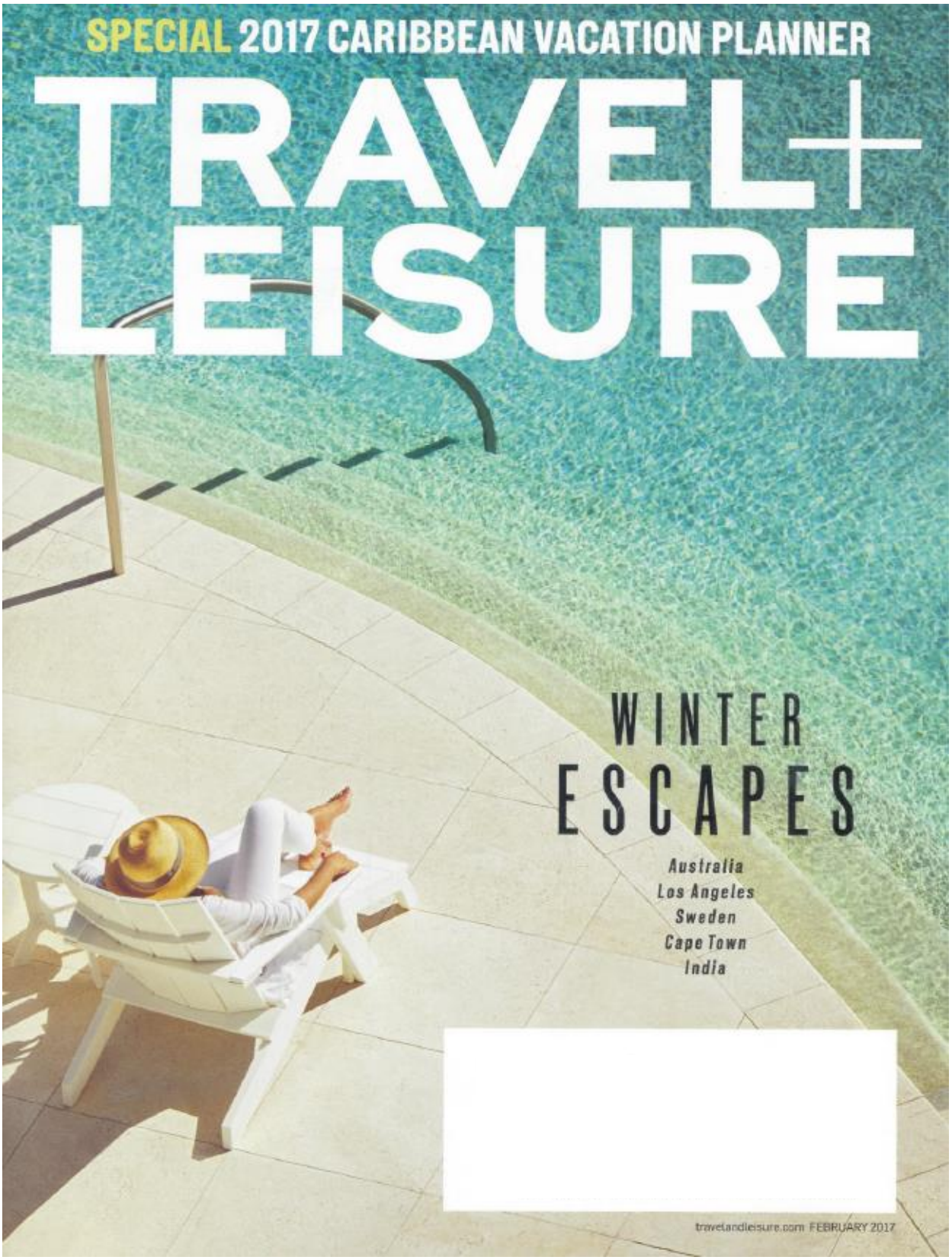


Splendor in the Grass

Southern Montana cattle country is the unlikely backdrop for a new arts center that couples giant installations with classical-music performance. BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

Cows congregate beneath Prowers, a metronome-like sculpture by Mark di Suvero at Tippet Rise Art Center.

