While musicians and visual artists found virtual outlets livestreaming and posting on social media amid the pandemic, staged productions quite a bit trickier to adapt to lockdown (although playwright Richard Nelson and the Apple family piloted an innovative new Zoom-based production). Hudson Valley art organizations and performance venues
were forced to cancel productions and events from mid-March on but have since developed creative strategies to keep live performances moving forward despite social distancing.

In a pioneering move, The Phoenicia International Festival of Voice has turned their upcoming opera, “Tosca,” into a drive-in performance, The Center of Performing Arts in Rhinebeck is using their great lawn to bring socially distanced Shakespeare to the people, and PS21 has developed a diverse summer season of events and performances using their spacious outdoor scenery, all in an effort to reconnect the community and provide their artists with continuous opportunities to due what they love.

Parking Lot Opera

Maria Todaro, director of the The Phoenicia International Festival of Voice—normally, a multi-day festival with dozens of performances and workshops—is pivoting their direction of the festival, and is deep in preparations to direct the pandemic’s first drive-in opera. Puccini's “Tosca” is set in Rome at a time when papal rule was threatened by French forces committed to republican government, secretly championed by activists like the painter Mario Cavaradossi, the lover of the famed singer, Floria Tosca. Tosca lives only for art and for love of Mario, but to the chief of police, Scarpia, she is an object of lust and a useful tool against the republican activists, and the incredible drama sets forth.

The challenges artists have faced throughout the pandemic have weighed heavily on Todaro’s mind while making Tosca come to life. These struggles have been one of the many key motivators that have kept Todaro moving forward with the innovative, upcoming opera.

“There are a lot of people that just say to artists, ‘Well, you don't have a theater to work on, just change jobs,’ but opera singers spend their whole lives studying to perfect their instrument,” Todaro says. “They are athletes, they have no microphone, they work with their body, so they train their body to a very high standard. They learn five to six languages. As musicians, they dedicate maybe 8 to 12 hours a day for their craft. It's not a hobby. It's a job. It's a lot of sacrifices. So it’s heartbreaking when people say, ‘Just take another job’ when it’s our life.”

Todaro asks people to imagine what quarantine would look like without artists. She points to many of the ways we’ve spent our extra time at home during lockdown—listening to music, reading a book,
watching a film—all creative expressions that reinforce the importance of art in our lives. So when Todaro made it a goal to orchestrate a drive-in opera, she set forth with vigor and passion to create an opportunity for artists to feel connected to their craft once more, and for the community to remember how vital art is to our wellbeing.

The ambitious idea of a drive-in opera came to Todaro and her team at the end of April, and they have been planning ever since. When Ulster County heard of the plan, they were more than happy to provide TechCity in Kingston as the venue. The sprawling former IBM complex has more than enough space to staggered cars and support social distancing amongst audience members. When the performance begins at 8:30pm on August 29, audience members have the opportunity to hear it through open windows or tune in via their car’s FM radio—or both—as they watch the live action both onstage and simulcast on four 20-by-20-foot Jumbotron screens. People will not be allowed out of their cars without a mask, but there will be room for picnicking, and according to Todaro, the sound quality will still be fantastic even if you just roll down your windows. They have been working hard to perfect the sound of the opera specifically, so that it is still as authentic and moving as any other opera would sound.

“Opera is a very specific sound,” says Todaro, “People that love opera are very picky about sound, so to be in the middle of the car in the parking lot is a horrible scenario for any opera lover. But we have people like Mike Seddon with his company, Live Sound, that took the challenge. He said, ‘This is the hardest thing I will have done in my career, so I want it to be a success’ and made it a challenge of a lifetime.”

In another first, this drive-in production will also use Augmented Reality (AR). This technology, typically used in science-fiction films and video games, has been adapted and executed by the Festival’s highly skilled tech team, to provide a more immersive experience for the audience. Todaro promises it will be a real treat, but is keeping the details as a surprise.

While the Phoenicia International Festival of the Voice has faced issues from fundraising to the logistics of putting on a live drive-in show, Todaro is still confident about their August 29 opening night. “Every day, there’s a victory” she says.

Shakespeare Coming to You Live
The Center of Performing Arts in Rhinebeck is currently putting on a ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream, which began on July 7 and will run until July 18 on the great lawn.

The production was originally slated to open as a part of the center’s Shakespeare Festival in March, but was postponed due to the pandemic. With the start of Phase 4, Trapani committed to putting on the production and has worked hard to adapt the show to our current reality. All of the actors are wearing masks and their own clothes while maintaining social distance throughout the performance. Although no actual lines have been changed to justify the unusual attire and blocking, Trapani says it adds a level of meta humor to the show.

“A guy rushes up to you to kiss you,” says Trapani. “He's wearing a mask, and before he can get anywhere close to you, you put your arms out to stop him. You shake your head. You point to your mask. He points to his mask. Then you move on with your lines. No kissing, no touching, but the audience will understand exactly what's going on.”

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is taking place on the one-acre lawn where a 40-by-20-foot stage has been built. Four microphones, two on the ground and two hidden boom mics, in addition to an amplifying system, is broadcasting the show.

