Western Voices

Jed Distler offers an insight into three American festivals which combine serious music-making with the peace and beauty of some stunning scenery.

The American West evokes the world of myths and legends, folk heroes and film genres, plus archetypes and stereotypes that resound today. It's also home to one spectacular natural setting, landscape and national park after another. While these places thrive, and sometimes suffer, as touristic destinations, certain locales have long held special attraction to musicians, who draw inspiration from rural and remote surroundings at far remove from big city pressures. Such settings lend themselves to concentrated work and spontaneous play; they also create a sense of community that appeals not just to performers, composers and students, but also to music-loving audiences who hunger for travel and adventure.

Grand Teton Music Festival

The Grand Teton Music Festival was launched in 1992 as part of the Jackson Hole Fine Arts Festival. Co-founders originally took place at the Jackson Hole High School gymnasium before the festival moved into the neighboring Teton Village.

A permanent structure at the foot of Rendezvous Mountain, Walk Festival Hall, became the festival's home in 1974, and is significant for its excellent acoustics, amphitheatre-style seating and sophisticated sound reinforcement.

World-class music-making and intense outdoor activity go hand in hand during the festival's seven weeks, whether one is spotting wildlife in uneasily stilling beauty in the wilderness, or driving to the nearby Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks for some serious hiking. Should you decide to stay closer to town in the vicinity where festival artists are housed, you'll be more likely to hear musicians practicing in the distance, as opposed to their own more moderate calls.

'The Grand Teton Music Festival Orchestra members are chosen from many of America's first-tier ensembles, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Conductor Donald Runnicles has been Grand Teton's Music Director since 2006 and, more than a decade on, it clearly holds great appeal for him. Breathing the fresh mountain air, performing the great works of classical music with such outstanding musicians, bearing witness to the generous support by Jackson Hole's tremendous community - that is theVisibleSourceSource of the unique alchemy to be experienced at the Grand Teton Music Festival.'

The 2018 season takes place between July 3 and August 18, and simultaneously looks both to the past and to the future. Leonard Bernstein's centenary takes centre stage with soloists that include violinists Leila Josefowicz and Julian Rachlin, pianists Daniil Trifonov, Kirill Gerstein and Olga Kern, cellist Johannes Moser and composer/conductor Edgar Meyer, along with Broadway luminary Audra McDonald headlining the festival's annual gala concert. This young Syrian-American Karen Rostron has been invited as composer-in-residence, while a new festival commission from former Cleveland Composer Fellow Susan Shephard receives its world premiere. Visit gtmf.org for the complete schedule and to buy tickets.

Aspen Music Festival and School

The Aspen festivals, including the Aspen Music Festival and School, are held annually in the otherwise quiet mountain town of Aspen, Colorado. Named after the surrounding Aspen trees, the festival is known for its high-caliber of performances and its relaxed atmosphere.

Through the Aspen Music Festival and School, hundreds of musicians from around the world come together to share their passion for music. The festival offers an array of programs, including symphony concerts, chamber music, jazz, and even opera performances.

Moreover, the Aspen Music Festival and School is not just about performance. It also provides educational opportunities for students interested in pursuing a career in music. The school offers a variety of programs, including summer music camps and classes for both children and adults.

Overall, the Aspen Music Festival and School is a vibrant hub for music lovers and enthusiasts, offering a unique opportunity to experience the beauty and power of music in a picturesque setting.
international roster of teachers, students, alumni and artists have constituted a veritable who’s who of 20th- and early 21st-century music luminaries.

During the summer, concerts take place almost daily in the main Benedict Music Tent, an acoustically superb venue characterized by its open sides and curving roof constructed from Teflon-coated fiberglass. Most chamber music concerts, solo recitals and public masterclasses are held next door in the 700-seat Joan and Irving Harris Concert Hall that opened in 1995. By contrast, the historic Wheeler Opera House, a long-time festival partner, has been in business since 1889 and features a wide array of professional and community events from concerts and stand-up comedy to discussions and lectures.

The Aspen Festival’s infrastructure and mission have evolved over the years. In the 1990s, Aspen had grown almost by accretion, with more than a thousand students,” says composer/administrator Alan Fletcher, who came to Aspen in March 2006 as President and CEO. “It became necessary to scale back to around 650 students and adjust the size and direction of the faculty accordingly, in order for everyone to fully benefit from teaching and performing opportunities at the highest levels.” One significant development was the completion of the 880-seat Matthew and Carolyn Buckman Campus in 2013, situated on 38 acres amid woodlands, spruce-covered foothills and two trout-laced ponds.

