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A Weekend at Tippet Rise, Where Landscape Immensity Meets Musical Intimacy

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FISHTAIL, Montana--Lots of music festivals beckon with the prospect of a temporary retreat from the mundane. Tippet Rise Art Center takes this to a remarkable extreme, thanks to its geography. Located on a 10,260-acre working ranch in rural south-central Montana, Tippet Rise requires nothing less than a pilgrimage just to take in one of the musical weekends of this year's summer festival season, spread over eight weeks between July and September.

"This landscape is so primeval and powerful, it insinuates itself into your cells. It's a place where you can have a deep cultural experience while being tied to the earth in a way you're not used to," says Cathy Halstead, who, together with her husband Peter, founded Tippet Rise as an expression of their shared passion for art, nature, and education.

That's a singularly apt characterization of what I experienced during my stay over the third weekend (July 20 and 21). The hallmark of Tippet Rise, which opened to the public in 2016, lies in its unique contextualization of musical performance. Whatever programming happens to be on offer, the combined Big Sky grandeur and remoteness of the setting encourage a sensibility that stands apart from the usual process of listening.

The same holds true for the massive sculptural installations for which Tippet Rise is likewise known. In contrast to a typical exhibition, in which a selection of artworks commands attention in themselves, the gigantic outdoor works here—only eight of them, by the likes of Mark di Suvero and Stephen Talasnik, each spaced so far apart as to be independent—wield their effect in dialogue with the surrounding landscape.

"The idea is that people can spend a whole day with a sculpture, so that a visitor gets to experience his or her personal revelation with that work of art," explains Peter Halstead. "Cathy and I were drawn to those moments of transformative experiences with art in our own lives. We want to make that happen here."

For the visual and musical dimensions alike, at the center of the Tippet Rise aesthetic enacts a breathtaking interplay of immensity with intimacy. The concert programming revolves around piano and chamber music, yet the implications of the natural surrounding—as engulfing and oceanic as the prairies and skies in Willa Cather’s best selling novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop**—remain ever-present.

Friday night’s concert was devoted exclusively to Jeffrey Kahane’s performance of the Goldberg Variations, which he preceded with an engaging introductory talk underscoring how Bach’s spectrum ranges boldly from the earthy to the transcendent. Kahane played in the main performance venue at Tippet Rise, the 150-seat Olivier Music Barn. With its high timber roof and large window that frames the rolling ranch landscape and Beartooth Mountains (gateway to Yellowstone Park beyond), the Olivier calls to mind such similarly removed-from-the-fray venues as Aldeburgh’s Snape Maltings.

Tippet Rise boasts an impressive collection of personality-rich instruments among its collection of Steinways—Peter Halstead trained as a pianist under Russell Sherman—from which Kahane selected the one dubbed “Véra” (after Nabokov’s wife): a Hamburg Steinway whose transparency was well-suited to his clean voicing. His preference for fast tempi and balanced articulation seemed more focused on the large-scale structure of Bach’s scheme than on the distinctive character of each variation. As a result, they tended to blur until the “black pearl” (No. 25), whose tragic intensity was especially affecting.

The reprise of the aria evoked an architectural satisfaction that neatly complemented the effect of a pair of sculptures viewed during a tour of the ranch earlier in the day: Beartooth Portal and Inverted Portal, two monumental works by the Ensemble [sic] Studio that distantly echo and comment on each other across the Tippet Rise landscape. Meanwhile, I couldn’t help hearing Kahane’s intricate ornamentation choices through the filter of the ubiquitous song of meadowlarks or the trills of flapping grasshopper wings.

Another on-site creation by Ensemble Studio (which is led by the Spanish architects Antón García- Abril and Débora Mesa), called the Domo, was designed to host outdoor performances (very much dependent on the last-minute behavior of the weather). The young American Dover Quartet (Banff Competition winners in 2013) was in residence throughout the weekend and presented pieces by the composer-performers Gabriel Kahane (son of Jeffrey) and Timo Andres in a midday performance there on Saturday (the weather giving its approval).

