

New Sounds for Summer

The Hollywood Bowl, iconic outdoor home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Presentations at the Bowl range from classics and rock concerts to premieres of new orchestral works.



Los Angeles Philharmonic Association

Summer music festivals often venture beyond beloved blockbusters to explore new music. These range from deep-dive events that focus exclusively on new music to festivals that commission, perform, and spotlight contemporary scores in the context of the canon—lending new perspectives to both.

by Steven Brown

The information about these and other summer music festivals was accurate at press time. However, the global pandemic is causing postponements and cancellations. Check each organization's website and social media for the most current information.



California's Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music focuses on the sounds of today. In photo: composer Du Yun consults with Music Director Cristian Măcelaru on one of her scores.



Composer Osvaldo Golijov has a long association the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood festival, first as a student, then a teacher, and now as often-programmed composer. In photo: Golijov bows with conductor Robert Spano at the Boston Symphony Orchestra's 2014 performance of his *La Pasión según San Marcos*.

The Britt Music and Arts Festival in southern Oregon will celebrate Beethoven's 250th birthday its own way. Yes, Music Director Teddy Abrams will lead a performance of the Ninth Symphony. But that's only the beginning. Abrams and the festival will leverage the composer's quarter-millennium to promote the music of today. "We thought about all the Beethoven celebrations going on, and there are so many where all you're doing is playing more Beethoven," Abrams says. At this year's Britt Festival, "the biggest celebration is to have artists coming in

who fit the model of Beethoven: people who compose and perform and see music as kind of a multiple opportunity to live." The concert two nights after the *Ode to Joy* will open with *Everything Must Go*, a 2018 work by 25-year-old composer Conrad Tao, who then will step onto the festi-

val's stage—an outdoor pavilion at the foot of a hill—to play the solo part in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20. Another program will start with *Everything Happens So Much* (premiered in 2016) by another pianist-composer, Timo Andres, who will join Abrams and the Britt Festival Or-



Music Director Andris Nelsons leads the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood, which features contemporary scores within a broad musical lineup.

Chris Lee

chestra in Béla Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3. In other concerts, Mason Bates will fire off the electronics in his 2018 *Art of War*, and Abrams will conduct *The Order of Nature*, which he co-wrote in 2019 with indie rocker Jim James of the band My Morning Jacket.

Spurred by Abrams, who is also music director of Kentucky's Louisville Symphony, the Britt Festival is one of many festivals across the country that let living composers and their works enjoy the soft summer air. Some, like California's Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, make this their *raison d'être*. The Britt Festival and others, such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood Festival and the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Hollywood Bowl concerts, include the work of today's composers within broad musical menus, classical and popular. The Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival cultivates an audience that knows music and welcomes the contemporary; the outdoor crowds at Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival include concertgoers

who may be newcomers to classical music of any vintage.

Each Grant Park concert attracts 8,000 to 10,000 people, President and CEO Paul Winberg says, and "for many of them, hearing a Beethoven symphony live is a new experience. They don't come with a bunch of preconceptions. That has always been the challenge of new music—getting people to open their minds and ears to it.

And I'd say that our audiences come to the table ready."

Mixing Classical and Contemporary

When it comes to programming, says Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival Artistic Director Marc Neikrug, leaders at summertime festivals face a choice "between curating old pieces or, on the other hand, seeing classical music as an ongoing, liv-

The bucolic scene at Colorado's Aspen Music Festival and School, where audiences and students experience programming that ranges from the classical to the contemporary.



Elle Logan

In New Mexico, the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival balances newer and older works.



Santa Chamber Music Festival

“Hearing any older piece in the context of newer pieces and other pieces from different time periods gives it its own identity and context,” says Marc Neikrug, artistic director of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival.

ing entity.” Neikrug, who is a composer, pianist, and conductor, believes in option No. 2. The works in store for Santa Fe this summer range from J.S. Bach concertos and Beethoven piano trios to world premieres by Augusta Read Thomas, Helen Grime, and others, as well as pieces by such contemporary-music luminaries as the late Toru Takemitsu and Oliver Knussen. Neikrug has led his audiences to his hybrid format slowly, beginning when he took over the festival in 1998.

