

Classical Voice North America

In Pastoral Vastness, Grand Art Harmonizes With Music's Intimacy

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By Thomas May

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Ai Weiwei's 'Iron Tree' (2013), on the Tippet Rise campus, joins 97 separate iron parts in a tense alliance to form the shape of a leafless tree. (Photo by James Florio)

FISHTAIL, Mont. — Set amid endlessly rolling hills, mesas, and grasslands that are framed by rugged mountains and the vast Montana sky, [Tippet Rise Art Center](#) beckons with a unique intersection of pristine nature and interdisciplinary artistic adventure. The surrounding landscape inevitably injects itself into each musical experience, while looming sculptural shapes retune the sounds of wind and distant thunder. The metaphors proliferate so abundantly here that you need to take care not to step on them — to adapt Brahms' famous observation about a favorite summer idyll that stimulated his creativity.

Massive outdoor sculptures and architectural attractions are dispersed across the Center's 12,500-acre expanse in southcentral Montana (just north of Yellowstone). Tippet Rise also encompasses a small campus focused around the 150-seat [Olivier Music Barn](#), the main performance venue for the [summer festival](#) concert season of chamber music and recitals.

This rural retreat for art and music simultaneously operates as an active ranch: Inquisitive Angus cattle and sheep can be seen (or heard) calmly grazing, while the highly varied terrain attracts hikers and mountain bikers to explore some 15 miles of winding trails. The nearest town, Fishtail, has a population of just a few hundred residents.



Composer Reena Esmail and cellist Arlen Hlusko

“The land here influences everything,” says [Cathy Halstead](#), an abstract painter who founded Tippet Rise with her husband — poet, photographer, and pianist [Peter Halstead](#). “We think about the land very much the way we think about the sculptures and about the spaces that all of us are in. And the music brings us deeper into the land and opens us up to extraordinary experiences that we might not have somewhere else.” (The name Tippet Rise combines her childhood nickname for her mother, “Tippet,” with the geological term for the rising altitude of the local topography.)

“Tippet Rise is a metaphor,” declares their mission statement, “an intersection where art, music, land, sky, and poetry can weave together into an algorithm which is greater than the sum of its parts.” During an afternoon interview just a few hours before the opening night performance of the [2022 summer season](#), the Halsteads shared their latest thoughts on the interaction of nature and art — and of the arts with each other — that is at the center of their vision. The couple has left their mark as influential philanthropists on music, visual arts, film, and poetry — and, through their [innovative stewardship](#) of the ranch, on environmental awareness.

“You listen to a piece of music differently when you’re looking at the landscape around you, and each artwork here has something to say about the others — including the landscape,” says Peter Halstead. “It all becomes a metaphor, where you begin to hear, say, Bartók’s *Out of Doors* pieces as maybe painting the landscape with chords.” He goes on to reference Baudelaire’s notion of [correspondences](#) between nature and the artist’s vision, along with Debussy’s depiction of “the rain in the sunlight” in *Jardins sous la pluie*.

My visit took place Aug. 26-28 during Tippet Rise's first weekend of live concerts since the pandemic began. Ever since the inaugural season in 2016, tickets to these performances have been available to the public through a randomized drawing (only \$10 for adults and free for everyone under 21). The concert season, which in previous years ran earlier in the summer, stretches over five weekends, from Aug. 26 to Sept. 25; the cast of musicians for each is different. All told, they will perform 15 concerts at the Olivier Music Barn and other nearby sites on the campus, as well as various pop-up performances at some of the art installations (weather permitting).

A pre-concert talk in the open-air [Tiara Acoustic Shell](#) introduced [Reena Esmail](#), the first of Tippet Rise's three commissioned composers for 2022. Pianist [Pedja Mužijević](#), a frequent performer at the center who also serves as artistic adviser, interviewed the much-sought-after, Los Angeles-based composer about her collaboration with Canadian cellist [Arlen Hlusko](#) to create the new work in question, *Sandhiprakash*. Hlusko brought Esmail to the attention of the Halsteads when she began collaborating with her as part of [September Solo Cello](#), a commissioning project for which the cellist invited composers to submit ideas at the height of the pandemic. The project resulted in a harvest of some 20 pieces stipulated to last only one minute or less.



