

# The New York Times

## A Paradise Where Music and Art Meet Postcard Mountain Views

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Tippet Rise Art Center in Montana offers concerts in surroundings that make you feel as if you're listening inside the land rather than around it.

Reporting from Fishtail, Mont.

To hear a concert at the “Domo,” a sculptural apparition by [Ensamble Studio](#) that beats at the spiritual and aesthetic heart of [Tippet Rise Art Center](#), you can take a school bus up a hill. Or you can ride a mountain bike, to an elevation a thousand feet above the parking lot. If you are able, though, I strongly suggest that you walk.

The trip is maybe five miles on the most direct route, but Tippet Rise — an all but ideal sculpture park and chamber music venue a few dirt roads away from the tiny town of Fishtail, Mont. — rewards you for taking your time. So, early one recent morning at the start of the center's five-week summer music season, I took the trails less traveled, adding another three miles and a few more blisters to the hike.



The "Domo," designed by Ensamble Studio.



Performances at the "Domo" accommodate about 130 director's chairs under the canopy.

From the bottom of the climb, where the Olivier Music Barn stands among works by Alexander Calder, Francis Kéré and Patrick Dougherty, you can just about make out a pair of portals on the crests before you; they are two other Ensamble Studio monuments that beckon you on. Head toward "[Beartooth Portal](#)," the one on the distant right, and after a mile or so of stony track, you will find yourself rambling through sagebrush and grass, with flights of swallows, some remarkably springy deer and the odd covey of grouse for company. Rattlesnakes lurk unseen.

Many places where you can hear classical music outdoors are becoming [distressingly fragile](#) in our worsening climate crisis, but Tippet Rise feels astoundingly permanent. Some of the rocks you see as you wander its 12,500 acres date from the late Cretaceous period, with sedimentary deposits that are young enough to yield dinosaur teeth and a petrified tree. Yet your eyes are perpetually drawn to the horizon, and to the Beartooth Mountains, whose [granites and gneisses](#) are billions of years older still.



Wendy Red Star's "The Soil You See..." a sculpture that tells visitors about the Native American history of Tippet Rise's land.

There are reminders, though, of just how contemporary and human Tippet Rise is: "[Geode](#)," a deconstructed pyramid refined for musical use by modern acoustical software, for example, or Wendy Red Star's "[The Soil You See...](#)" a thumbprint sculpture that tells you this land was once the domain of the Apsáalooke, the Crow, that it was sacred long before it hosted art. Stride without due attention, and evidence will stick to your boots that this is a working ranch, too.

You don't see the "Domo" until you are there. Concealed in a little depression, it weighs more than a thousand tons, but it conspires with the scenery instead of imposing itself on it. To make it, Antón García-Abril and Débora Mesa, Ensemble Studio's founding architects, dug three craters in a mound of road mix, lined them with plastic, filled them with rebar and cement, excavated the dirt around, then tore away the sheeting, leaving surfaces that ripple like moorland in the breeze.



The horn player David Byrd-Marrow at the “Domo” in August, preparing for one of Tippet Rise’s opening concerts.



The violinist Yura Lee playing at the “Domo.”

If the weather is clement enough for musicians to bear, Tippet Rise slots about 150 director's chairs into a cave under the canopy. Sitting in one, I heard a concert that was built around [Beethoven's Septet](#), transposing a work written for the soirees of Viennese aristocracy to nature's own drawing room, layered with pieces by [Caroline Shaw](#) and [Svante Henryson](#) that spoke candidly to the environment all around. There was also an evocative premiere from [Jessica Meyer](#), who drew on photographs to imagine herself standing in front of "Beartooth Portal," birdsong and all.

Played gamely in a bitter wind by Yasmina Spiegelberg, Eleni Katz, David Byrd-Marrow, Yura Lee, Natalie Loughran, Oliver Herbert and Nina Bernat, the program was clever and unforced. It alloyed ancient and modern with the same tasteful discretion as the placement of the [Alexander Liberman](#) and [Mark di Suvero](#) edifices on hillsides nearby. Somehow, it felt as if I were listening *inside* the land.



