



# “YOU CANNOT KILL CLASSICAL MUSIC, BUT YOU CAN MISMANAGE IT!”

by **DOUGLAS SHELDON**

**DOUGLAS SHELDON** is one of the best-known and influential artist managers and impresarios in the world of classical music. Based at Columbia Artists for more than 50 years, he worked with the best symphony orchestras, such as the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theater, the London Symphony and represented some of the world's preeminent artists, such as Valery Gergiev, Anne-Sophie Mutter since 1986, Jaap van Zweden, Vadim Repin, Julian Rachlin, Nelson Friere, Eric Lu, and Khatia Buniatishvili. During this unpredictable and complicated time, we asked him to contemplate how Covid-19 will change the world of classical music and what his advice to young musicians will be in this global pandemic reality.

In my view, the pandemic and the current economic recession are related as cause and effect. Moreover, the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders are likely to cause a shift in the public's attitude and habits about attending live music events. In less than 50 years the CD, the Fax, the 'mobile phone' and even 3-D filming have come and gone, and the communication of music is developing via YouTube, Spotify, Facebook, and streaming – all available on



photo: (1) unsplash.com; (2) www.douglassheldon.com



Barcelona's Gran Theatre del Liceu Opera House reopens with performance to 2,292 plants



photo: The Gran Teatre del Liceu

a hand-held computer that used to be just a simple mobile phone with no other functions.

Currently, with no live performances taking place, the emphasis on streaming grows. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the nature and habits of how we listen and watch have also changed. And I predict that change in consumer habits will develop even faster during the world's enforced social distancing period.

We do know that the marketing techniques used by experts in the twenty-first century have failed to catch up with the public's ticket-buying habits and the changing culture of listening and viewing classical music. Nor have marketing managers learned how to best use the streaming techniques available. The Great Recession of 2008 led to nearly a decade during which twenty-first-century technology available to the consumer advanced at a much faster rate than twenty-first-century marketing could grapple with.

As a result we experienced a period during which the ability to fill a music hall and earn income and the ability to recapture philanthropic giving slowly caught up to a consumer base that encountered many more entertainment choices, much easier and more immediate access to entertainment, and less urgency to purchase tickets to live events. And just when things had settled into a more normal routine for musical institutions along came a pandemic that shut down all live performances and created economic conditions that made the stock market vulnerable and threatened philanthropic giving. Now we face a serious recession, the seventh since 1969, which will

produce greater unemployment, necessitate larger stimulus packages, and demand higher state subsidies for private business, all of which will impact the musical and theatrical arts.

The future is unknown. How quickly and how willing will the public be to sit shoulder to shoulder, squeezed in among two or three thousand people after the acute stage of the Covid-19 crisis is over? And can the government really declare an "all clear?" How? When?

For sure, major institutions will be reviewing, revising, and possibly rescheduling cancelled events. They will re-negotiate existing obligations that they were unable to meet when venues begin to reopen. Strict social distancing will result in woefully reduced income. Add to that an environment with an audience insecure about public gathering, reduced philanthropic giving, and wavering donations and sponsorships.

Yes, we have seen it before, particularly in the 1980 and 1981 recessions and in the eighteen-month recession that spanned parts of 2007, 2008, and 2009. But we must acknowledge that since 2009

the development of audiences and relevant marketing underwent a decade of growth. But now we have a much greater setback.

I have an axiom: "You can't kill classical music, but you sure can mismanage it." You cannot kill classical music because it is intrinsically of the human spirit! The power and the love and the inspiration of the human spirit. You live it. You breathe it. You sing it!

Further, you cannot kill 'live' music! Despite the de-socialization impact of social media and the prevalence of the current Zoom-dependent world, despite the economic push for businesses to rely more on "stay at home" offices and digital communication, people need people! And people need contact and emotion and shared feelings. Music, dance, and theater have always been the leading socializing and civilizing forces.

Covid-19 and the accompanying recession will demand of all professionals an imaginative new effort to restore the music business and its audience and build them into something really strong again. That professionalism will be fueled by our imagination, our drive to accept and master change, and the strength of our spirit.

For young artists, my advice is to stay the course. Believe in your art and in your mission. Raise your standards not only by learning a new repertoire, but also by engaging the art, poetry, and philosophy that surrounded that repertoire. Leap from technically excellent performances to performances that are thoughtful, searching, and probing. Take full benefit of your teachers and mentors and do not be afraid to search out other influences.

Think deeply over your repertoire with more than one advisor. Be practical about it. Now is the time to build your recital and concerto repertoires that you will present to get engagements. If you are a chamber musician develop that repertoire with chamber music colleagues. If you expect a solo career have six to eight concertos ready and a recital 'library' from which to choose readily.

If you are interested in online performances, be sure of their quality if you stream via iPhone, which often leaves a lot to be desired. There is a tendency for this kind of performance to be too casual in preparation, implementation and appearance—as if one were doing humanity an unsolicited favor.

Symphony orchestras, opera houses and theater companies may have trouble re-establishing an audience and will probably have to ask established artists to lower their already contracted fees. Therefore, there may be a greater demand for younger artists who are fresh and have promise and something special to offer because they command lesser fees. The business and financial demands on musical institutions in the post-Covid-19 era will force those institutions to be more imaginative and creative, and implement new ideas and find new talent. So, the

opportunities for young artists will grow if they are ready with a repertoire, ready with their musicality, ready with fresh program ideas, and ready with timely supportive materials.

The world needs beauty, truth, and emotional expression. It needs art and artists, and it will always return to the positive depths of the human spirit.

Young artists' spirit and growth can be the forces that express the most positive and profound of art and humanity.

Nonetheless, musical and theatrical institutions, as well as touring organizations, will find themselves in a difficult position: without a vaccine and a governmental "all clear" we are entering a dark period in which performances will not be financially viable. The priority needs to be on different ways of communication with audiences and keeping business profiles and visions vibrant. Many will turn to the social distancing of live performances, but that will require imagination and evolving relationships with partners, artists, staff, venues, sponsors, and advertisers.

Some will shut down temporarily and hope that a vaccine will be widely available by 2021 and that business may then return to a kind of normalcy. All will have to deal with public psychology --in other words, with their audience and its eagerness or reluctance to re-enter the concert halls, arenas, and theaters. Nothing about this will be easy and, some would say, 'no fun at all.'

Mark Cuban, an American billionaire and successful entrepreneur, recently suggested that the next twelve to eighteen months may see record business closures and bankruptcies. He also said that it could be a period of entrepreneurship and new ideas. He sees it as an ideal time for individuals and institutions to refocus and redefine and invent new models for their activities. And taken positively and energetically perhaps that could be 'fun.'

In time, the world will recover and be ready for young artists. Will they be ready?