'Domo' is a site-specific work by the Madrid-based Ensamble Studio. (Photo by Iwan Baan)

But *Sandhiprakash* took on a life of its own and expanded when it turned into a Tippet Rise project. Esmail learned about the art center from Hlusko, who had performed there. She became intrigued by the cellist's description of its unique surroundings and decided to write a piece about sunrise/sunset at Tippet Rise. Unable to visit the campus in person as she was composing the piece during the long shutdown, Esmail immersed herself in the trove of videos and photographs documenting both its natural setting and artistic activities.

For its part, Tippet Rise had responded to the pandemic by enhancing its [library](#) of recorded live performances and short films, a strategy made feasible thanks to the audio and visual control rooms housed in the timber-clad, [LEED Gold-certified](#) Olivier Music Center, which also boasts a high-end recording studio (particularly in demand during the off-season months).

There was a curiously satisfying irony — or was it a sense of resolution? — to the real-time, on-site experience of a composition that had been created under conditions of distance and virtual workarounds intended to simulate live performance. *Sandhiprakash* (“joining light”) is the term used in Hindustani music for the ragas associated, alternatively, with dawn and dusk — the ambiguous threshold between day and night. Esmail moves seamlessly between the extended techniques familiar from Western avant-garde composers and her in-depth understanding of Indian classical music traditions.

Hlusko’s eloquent performance sustained a prayerful, meditative atmosphere that belied the relative brevity of the 10-minute piece. She summoned notes spanning the full range of the cello, realizing Esmail’s varying combinations of ethereal harmonics, sul ponticello scrubbings, and plaintive glissandi. She traced an arc from the “luminous, mysterious” opening through brightening arpeggios to the brilliantly lit final section, where the overall mode shifts with a palpable intensity corresponding to the three distinctive ragas that conjure the moments just before, during, and just after twilight. An identifiable vocal quality emerged from Esmail’s emulation of Hindustani-style ornamentation. She explained that this resulted from a combination of her own notation and having Hlusko imitate her singing voice on the instrument.



The Olivier Music Barn. (Photo by Erik Petersen)

Mozart’s Violin Sonata in A major, K. 305, served as a curtain-raiser for the program — the first live music since 2019 to be heard in the Olivier Music Barn. The animated account by violinist [Jennifer Frautschi](#) and pianist [Zoltán Fejérvári](#) played up the individuality of the variations in the second movement. Following Esmail’s new work, Hlusko joined the other two musicians for a deeply engaging interpretation of Schumann’s Piano Trio No. 2 in F major. They responded earnestly to the work’s widely ranging emotional landscape, achieving a delectable balance of string and piano timbres that gave the slow second movement an intimate serenity. Fejérvári artfully exploited the gentle, bell-like resonance of the restored 1897 keyboard that is one of the glories of Tippet Rise’s [collection](#) of a dozen Steinway grand pianos.

Schumann is among the “household idols” at Tippet Rise, so it was freshly illuminating to experience his evocation of liminal moments in the context of Reena Esmail’s transitional soundscape — and vice versa. *Sandhiprakash* might also be taken as a study in ambivalence, with its subtle modulations between yearning and hope. After the concert, Esmail and the musicians stood on the gentle slope outside to observe as the actual sunset cast its radiant glow beyond the horizon.

One appeal of the commissioned works, for Peter Halstead, is that they offer “another way of approaching something that we all see every day from different eyes.” The transformation of landscape into music or sculpture is, in short, a process of making metaphors.

That’s the Tippet Rise aesthetic in a nutshell. You can find it in the collaboration with a previous resident composer, [John Luther Adams](#), who wrote his string quartet *Lines Made by Walking* during a residency here; the [JACK Quartet](#) gave its world premiere in the Olivier Music Barn in 2019. Adams says he was prompted by the music he imagined “coming directly out of the contours of the land.” Peter Halstead also mentions a proposal for a potential upcoming project involving a Native American trail maker and hunter who plans to “trace a way of looking at the land through the eyes of someone whose tribe lived here.”



Jennifer Frautschi (violin), Zoltán Fejérvári (piano), and Arlen Hlusko (cello) performing in the Olivier Music Barn. (Courtesy of Tippet Rise Art Center/Kevin Kinzley)

Halstead likes to talk about the value of “strangifying” the familiar: “Glenn Gould believed this, too, that if you play a piece more slowly or faster than expected, you break the lightning connection between the land and the ground, and you hear something unusual that you haven’t heard before.” He points to a recent addition to Tippet Rise’s sculptural collection by the Madrid-based architectural team [Ensamble Studio](#), which is responsible for three of the center’s iconic, site-specific works (*Domo*, *Beartooth Portal*, and *Inverted Beartooth Portal*).

