

# The New Criterion

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## For the duration

*by Timothy Jacobson*

“For the duration” is a wartime phrase. It means until peace comes, until the boys come home, until they sound the last all-clear. Long ago, to us anyway—say, March, when we first awoke to the attack of a bio-enemy and lurched into action against it—concert- and theatergoers everywhere were soon reading rapid-fire announcements that “our next performance,” and then “the rest of our season,” is canceled. This trend held from the Metropolitan Opera in Manhattan to Garth Newel out in the Alleghenies. Some thought it gentler to say “postponed,” not canceled, but shut is shut, whatever you call it.

We are now in a second stage, what with scientists still unable to tell us if or when the plague will die out or be beaten. Cultural institutions must make plans further out. A packed house is the joy of every performer and warms the heart of every treasurer. Ticket sales and the donations that come with them keep the show rolling, and the presence of live audiences is essential to performed art, which does not happen in a practice room.

A particularly distressing announcement in this second stage appeared on my screen a couple of days ago. The summer music festival in my small town was canceling this year’s program, scheduled for a ten-day stretch in August as it had been for the last twenty-two years.

“Postponing” is how they put it, which is technically true—the same exact program is promised for the summer of 2021, providing of course we’re out of the covid woods by then. Postponed or canceled, the same hole stares us in the face now. In a town this size (twenty-five thousand or so), it is a big hole.

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The Staunton Music Festival (SMF) recruits musicians from around the world and attracts audiences from up and down the eastern seaboard and beyond. Hotels and restaurants fill up. Downtown bustles. The brainchild of a few talented professionals and fans of

chamber music, the festival began in the late 1990s, relatively flush times when Staunton was

seeking ways to brand itself as something other than a quiet Southern courthouse town with some nice schools and the manse where Woodrow Wilson was born but never really lived. “Reinvent” was then the favorite term. The town had a stock of fine Victorian buildings where lawyers and accountants and a few other professionals plied their trade, but it needed goings-on. Back in the 1950s, we spoke of a place as having “attractions.” Now we are more likely to boast of our “assets as a destination.” But it is all the same thing. To prosper, places like this need visitors and the immigration of new residents. The SMF and its fellow bearer of the flag of high culture, the Blackfriars Playhouse (home of the American Shakespeare Center), which was established about the same time, became keys to the town’s quest for cultural renewal.

As these second-stage cancelation announcements go, SMF’s was a model of sober realism. “Under normal circumstances,” they explained, the concerts would begin in just a few months. “However, as you are certainly aware, we are not living under normal circumstances.” Even as some businesses are allowed to reopen and as social-distancing measures are eased, “we believe attendance at major festivals and concerts will not rebound until much later.” That is the dark news: nobody knows *how much* later. Stock markets make guesses about future corporate earnings and value securities accordingly. In the arts, it is boards of trustees and executive and artistic directors who must make analogous guesses—about prospective audience size, the continued generosity of donors, the flow of grants. On the correctness of those guesses depends the future viability of their institutions.

Our festival managers promise the next-best, with video and online content and educational material all in development. Stay tuned. In this department, Blackfriars has led the pack, earning praise from the *Wall Street Journal* for its pay-per-view streaming of broadcast-quality archived performances, revenues from which help keep the lights on and support furloughed actors. Of course, it is not the same as the real thing: “This will not substitute for the beauty of live performance,” smf admits of its forthcoming online offerings. Screens reduce everything they portray, literally and figuratively. What was life-sized shrinks. What was immediate becomes mediated. The whole artistic experience is diluted and loses power. Chiefly, I suppose, these digital alternatives are meant to serve as a reminder. One can hear the refrain at anxious board meetings: “We’ve got to keep ourselves in front of our audiences digitally, or they won’t come back! We’ve got to go virtual!” The marketing impulse is nothing new in the arts world. In a crisis, and now technology-boostered, it finds new opportunity.

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finds new opportunity.

But we shall see. There will be no way to verify the necessity of such measures, since everybody is implementing them. To some of us in confinement, these offerings will no doubt have enormous appeal. It will have none at all to others, who are no more likely to forget their favorite ensembles than they are to enjoy the pale substitutes extolled by those smitten with the wonders of digital connectedness. It almost makes one long to hear the honest opposite. It would take a brave executive or artistic director or board chairman to announce, as if in wartime: "For the duration, you will hear very little from us save for updates about eventual reopening. Keep faith that we will meet, at great concerts, again. Practice patience. Great art has survived worse than this."

Another thing it would be nice to hear less of are those preening "we-care-about-your-safety-above-all" prefaces to virtually every communication from arts organizations large and small (and in fairness not arts organizations alone: think airlines, hotel chains, your favorite insurance company). Relatively speaking, my friends at the music festival are far from the worst offenders. Their simple, clinical-sounding "With concerns of public health foremost in mind, we have decided to postpone . . ." is more or less straight talk. We all know there are liability issues for performance-sponsoring organizations lurking here, and that the lawyer's hand lies heavy on much of this. But probably not all of it. "The board has the responsibility to protect the health and welfare of all people associated with smf: patrons, performers, hosts, volunteers and staff . . ." That is a heavy load. Why do I think that Bach, Mendelssohn, or Mahler didn't lose much sleep over the health and welfare of their musicians?

Fortitude begets loyalty. Better that our music festivals, symphonies, and theaters stand tall, assuring us that now more than ever that they are committed to their noble purpose and that it will take greater calamity than this to defeat them. For the duration, anyway.

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**Timothy Jacobson (1948–2024)** wrote from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.