

GRAMOPHONE

April 2018

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 resist tearing down. It's also home to one spectacular natural setting, landscape and national park after another. While these places thrive, and sometimes suffer, as tourist 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 situations 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 hanker for travel and adventure.

Grand Teton Music Festival

The Grand Teton Music Festival was launched in 1962 as part of the larger Jackson Hole Fine Arts Festival. Concerts originally took place at the historically landmarked Jackson Lake Lodge and in the Jackson Hole High School gymnasium before the festival moved into the neighbouring 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 sightlines, 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 wild game innocently ambling about 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



Grand Teton owes its alchemy to 'fresh mountain air and outstanding musicians'

housed, you'll be more likely to hear musicians practising in the distance, as opposed to bear growls and moose 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 the veritable source 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/bassist Edgar Meyer, along with Broadway luminary Audra McDonald headlining the festival's annual gala concert. The young Syrian-American Kareem Roustom has been invited as composer-in-residence, while a new festival commission from former Cleveland Composer Fellow Sean Shepherd receives its world premiere. Visit gtmf.org for the complete schedule and to buy tickets.

Aspen Music Festival and School

The upscale boutiques, gourmet coffee shops and mouth-watering dining options engulfing downtown Aspen belie this venerable municipality's roots as a mining camp founded in the 1880s during Colorado's Silver Boom. However, the Aspen we know today started coming into its own in the mid-20th century, when Aspen Mountain became a skiing resort and Chicago



The open-sided Benedict Music Tent, the setting for almost daily concerts

industrialist Walter Paepcke began to buy up and develop properties. What started in 1949 as a successful two-week celebration of the German poet Goethe's bicentennial soon materialised into an annual summer music programme. The first official class in 1951 comprised 183 students, with Igor Stravinsky on hand as composer and conductor. Over the decades, Aspen's

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 characterised by its open sides and curving roof constructed from Teflon-coated fibreglass. Most chamber music concerts, solo recitals and public masterclasses are held next door in the 500-seat Joan and Irving Harris Concert Hall that opened in 1993. 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 600 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 \$80m Matthew and Carolyn Bucksbaum Campus in 2013, situated on 38 acres amidst woodlands, spruce-covered foothills and two man-made 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 talks 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 70th 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 Sante 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 Ivo 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 architectural and



The Tiara Acoustic Shell, one of Tippet Rise's unique performance spaces

acoustic design were in some respects inspired by Snape Maltings, the Halsteads' favourite concert hall, although the latter's 832-seat capacity is a far cry from the Olivier's 150 seats. More unusual, however, is the Tiara Acoustic Shell. At first glance it looks a little rough and ready: a bare-bones portable stage with a rudimentary covering held up by plywood sticks, plopped 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 Oxingale Series (including artists such as Yevgeny Sudbin, 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 Istomin.

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 Julien Brocal, cellists Johannes Moser and David Finckel, violinist Vadim Gluzman, and the Calidore 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 Halsteads' lofty artistic ideals translate into a warm, familial atmosphere, created by the combination of the reasonable ticket prices, welcoming communal dining area and genial canyon tours to spontaneous events that couldn't happen anywhere else. For example, after giving a substantial evening concert, violinist Caroline Goulding led a small group of friends, colleagues and journalists up to an Alexander Calder sculpture. Barely 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. 📍