

by Chester Lane

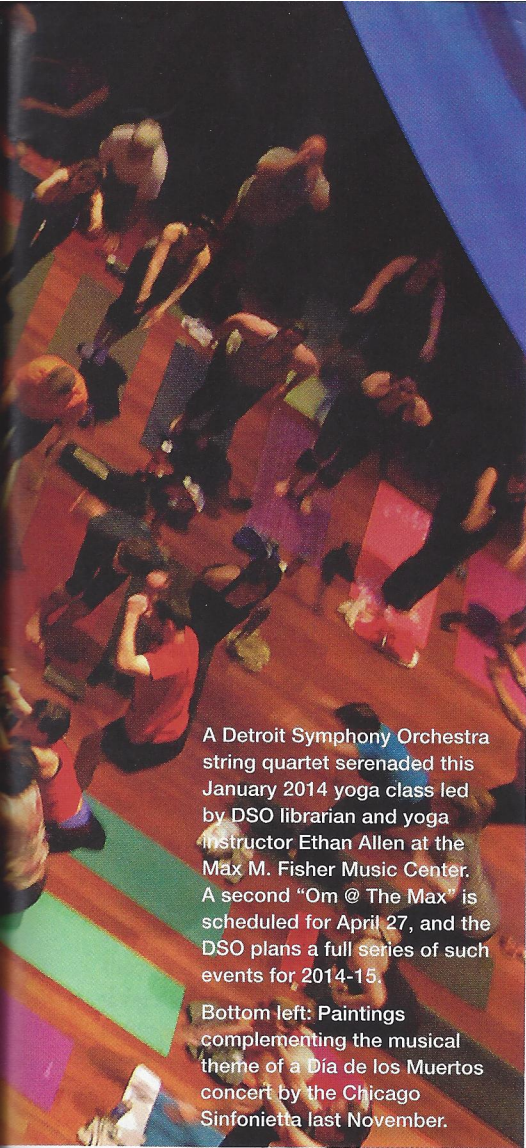
MESSING WITH THE

Model



Chester Lane

When it comes to presenting repertoire in new and unusual ways, there's a lot happening at orchestras these days, both onstage and off. **How are they finding ways to provide audiences with experiences that provoke, surprise, and stimulate?**



A Detroit Symphony Orchestra string quartet serenaded this January 2014 yoga class led by DSO librarian and yoga instructor Ethan Allen at the Max M. Fisher Music Center. A second "Om @ The Max" is scheduled for April 27, and the DSO plans a full series of such events for 2014-15.

Bottom left: Paintings complementing the musical theme of a Día de los Muertos concert by the Chicago Sinfonietta last November.

Lindsey Evert

What's breaking the mold these days as orchestras venture beyond the time-worn format of overture-concerto-symphony programs in traditional concert halls?

How about Mozart's Requiem featuring a skeleton-costumed, choreographed chorus with oversized skull masks, performing in a Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) concert whose "darkness into light" theme is accentuated with theatrical lighting and three varieties of complimentary wine in the lobby? Or a concert of new music by an orchestra's chamber ensemble, performed in an art gallery in collaboration with local writers and composers?

How about concerts inspired by the signature dishes of chefs at restaurants near the concert hall, who appear onstage with the conductor to talk about their culinary creations? Or an orchestral concert experienced up close from the perspective of a string, brass, or wind player and with a full view of the conductor's face? Or a guided nature hike in the Rockies, in the company of a geologist-composer whose own symphony is being performed by the hometown orchestra as part of its season-long exploration of music inspired by nature? Or a string quartet serenading a gargantuan yoga session with rhythmically appropriate music by Haydn,

Dvořák, Mozart, and Puccini?

Many such innovative events are being presented these days. Here we consider some of the ways that orchestras, without compromising artistic integrity, are altering and enhancing the audience experience—both inside and outside their main concert halls, not just with the music itself, and usually in partnership with other community groups.

