

OPERA WIRE

Q & A: Cathy & Peter Halstead of Tippet Rise Art Center on Music, Art, & the Land That Shapes Both

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OperaWire

September 12, 2026



OperaWire visited [Tippet Rise Art Center](#) co-founders [Cathy](#) and [Peter Halstead](#) on a busy Friday afternoon, between a morning grand tour of the venue led by co-directors [Lindsey](#) and [Pete Hinmon](#) and the “[American Songbook](#)” concert at sunset. We met in a quiet building called Stillwater Porch, just off to the side of Will’s Shed. The room hosted a collection of Peter’s books and Cathy’s paintings. There was a sense of deep reflection within the space — a haven for one to enjoy solitude and a good book. After our conversation, Peter suggested I take time in the room to immerse myself in a couple of his books, reflecting on what we had discussed in this exclusive Q & A. I took his advice and spent time reading “[Prisms in the Air](#)” and “[A Winter Ride](#).”

It was not until after I sat with both books that I began to realise that the language Cathy and Peter speak together is the recipe for what makes Tippet Rise Art Center so unique. Every page was full of photography ranging from image reflections saturated in color to stark black and white landscape views. Nothing seemed outside the poet’s eye — the perfect display of living life as an artist. This is where my understanding of Tippet Rise truly began.

OperaWire: When did your vision for Tippet Rise begin?

Peter Halstead: The threads of it started long ago. It started with experiences that Cathy and I had, that other people had created so that we could have those experiences. And if I thought about a few of the early earliest ones, like going to “[Aida](#)” at the [Baths of Caracalla](#) when I was 16, it was probably the first opera I ever went to, and the idea of being outdoors and then having everyone in this ancient coliseum and this spectacle happening and the sky above you — that stayed with me.

Cathy Halstead: Then, we went together to the [Parc de Sceaux](#) outside of Paris, which is a beautiful chateau. In front of it they would do opera in the summertime, which was so exciting. We also went to Aix-en-Provence in the south of France for their outdoor festival. We were inspired by the visual arts at the [Fondation Maeght](#) in Saint-Paul-de-Vence above the Riviera on only six acres. It has wonderful works by artists including [Matisse](#), [Chagall](#), [Picasso](#), [Braque](#), [Léger](#), and [Miró](#). In so many ways, these artists came together to create the museum. And even though it is only six acres, somehow because of all the trees and that little view through to the Mediterranean, it feels magical.

OW: What live performance settings have inspired you the most?

PH: When we went to the [Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts](#), where they have outdoor venues right outside of New York, we were sitting in the Venetian Theater, which at that time wasn't covered, and it started to rain. The Croatian pianist, [Ivo Pogorelić](#), invited the 30 of us who were left to come onstage. It was a gentle rain and then it started pouring and he said, come and stand around the piano and I'll just continue playing. And so it was in that moment, being right next to him for this outdoor concert, when we knew that if we ever did something like this we would want it to be like this. We would want outdoor art the way we have seen it and we would want outdoor music, because there is this kind of deep, almost physical, sensation from seeing this kind of art outdoors.

CH: We were also inspired during our first visit to [Storm King Art Center](#) in New York, which was probably when we were in our early thirties, and just how deeply that struck us. There are definitely very personal experiences inside of museums as well, but there's something about what happens outdoors that is just so powerful.

OW: How does a natural landscape shape our experience of art and music?

PH: It is all about reflection. We moved to Colorado about 35 years ago and were in the mountains, understanding that landscape. I was also a Himalayan climber when I was younger and I went to Nepal and got up to 22,000 feet — not Everest, but there were a lot of adventures. I just love the mountains, and having the Beartooth Mountains so close and accessible here at Tippet Rise is the experience we wanted. When one can look up to the Beartooths from the sculptures, I think it reflects with the sculptures and the music, and this is something that we have always wanted to create. The idea and the feeling one gets from these dramatic landscapes and from the art and music, and now even from poetry that we're bringing in — I think all of these threads shape one's experience.

We saw a picture by the French photographer [Robert Doisneau](#) of a cellist on top of a mountain in Verbier, with the mountains behind him. We said, wow, that is what music should be. The cellist alone with wilderness, with solitude and with majesty. With that monumental sense of untamed monstrosity that the mountains are. That's what inspired Tippet Rise's "[The Geode](#)" (2024), designed by Arup with lead designer Willem Boning. You can see seven mountain ranges all around you from that point. You can hear the music as if it was indoors, but feel like you're on top of the world — this was something we felt early on and really wanted to recreate. Even if we couldn't be on top of a mountain, we could get close enough and have that connection to the mountains.

We have artists who come to Tippet Rise and they say, we want to tour the ranch, we want to feel the land, to feel the art, and then we want to put that into what we play when we play. We want to create music that plays with nature and the sculptures. Music is a series of notes and metaphors which creates something else that is not just the notes. It goes beyond. It is beyond the music. You always want to convey that as an artist, as a singer, as a pianist, or as a sculptor: convey something that is outside. It is very platonic. Not just the thing, the shadow, but the essence beyond the shadow. That is the feeling that you convey.