“I always felt that a reasonable audience that would come to concerts in the first place is interested and able to expand



Marc Neikrug

their parameters if they’re guided,” he says. So he chose works that led listeners gradually into the world of new music. “For the first couple of years, I programmed shorter pieces—eight minutes in length. I made sure they were rehearsed and played better than anything else, and that they were



Britt Music and Arts Festival

The Britt Music and Arts Festival in southern Oregon promotes contemporary music within a wide framework. In photo: composer Caroline Shaw in rehearsal with the Britt Festival Orchestra and Music Director Teddy Abrams.

pieces I knew would be interesting and attractive to any audience,” Neikrug recalls. Concertgoers warmed to what they heard, and after two decades of closer acquaintance, new works are now “exciting for people, which is how it should be.”

Most Santa Fe concerts put new music right alongside older fare that Neikrug finds complementary. He thinks the juxtapositions benefit the familiar works, too. “Hearing any older piece in the context of newer pieces and other pieces from different time periods gives it its own identity and context,” Neikrug says. Other festival leaders put it differently, but their viewpoints harmonize with Neikrug’s. “When somebody has a real voice—an authentic voice—and they’re also interested in making music for *people*, those are the two criteria I’m interested in,” the Britt Festival’s Abrams says. At the Grant Park Music Festival, “we definitely think about composers who have a style and vocabulary



Paul Winberg, president and CEO of Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival, says that audiences don't come with preconceptions about the music they will hear.

Grant Park Music Festival

that are really about connecting with the audience," Winberg says.

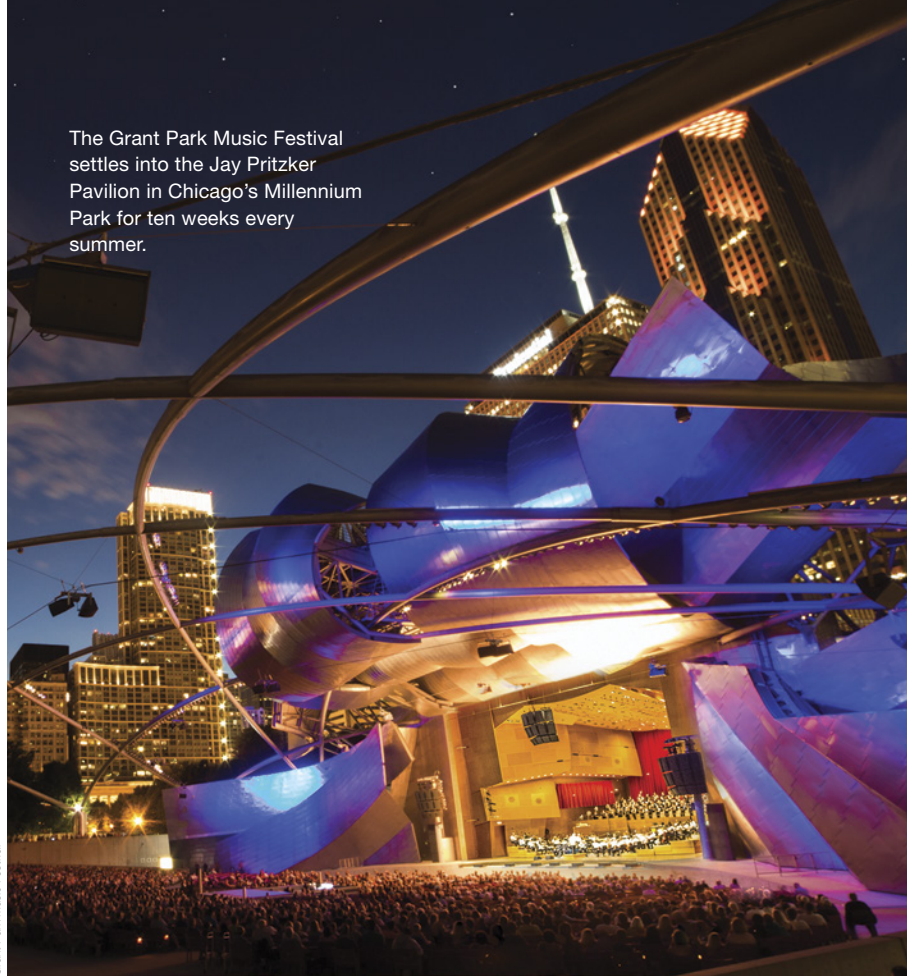
Grant Park took up commissioning in earnest, Winberg says, when it tapped Michael Gandolfi and Sebastian Currier to compose works to celebrate the Grant Park Chorus's 50th anniversary. Premieres now come every year: This summer will bring a violin concerto by jazz composer and musician Billy Childs and a chorus-and-orchestra work by Chicago composer Mischa Zupko—the latter tied to a city-wide celebration of Chicago music.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic treats new music as one of its top priorities, and "we believe that should go across all of our venues," says Meghan Martineau, vice president of artistic planning. "We feel very strongly that new music has a place at the Hollywood Bowl, just as it does in Walt Disney Concert Hall." This summer,