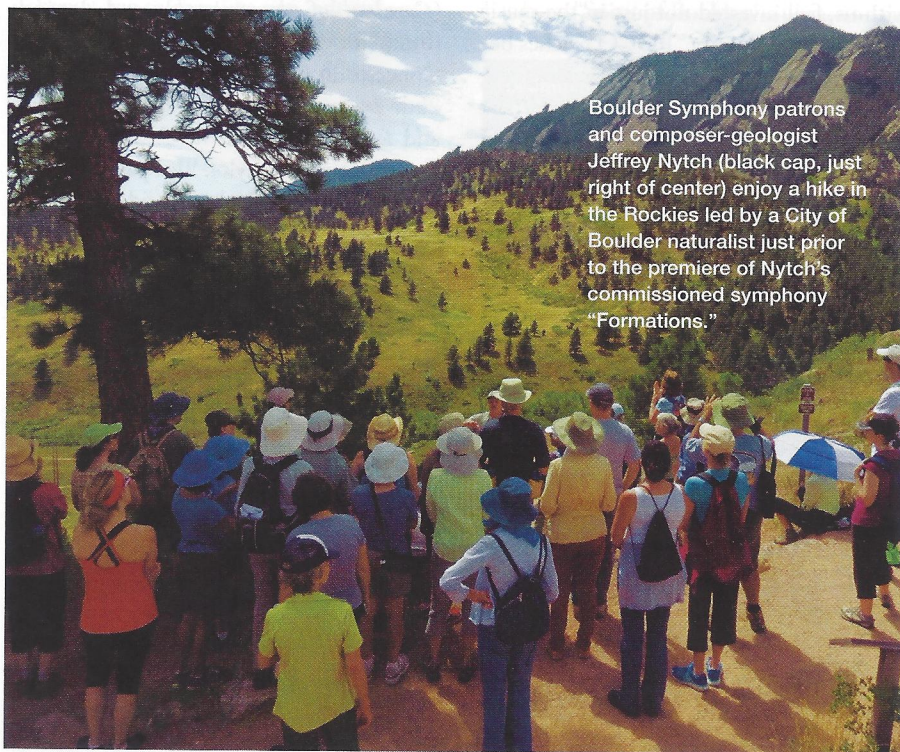
Human Connections

A January concert marking the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. is a fixture at many U.S. orchestras. At the Chicago Sinfonietta, says Executive Director Jim Hirsch, honoring Dr. King is a tradition that dates almost to the orchestra's founding in 1987 by the African-American conductor Paul Freeman. But this year, "America's most diverse orchestra," as the Sinfonietta calls itself, eschewed formulaic programming of African-American composers in favor of a "destiny" theme. Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* overture began the evening, and the concert's centerpiece was the North American premiere of *Mountaintop*, a multimedia piece by the "avant pop" Dutch composer Jacob ter Veldhuis, aka Jacob TV.

Scored for chorus, percussion, and electronics, it employs images of King's face, and audiotape and the printed words from his 1968 "I've been to the mountaintop" speech—all manipulated by the composer. "What Jacob TV has done," says Hirsch, "is expose elements of King that we never really think about. He was a hero who changed the lives of millions, but he was also a man. He was afraid, had moments of doubt, knew he was on a potential path to martyrdom. Here you can see these moments of fear, see the doubts flicker across his face."

The Chicago Sinfonietta's commitment to diversity, both on and off the stage, extends to the Hispanic as well as the African American population. Since 2010 it has presented a concert celebrating Día de los Muertos, the Mexican custom of honoring departed loved ones in October and November. This season, after several years of featuring Mexican and Latin American composers or guest artists, the Sinfonietta "explored the different ways that human beings look at and experience mortality and the loss of loved ones," says Hirsch.

The concert, performed in suburban Naperville and at Symphony Center in downtown Chicago, opened with the "Preludia"



Boulder Symphony patrons and composer-geologist Jeffrey Nytch (black cap, just right of center) enjoy a hike in the Rockies led by a City of Boulder naturalist just prior to the premiere of Nytch's commissioned symphony "Formations."

Kevin Struck

and “Balada” from Osvaldo Golijov’s chamber opera *Ainadamar* (Fountain of Tears), followed by six movements from the Mozart Requiem. Both works employed choristers from Chicago’s DePaul University, and choreography for the Requiem was by Redmoon, a Chicago performance company. In presenting a mass for the dead performed by a chorus of human skeletons, Redmoon’s take on the Requiem astonishes, and at times borders on the burlesque. Choristers whip hand-held skull masks suddenly onto their faces to accentuate downbeats; they sway in unison to the music, most memorably in the dramatic D minor scale of the “Lacrimosa.” (Would the famously witty Mozart have appreciated this quirky, arguably sacrilegious, but wholly unforgettable interpretation of his masterpiece?) Following intermission, the “darkness into light” theme continued with Astor Piazzolla’s *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*—featuring the young African-American violin soloist Adé Williams—and finally, three movements from Manuel de Falla’s *Three-Cornered Hat*.

In keeping with the themes of mourning and celebration, the Sinfonietta invited audience members to tweet their thoughts about lost loved ones or share them through the Sinfonietta’s Facebook page. Complimentary wines served in the lobby were matched with repertoire, and outside the concert hall in Naperville, Día de los Muertos-inspired paintings were on exhibit and available for purchase.

