

# Music in Times of COVID: In Conversation with William Christie and Claire Roserot de Melin

Gabrielle Desalbres

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*William Christie is an American-born French conductor and harpsichordist. He read History of Art at Harvard and then Music at Yale, where he specialised in the baroque repertoire. Opposed to the Vietnam war, he moved to France in 1970 and pioneered the renewal of French baroque music by creating his musical ensemble Les Arts Florissants in 1979. Since 1985, he has lived in his seventeenth-century manor in Thiré (Vendée) which hosts a yearly festival of baroque music, Les Jardins de William Christie. A gifted pedagogue, in 2002 he founded the Jardin des Voix, a biennially-run academy for young singers, and he regularly teaches at the Juilliard School and the Conservatoire National Supérieur in Paris.*

*Claire Roserot de Melin is General Manager of the Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse in France. She previously worked as an artistic coordination director, at the Opera of Rouen and for various companies and ensembles. She used to be an oboist.*

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In conversation with Gabrielle Desalbres, William Christie and Claire Roserot de Melin discuss the challenges the music industry and the performing arts have faced since March 2020, and outline perspectives on the future.

**CJLPA: What is the current situation for the music industry? What sorts of scheme exist to protect musicians in these troubled times?**

**Claire Roserot de Melin:** There are two dimensions to the issue of musicians' social protections in this crisis. Even though some gaps in social protection remain, musicians have been better protected in France than anywhere else. Firstly, the existing system of *intermittents du spectacle* has enabled artists to get social benefits as any other employees. Paid for by employers and workers' contributions, it allows performing artists to claim benefits for the fallow periods between intermittent contracts, as long as they have worked for at least 507 hours in ten and a half months. The second aspect is the introduction of an *année blanche* which consists of the extension of the *intermittents* entitlement to social benefits in line with the 2019 fiscal year. This system is relatively effective but it nonetheless excludes *intermittent* new entrants and non-national artists. Trade unions and employers are asking for the prolongation of the *année blanche* after 31 August, when they are supposed to come to an end, and for more financial support for entities responsible for artists' day-to-day lives, such as artists' health support groups,

which have been strongly impacted by the loss in revenue. But our main priority remains to reopen concert halls, and we have been in talks with the Ministry of Culture and the Prime Minister for months. Major public cultural institutions such as the Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse have a leading role to play in protecting the artistic ecosystem. We have fulfilled every work contract regardless of nationality, and permanent artists have pursued rehearsals and recordings as usual. In contrast, privately funded institutions have been terribly hit, economically, by the closures of concert halls, and some might unfortunately never reopen.

**William Christie:** I do not think there are such things as schemes but, rather, less ambitious protocols focussing too much on sanitary issues and leaving musicians aside with no prospects. Concert halls, musical venues, and theatres have been closed since March 2020, with the exception of Spain and Monaco in Europe, and musicians have no other option than to play concerts without a public. Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have had more than 100 concerts and six opera productions cancelled, and the future is still very unclear. France has nonetheless been good to us with the system of '*chômage partiel*', but there is a difference between having a normal professional life and one with no prospects. France takes great pride in its culture, *l'exception culturelle française*, which is used as a political weapon, and its showcase abroad, yet its political significance has eroded domestically since the 2000s, and the time France had visionary culture ministries seems gone.

**CJLPA: How would you see the longer-term effects of COVID on the music industry, if any?**

**WC:** Concerts are at the heart of our job as musicians, but even though we have had to adapt in the last year to strict health restrictions, with livestreamed concerts, for example, the form of concert will remain the same. In its classical form, the concert lies on three essential pillars: performers who bring music to life and offer it to the public; an audience to interact with performers and be moved by music; and a place which is designed to make the concert a special moment, with excellent acoustic qualities to enhance artistic performances and make music more beautiful. Technology has allowed us to record pieces of music with people across the globe, yet I do not consider it to be music making: this is 'tin-can music'. Outdoor concerts are not a good alternative either, for nothing will ever replace a great concert hall in terms of acoustics. During my summer festival in the gardens of Thiré, I have to make concessions both in terms of repertoire and quality, and bad weather is always a significant worry.

Social distancing rules obviously affect opera staging and music making, but they cannot continue for any longer. An orchestra occupying the equivalent of a football stadium is extremely difficult to conduct, both in terms of sound making and logistics. In those conditions, playing together requires even more acute attention and listening from the players and the conductor. I do not believe, though, that downsizing music ensembles would solve the problem. This path might be chosen for financial reasons, which are not new, but it would impoverish the playable repertoire or void it of its substance. Could we imagine listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony played by a string quartet?

**CRM:** I perceive three main positive longer-term effects on the world of culture. First of all, it may have accelerated a philosophical shift, from a society purely based on economic aspirations and greed to a more humanist one, with a refocussing on the core values of emotion, sharing, relationships, and exchanges of ideas. In no more than a year, people have become aware of the importance of culture, which was deemed nonessential for a time but now seems more essential than ever because of the profound isolation we have felt in the successive lockdowns. Then, we can expect a change in the modes of consumption. Whilst people easily organise last-minute movie nights or theatre outings, attending a concert or an opera performance is something planned much earlier on. This may change in the future for more flexible and gluttonous modes of cultural consumption. Finally, this pandemic has incited us to develop online content aimed at various audiences. It has prompted us to adopt an ambitious new digital strategy which can be used to attract the 30–45 age group, relatively difficult to catch, and online content must aim to breed in these people the desire to attend live performances.

