

# Classical Voice North America

## **On Vast Montana Vista, Chamber Music Invokes An Unexpected Intimacy**

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Violinist Rebecca Anderson, pianist Jenny Chen, and cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir performed in Tippet Rise's Olivier Music Barn. (Photos by Kevin Kinzley)

FISHTAIL, Mont. — Intimacy is about the last thing that springs to mind when envisioning a classical-music performance at a 12,500-acre working ranch in Montana, but Tippet Rise Art Center provides just that. Music is to be found in places that at most provide seating for 150 people. The expansive vistas of Big Sky Country and the monumental sculptures that punctuate the landscape provide the unforgettable ambience to savor it.

For those who sense a whiff of elitism, toss that thought aside. The vast majority of tickets to concerts are distributed through a lottery and cost \$10. Many in the audience are local, which is relative, given the vast openness of the region. Excellence, however, prevails in every element of the Tippet Rise experience. And toss in good will, as staff, volunteers, and visitors generate a nonstop flow of good vibes.

Tippet Rise is the creation of Cathy and Peter Halstead, who believe that art, music, architecture, and nature are intrinsic to the human experience, each making the others more powerful. The musical element is entrusted to pianist Pedja Mužijević, whose imaginatively curated concerts feature some of the finest musicians around. Due to the demand for tickets, few visitors are as fortunate as I was in being able to attend not only two concerts, but also an unadvertised pop-up event and even a bit of a rehearsal.

The second week of the 2023 festival opened Aug. 25 with a chamber-music concert in which Mužijević was joined by violinist Rebecca Anderson, cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, and pianist Jenny Chen. On a late summer afternoon, Tippet Rise's Olivier Music Barn offers an ambiance that few, if any, concert halls can provide; the musicians performed in front of a large window that framed a lone tree silhouetted against the Beartooth Mountains, with black-eyed Susans and tall grasses swaying in the breeze.

Mužijević's wit in crafting a program was evident from the start as the concert opened with what he termed a "Mozart Sandwich." Inserted between the first and third movements of Mozart's Sonata for Piano Four-Hands in B-flat Major, K. 358, was George Crumb's "Beta Cyngi" from *Makrokosmos* Vol. IV. The first few seconds of the Crumb elicited a sprinkling of laughs at the sounds Mužijević and Chen drew from the piano while barely touching a key. That rustling instantly faded as the lyricism and beauty of Crumb's music exerted their hold over the audience.



Imani Winds gave a concert in the Domo.

The remaining works were all by women composers. Three of them — Clara Schumann, Lili Boulanger, and Florence Price — achieved some modicum of fame in their lifetimes but then fell into obscurity. They now are being judged on their merits, not their gender. That was Price's dream, aware that she labored of the dual "handicaps," as she termed them, of being female and Black.

Boulanger's Two Pieces for Violin and Piano and Price's *Adoration* (arranged for violin and piano) have graceful, lovely melodies that Anderson played with lyricism, astonishing richness of sound, and great emotional depth. At the piano, Chen expressed her delight in the charm and inventiveness of the music through her sprightly playing.

Veronique Vaka was the only living composer represented on the program. The Icelandic composer strives to create a poetic context between what she sees, hears, and feels in unspoiled nature, and distill it into a musical composition. It's an aesthetic tailor-made for Tippet Rise.

Thorsteinsdóttir performed the brief second piece of Vaka's work-in-progress for solo cello, *Niege éternelle*. Primed by the Crumb, the audience was instantly silent and attentive as Thorsteinsdóttir created eerie, intriguing sounds that captured the bleakness and terror of a brief but intense and icy snow squall.



The Domo, one of three creations at Tippet Rise by the team of architects known as Ensamble Studio, merges sculpture, land, and concert space.

The venue for the following morning's concert by Imani Winds was the Domo, one of three creations at Tippet Rise by the team of architects known as Ensamble Studio. Sitting atop a barren hill, the Domo merges sculpture, land, and concert space. The structure's acoustics are ideal for a wind ensemble, and the ambience couldn't be bettered.

The five members of Imani Winds — flutist Brandon Patrick George, oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, clarinetist Mark Dover, hornist Kevin Newton, and bassoonist Monica Ellis — beguiled the audience in a presentation entitled "Black and Brown: A Program Celebrating Composers of Color." The players' brief introductions, in which they expressed not only their love for their instruments and music but also the works they were performing, were key to the experience.

In the first work, *Titilayo*, by Jeff Scott, an original member of Imani Winds, Dover sounded the call on his clarinet and George responded jubilantly on flute. The most moving moments were those in which all joined in somber, hymn-like passages that resonated deeply for those gathered in the almost primordial space.

In *The Light Is the Same*, Reena Esmail intertwines two contrasting Hindustani ragas that differ by only one note, analogizing this to the human conditions where in spite of our differences, we all look at the same stars. Ellis described the work as a "joy to perform." For the audience, the work was a celebration of sound with beautiful melodies woven into Esmail's shimmering musical textures.

Dover described Wayne Shorter's *Terra incognita* as the most important piece in the Imani Winds repertoire. This is due not only to its musical value but also for the ensemble's close connection with the late jazz great. The emotional highpoint of the performance was a solemn solo by oboist Spellman-Diaz, which led into music that was at one with nature, especially the sounds George coaxed from his flute.



Pianists Pedja Mužijević and Jenny Chen participated in a pop-up concert in a building where the atmosphere is closer to a living room than a concert hall.

The two other works on the program, four movements from Paquito D’Rivera’s *Aires Tropicales* and Julio Medaglia’s *Belle Epoque en Sud-America*, brought the sounds and rhythms of Latin America to Tippet Rise. The D’Rivera’s Cuban beat gave Ellis the chance to display her virtuosity and her personality in the ostinato bassoon line that courses through “Son,” the second piece of the set. On flute and piccolo, Newton had his moments to shine in the *Belle Epoque en Sud-America*, and Dover injected humor and awe into his high-flying playing on E-flat clarinet.

One of Cathy and Peter Halstead’s hopes is that people who come to Tippet Rise to hike or bike will hear music and be drawn to it. Visitors learn about pop-up concerts only once they are on the premises. They are informal affairs, in many ways a throwback to an earlier era when entertainment evolved around the home, before recordings, radio, and television had been invented. This concert was held in one of the buildings on the center’s Cottonwood Campus where the setting was more living room than concert hall, with some of the audience spilling out onto the large porch.

It began with Peter Halstead, a poet as well as a pianist, reading from his *Postcard Poems*. He and Mužijević then launched into a spirited reading of Mozart’s Sonata for Piano Four-Hands in D major, K. 381. Chen took Halstead’s place to perform Fauré’s *Dolly Suite*, Op. 56, an endearing collection of pieces for piano duet the composer dedicated to the daughter of his paramour, the singer Emma Bardac.

The last music I heard that day was a taste of the next morning’s chamber-music concert. Could there have been a better way to end the day than listening to Chen and Mužijević play Amy Beach’s *Summer Dreams*, Op. 47, for piano four-hands? Perhaps, but I couldn’t stay for more than a few minutes of Thorsteinsdóttir and Mužijević rehearsing Crumb’s *Vox Balaenae*.

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