A more intimate Día de los Muertos celebration took place last fall at Lawndale Art Center in Houston. Musicians from that city’s River Oaks Chamber Orchestra presented a free “Musical & Literary Ofrenda” program with Inprint, a Houston writers’ association; Musica, a composers’ group dedicated to integrating music with other art forms; and the Mexican Consulate. ROCO commissioned short works for the occasion from members of Musica and Inprint. Lining the walls were *retablos* fashioned from materials that Lawndale provided to local artists.

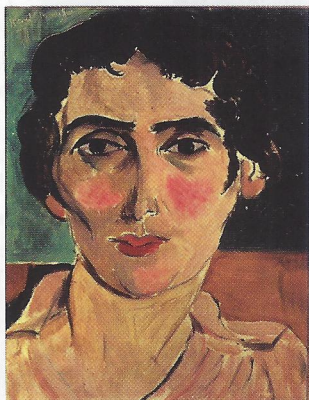
Aside from its numerous small-ensemble “Connections” events like the one at

Music Director Mei-Ann Chen leads Chicago Sinfonietta musicians and singers from the Apostolic Church of God Sanctuary Choir in the North American premiere of Jacob TV’s *Mountaintop* in January. Words from Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1968 “Mountaintop” speech, creatively manipulated by the composer, appeared onscreen along with images of his face.

Chris Ocken Photography



Lawndale, ROCO assembles up to 40 players for its main concert series at Houston’s Church of St. John the Divine, and presents a chamber music series at the Houston art gallery Gremillion & Co. Artistic Director Alecia Lawyer, who founded ROCO in 2005 and plays oboe in the group, says that a central part of its mission is “to get to know the audience, and have them get to know the musicians. We have the house lights up for the entire concert, so we can see the audience members. We put name tags on and go out at intermission to say hello. Individual musicians are sponsored by individual people or groups of people. It’s a way to foster a relationship where the musicians, who fly in from all over to play with us, feel invested not just in the music but in our community.” ROCO reaches beyond the concert hall in many ways, ranging from live video-streaming of its concerts at retirement homes and the MD Anderson Cancer Center to an annual *Peter and the Wolf* performance at the Houston Zoo, paired with a discussion about wolf conservation.



Henri Matisse’s *Head of a Woman* provided visual context for the Omaha Symphony’s “Outside the Lines” program at the Joslyn Art Museum in February.

Joslyn Art Museum/Cliffert C. Swanson Foundation

Picture This

Museums and galleries often provide congenial venues for small-ensemble concerts. Some orchestras extend this synergy by not only performing in these venues, but pairing works on the program with paintings on the gallery walls.

The Omaha Symphony’s six-concert chamber or-

chestra series, split between Music Director Thomas Wilkins and Resident Conductor Ernest Richardson, takes place at the Joslyn Art Museum’s Witherspoon Concert Hall. Curators select a painting from the Joslyn’s collection appropriate to the repertoire, and on the day of the concert lead tours of the work that are open to all museum goers without charge. “Symphony patrons come early, have lunch at the museum, take the tour, visit the gift shop, then go to the concert,” says Wilkins. “It ends up being a great event-centered day.” For the February 2014 concert titled “Outside the Lines: Unexpected Delights from Major Composers,” Wilkins conducted pieces by Shostakovich (*Incidental Music to Hamlet*), Saint-Saëns (*Carnival of the Animals*), and Janáček (*Suite for String Orchestra*), along with Concerto in One Movement for Oboe by 20th-century conductor Eugene Goossens, and *Leap*, by 30-year-old American composer Benjamin Taylor. The painting chosen to match Wilkins’s “Outside the Lines” theme was Henri Matisse’s bold, assertive *Head of a Woman*.

In Hartford, Connecticut, a similar relationship exists between the Hartford Symphony Orchestra and Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, site of the HSO’s Sunday Serenades Chamber Music Series led by Concertmaster Leonid Sigal. For Sigal’s “Picasso and Prokofiev” program this winter, Curator of European Art Oliver Tostmann warmed up the audience with an illustrated pre-concert talk about four Picasso paintings in the museum’s collection: *The Painter*, *Still Life with Fish*, *The Artist*, and *The Women of Algiers*. Repertoire consisted of *Pour Picasso*, a clarinet miniature by Stravinsky; the *Quintet in G minor* by

Prokofiev; and chamber concertos by Erwin Schulhoff and Manuel de Falla.