Open-air festivals appeal not only to concertgoers looking for nights out, but to composers.

Bowl audiences will hear the orchestra, Music Director Gustavo Dudamel, and violinist Anne Akiko Meyers give the world premiere of a violin concerto by Mexico's Arturo Márquez, whose *Danzón No. 2* is practically his homeland's second national anthem. Two weeks later, British trumpeter Alison Balsam will take center stage in the U.S. premiere of her countrywoman Thea Musgrave's *Trumpet Concerto*.

"Gustavo is a huge fan of the Hollywood Bowl, and he thinks new music is super-vital to the work he does and we all do," Martineau says. "I love his approach



Grant Park Music Festival

The Grant Park Music Festival settles into the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park for ten weeks every summer.

to bringing brilliant pieces to a wider audience." She points to Dudamel's 2017 pairing of Mozart's *Requiem* and John Adams's *Harmonium*. "It was a huge hit," Martineau recalls, serving notice that the Bowl can be an "important venue to introduce major pieces of repertoire to our audience."

Focus on Now

California's Cabrillo Festival might seem to occupy its own aesthetic world, thanks to the devoted new-music audience it has cultivated over the past 57 years. "I have the freedom to explore everything, from avant-garde to more mainstream," says conductor Cristian Măcelaru, who has been Cabrillo's music director since 2017. He looks for works that will "make a connection to the people who will come to the concert." As a framework, Măcelaru focuses each year's festival on a theme that looks at the world beyond the concert hall. The Cabrillo programs for 2020 will spotlight composers who use music to describe and influence society. [Note: at press time, the Cabrillo Festival announced the cancellation of its 2020 festival due to the global pandemic.]

At Cabrillo, Iván Enrique Rodríguez's *A Metaphor for Power*, a West Coast premiere, depicts the Latinx experience in the United States. Stacy Garrop's *For the Crime of Voting*, a world premiere, will commemorate the centennial of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the vote. Sean Shepherd's *Mass Appeals*, another premiere, will celebrate societal movers-and-shakers from Robespierre to Abbie Hoffman to Greta Thunberg—through sound, not words, drawing on music from their times. The festival's social-impact theme will even encompass a salute to Beethoven's birthday, Măcelaru says, via works by Joan Tower and Pierre Jalbert that allude to his music: "We're looking at Beethoven as one of the first social activists—an artist using their voice to make social change."

