

The hottest event at Toronto concert halls

Film screenings with live music have become popular moneymakers for struggling orchestras

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SENIOR ARTS CRITIC

It's exactly six hours before showtime at Meridian Hall on a recent Friday afternoon, and conductor Evan Mitchell is putting his orchestra through its paces.

At first listen, this dress rehearsal sounds like any other. As the maestro puts his final touches on the program, he offers the musicians some small, last notes: a reminder about the musical phrasing in one passage, a request that they should not slow down in another.

But what they're preparing for is no typical classical music concert. And Mitchell's group is no regular symphonic ensemble.

Rather, they're a film music orchestra. And not only must these musicians play all the notes on the page, but they must line it all up — exactly — with a movie playing on a big screen above them.

These film screenings with live orchestra have surged in popularity since the pandemic. In Toronto alone, they can draw tens of thousands of audience members each year. And for many orchestras around the world, they've become an indispensable source of revenue, along with an unexpected force driving audiences back to concert halls.

"Since the pandemic, and with the way that the internet has evolved, we've all become isolated a little bit," said Mitchell, speaking with the Star after rehearsal. "But now, I really feel there's sort of a counter-culture swing back in the face of these digital developments, with people saying, 'No, I want to hear a real orchestra do it in real time, and see this film with other people.'"

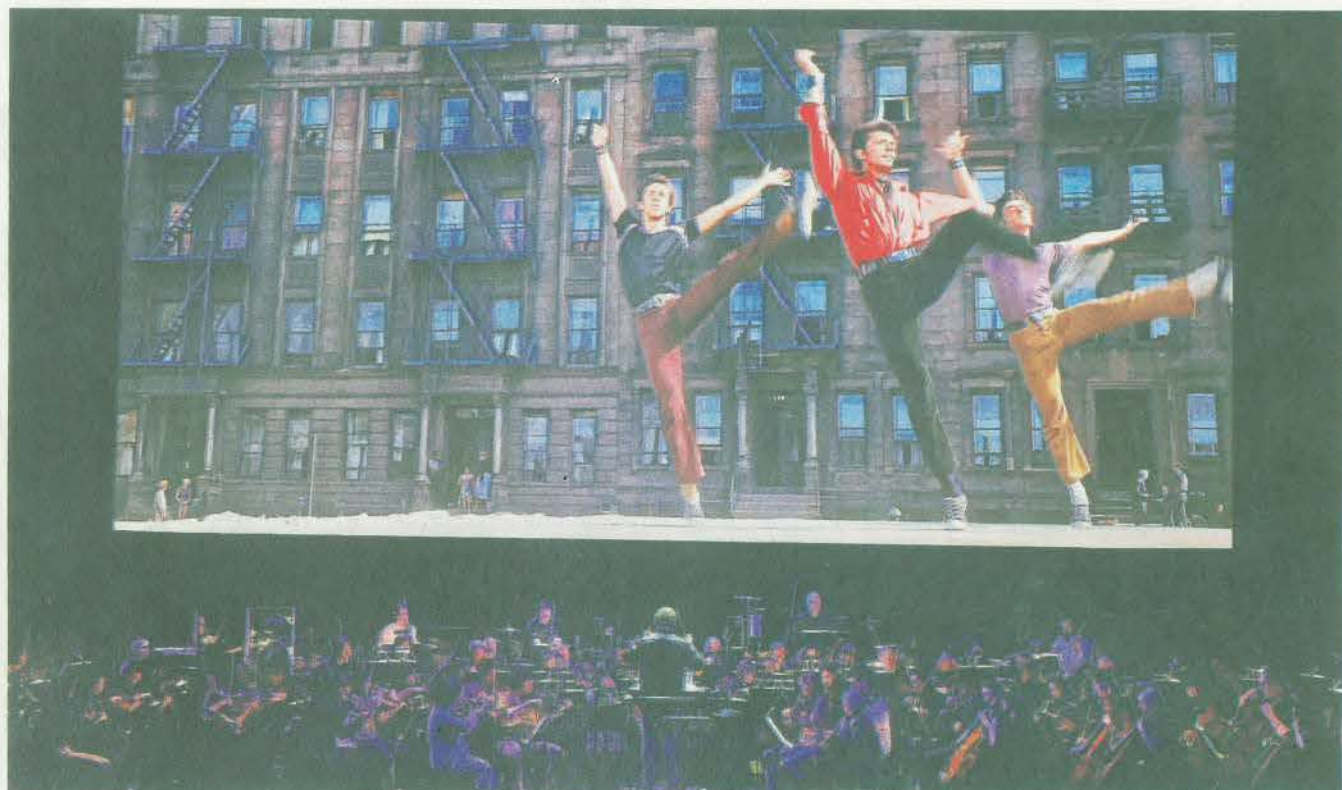
Tonight, the film in question is the 1961 movie adaptation of "West Side Story." The music by Leonard Bernstein is filled with complex time signatures and syncopated rhythms, all paired with Jerome Robbins' acrobatic choreography. One of the most challenging scores in the film music repertoire — Mitchell described it as "a monster" — it calls for unfaltering precision from its musicians.

