

Cities and States Are Easing Covid Rules. Should the Arts Follow?

Cultural institutions face tough decisions: Is it safe to drop mask and vaccine requirements, and would doing so be more likely to lure audiences back or keep them away?



By Matt Stevens

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When music fans walked beneath the familiar piano-shaped awning and into the dark embrace of the Blue Note Jazz Club in Greenwich Village this week, a late-pandemic fixture was missing: No one was checking proof of vaccination and photo IDs.

A special guest visited to herald the change. “Good to be back out,” Mayor Eric Adams of New York told the overwhelmingly maskless audience Monday, the day the city stopped requiring proof of vaccination at restaurants and entertainment venues. “I consider myself the nightlife mayor, so I’m going to assess the product every night.”

It is a different story uptown, where Carnegie Hall continues to require masks and vaccines and the Metropolitan Opera goes even further, requiring that all eligible people show proof that they have received their booster shots — safety measures that always went beyond what the city required but which reassured many music lovers. “We want the audience to feel comfortable and safe,” said Peter Gelb, the Met’s general manager.

With cities and states across the country moving to scale back mask and vaccine requirements as coronavirus cases fall, leaders of cultural institutions find themselves confronted once again with difficult decisions: Is it safe to ease virus safety measures, and would doing so be more likely to lure audiences back or keep them away?

Their responses have varied widely. Broadway will continue to require masks and proof of vaccination through at least the end of April. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington announced that it would drop its mask requirement for visitors to its museums and the National Zoo on Friday, following moves by major art museums in places like Chicago and Houston. Some comedy clubs in New York that ditched masking mandates months ago are weighing whether to continue to require proof of vaccination.

“At the beginning of this, many arts organizations were having to develop their own policies before there were clear government guidelines,” said Matthew Shilvock, the general director of the San Francisco Opera. “As we come out of this, again, you’re finding arts companies having to find their own way.”

The Metropolitan Opera continues to require masks and proof of vaccination and booster shots, and to limit food and drink consumption to one part of the opera house. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

In interviews, leaders of almost a dozen cultural groups across the country emphasized the need for caution and carefulness. But they noted that each of their situations are distinct. In museums, patrons can roam large galleries and opt for social distance as they

please. In theaters and concert halls, audience members are seated close together, immobile for the duration of a performance. Opera houses and symphony orchestras tend to draw an older and more vulnerable audience than night clubs and comedy clubs.

The feedback arts leaders say they are getting from visitors has differed: Some said that they had felt increasing pressure to ease their rules in recent weeks, while others said the vast majority of their audience members have told them that they were more likely to visit venues that continue to maintain strict health and safety requirements.

“For every one person who complains about the mask requirement, we have probably about 10 people who express unsolicited gratitude for the fact we are choosing to still have masks in place,” said Meghan Pressman, the managing director and chief executive of the Center Theater Group in Los Angeles. She said she would be “surprised” if her organization changed its masking rules before Broadway does.

On Broadway, which was shut down by the pandemic for more than a year, officials have said that theater operators would continue to require masks and proof of vaccination through at least April. “We do look forward to welcoming our theatergoers without masks one day soon, and in the meantime, want to ensure that we keep our cast, crew and theatergoers safe so that we can continue to bring the magic of Broadway to our audiences without interruption,” Charlotte St. Martin, the president of the Broadway League, said in a statement.

The Metropolitan Opera, which was the first major arts institution to require people entering their opera house to be both vaccinated and boosted, never missed a performance during the height of the recent Omicron surge, and is in no rush to ease its safety measures. “For us, safety comes before Covid fatigue,” said Gelb, the general manager. “So we’re going to err on the side of caution.”

But the company has eased some of its backstage protocols: Soloists were not required to wear masks during recent stage rehearsals of Verdi’s “Don Carlos,” which helped some work on their diction as the company sang it in the original French for the first time.

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Like the Met, the New York Philharmonic and Lincoln Center are also maintaining their mask and vaccine mandates for the moment. Carnegie Hall continues to require masks and proof of vaccination, but recently dropped its policy of briefly requiring booster shots. Masking and vaccine rules also remain in place at the San Francisco Opera, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Opera and Center Theater Group.

Two of New York's premier art-house cinemas are taking different approaches — at least for now. Film Forum's website says that proof of vaccination is no longer required and that masks are encouraged but not required. Film at Lincoln Center will continue to require proof of vaccination and masks through Sunday, but plans to relax its policy next week.

A recent poll conducted by The Associated Press found that half of Americans approve of mask mandates, down from 55 percent who supported the mandates six months ago and 75 percent who supported them in December 2020.

Choosing what to do is not easy.

Christopher Koelsch, the president of the Los Angeles Opera, said that the surveys he has reviewed suggest that roughly a third of audience members would only come to performances if a mask mandate was in place — but that roughly a third would refuse to come if masks are required.

“No matter what decision you make,” he said, “there are people who are going to be upset with you and believe that you are making the wrong decision.”

Some museums are in an in-between moment. The Metropolitan Museum of Art stopped checking vaccine cards as of Monday but still requires masks. And the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City is likely to lift its mask mandate this month, said Julián Zugazagoitia, the museum’s director.

As mask mandates fall in schools, restaurants and other settings, he said, he felt “almost forced” to follow suit. “What I’d like to see us do is keep this as a suggestion,” he said of wearing masks indoors.

Other art venues have already changed their rules. Officials at the Art Institute of Chicago said the museum eliminated its requirements for masks and vaccines on Feb. 28 in line with new governmental policies. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston — one of the first major American museums to reopen after the country went into lockdown in March 2020 — also relaxed its most recent mask mandate last week. As it did previously in the fall, the museum is now recommending — but not requiring — masks for visitors and staff.

“We’ve had an increasing number of visitors and staff inquire about why we haven’t — or when are we going to — relax the mandatory mask requirement,” said Gary Tinterow, the museum’s director.

At the Broadway Comedy Club in New York, patrons have been allowed inside maskless for some time. But Al Martin, the club's president, said he has been debating whether to stop requiring that his guests be vaccinated.

On one hand, he said, checking people at the door required him to add staff members, which costs money. And he estimated that he has lost roughly 30 percent of his audience because of the mandate. On the other, he said, he liked having a city vaccine mandate to fall back on. "It gave a degree of safety and assurance to people," he said.

He ultimately decided to do away with the vaccine mandate at his club as of Monday despite his personal concern that the city "might have been slightly premature" in rolling back the rules.

He reserves the right to change his mind about his club's policy, he said.

"If I see my business drop 40 percent because people are not feeling safe in my venue," he said, "we're going back to the vaccine passport."