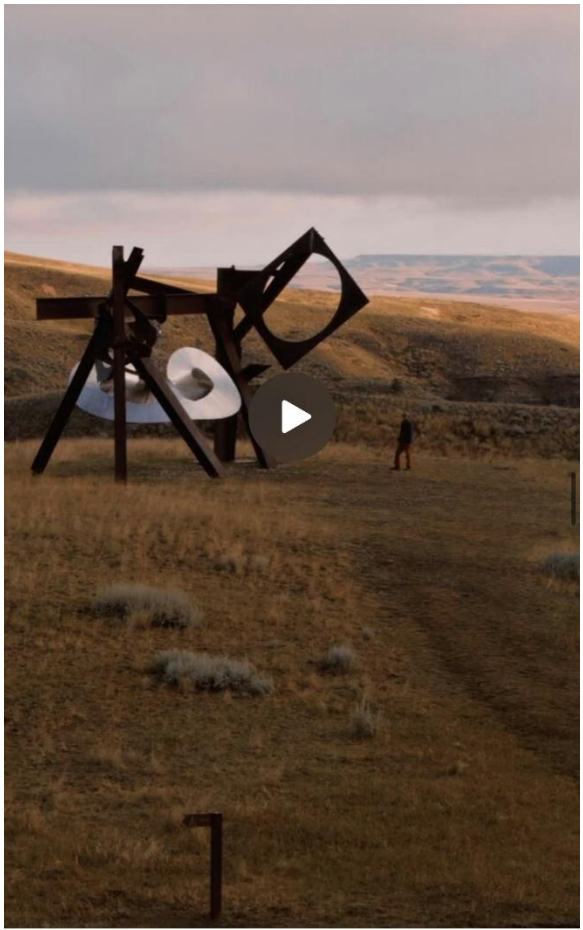
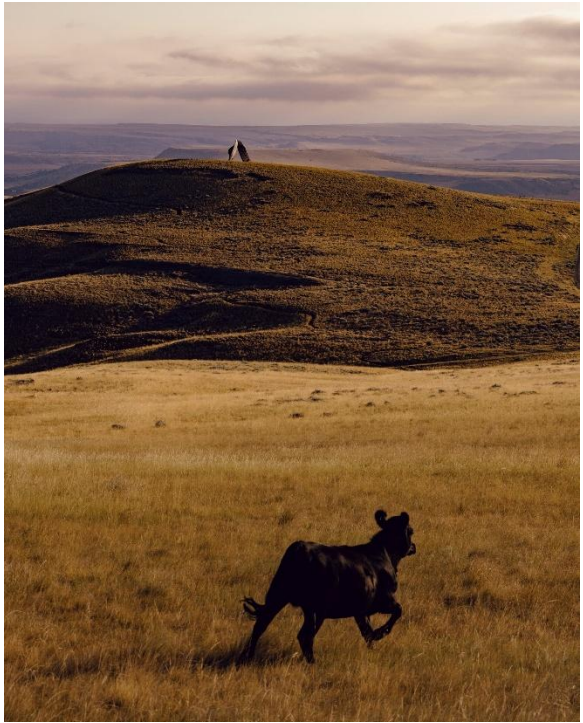
Tippet Rise allows visitors to hike or bike without a reservation, but availability is capped to maintain a feeling of solitude throughout the property.



**TIPPET RISE IS** the evolving masterpiece of its founders, Cathy and Peter Halstead, along with a staff led by another couple, Lindsey and Pete Hinmon. Cathy, who is 78 and a painter, and Peter, 79 and a poet-pianist, started looking in earnest for a site to marry music with sculpture during the Great Recession. The [Storm King Art Center](#) and the [Caramoor Center for Music and Arts](#), north of New York City, were among their examples, but they also wanted, Cathy said, to meld the exhilaration of the mountains with the “warmth and intimacy” she feels while hearing Peter play at home — the “casual sense that the piano is just part of life.”