The HSO's partnership with Wadsworth Atheneum predates Carolyn Kuan's tenure as music director, but collaborations have blossomed since she arrived in 2011. A program featuring *Rite of Spring* and selections from *Swan Lake*, performed in May and June of last year on the Masterworks Series, employed dancers from The Hartt School at the University of Hartford and

“Orchestras are there to serve communities, not just in terms of audience experiences but for what we can do with partnerships,” says Hartford Symphony Orchestra Music Director Carolyn Kuan.

the Nutmeg Conservatory for the Arts in nearby Torrington. A highlight of this season's Masterworks Series—even amidst the current boomlet of Shakespeare-themed programs at orchestras—was a four-performance run of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in January at Bushnell Center for Center for Performing Arts, the orchestra's regular concert venue. This was a Hartford Stage production enhanced with the complete incidental music that Mendelssohn provided for an 1843 staging of the play in Berlin. Joining the HSO onstage were soprano Amanda Hall, mezzo-soprano Jamilyn Manning-White, and 55 voices from the Torrington-based choral organization Joyful Noise. This was a happy occasion for celebrating two cultural milestones: the Hartford Symphony's 70th anniversary and Hartford Stage's 50th.

An orchestral subscription concert dedicated to accompanying a Shakespeare play is hardly standard fare. How was it received? “In concerts featuring this music we usually just hear the scherzo, the intermezzo, and of course the famous wedding march,” says Kuan. “Hearing the complete score in context is something most audiences don't get to enjoy. We got a fabulous response, the performances were sold out, people were thrilled. Several audience members wrote that when they walked into the hall there was a buzz about how the average age seemed to have dropped by 20 years. But I also got letters saying, ‘This isn't what we expected. We enjoyed it, but we want you to be careful in the future.’ Mendelssohn wrote about 60 minutes of incidental music to *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and there's another 60 minutes that's just the play. If an audience member is used to listening to two

hours of music, this is something different.”

Kuan says that partnering with community institutions and “creating new and interesting experiences” are both important to her. “Orchestras are there to serve communities, and not just in terms of audience experiences but also, ‘what can we do in terms of collaborations and partnerships?’” It's this kind of thinking that has led to the annual “Playing with Food” concert, which debuted on the Pops series last season. “I

decided we would partner with five downtown restaurants,” says Kuan. “I asked each of their chefs to tell me what their signature dish was, and I would then think of a piece of music inspired by that—one dessert chef, for example, listened to Fauré's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and thought, ‘This needs light cream—and strawberries!’ In the concert we'd have the chefs onstage; we'd talk about what piece of music would go with the dish, and about how they were inspired by the music to create something.”

A Sense of Place

Michael Butterman, music director of the Boulder Philharmonic in Colorado, says that for several years the orchestra's tag line has been “Spirit of Boulder,” a phrase meant

to convey “the sense of adventure and exploration, and the physical beauty of the place. But as for specifically tying in an entire season with geography and the environment, this is the first time we've done it.”

The Philharmonic's 2013-14 season has been rife with nature-inspired works, both old and new: “Four Sea Interludes” from Britten's *Peter Grimes*; Copland's *Appalachian Spring* and *Tender Land Suite*; Mason Bates's 2006 work *Rusty Air in Carolina* for orchestra and electronica; “Ghosts of the Grasslands” from Steve Heitzeg's 2002 *Symphony to the Prairie Farm*; Mahler's *Blumine* (Flowers); Debussy's *La Mer*; and, yet to come, Smetana's *Die Moldau* and Beethoven's “Pastoral” Symphony. Nature also played a role in the Philharmonic's “Night at the Oscars” program in February, which celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Boulder International Film Festival. That concert included music by Josh Ralph from two award-winning documentaries produced in Boulder: *Chasing Ice* (about global warming) and *The Cove* (about dolphins imperiled by Japan's fishing industry).

This season's headliner was the world premiere, on September 7, of Jeffrey Nytch's Symphony No. 1 (“Formations”), which audibly celebrates the geology, the natural history, and to some extent the human history of the Rocky Mountains. With support from ExxonMobil Foundation, the Philharmonic commissioned Nytch's 26-min-

In January the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, choristers from Connecticut's Joyful Noise ensemble, and two vocal soloists joined together to enhance this Hartford Stage production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the complete incidental music Mendelssohn wrote for the play.





River Oaks Chamber Orchestra

Musicians performing in ROCO's Día de los Muertos-inspired concert at Lawndale Art Center last October included baritone Timothy Jones, violist Susanne LeFevre, cellist Julia Sengupta, and oboist Alecia Lawyer. On the walls are *retablos* (altars) created by local artists.

ute, four-movement symphony to mark the 125th anniversary of the Geological Society of America, headquartered in Boulder.