Visitors to Alexander Calder's *Two Disks*, on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.

The pianist Stephen Hough sat before a large window, stroking the trembling, purple chords of Liszt's "Transcendental Etude no. 11," subtitled "Evening Harmonies." As I looked past him onto an expanse of southern Montana ranchland at dusk, I saw clouds boiling down from the Beartooth Mountains. Lightning accompanied Hough's fortissimos. After the concert, as the small audience drifted outdoors, a last spasm of sunset lit up the hills a gaudy yellow. First one rainbow, then a second, arced across the charcoal sky.

The weather makes its presence felt at Tippet Rise, a vast yet intimate new arts center draped across 10,260 acres of pasture and canyons. The complex, which opened last June, springs from a dream shared by the married, culture-loving philanthropists Peter and Cathy Halstead of a place where landscape, art, and music could coexist in utopian harmony. The scion of a banking family and the daughter of a liquor tycoon, they met as teenagers, attended the same college in New York City, and have spent much of their 36 years together giving away their money. To create their high-country arts Eden, they bought up seven ranches in Stillwater County, where a few thousand sheep, several hundred cows, and a small team of cowboys still roam; Tippet Rise remains a working ranch. The Halsteads also built the music barn where I saw Hough play and a few artists' cottages, then filled them with pianos—and not just any pianos, but gorgeous, precious Steinways, some dating from the 19th century.

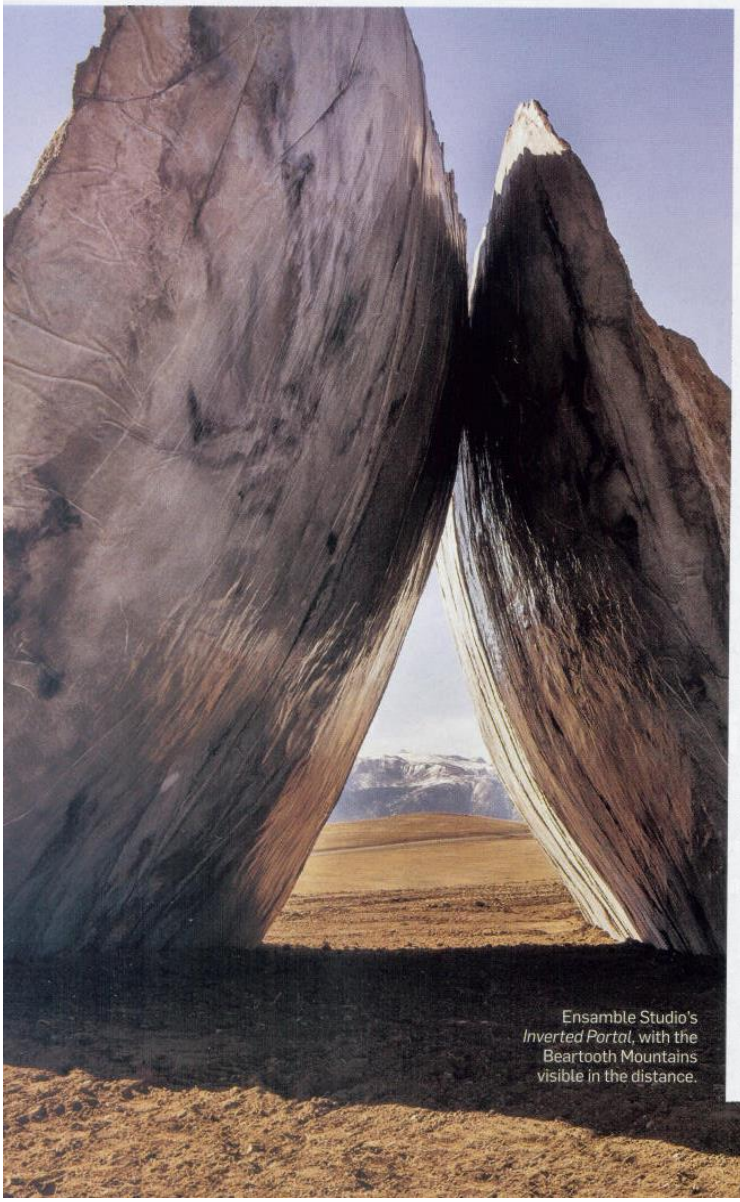
The instruments have drawn international virtuosos far from their usual circuit. "This is the best collection of Steinways anywhere—better than Carnegie Hall or the Southbank Centre in London," Hough told me at his cottage, a few dozen yards from the music barn's stage entrance. For his recital, he had chosen to play CD-18, a 1940 masterpiece that was originally owned by the legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz and later acquired by the equally prodigious Eugene Istomin.