For our audience it is about the moments when you sit there in the art's own valley and you see one sculpture and have your personal moment with that sculpture — you're not with a million people with selfie sticks with the Mona Lisa. That is also why we limit the number of people every day who can come to the ranch and who can come to the concerts. We want people to have a personal experience.

The land itself is very delicate, even though it is so vast. We want to respect the land and we have left most of the land totally untouched and we always will. The land informs the sculptures and the music.

OW: What is your philosophy of art in relationship with the land?

PH: How did the Italians think of art? It is like [Cadmus](#) and how he was a farmer sowing seeds and out of the seeds came the Alphabet. They were asking, where does language come from? It really comes from the earth. And where does sculpture come from? It comes out of the land. It rises like [Venus on the half-shell in Botticelli](#). It is created that way.

[Ensamble Studio's "Inverted Portal" \(2016\)](#), ["Beartooth Portal" \(2015\)](#), and the ["Domo" \(2016\)](#) were literally created from the earth beneath them, mixed with concrete, and pulled upright by cranes into what they are now. The "Domo" weighs a thousand tons. So it would have been hard to ever have moved it once it was made. Maybe not just hard. Impossible.

Ensamble used plastic to cast the concrete and then they bunched the plastic up to make it look like the folds in a [Botticelli](#) robe in a Renaissance painting. They poured in concrete and dirt and then it took around four months for it to cure because it was winter and very cold outside. Then they unearthed it and they had bolts in it so that they could attach wires to the bolts and pull the wires up with cranes, pulling up the "Portals" and then attaching them. So it really was a process, a very slow process of birthing something out of the earth. The process was the same for the "Domo."

OW: How do the sculptures here at Tippet Rise reflect your own philosophy on life?

PH: [Frances Kéré's "Xylem" \(2019\)](#) was a dead forest which he turned into a living sculpture where people can really relate to a forest of trees inside the sculpture. In this way people can relate to each other. The center of the tree, between the roots and the canopy, is us. We are the "Xylem." We are the conduit through which the earth flows to the sky and the sky flows to the earth. And that conduit in a tree between the roots and the leaves makes the tree. It is a joint combination of teamwork between the earth and the sky, and then there is the tree, just like a person. In that we are the same. We're created by the earth, we're creatures of the earth, but we're also star men. What is in us comes from stars — the chemicals in us are only made in stars. They're not made on earth. So even though they're on earth and thus become part of us, they really come from the sun. And so really we are a part of the sun. Even physically speaking, we react to these things because they contain us, we contain them.

"Xylem" is an immense metaphor where people become trees. The "Portals" are also metaphors where they're homages to the spikes that are on the Beartooth Mountains, because they're like teeth of a bear. They have these spires that come out of them, hundreds of spires that stick up out of the earth, and they're 100 feet tall. They're shale that has been pushed up by volcanic forces, when the Beartooth Mountains were created by the Yellowstone volcano on the other side of it. Ensemble Studio created the "Portals," which are a reflection of those teeth that stick up like spires and yet they're also portals to the mountains. The miracle of these sculptures is that they are a portal to our own imaginations.

OW: How have your own individual art practices informed your vision for Tippet Rise?

CH: I grew up in a family where my mother, especially, and my father as well, loved art and truly believed in me. When I was a child, I would sit and draw. My parents had a friend who, when I was born, gave me a tiny Calder mobile and it would sit on the table in our living room. The table had a mirror on its surface, allowing you to see the Calder moving above it while also creating a reflection of the work. One of my first memories is sitting at that table or sitting on the floor next to it and drawing the Calder as it moved in front of me. I was about four years old. I was always in love with making things and building things.

We moved from the city up to New Rochelle, when I was about five, and I took with me my most precious possession which was this cardboard box that I had made into a dollhouse. It had these pipe cleaner people that wore clothing made out of tissues and it gave me the feeling of being an artist. This was really something I was encouraged to feel and being brought up with this encouragement allowed me to be myself. My parents would hang my paintings, when I was six years old, right next to a Picasso drawing so that I always had this feeling that I was an artist.

OW: How has your soul relationship with one another evolved your art practices?

PH: We got married out of a sense of joy. We have a lot of joy and we get to bring all our joy to Tippet Rise in a whole different way. It is that sense of wanting our visitors to have that feeling that evolves us. The sense of joy that inspires an artist begins with an artist. It is really about this sense of wonder and awe.

CH: I knew Peter way before we were married. He is an incredible writer and photographer, and everything he plays on the piano is completely compelling, engaging, and different. He draws you in as a reader and a listener.

OW: Reflecting back on the past 10 years here at Tippet Rise, how do you see your vision evolving? What do you hope for in the years ahead?

CH & PH: Of course we are always open to a special sculpture that might fit into the land and the sky here. We don't want to grow in size, but in depth. We think there is much more to the interaction of art, music, photography, and poetry with the land and sky than what we've unearthed so far, and we plan to develop our metaphors into further ways of revealing the correspondences between the moving parts of our unusual moonscape.

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