There are tools in place to help the musicians keep in sync with the movie. All of them wear earpieces, from which they're fed a consistent click track. Mitchell also has a desktop-sized monitor in front of him, with moving bars, called streamers, that indicate downbeats in the music and other important cues. "It's basically like 'Guitar Hero,'" he joked.

What makes "West Side Story" especially difficult to perform are its multiple tempo changes, some occurring in the most unexpected of places, like in the middle of a bar.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is in "Tonight," the iconic duet sung on a New York fire escape by Tony and Maria, who push and pull the tempo so aggressively. It's in instances like these when the orchestra's click track offers little assistance — when all the musicians can really do is listen to each other and watch their conductor.

For principal percussionist Kristofer Maddigan, another challenge is the work's physicality. While most classical symphonies last anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour, and traditional concerts rarely run longer than two hours, movies like



"West Side Story" can stretch well beyond that.

"A lot of these film scores are very physically demanding," Maddigan said. "They were probably recorded over days or weeks. And they weren't written, specifically, to be performed front to back."

Then, there's also the mental focus required to tackle the piece. "You can't ever look up and actually watch the film," said concertmaster and violinist Allene Chomyn, "because then you'll get distracted from what you're supposed to be doing."

Film screenings with live orchestras have become a burgeoning business for many arts organizations. TO Live, which presented the "West Side Story" screenings, sold more than 71,000 tickets to these kinds of shows last year, with audience attendance more than doubling from 2024. Meanwhile, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, which presents four or five of these screenings each season, draws more than 20,000 audience members annually to these concerts.

The programming typically attracts a younger and more diverse crowd than a traditional symphony concert. And whereas much of the audience at a regular orchestra performance is usually made up of couples or single patrons, it's not unusual to see multi-generational families attending these screenings.

The shows are also as diverse as the audiences. In addition to classic films like "West Side Story" and "The Wizard of Oz" (coming in September), TO Live also presents live screenings of contemporary blockbusters. And it's not just musicals. Up next, in fact, are two screenings of "Top Gun: Maverick" in May.

Traditionalists may chafe at how Big Studio has infiltrated the concert hall, or how the classical music experience has become more commercialized by these concert screenings. But these shows have also helped to introduce orchestral music to new audiences, particularly those who may not otherwise attend a classical music concert.

"I think anyone who's been to a concert screening can say there's a certain energy that comes from a live orchestra that just can't be replicated, no matter how good the orchestra is on screen," said Chomyn,

discussing what makes these events unique. "It's just a different experience."

The art form is still relatively new. In North America, most major orchestras only started to program these live screenings within the past two decades.

For more contemporary films, particularly those where the original audio mix still exists, it's often far easier to isolate the vocal tracks and remove the pre-recorded orchestral accompaniment than it is for an older film such as "West Side Story" or "The Wizard of Oz," where all the audio is on a single track. In those circumstances, the orchestral accompaniment is digitally scrubbed in a process that carefully preserves the vocal tracks. During the concert, the orches-

tra's sound is mixed live from the back of the hall, ensuring there's proper balance among the instruments, and also between the whole orchestra and the pre-recorded vocal tracks.