On the supply side, big institutions may programme more 'local' artists. It is sometimes surprising to see regional artistic productions only made up of foreign artists, while there are many outstanding ones in France! With more than 200 permanent artists and fantastic freelancers living in Occitanie, the Théâtre du Capitole already employs a short-term work system, but it is also essential to hire international musicians, conductors, opera singers, stage directors, and so on, for mobility boosts creativity and brings new energy. On a day-to-day basis, COVID strongly affects opera staging and music making. Although artists are legally exempt from social distancing rules on stage, we strictly follow guidance to be able to undertake productions until the end. Artists are tested every week, everyone wears a face mask (except woodwind and brass players),

the orchestra plays 1–1.5m apart, the floor is dismantled... We are ready to make every possible compromise to play!

**CJLPA: How do you adapt your style of management?**

**CRM:** Management in times of COVID is indeed challenging. Opera houses are places filled with emotions, where passionate and very sensitive people work together and give their very best. As managers or directors, we have to deal with a wide variety of requests, and whatever the decision, it always seems the wrong one. If we decide to cancel a concert, technicians and artists feel demotivated by the lack of prospects. On the contrary, if we decide to maintain and live stream a performance, administrative staff have to constantly review and write new contracts, and are on the verge of burnout. Steering an institution such as this one in the best possible way requires humility, kindness, listening to individual cases, and cooperation to find the best way to overcome this crisis.

**CJLPA: How do you understand the public service mission of opera houses?**

**CRM:** Opera houses and other musical institutions are too often perceived as elitist and inaccessible to the majority of citizens, and too rich whilst other more urgent causes lack funding. But culture is not something superficial or irrelevant to people in need. As André Malraux beautifully puts it, 'Culture is what answers man when he asks himself what he is doing on earth.'<sup>1</sup> The accounting logic that would like to take funding away from some and give to others is not tenable, because large institutions like ours are the locomotives that pull the smaller ones along. It is because these institutions do well that artists, ensembles, and companies also do well. On the contrary, if they are weakened, everything collapses. The culture industry is a fragile ecosystem whose balance should be protected, not threatened.

The Théâtre du Capitole has adopted an artistic and cultural policy aimed at all audiences, from kindergartens to care homes, and from neophytes to aficionados and connoisseurs. Reaching such a large and varied audience can only be achieved through emotion. Opera houses are also custodians of unique skills such as the manufacture of show wigs, sets, and costumes, which are transmitted through apprenticeship programmes in our historical workshops.

**CJLPA: How do you envision the future of classical music?**

**WC:** To all pessimistic classical musicians who wonder if they will still have an audience to play to in the future: we are basically dealing with something above the rest of the fray, we are dealing with culture, we are appealing to emotions which are universal. Culture can thrive. We will not forget things now that essentially have been part of civilisation for the last 500 years, if not more. History has already made its selection. If these artists and their works were not worthwhile, they would already have been forgotten.

**CJLPA: There have been substantial cuts in public funding allocated to the arts in recent years, and these may continue given the economic context. How do you deal with that?**

**CRM:** Public subsidies are decreasing but Toulouse Métropole has always provided a strong financial support to the Théâtre du Capitole. Like any other public institution, we had to adapt, reinvent ourselves, the way we work, and rethink the infrastructure, but we

1 André Malraux (1901–76), French writer and Minister of Culture during the de Gaulle presidency.

have now reached the bone. We are therefore turning more and more to sponsorship, but the culture of companies in France is quite different from that of the Anglo-Saxon world. Fundraising requires constant work to renew the pool of donors, and although we have two full-time people in charge of sponsorship, private funding is far from being up to the task. The Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse and its conductor Tugan Sokhiev are internationally renowned, and have therefore been able to attract private funding through the charity Aïda. But otherwise, the overall financial balances will remain the same. In our 2018–19 activity report,<sup>2</sup> 82% of revenues came from public subsidies (73% from Toulouse Métropole, 8% from the State, 1% from the Occitanie region) and our own revenues covered the remaining 18% (12% from ticket sales, 2% from tours, 1% from private fundraising, 3% from other sources of revenue).

**CJLPA: Does private funding affect your artistic programming?**

**CRM:** Not really. Companies target their support to projects, mainly educational, innovative, and social ones, for tax reasons, while public funds finance the structure itself and the heart of artistic projects. The artistic director Christophe Ghristi is therefore very free in terms of artistic programming.

**CJLPA: The UK is not part of the European Union anymore. How does the EU support the music industry and how much Brexit will affect it?**

**WC:** I have worked in the UK since 1970. I brought my ensemble to the Proms in the 1980s, I played at Glyndebourne for 25 years, I conducted the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment... and I am extraordinarily impressed by British music-making. Before settling in France, I spent an enormous amount of time in London and Amsterdam and I think London was until recently the greatest musical centre in the world. Brexit is a terrible thing for the arts and it is going to be extremely difficult for British musicians to come to Europe, with all the paperwork and visa issues. Mr Johnson and his cronies have dealt a terrible blow to British music-making.

The EU has an indirect but crucial role in the blossoming of the music industry in Europe. Freedom of movement is more efficient than a grand scheme. My co-director Paul Agnew has been living in France for years now and has applied for French citizenship. As a direct result of Brexit, he had to cancel a concert at the Philharmonie de Paris because British singers could not come to France.

**CRM:** We have not yet fully experienced the effects of Brexit because of COVID, but we hope that it will not cause more administrative complexity for the music industry. Quarantine rules and sanitary restrictions associated with the UK have been incredibly tough to deal with. On Brexit, we do not have enough hindsight yet and this would require data, but at the moment many British musicians are moving to Europe and applying for citizenship on the continent.

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<sup>2</sup> Théâtre du Capitole, 'Rapport d'activité 2018/2019' <<https://www.theatreducapitole.fr/documents/5561745/5736311/Rapport+d%27activit%C3%A9+2018+2019/b6c789dd-60af-42b2-b40f-de2341fa8353>>.