A Sense of Place

Open-air festivals can appeal not only to concertgoers looking for nights out, but to composers seeking stimuli. When Osvaldo Golijov crafted his *Azul*, a cello-and-harp concerto that was given its world premiere by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 2006 at Tanglewood, he thought back to

attending concerts there in his youth. “The inspiration was my own experience as a student,” Golijov says. “I used to lie down on the grass outside the Koussevitzky Music Shed and look at the sky while the music was going on.” *Azul*, whose title is the Spanish word for blue, grows from “the idea of the nocturnal sky—the nighttime sky. I think you can hear that in the music,” the composer says.

At the Britt Festival in southern Oregon, in 2016 Abrams and festival’s musicians invited listeners to a performance at nearby Crater Lake National Park, a scenic wonder created by a volcanic blast nearly 8,000 years ago. The park’s cliffs and deep-blue waters supplied the backdrop for the world premiere of Michael Gordon’s *Natural History*, which celebrated the centenary of the National Park Service. The work drew on the drumming and singing of the region’s Klamath Tribe, and extra brasses pealed from the cliffs. “I can’t tell you how magical that was, to be on the rim of this massive lake,” Abrams says. “It was an authentic and very genuine work of music. It was transporting. People were in tears. It was one of the standout moments of my musical life.” A documentary about the work and its premiere, *Symphony for Nature*, has aired on public-television stations, helping the occasion reach far beyond Oregon.

Connecting with Audiences

A work from any period depends on performers to get its message across, and some festivals give musicians free rein to do whatever they can to connect their audiences with the pieces. The Britt Festival strives to create “an environment where we share,” Abrams says. “We talk about the music we’re playing and why. We explain the theme of the program and what we were imagining in creating it. We talk about who the living composers are and who the non-living composers are. When the audiences understand that these composers are real people who are living and breathing music, they listen in a differ-



In 2016, the Britt Festival Orchestra, led by Music Director Teddy Abrams, gave the world premiere of Michael Gordon’s *Natural History* at Crater Lake National Park.

ent way.” If the composer is on hand and comfortable discussing his or her music, he adds, so much the better. The Cabrillo Festival opens all its rehearsals to the public, and “we have many people who come to absolutely everything, from the first rehearsal to the last concert,” Măcelaru says. “It’s amazing. Just as we musicians get more and more out of a work the more we study it, that’s the audience’s response as well.”

Composers also benefit from festivals’ electricity. Sarah Kirkland Snider, whose links to the Aspen Music Festival and School in Colorado reach back to a summer as a student there, says she feels a “frisson of excitement as soon as I walk onto the festival grounds.” She’ll return this summer. As part of a programming theme called “Uncommon Women of Note,” the festival will feature two of her works, including a world premiere drawing on the words of prominent suffragists. [Note: at press time, Aspen announced that its 2020 festival will be delayed and shortened due to the pandemic.]

Snider looks forward not only to that, but to teaching—and to bonding with other composers taking part in the school and concerts. “You’re all visitors, you’ve all traveled to be there, and you’re sharing in the excitement of working with incredible

performers in a high-pressured but artistically nurturing environment meant to support this relatively niche-y thing you do, which is to write classical music in the 21st century,” she says. “I love hearing my music in any context, old or new, but I particularly love hearing new works by my peers, and a place like Aspen is a dreamy setting to get to do that.”

Golijov, a Tanglewood veteran—first as a student, then as longtime teacher and often-programmed composer—says the Massachusetts festival “becomes like a home in the summer.” When he attended in 1990 as a student, he recalls, it was the first time performers gave his music their full energy and attention—rather than making him “beg people” to do as he envisioned.

“People are in a different mood,” he says. “It’s such a beautiful place. There’s such a sense of flexibility and possibility. The halls—both Ozawa Hall and the Shed—are open to the outdoors. That physical openness translates into a spiritual openness and mental openness. I’ve learned so much there.” **S**

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