The notes are the same as originally written. So is the tempo. But hearing a live orchestra accompany a film screening is a bit like watching a movie you're intimately familiar with in a 3D format for the first time, with a sound that's somehow bolder and even richer.

Mitchell hopes his audience is at times acutely aware there's an orchestra playing on stage, but in other moments able to completely forget they're there. That's the magic of the experience, he said. "Having the orchestra play live is a dynamic that's just without substitute."

A full symphonic orchestra accompanied TO Live's recent screening of "West Side Story." These events have surged in popularity since the pandemic.

R.J. JOHNSTON/
TORONTO STAR

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THEATRE

A season fit for a 10th anniversary

TO Live lineup filled with dance, orchestras and 'Raiders of the Lost Ark'

KRISTJAN LAUTENS
STAFF REPORTER

Clyde Wagner has battled major rebuilds and existential threats to TO Live throughout his tenure as president and CEO. As the head of the city agency — which oversees Meridian Hall, Meridian Arts Centre, and the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts — Wagner's path to leadership was unconventional.

The son of a military family, he grew up outside of Ottawa and launched successful mobile tech startups and e-commerce ventures before his background in theatre eventually called him back.

When the city merged its three major venues in 2017, it tasked Wagner with a dual mandate: protect Toronto's status as a high-art hub while achieving profitability. Now, as TO Live prepares to celebrate its 10th anniversary, Wagner says a new lineup of Grammy and Juno Award-winning artists will help the company reinvest in local creators who are desperate for space.

"Who wants to live in a city that has no art or culture? That's why you're in Toronto. You don't want to go somewhere else," Wagner said. "It'd be so boring, like Wonder Bread."

Since its 2017 merger, the agency and its non-profit arm have supported approximately 1,750 artists and increased revenue by 37 per cent. While the initial restructuring and lengthy COVID-19 blackouts forced programming overhauls, Wagner says the focus has shift-



JAE YANG/TORONTO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA FILE PHOTO

Eric Abramovitz performing Mozart's "Clarinet Concerto" with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

ed to protecting cultural spaces threatened by the city's rising costs. He believes helping artists find their footing protects the rest of Toronto.

"(Artists) are like the canary in the mine. It's the original gig work is arts. And watching where the artists go, where the stresses are, where they meet in the economy, that plays a significant role in trying to figure out how to help everyone."

The season kicks off Oct. 15 with the Fall for Dance North Festival, featuring homegrown and international dancers across various styles.

Other highlights include:

■ Mali Obomsawin: The Ojibwa First Nations composer, bassist, and singer performs her album *Sweet Tooth* at Meridian Arts Centre on Oct. 30, 2026.

■ Sepideh Raissadat: Performing with the Canadian Golha Orchestra on Nov. 14, bringing "the timeless beauty of Iranian classical and orchestral music to life."

■ Caity Gyorgy and Christian Wiggs: The three-time Juno winner leads a holiday sing-along at Meridian Arts Centre on Dec. 12, 2026.

■ Cirque du Soleil: Returning to Meridian Hall for 'Twas the Night Before ... during the holidays.

■ Patrick Watson: The Juno-winning singer performs Feb. 4 with French choreographer Yoann Bourgeois.

■ The Silkroad Ensemble: Featuring three-time Grammy winner Cécile McLorin Salvant in April to celebrate musical traditions from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

The agency will also continue its "film with orchestra" series — featuring "The Wizard of Oz," "How to Train Your Dragon 2," and "Raiders of the Lost Ark" — alongside Sound Break, a free weekly concert series for local musicians.

Wagner is now focusing efforts on the TO Live Foundation to provide creatives with

highly sought-after space. By hosting international acts, Wagner aims to reinvest earnings back into local artists doing similar work.

Since 2017, Wagner's goal has been to make these art forms profitable. While he says his predecessors frequently sought city funding, he has found a sustainable path through corporate sponsors; TO Live now boasts six times the sponsorship revenue seen before the merger.

"You have to find the work that you feel is representative of what you want and then also will be viable from an economic point of view to balance overall in the budget," Wagner said.

Despite the financial success, he acknowledges that programming in Toronto remains a challenge due to "cutting edge" tastes that make audience demands difficult to predict a year out.

"We still just have to preserve our culture."