

the Strad

'An amphitheatre of sky and earth' - Postcard from Montana: Tippet Rise

By Thomas May

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US correspondent Thomas May reports on a recent visit to Tippet Rise Art Center in Montana, where concerts unfold amid monumental sculptures and dramatic skies. At the season's opening weekend, beloved works by Vivaldi, Copland and Schubert were heard anew, shaped by a landscape where art and nature are inseparable.



Melissa White, Isabelle Ai Durrenberger, Pedja Mužijević, Benjamin Beilman, Bryan Cheng, Lizzie Burns and Emma Wernig in *The Four Seasons* at the Olivier Music Barn; photo: Brian Langeliers

From this magical spot in south-central Montana, the horizon is ringed by mountains: the Beartooths to the south, guarding the way to Yellowstone; the Absarokas to the east; and the Crazies rising in the west. The panorama shifts as quickly – and as dramatically – as the skies above. Storms can sweep across the land like Wagnerian preludes – dark, brooding, full of menace – only to dissolve moments later into shafts of unearthly light.

It is here, on a 12,500-acre working sheep and cattle ranch called Tippet Rise, that music and large-scale sculptural installations find their unlikely stage, each season revealing a different facet of the landscape.

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Co-founded in 2016 by Peter and Cathy Halstead – he a poet and pianist, she an abstract painter – Tippet Rise has since hosted an annual summer season of concerts, together with virtual offerings on its lively website that reach far beyond Montana. Monumental works by leading artists and architects rise from the rolling hills and ridges, turning the site into a vast open-air gallery.

Many visitors come as much for the hiking and the art as for the music: a constituency of nature-lovers and art-lovers who may never set foot in a concert, but for whom Tippet Rise has become a place of pilgrimage.

‘Tippet Rise is anchored in the belief that art, music, architecture and nature are intrinsic to the human experience, each making the others more powerful’ runs the mission statement. That conviction belongs to the Halsteads, a husband-and-wife team who are passionately hands-on, involved in every aspect of the project as deeply knowledgeable arts philanthropists.

On the opening weekend (15-17 August), I joined colleagues for a morning tour of the campus, reacquainting myself with sculptures I remembered and marvelling at new arrivals since my last visit in 2022 – among them Louise Nevelson’s enigmatic *Trilogy*, installed in 2023. Cathy Halstead remarked: ‘The young musicians who come here want to take it all in. They’ll take a trip to see pieces like *Trilogy* between rehearsal and dinner’.



Trilogy by Louise Nevelson; photo: James Florio

Her observation captures something fundamental: here, music-making is inseparable from both the landscape and the surrounding art. The essence of this place lies not only in performance, but in the way artists absorb the stimuli around them: the sculpture and architecture, the poetry of place and the elemental drama of the land.

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The 150-seat Olivier Barn, designed with acoustic precision and warmth by Arup's engineers, was modelled on a combination of Esterházy's Haydn-Saal, Snape Maltings in Suffolk and Wigmore Hall in London. With its recessed window framing the mountains behind the musicians, who play without a raised stage, the hall places performers and listeners on the same level, creating a shared intimacy that becomes part of the music itself.

Friday's opening concert put those ideals to the test. The US violinist Benjamin Beilman was the soloist in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, playing with a spontaneity that sparked phrasing alive to dialogue with his colleagues – fellow violinists Isabelle Ai Durrenberger and Melissa White and violist Emma Wernig, the basso continuo adroitly realised by Bryan Cheng on cello, Lizzie Burns on double bass and Pedja Mužijević at the harpsichord. In the cello's telling solo lines, Cheng projected with eloquence and presence.

Beilman performed on a 1740 'Ysaÿe' Guarneri del Gesù violin – an instrument, as he pointed out, crafted only 15 years after the *Four Seasons* were first published as part of the collection *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione*,

Mužijević, who also serves as Tippet Rise's artistic advisor and music curator, had devised the idea of interspersing the Vivaldi with recordings of local birdsong, so that the *Four Seasons* seemed to open out into the surrounding landscape, the violin lines taking flight in colloquy with Montana's avian voices.

In a similar spirit, between the concertos Mužijević placed contemporary pieces: Angélica Negrón's *Marejada*, evoking the Puerto Rican shore with gently undulating textures and washes of electronic sound, and Kenji Bunch's *Allemande pour Tout le Monde*, a cheeky offbeat twist on the stately Baroque dance.



Isabelle Ai Durrenberger, Lun Li, Pedja Mužijević, Jay Campbell and Jordan Bak; photo: Brian Langeliers
performing at the Domo; photo: Brian Langeliers

At Tippet Rise, even the act of reaching a venue can feel like part of the performance. The next morning, the audience boarded yellow school buses for a pilgrimage across the ranch to the Domo, a monumental sculpture by Ensamble Studio (Antón García-Abril and Débora Mesa), whose blurring of architecture, sculpture and landscape has produced some of Tippet Rise's most striking landmarks.