The Halsteads' boundless funds have yielded a minor populist fantasy in a plutocrats' retreat. Two-hour van tours of the sculpture park are free. Concert tickets cost just $10, and another $15 will buy a pre-performance barbecue buffet good enough to satisfy the Halsteads' exacting friends. Most of the current programming is scheduled during the warmer months, though the founders hope eventually to keep the center active year-round.

This sublime but peculiar enclave is especially improbable in terrain that's remote even by Montana standards. Small-town classical-music festivals (like the one in Ojai, California) and expansive sculpture →

parks (such as Storm King, in New York's Hudson Valley) are typically within striking distance of major cities or resorts. Fishtail, the town closest to Tippet Rise, consists of little more than a general store. Because on-site accommodations are available only to visiting musicians, most out-of-towners stay in Red Lodge or Billings, both about an hour away—close, by Montana standards. You're more likely to spot a mountain lion than a concert pianist in this part of the country.

But the brisket line turned out to be heavily populated with retired orthopedists, insurance moguls, and hobbyist ranchers who sit on the boards of their hometown chamber-music societies. The Halsteads may have wanted to bring art to the people, but mostly they're bringing their people to the art.



Ensamble Studio's *Inverted Portal*, with the Beartooth Mountains visible in the distance.

The couple seem to be enjoying their creation enormously. Cathy bobs around, welcoming guests with a spray of pewter curls and a perpetual smile. Peter hurries over the grounds in a Tyrolean loden vest and a battered pink sun hat over his shoulder-length white hair. The job of keeping the place humming falls to its French-born executive director, Alban Bassuet. While working as an acoustician for the global engineering firm Arup, Bassuet became particularly passionate about the music room in Esterházy Palace, in Hungary. It was there, in the late 18th century, that Haydn elevated chamber music from dinnertime entertainment to an art form. When the Halsteads ordered up the perfect rural music venue, Bassuet set out to create an Esterházy Palace of the West, a rustic barn as acoustically exquisite as Haydn's Rococo workshop.

Miraculously, the Halsteads found a team that could design and build such a thing: a Harvard-trained architect named Laura Viklund and her husband, Chris Gunn. East Coast refugees who now live in Powell, Wyoming, about 70 miles south of Tippet Rise, the couple owns and operates Gunnstock Timber Frames. The old art of timber framing—assembling brawny beams using joinery, rather than hammering together two-by-fours—is a New England craft, and the barn looks as if it could have migrated from Massachusetts, as Viklund and Gunn did. Its sturdy frame and weathered-steel plates give it the necessary toughness to protect the pianos through the Montana winter. Inside, all is blond wood, friendly, and climate-controlled. It is among the most seductive chamber-music spaces I have ever visited.

