

A virtual seat for a galaxy of virtuosi

Top classical festivals are very expensive and difficult to get into. But, says Jessica Duchen, now a mouse-click may be all you need

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Europe's elite classical music festivals do not, as a rule, come cheap. Many demand dizzying ticket prices; some are habitually so over-subscribed that it's nearly impossible to get in even if you can afford it. Now, though, you can beat financial pressure by sampling such events from the comfort of your home computer: some savvy organisations have set out to reach a wider audience for the events via webcasting.

The technology has made galloping progress since the first opera webcast in 1999 (from St Petersburg's Kirov, now the Mariinsky). The Berlin Philharmonic's pioneering, year-round Digital Concert Hall has set the bar high in terms of standard and many more orchestras and opera houses have since started dabbling with online streaming. Festivals are no exception; their webcasts are making rapid gains in both quality and quantity.

For them the advantages of webcasting are obvious. More viewers mean more potential attendees, while the ease of access dilutes any suggestion of elitism. Problems can spring up around copyright and high-quality production ratchets up the bills; but these issues will probably have to evolve with the times. Webcasting is clearly not just a bandwagon. In the future it may become de rigueur for everyone to offer at least a taster performance on the internet.

This summer there has already been considerable success for webcasts such as *Fidelio* from Munich's Opera Festival, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* from Glyndebourne, the Martha Argerich Project from Lugano and, at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, apparently the largest international webcast that has yet been attempted. Some ask a modest fee, others are completely free; here is a selection of the best.

Verbier Festival

Verbier, high in the Swiss Alps, is nearly as sought-after for summer music as it is for winter skiing. Its annual festival is at the top of the range when it comes to webcasting: this galactic conglomeration of stars streams all its

concerts live with the web-based Medici TV. From 15 to 31 July you can log on to watch such luminaries as Martha Argerich, Anne-Sophie Mutter, René Pape, Leif Ove Andsnes and many more, in everything from solo piano and chamber music to a concert performance of Tosca starring Barbara Frittoli and Bryn Terfel. The webcasts can be enjoyed online for a month after the event and can also be viewed with Medici's iPhone app. Subscriptions to Medici TV start at €7.90 (£7) per month.

<http://www.medici.tv>

Bayreuth Festival

Wagner built his own opera house at Bayreuth with the ideal that his works should be available to everyone. But the theatre is rather small by today's standards; and so popular is this month-long annual celebration of the composer's operas that it's extremely difficult to get tickets – they're allocated annually by ballot – and pricey if you do. Now the festival has started to offer one annual webcast of a complete opera, thanks to sponsorship from Siemens.

This year it's Lohengrin on 14 August. The production is by Hans Neuenfels and stars Klaus Florian Vogt, Annette Dasch and Petra Lang, with Andris Nelsons conducting. Online "tickets" cost €14.90 (£13) and include "virtual entry" to the backstage area. The webcast is live but can be viewed on demand from 15 to 30 August.

Information and tickets: <https://live.bfmedien.de/pre.html>

Festival d'Aix-en-Provence

They still can't webcast the herb-laden flavour of the cheeses and sausages in the Provençal markets of Aix, the historic city that was home to the artist Paul Cézanne. But the town's delectable music festival, currently in full swing, webcasts a selection of its most exciting events, some live, some deferred by a day or two.

By logging in to Arte Live Web on Saturday you can see the great French soprano Natalie Dessay in the leading role of Verdi's *La Traviata*, a production by Jean-François Sivadier; the London Symphony Orchestra accompanies, conducted by Louis Langrée. Viewers can also sample groundbreaking contemporary music: on 15 July, the cycle *L'Appel de l'Atlas* by Andy Emler brings together French and Moroccan musicians, and on 18 July students of the Académie Européenne de Musique perform the world premiere of a new string quartet by Yann Robin.

More at www.festival-aix.com/fr/node/1358 and <http://liveweb.arte.tv>

George Enescu Festival and Competition, Bucharest

Romania may seem off the beaten track, but it doesn't want to stay that way. Its biennial George Enescu Festival, named after the country's most celebrated composer, is immensely ambitious, bringing to Bucharest some of the world's finest orchestras and soloists. The city, the 19th century's "Paris of the East", emerged poverty-stricken and desolate from the Ceaucescu era. Now it is reinventing itself as a major modern metropolis for eastern Europe.

"Streaming live events is very important for building an international audience and we are thrilled to be broadcasting a number of concerts on our website this September," says the festival's manager, Mihai Constantinescu. But he points out a potential stumbling block for the technology: "I am not sure whether webcasting is the future for the most high-profile orchestras and artists. It is very difficult to secure rights for live broadcast, as these artists tend to prefer deferred transmission, which we feature as excerpts on our website. Perhaps the way forward is to feature young artists who are more interested in building their profile and reaching a wide, international audience."

Prime among this year's live webcasts are the finals of the Enescu International Competition for pianists and violinists, plus the laureates' concert. The festival is also live-streaming its gala opening with the Residentie Orchestra of The Hague conducted by

Christian Badea on 1 September. [http:// www.festivalenescu.ro](http://www.festivalenescu.ro)

Festival de Saint-Denis

One for anybody who loves Paris in sizzling summer, this magnificent festival takes place in the medieval Cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis, six miles north of the French capital; its varied, vibrant programme attracts tens of thousands of spectators. This year's festival has just finished, but you can still attend its highlights via the video-on-demand website.

Concerts include Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue with the pianist Gabriela Montero, Britten's War Requiem conducted by Semyon Bychkov, a Latin American concert with the Quatuor Debussy and, perhaps most spectacular of all, Bach's St Matthew Passion conducted by John Nelson and featuring the German tenor Werner Güra as the Evangelist. This performance is also at Medici TV.

Log on at <http://www.festival-saint-denis.com>