Assembled from colossal panels of unpolished raw concrete leaning into each other like a prehistoric dolmen, the Domo also provides a remarkable performance space. On this occasion, it housed the largest ensemble yet to appear there – the 13 players required to play the suite from Copland's *Appalachian Spring* in its original chamber scoring for the Library of Congress.

Mužijević's imaginative curatorial hand was especially evident here, shaping a programme that traced rhythm in its many guises: beginning with the obsessive drive of Andy Akiho's *The War Below* (from the film *Prospects of a Misplaced Year*), proceeding to the nostalgic grace of Joseph Lanner's *Marien-Walzer* (published in 1839) – its Viennese lilt rendered all the more poignant in that elemental space – and then to Guillaume Connesson's witty mimicking of a rave in *Techno-Parade*, a trio for clarinet, flute and piano.

All of this pointed towards the Copland, where rhythm, dance and myth-making were distilled into something transparent and elemental. The strings gleamed at the core of this soundscape, as the surfaces of the Domo's sheltering arcs caught and amplified every nuance. The three woodwinds (with rapturous lyrical contributions from Brandon Patrick George on flute, Yoonah Kim on clarinet and Monica Ellis on bassoon) added vivid character, their lines cutting through the string sonorities with pastoral freshness and pungency.



Performing *Appalachian Spring* at the Domo; photo: Brian Langeliers

The effect was site-specific in the truest sense: just as the sculptures converse with the land, Copland's score seemed to rise from it. With the darker wartime sections of the full ballet omitted, what remained was innocence, clarity and dance, the beloved Shaker hymn glowing in this amphitheatre of sky and earth, hewn from concrete.

The audience, visibly moved, seemed to hear in that soundscape an America still worth believing in. For Peter Halstead, who had long dreamt of hearing *Appalachian Spring* in this setting, the experience felt uncannily right: its open intervals and radiant harmonies echoed the very ethos of Tippet Rise – a vision shaped by Montana's vastness and light.

The next morning, Sunday, began with a return to the Olivier Music Barn, where the accent became strongly Viennese. In Strauss II's *Kaiser-Walzer*, heard in Schoenberg's translucent chamber transcription, the shift from the stately duple-metre introduction to the first waltz proper floated weightlessly before settling into motion.

The performance of the 'Trout' Quintet by Lun Li (violin), Emma Wernig (viola), Jay Campbell (cello), Lizzie Burns (double bass), and Mužijević (piano) showed Schubert in his most cheerful and extroverted mood, the music brimming with ease, wit and camaraderie.

It also brought to mind Alfred Brendel's striking image of the composer as the Wanderer. The score's unfolding seemed to mirror a leisurely walk through the Tippet Rise landscape, with genial ambulations and excursions like a hike that ventures forth and eventually circles back home, refreshed by the view.



Schubert's 'Trout' on a Sunday morning; photo: Brian Langeliers

The ranch itself affords such experiences: the previous afternoon, hiking in the Gallatin National Forest, I felt how closely they resemble music: the jagged peaks looming overhead, the sudden fear of a storm about to break, then the sun shimmering on glacial lakes – all like shifts of mood within a score, in keeping with the dialectic of 'harmony and invention' – order and architecture on one side, fantasy and surprise on the other – that so inspired Vivaldi.

Performed between Strauss and Schubert, New Zealand composer Salina Fisher's *Mata-Au for string trio* (Isabelle Ai Durrenberger, violin; Jordan Bak, viola; Jay Campbell, cello) offered a moment of timeless suspension, its riverine flow gradually coming to rest as though eternity itself had paused.

It was a reminder that what lingers most from a weekend at Tippet Rise is not novelty for its own sake but the way familiar works are heard anew. We often think of programming as a balance of old and new. What struck me here was how much discovery could happen within even works from the canon themselves. The weekend's great landmarks – Vivaldi, Copland and Schubert – all felt renewed, not through juxtaposition alone but through context.

An epilogue awaited at The Shed, the campus's communal dining hall, where a pop-up concert offered Poulenc's witty Clarinet and Bassoon Sonata and a reprise of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. Outside, a thunderstorm rolled in as farewells were said – nature once more providing its own coda.

The paradox of change and renewal is integral to the Halsteads' vision: their constant care and imagination have made this place not only possible, but endlessly surprising. Peter – usually seen beneath his signature fisherman's hat, reciting lines of poetry – and Cathy, equally ever-present, shape the spirit of the ranch as vividly as the artists and the landscape themselves.

In that interplay of immensity and intimacy, of time suspended and time renewed, Tippet Rise continues to imagine a world where art and nature conspire to let us hear things anew.

The Tippet Rise season continues until 14 September; performances are also [posted](#) on the Tippet Rise YouTube channel.

<https://www.thestrad.com/playing-hub/an-amphitheatre-of-sky-and-earth-postcard-from-montana-tippet-rise/20113.article>

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