Titled *Folds*, the new installation comprises 16 ghost-white chairs and lounge seats cast from malleable concrete canvas. A few of them are positioned outside the Olivier Music Barn, haunting but playful transformations of one of the most familiar of daily objects that suggest unseen presences and turn spectators into the spectated. (They’re also remarkably comfortable to relax in, and are meant to be.) Another favorite I came upon during a highly informative tour of the artwork led by [Lindsey and Pete Hinmon](#), co-directors of Tippet Rise since the center began, is *Iron Tree* by [Ai Weiwei](#) (2013). Joining 97 separate iron parts in a tense alliance to form the shape of a leafless tree, Weiwei’s sculpture pits individualism against the collective — and, in its new location in rural Montana, stands as an unsettling, rust-colored counterpart to the Edenic cottonwoods nearby.

The contemplation encouraged by a weekend at Tippet Rise provides still another fresh context for musical experience, no matter how well-known the repertoire. This holds true not only for audiences but for the performers as well. Saturday's main musical event offered another first where I could test this out: the inaugural use of [Will's Shed](#) as a performance venue. Adjacent to the Olivier Music Barn, Will's Shed is a multi-purpose structure used for meals or coffee breaks as well as community events. But starting this summer, Pedja Mužijević convinced his colleagues to experiment with the Shed as a more casual alternative to the Olivier (though the latter is itself relatively relaxed and, with its enormous picture window behind the performers, likewise constantly informed by the landscape).



One program comprised string sextets, including Schoenberg's 'Verklärte Nacht.' (Image courtesy of Tippet Rise Art Center Kevin Kinzley)

Frautschi and Hlusko were joined by four other young string players — Katie Hyun (violin), Jordan Bak and Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt (violas), and Gabriel Cabezas (cello) — for a [program](#) of sextets. Cathy Halstead's triptych of cheerfully biomorphic abstractions, which normally hangs at one end of the Shed, was repositioned to disguise the kitchen/cafe area, providing a vibrantly colorful backdrop for the performers.

Before they began with Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, Peter Halstead suggested that the music stages a kind of pathetic fallacy, whereby nature seems to mirror and even transform human emotion — a phenomenon to which Tippet Rise makes us especially susceptible. It's the conceit that frames [Richard Dehmel's](#) poem depicting a troubled couple who reconcile to the tune of a radiant, moonlit, cloudless night, which in turn inspired Schoenberg to compose his early masterpiece. The musicians reveled in the music's hyperactive polyphony, giving special attention to its startling — indeed, transfiguring — shifts of color and timbre.

Here and in the ensuing *Souvenir de Florence* by Tchaikovsky (where Hyun changed places with Frautschi as lead violin), the ensemble peppered the performance with individual touches while maintaining a unified sense of passion. The last two movements in particular unleashed a whirlwind of rhythmically driven, irresistible exuberance.

This transformation of Will's Shed turned out to be a risk that paid off, though a robust breeze that underscored the rustling textures of *Verklärte Nacht* momentarily threatened to swell into something more obtrusive. The constantly shifting cloudscape remind you of nature's dramatic mutability in these parts: pop-up concerts at the outdoor sites frequently have to improvise around a sudden change in the weather.



'Beethoven's Quartet' by the sculptor Mark di Suvero. (Photo by Erik Petersen)

But it is precisely this nature that provides Tippet Rise with its irreplaceable aura. You might well be reminded of some of the other places the Halsteads have taken as models — [Storm King Art Center](#), Aldeburgh's [Snape Maltings Concert Barn](#), and Vail, Colo., among them — but the relationship you feel with nature here is unique, almost primordial, and on a different scale, a scale echoed by the sculptures.

The Halsteads together cite another signature Tippet Rise artist, the sculptor [Mark di Suvero](#), whose *Whale's Cry* (1983) is another recent addition to the collection. His monumental, 25,000-pound *Beethoven's Quartet* (2003), installed at Tippet Rise before the center opened to the public, juxtaposes the clear, geometric, mathematical forces we're used to measuring the world with against "the ineffable curve" at the center, left to swing in the wind — a metaphor for human imagination and art, as Cathy Halstead sees it. In the face of industrial society's failure, adds her husband, "that's maybe the most powerful tool that we have to measure the world."

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