Nytech, who is trained in music and geology—he's a member of the University of Colorado's geology faculty—incorporates into his symphony the hissing of underground steam vents in the formation of the Rockies and the rattling of miners' pins as they pan for gold and silver. (For the latter effect, percussionists are equipped with baking sheets loaded with rocks.) Kevin Shuck, the Philharmonic's executive director, says the premiere of "Formations" was greeted with "whoops and hollers" from the audience. At a performance for members of the GSA, he reports, "The geologists were just over-the-top enthused by it. People were coming up to me and saying, 'I almost didn't have to read the program notes—I could tell exactly what was happening from the music.'" Several other orchestras have expressed interest in "Formations," and the work can be heard on the Boulder Philharmonic [website](#).

The "Spirit of Boulder" is alive and well this season both inside the concert hall and outdoors. Scheduled prior to each concert is a guided hike led by a naturalist from the City of Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks agency, marketed to Philharmonic subscribers and to the park district's publicity channels. Shuck had pitched the idea of guided hikes to Open Space not knowing how it would be received, and says he had the entire staff onboard "within 48 hours." When the hikers are asked how they learned about the opportunity, "Prob-

ably a little more than half say it was through the park district, and the remainder say they learned about it from the orchestra. A great win for both of us."

Neither Butterman nor Shuck expects "nature and music" to be a recurring theme. While there may be no shortage of music inspired by nature, notes Butterman, "doing exactly the same thing again robs it of freshness. We've talked about continuing to program

composers, repertoire, artists, and collaborators who in some way connect to our community. We believe Boulder is interested in finding things a little bit off the beaten path. As long as I'm here we will be working with this notion of being 'Boulder's orchestra' and embracing the spirit of Boulder."

Up Close and Personal

Local connections, local collaborators, and local spirit can enhance interest in live music. But the "sense of place" that engages audiences can also come from proximity to the music-makers themselves—from one's physical place in the concert hall. It's an idea that at least one symphonic organization in the U.S. has been exploring this year.

The Florida Orchestra presents concert series in three venues: Mahaffey Theater in St. Petersburg, Ruth Eckerd Hall in Clearwater, and Straz Center for the Performing Arts in Tampa. At the beginning of this season it began offering subscribers seats—at the premium price of \$75—that were not in the traditional seating areas but actually onstage, a few feet behind the musicians.

Onstage seating, says President and CEO Michael Pastreich, is an idea that grew out of an accessibility initiative launched in 2010. That plan called for drastically lowered ticket prices, simplified subscription packaging, and diversified programming. The results? "We grew weekday matinees," says Pastreich. "Our coffee concert series grew exponentially. We started Friday morning Masterworks concerts and rock concerts, started playing videogame music. I would say that onstage seating has been part

of this accessibility initiative as well."

Early on, says Pastreich, there was internal debate about how to price onstage seats. "Some people, particularly musicians who were going to be sharing the stage with patrons, said—just kind of conceptually—that they should cost \$300. Our stance was that the seats should be accessible to everybody. The original plan had been to do it on ten of our fourteen Masterworks programs—everything that didn't have a massive orchestra. As we looked at it to make sure the musicians and patrons had enough space, we changed that, and now have onstage seats at a little less than half of our concerts.

"Even for the first concert," Pastreich says, "we had people who had never attended a Florida Orchestra concert before but had received a mailing and were coming because of the onstage seating. One person put his hands together, bowed to every musician he passed—and immediately bought tickets to the next one.

"Having patrons onstage has proven to be a lot of work," Pastreich continues. "Somebody who really knows the organization has to meet them in the lobby, brief them, bring them backstage and onto the stage, meet them at intermission, and take them offstage."

How has onstage seating gone over with patrons in the regular seats, who now watch their fellow audience members as well as the musicians? "We've had a spectrum of comments," says Pastreich. "Some people have been very excited at the prospect of sitting on the stage. Some have been distracted by a bright-colored jacket, or by seeing a woman swing her feet to the music. It may be that a year from now we'll be saying, 'Well, people swing their feet to the music. It happens.'" Whether onstage seating will become a permanent fixture at the Florida Orchestra has not yet been determined, he says. "The musicians' jury is still out. The deal we made was that we would check in with them before we sold the next season. After we've had the last concert and have let a few more weeks go by, we'll ask them what they thought of it.

"New ideas always have a different level of scrutiny than old ones. At this point I would call onstage seating an experiment. I'm hoping that three years from now, we'll be able to declare it a successful one." **S**

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