In the end, the Halsteads fused several Montana ranches to form what they eventually christened Tippet Rise — Tippet, after Cathy’s childhood name for her mother, and Rise because the land, well, rises. “It wasn’t until we saw the land that we started figuring out what to do with it,” Peter said. By 2016, roads had been laid down, some sculptures were in place, the Barn had been built under the guidance of the architect and timber specialist Laura Viklund, and the center opened its doors.

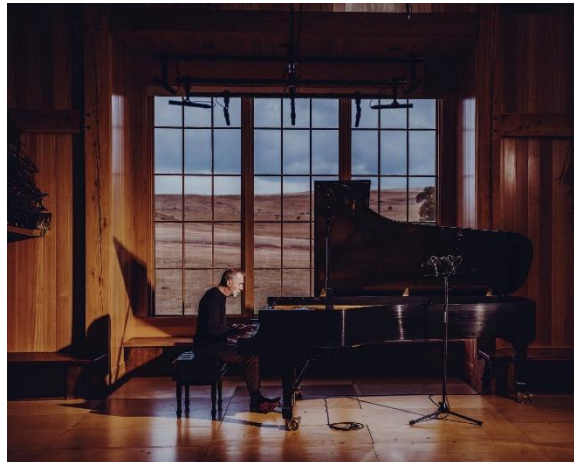
The Halsteads’ aim became not just to showcase sculpture and music in the same place, but also to conceive a broader artwork of their own. The pianist Pedja Muzijevic, Tippet Rise’s artistic adviser for the past eight years, said in a talk one evening that he thinks of the result as a Gesamtkunstwerk, and there is certainly a Wagnerian theatricality to how it reveals itself. Peter once wrote of the center as “a metaphor in a way, where the synergy among music, landscape, sky and art makes something else, a kind of poetry.”



“We’re trying,” he added, “to make poetry come true.”

Such things may sound implausible, but they are honestly not that far from what Tippet Rise has achieved. Some of the Halsteads’ principles bear noting. Perhaps the simplest, if also the boldest in our beleaguered times, is respect for the land. “Wildness suffuses everything that is here, and contributes to it,” Peter said. “If we turned everything into sculptures, as lovely as that would be, it would really ruin the feeling of a sculpture in the wilderness.” Many of the sculptures, as well as the “Geode,” the Barn and even the metal signs that mark the way among them, have been weathered to look as if the terrain has staked a claim to them. It comes as no surprise that [John Luther Adams](#), our leading musical naturalist, spent sufficient time on the ranch to write a [string quartet](#).

Another tenet is what Loughran, a violist on her second visit, called “palpable care.” She said that “the attention to detail here is unlike anything I’ve seen before,” whether the chairs the players play on or the cottages they stay in. Pianists can select from three pianos of different timbre, including a Steinway that [Vladimir Horowitz](#) treasured. Concerts are [meticulously archived](#), and the exquisite recording facilities have made the center a [destination](#) for artists [entering the studio](#). Tippet Rise is launching its own label this month, with a release from the cellist [Arlen Hlusko](#).



