphony cut her pay and eventually her job, Ms. McLean was locked into a one-year lease in Indianapolis. She flew to New Hampshire to spend quarantine with family. With her science degree, she got a job as a coronavirus contact tracer. She's planning to audition for orchestras in Germany.

Lately, smaller orchestras have been experimenting with ways to keep going. The Tulsa Symphony Orchestra is performing live at a baseball park. In Jacksonville, Fla., Dallas and Fort Worth, regional orchestras have begun performing with smaller audiences, smaller ensembles, masks and in some cases with acrylic panels dividing sections in order to meet safety standards for Covid-19. Those generate goodwill but generally not enough revenue to make ends meet. Many other orchestras have been renegotiating contracts to cut musician pay and eliminate jobs.

Share Your Thoughts

What do you see as the future of live music performance? Join the conversation below.

When auditions do get scheduled, hundreds will be applying for even more limited positions, says Rictor Noren, a violin and viola professor at Boston Conservatory at Berklee. He steers students away from traditional orchestra jobs and urges them to learn technology and business. "The satisfied ones are the ones who diversify," he says.

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