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INDUSTRY NEWS

CMS Lincoln Center Syndicates Its Streams

July 29, 2020 | By Brian Wise, *Musical America*



As presenters attempt to sort through the glut of digital content generated by a music business in lockdown, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (CMS) is offering an option well known to the worlds of radio and television: syndication. This month it began rolling out episodes of "Front Row," an online performance series, which has been picked up by more than 30 concert presenters in the U.S. and Canada.

The weekly series, first launched on the CMS website in May, is an amalgam of highlights from some 900 Alice Tully Hall concert recordings made over the last decade. Each episode is capped by a live Zoom conversation with the featured performers and co-artistic directors David Finckel and Wu Han. After an initial eight-episode run, the CMS posted the first of six additional weekly shows on July 12.

In its syndicated form, presenters can post the full video episodes to their own websites for a five-day window of their choosing. They can also elect to add their own, customized commentary surrounding the performances (selected CMS artists are made available to participate in Zoom chats), as well as their own fundraising messages. Initial interest in the series has come from presenters of varying budget sizes, from large festivals such as the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and the Wolf Trap Foundation to smaller series in Mobile, AL; Logan, UT; and Middlebury, VT.

Wu Han says hopes the series might especially appeal to smaller operations that lack video production resources and face months with no offerings on their stages. "I started to hear a lot of really sad stories from the presenters," she says, "worrying about what they could do. I also started to see people throwing a lot of homemade content on the internet. With a comparison, I realized our production was really superior." Through its active touring program, CMS has come into contact with multiple presenters, especially in the U.S.

Shot in HD with multiple cameras directed by a score reader, the videos are pitched as an alternative to the more homespun video efforts with their sometimes blurry feeds and distracting home décor. Wu Han says she proposed the idea for syndicating the series to her manager, David Rowe, who has been overseeing its distribution. "It's actually our job to offer and to share our content with everyone," she said. "So it was really out of that [sense of responsibility]."

Wu Han says the "Front Row" series is not intended as a revenue generator. Presenters can purchase a package of eight episodes for about \$1600 (\$200 per episode), or individual shows for \$300. The fee, she says, helps cover the streaming and distribution technology costs (though the programs can be promoted on organizations' social media, they cannot be hosted on Facebook or Instagram, for example).

Since the start of lockdowns in March, the Chamber Music Society has seen a 360 percent increase in its own web traffic, taking into account its new education series, hosted by Bruce Adolph. Leading the surge is the 55- to 64-year-old age group, followed by 65-and-over. Each program is centered around a specific artist, using primarily archival material.

The first installment, for example, spotlighted pianist Michael Brown and several colleagues performing his own music as well as that of Barber and Mendelssohn. Further installments were built around pianists Alessio Bax and Lucille Chung, Gilbert Kalish, Gloria Chen, and Anne-Marie McDermott; violinists Cho-Liang Lin and Arnaud Sussmann; and clarinetist David Shifrin. "Summer evenings," as the next six episodes are called, is less personality driven, staying a largely traditionalist course with a mix of Baroque, Classical, and Romantic repertoire.

Kerryn Booth, executive director of Chamber Music Houston, says her organization picked up the initial eight-week series after it canceled 10 concerts this fall that would have marked its 60th anniversary. "Now we hope to lift the spirits of our patrons and music lovers throughout our community with these digital performances featuring many of the musicians we now call friends," she said in an e-mail, adding that the quality of video and audio was crucial in her decision.

While the CMS has cancelled its concerts in New York City and in "satellite" locations through December, Wu Han and Finckel hope to use the series to stay connected to fans both locally and nationally. "Every concert series will probably have a different viewership depending on how they market it and how closely they are connected to their general audience," she said. "But in Chamber Music Society's case we have a very steady audience."

Pictured: CMS Co artistic directors Wu Han and David Finckel

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