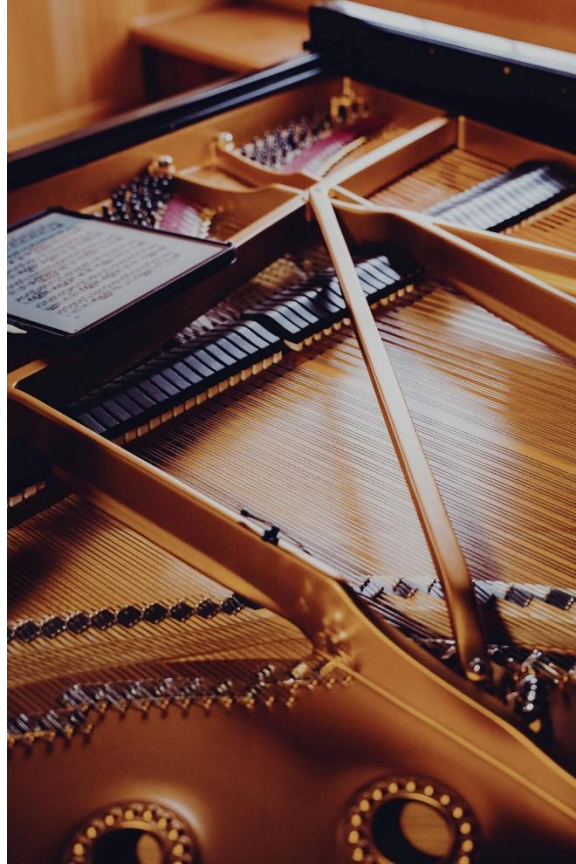
Money is of little real concern here. The (considerable) [funding](#) comes from the [Sidney E. Frank Foundation](#), which was created by Cathy’s father, a [billionaire liquor titan](#) who made a success of Jägermeister and Grey Goose vodka. Freed from balance sheet anxieties, the center can walk a narrow path between being open to all and not too much so. Tickets to see artists like the [Takács Quartet](#) are priced at \$10 and ordinarily sell out through a lottery; they would be cheaper still, Peter said, if cheaper tickets weren’t so easy to for patrons to set aside. You can hike or bike for nothing with an advance reservation, but availability is capped to preserve the solitude of visitors, roughly 60 percent of whom are from Montana.

**MOST OF THE CONCERTS** take place in the Barn, at the foot of the rise. Engineered by Arup, the venue borrows its proportions from a music room at [Esterháza](#), the palace where Haydn toiled, and steals the idea for its roof from Snape Maltings, the main hall for Britten’s [Aldeburgh Festival](#). Seating is limited to about 150; you could easily be in the Halsteads’ salon, and in effect, you are.

Paneled in larch, with a pair of intricate [Stephen Talasnik](#) sculptures beside the stage and a Calder mobile floating over the audience, the Barn’s picture window gives postcard views of the

Beartooths, if they are not swaddled in cloud or shrouded in smoke. The acoustic suits a solo piano beautifully, maybe a string quartet, but a performance that I heard of Schubert's Octet — for which the violinist Stephen Waarts joined the seven musicians from the “Domo” concert — indicated that it gets almost painfully constricted under more sonic pressure than that.





Muzijevic said that he prizes variety and informality in the programs, but denied that the music he chooses for them is consciously matched to the land. “It would be very popular to say that it is, but it’s not,” he said. “For me, it’s more about the space where the concert happens. I feel like every music has its natural habitat, so I try to get as close to that as possible and try to think what would fit there.” Links may emerge anyway. The opening night concert began with Dobrinka Tabakova’s [“Moreni,”](#) a work for clarinet, string quartet and piano, that had an apt feeling of undulating airiness to it.

It struck me that the point of hearing music at Tippet Rise was not to hear a perfect rendition of anything, whatever that might mean. There are no program notes; the stage is inches tall; sit near the front, and you are as close to the musicians as they are to one another. This might be one of the few places where a concert can truly come off as an act of communication rather than a performance, something more contrived.

Opening night ended with Muzijevic playing Schubert's emotionally intense late Sonata in A. It was a profoundly personal account, improvisatory and imprecise. If I had heard it at, say, Carnegie Hall, I would have scratched my head. Here, it didn't matter that it defied any expectations I might unreasonably have had. In the foothills of this Montanan paradise, it was just music.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/09/arts/music/tippet-rise-art-center-montana.html?login=email&auth=login-email>