All of the buildings can be easily accessed by foot, and include state-of-the-art practice rooms, orchestral rehearsal halls, teaching studios, administrative offices and an impressive library. While important commercial recordings have stemmed from live Aspen concerts, such as the Emerson Quartet’s DG Shostakovich cycle, most concerts and recitals are recorded for future broadcast on National Public Radio and local affiliates, with hundreds of items from recent and past seasons available for streaming in partnership with the website instantencore.com.

The year’s event, from June 28 to August 19, marks Aspen’s 74th season with an overall theme focused on works by Parisian composers and inspired by the French capital. Three mini-festivals showcase distinctive creative threads: Impressionism (1860–1910), Diaghilev Ballet Russes composers (1909–29), and a survey of Nadia Boulanger’s American composition students. Other highlights include Daniil Trifonov performing his own piano concerto and a contemporary music programme from violinist Augustin Hadelich, plus a collaboration with pianist Joyce Yang and the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. Visit aspenmusicfestival.com for details.

Tippet Rise Art Center

One of America’s newest and most unique classical music festivals takes place near the south-central town of Fishtail, Montana, on an 11,500-acre working sheep and cattle ranch, north of Yellowstone National Park and buffered by the Beartooth Mountains. The Tippet Rise Art Center, which opened in 2016, is the brainchild of artists/philanthropists Peter and Cathy Halstead, who began the process of purchasing six contiguous ranches back in 2009 for the purpose of creating an environment that enables both performing artists and the listening public to experience and absorb the subtle and profound connections between nature, visual art and music.

“We always were inspired by large spaces containing sculpture, like New York’s Storm King,” says Peter Halstead, “as well as how nature could shape a musical situation. We once heard pianist Iva Pogorelich in an outdoor theatre where only the stage was covered. It started pouring with rain, so the pianist invited the audience up on stage with him, and it was like he was making us a part of the performance.”

Tippet Rise holds concerts in several intimate venues. Upon entering the grounds, the Olivier Music Barn, with its timber frame and pitched roof, appears like a gentle surprise. Its archetypal and acoustic design was in some respects inspired by Snape Maltings, the Halstead’s favourite concert hall, although the latter’s 832-seat capacity is a far cry from the Olivier’s 170 seats. More unusual, however, is the Tippet Acoustic Shell. At first glance it looks a little rough and ready: a bare-bones portable stage with a monumental covering held up by plywood sticks, plugged down in the middle of nowhere. Yet the combination of an expansive surrounding landscape and remarkable reverberation gives new meaning to the term ‘psycho-acoustic.’

All concerts are painstakingly documented in high-definition video and audio. Items from the inaugural 2016 season appear on a double-CD release in Pentatone’s Ongaree Series (including artists such as Yvonne Luschi, Stephen Hough and others), while an ample representation of live performances can be found on YouTube. Such high technical care extends to the upkeep of the Art Center’s dozen Steinway pianos, all chosen with care by Peter Halstead, a pianist in his own right. This writer (also a pianist in his own right) was particularly smitten by the lovingly restored Steinway concert grand, CD-18, formerly owned by Vladimir Horowitz and later acquired by Eugene Istoistin.

The 2018 season, which runs from July 6 to September 8, includes the Tippet Rise debuts of pianists Wu Han, Gabriel Kahane, Ingrid Fliter and Julian Bliss, cellist Johannes Moser and David Finckel, violinist Vadim Gluzman, and the Calder String Quartet, along with the return of artists from past seasons, plus the premiere of the second in a series of three commissioned works by composer Aaron Jay Kernis. Happily, the Halstead’s lofty artistic ideals translate into a warm, familial atmosphere, created by the combination of the reasonable ticket prices, welcoming communal dining area and gradual canyon tours to spontaneous events that couldn’t happen anywhere else. For example, after giving a substantial evening concert, violinist Caroline Gooding led a small group of friends, colleagues and journalists up to an Alexander Calder sculpture. Rarely illuminated by the moonlight, she played unaccompanied Bach for the simple joy of it. Seating is limited, and reservations are strongly advised; visit tippetrise.org for schedule and ticket information.