Kahane sang to the Dovers’ accompaniment for his brief song cycle *Come On All You Ghosts* to texts by San Francisco poet Matthew Zapruder—a study in ironic, pop-tinged melancholy. The Quartet also juxtaposed Andres’s compact, idea-rich *Early to Rise* with the very last of Dvorák’s string quartets, Op. 105 in A-flat major. As an acoustic environment, the Domo is entirely unforgiving, robbing performers of reverberation. The Dovers played with such focus and impassioned involvement that my ears grew quickly acclimated.



One of the sculptures at Tippet Rise Art Center

Dvorák—via the Op. 81 Piano Quintet—also supplied the culmination point of the generous program that concluded the weekend on Saturday evening, back at the Olivier Music Barn. It featured not only the Dover Quartet but the Kahanes, father and son, and Andres among the lineup of performers. Peter Halstead told me that a principal goal for him in musical curation is to foster dialogue, much as Tippet Rise is about interdisciplinary dialogue between music and visual art, and between cultural expression and nature.

Dialogue, that is, between composers and eras, as in Kurtág’s lean transcriptions of two J.S. Bach chorale preludes for piano four hands, which Jeffrey and Gabriel Kahane executed, as well as 7/30/2018 Printer-Friendly Receipt <https://www.musicalamerica.com/news/printarticle.cfm?sid=40844&cid=0&arc=0> 2/2 Debussy’s versions of the Studies in Canonic Form that Schumann wrote for pedal piano. The latter, for two pianos, paired Gabriel Kahane with Time Andres at the keyboard; the duo also played an early two-piano work by Andres (How can I live in your world of ideas?), which quirkily weaves together a plenitude of allusions to Romantic piano literature and its discontents (including Schumann-tinged excursions).

Gabriel Kahane again took the stage as composer-performer, this time for a sampling from his acclaimed *The Ambassador*, a sequence of songs inspired by diverse addresses in Los Angeles. “Empire Liquor Mart (9127 S. Figueroa St.),” which recounts the shooting of African-American teenager Latasha Harlins by a Korean store owner in 1991, had the weight of a self-contained epic.

Another area Tippet Rise has been exploring is audio and video recording. (The Center’s website hosts an abundance of samples.) To get a taste of this side of the operation, I headed up to the state-of-the-

art recording studio nestled atop the Olivier for the concert's second half. Filtered through a complex DXD system in 9.1. Auto, the sound bloomed with spectacular presence—more alive in fact than it had from the middle of the audience below (where human bodies absorb some of the waves).

Gabriel Kahane gave exquisitely poignant accounts of a handful of Benjamin Britten's folksong arrangements, with Andres at the keyboard, underscoring their artful economy in particular with a heartrending "The Ash Grove."

Joined by the Dover Quartet, Jeffrey Kahane opted for the lush-sounding "Seraphina," a restored 1897 Steinway, for the concluding Dvorák. There was nothing gratuitous or routine in their ardent account of the beloved staple, the grasses visibly blowing with a heavy gust behind the window frame as if in response to the majestic sonorities produced by the ensemble.

Here was still another instance of the panoramic juxtaposed with the close-up, the imposing side-by-side with the intimate, that underlies the experience of art at Tippet Rise. At its heart is an aesthetic vision that can be found in the work of John Luther Adams, several of whose works have already been performed on site. Currently, Adams is working on a string quartet commissioned by the Center, and it was on the premises that he composed a major portion of *In the Name of the Earth*, his major new choral work that will be premiered in August in Central Park as part of the Mostly Mozart Festival.

"To me, Tippet Rise isn't just another music festival," Adams told me before one of the weekend's concerts. "It's a way of imagining the world we want to live in, that we hope to have for future generations, for people we will never know, where they can still make these connections." *Death Comes for the Archbishop concerns an attempt to establish a Catholic Diocese in New Mexico.

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