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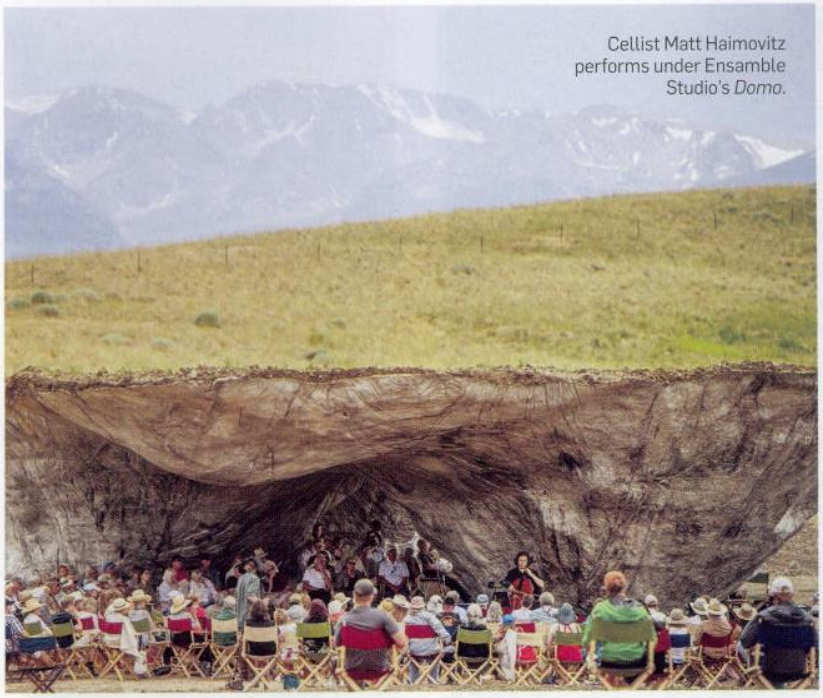
The barn lies low in a fold in the hills, where the cows and sheep graze among the oversize sculptures that now dot the landscape. Performers of global renown play for audiences of 150, ranged on creaky director's chairs. The music ripples through the larchwood rafters and comes back down swathed in a plush acoustic haze. In this deceptively rustic environment, you can hear a pianist's murmurs, the scratch of horsehair on catgut, the rubbing of one dissonant note against its fellows. It's like listening through a magnifying glass.

Outside, the property stretches for miles. A few unobtrusive signs point down a long dirt road to a lonely gate and a parking lot with no visible buildings nearby. From there, electric vans shuttle visitors over gravel roads among the scattered sculptures, which dominate buttes or nestle within depressions against a backdrop of snow-flecked mountains.

It takes a special kind of artwork to hold its own against such a mesmerizing landscape. Two of→



Cellist Matt Haimovitz performs under Ensamble Studio's *Domo*.

Mark di Suvero's big steel contraptions lend a note of industrial muscle. Stephen Talasnik's wooden *Satellite No. 5: Pioneer* looks like a timber-ribbed space capsule that landed in a grassy gully. Patrick Dougherty's *Daydreams* is a one-room schoolhouse snarled in dried willow branches. The most convincing interventions come courtesy of the Spanish partnership Ensamble Studio, made up of Antón García-Abril and Débora Mesa. One morning, as a ring of mountains glowered on the horizon, I sidled up to *Inverted Portal*, a pair of immense concrete clamshells leaning against each other to form a kind of triumphal arch. From a distance, it looked like a geological phenomenon, perhaps a hollowed-out peak that had wandered away from its range. When I approached, I found that I could caress its rough hide and polished interior, step inside and sing into its reverberant span, then reemerge to feel the wind whorl around its mass.

Like everything else in this illusory wilderness, the sculpture was meticulously engineered and executed with a mixture of anxiety and ambition. A sister work, *Beartooth Portal*—rough inside, with a smooth exterior—sits on a not-so-nearby rise. A third, *Domo*, forms an arcaded vault, like a prehistoric ruin fashioned by giants. Actually, workers capped an existing hill with a mound of gravel, then scooped out three chambers and filled them with concrete. The result is a work of negative sculpture: natural-looking voids created by clearing away loose dirt. And because music lovers conceived this wild arts center, the vaults of *Domo* are spacious and acoustically refined enough to accommodate an alfresco recital. Workaday Steinways are on hand for use at several outdoor performance sites.

One afternoon, I joined hundreds of audience members and musicians at Talasnik's *Pioneer* for a performance of the nature-inspired composer John Luther Adams's outdoor masterwork, *Inuksuit*. Bells, bangs, breaths, and whistles went ricocheting over the hills. A little ways away, a ranch hand in a Stetson sat atop his horse, listening. As the piece ended, and the cry of a distant piccolo mingled with the wind in the grasslands, that hour of magical noise seemed to distill the spirit of Tippet Rise: sound and sculpture mingling under the sun. ■