In regards to health protocols, Trapani has gone to a great extent to ensure the safety of his audience. After parking your car and putting on your mask, you walk to the lawn, set down your picnic, and enjoy the show with zero contact. Volunteers are available to ensure that each group of people are at least six feet away from each other, including separate exits and entrances when people need to use the bathroom. No more than three people are permitted in the lobby at once, since there are only three bathrooms, and the concession stand is closed.

While Trapani is eager to see the community after all these months, putting on the production has not been an easy task. The Center lost 75 percent of their annual revenue due to the three-month shutdown of the dance school, theater workshops, and scheduled shows.
“This has been really rough on all businesses, but it's been particularly rough on non-for-profits and really, really rough on arts organizations,” says Trapani, “I wouldn't be open right now if it weren't for all the donations and gifts from our community.”

Everyone pitched in to get the Center to this point including 13-year-old actress Madeline Carolan, who raised over $800 dollars in an afternoon selling small window pots with cacti in them at Migliorelli Farm Stand in Rhinebeck. She put up a table, an umbrella, a big sign, and got to work.

A Summer of the Arts at PS21

Little more than a month ago, bringing live performances back to PS21 before the next year seemed impossible, but thanks to their distinctive open-air pavilion theater, the performing arts center will be opening back up with an extensive and diverse program starting in mid-July.

“PS21 is architecturally a gem,” says Elena Siyanko, executive director. The venue has a 350-seat open-air proscenium stage protected by a pavilion roof, which, in cooler months, converts to a geothermally heated and cooled flexible black box theater seating 99. The theater, which features one of the only green, fully LED theatrical lighting systems in the country, sits perched above a 19th-century apple orchard at the apex of over 100 acres of fertile Hudson Valley land.

“We are lucky to have an open-air stage covered with a roof pavilion that allows us to reopen for the summer, but the limited audience allowed by the NY State Guidelines will only cover a small fraction of the presenting costs,” Siyanko says. “We hope the community will understand this and help through contributions, which will all be applied directly to cover artistic fees.”

Although tickets were sold for their first-ever Spring season performances, PS21 had to pull the plug on all of their upcoming productions when COVID hit. PS21’s entire revenue stream of ticket sales, concessions, rentals, and much of anticipated contributed income were effectively wiped out, almost overnight.

“Three companies from Spain were supposed to open our spring season with the Beyond Flamenco Festival in March,” says Siyanko. “One company, of Patricia Guerrero's Proceso Eterno, arrived in New York City and had to fly back to Madrid the next day. Not just in the spring season, but all international productions for the current summer, fall, and next winter have been either cancelled or postponed. The international artist mobility will be impaired for months to come.”

PS21’s open-air pavilion theater will accommodate 25 pairs of seats, less than 15 percent of the capacity of their 350-seat theater. Tickets can only be bought in pairs as a recently established protocol to counteract unnecessary interaction amongst the
audience. Tickets are being held at affordable price, with some performances and events free of charge, in an effort to aid the community when they need it most.

To gather the community and celebrate the breathtaking land PS21 sits on, they have established a program series called **PS21/Chatham PATHWAYS: Blazing Trails to a Sustainable Future** beginning August 3. The week-long celebration will mark the opening of a new network of walking trails connecting PS21’s 100 acres of orchards and meadows with neighboring Crellin Community Park and the town center, honoring the late PS21 founder Judy Grunberg’s far-reaching vision as one of Columbia County’s most historically active conservationists.

With people avoiding indoor spaces, outdoor recreation spots and state parks have been flooded with visitors, making it an ideal time to debut this new trail system.

The New York State premiere of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer John Luther Adams’s Ten Thousand Birds, will be one of the main highlights of **PS21/Chatham PATHWAYS** by the 20-member chamber orchestra, Alarm Will Sound. PS21 is also partnering with local artists on a series of workshops focusing on the creation of art and performance, to offer children (and adults) the opportunity to get creative while addressing important issues related to conservation and sustainability. For children and families, acclaimed experimental theater and opera director Ashley Tata will be working with conductor Alan Pierson and musicians of Alarm Will Sound on a free community program called “Follow Me Into the Field," an environmental adaptation of Ten Thousand Birds. Led by Alarm Will Sound musicians, families will take a socially distanced musical tour of the PS21/Crellin Park landscape. Through the voyage, instrumental sounds will come mingle with the calls of wildlife, rustling leaves, and human footfalls.

For the first time ever, PS21 will also be live streaming their on-site productions. They don’t expect live-streaming aid to replace the income they’ve lost from cancelled performances, but they’re pleased to be able to expand their reach. PS21’s revised event calendar kicks off with hour-long concerts without intermission by Sandbox Percussion on July 17 at 6pm and 8pm, a group "revitalizing the world of contemporary music" according to the Washington Post, and Calidore String Quartet on July 24 at 6pm and 8pm, praised by the New York Times for its "deep reserves of virtuosity and irrepressible dramatic instinct,” along with many more riveting performances and events to come for the summer season.