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Rocky Mountain Highs at the Aspen Music Festival and School

Its 75th anniversary was celebrated in the Colorado gathering's usual understated but tip-top fashion, mixing talented students with established figures in a diverse program that included Vivaldi, Beethoven and Prokofiev.

By David Mermelstein

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Robert McDuffie (right) at the Aspen Music Festival. PHOTO: DIEGO REDEL

Aspen, Colo.

The Aspen Music Festival and School, among America's premier summer gatherings of budding and renowned classical musicians and their admirers,

turned 75 this season and marked the occasion by doing something rare for an institution of such stature: It largely ignored its milestone anniversary. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that it celebrated the occasion in typically humble fashion, by simply going about its business—presenting orchestral and chamber-music concerts and operas, offering masterclasses and other forms of instruction, and generally advancing classical music's future.

Like much of the rest of the festival, its final stretch, which ended on Sunday, offered a diverse array of genres, music and musicians, with some events overlapping. One modest and welcome concession to the anniversary was a series of four “Reminiscences” programs, the last of which, on Aug. 14, was curated by the violinist Robert McDuffie, a 49-year Aspen vet. He spent his time at the Harris Concert Hall, the excellent-sounding underground recital hall here, performing and relating, in his homespun manner, tales of his career and musical associations—the ones about Mike Mills of R.E.M.-fame proving particularly amusing. Musically, the bill—all performed in the company of other musicians, some his students—was varied: “Summer” from Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” along with tidbits of Prokofiev, Bernstein and Glass, among others. But the keyboardist Derek Wang deserves special praise. Game for anything, he played piano, harpsichord and synthesizer with equal conviction and enviable idiomatic rigor.



Simone Dinnerstein PHOTO: BLAKE NELSON

A solo recital at Harris Hall the following night featured the pianist Simone Dinnerstein. I could stay only for the first half, but was thrilled to find it opened with Rameau’s Baroque masterpiece Gavotte et Six Doubles, a theme-and-

variations piece in need of yet greater exposure, which Ms. Dinnerstein played with ample grace and impressive vigor. And though she may have her reasons for refusing to pause after its conclusion and before the start of Philip Lasser’s “Twelve Variations on a Chorale by J.S. Bach” from 2022, which Ms. Dinnerstein has recorded, I thought both pieces suffered for it. Mr. Lasser’s work—he was present for the performance—proved quietly austere to start, but expectations were upended as Lisztian effects and some moody Americana, among other surprises, colored the sonic picture.

The season’s final major recital event, on Aug. 17, was to have featured two of the biggest names in classical music: the pianist Daniil Trifonov and the violinist Leonidas Kavakos. But an injury to Mr. Kavakos’s shoulder scuppered that plan. To the rescue came James Ehnes (violin) and Alessio Bax (piano), a less starry but no less capable duo. Their program of warhorses—Mozart’s E-minor Violin Sonata (K. 304), Brahms’s First Violin Sonata and Beethoven’s “Kreutzer” Sonata—might have caused some music lovers to cock an eyebrow, but not if they attended. Here was familiar music performed with a passion, and care, it doesn’t always receive. And though Mr. Bax’s playing lacked for nothing, it was Mr. Ehnes’s rich, singing tone that remained in the ear afterward.



James Ehnes and Alessio Bax PHOTO: DIEGO REDEL

Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro”—staged at the Wheeler Opera House in downtown Aspen and sung entirely by Aspen students, singers and instrumentalists, of which I heard the second of three performances, on Aug. 15—had the great good fortune to have the much-lauded young composer-

conductor Matthew Aucoin on the podium. He paced the full opera (no characteristic cuts!) exquisitely, never letting momentum flag yet always allowing the work's innumerable high points their due. No less important, the orchestra never subsumed the vocalists. The young singers all impressed, with the leads—Figaro (Vinicius Costa, bass), Susanna (Magdalena Kuźma, soprano), the Countess (Caitlin Gotimer, soprano), the Count (Trevor Haumschilt-Rocha, baritone) and Cherubino (Sophia Maekawa, mezzo-soprano)—tutored by the soprano Renée Fleming, the co-artistic director (with the conductor Patrick Summers) of the school's vocal-music programs. But the supporting singers, especially Jaemyeong Lee (tenor), deliciously oily as Don Basilio, and Sashekia Brown (soprano), winsome as Barbarina, made just as favorable an impression.

The two closing orchestral programs—from the Aspen Chamber Symphony conducted by Cristian Măcelaru, music director designate of the Cincinnati Symphony, on Aug. 16, and the Festival Orchestra led by Robert Spano, the festival's longtime music director, on Aug. 18—were presented in the Klein Music Tent, which surely has the greatest acoustics in the world for a performance space resembling an athletic stadium. And the venue served both programs marvelously. The two orchestras are composed of student musicians, this year numbering nearly 470, and a smattering of established players.



Interior of the Klein Music Tent. PHOTO: DIEGO REDEL

Mr. Măcelaru, leading an ensemble that was “chamber” in name only, gave persuasive accounts of two new extroverted works: Sarah Kirland Snider’s “Forward Into Light” (2020) and Christopher Theofanidis’s “The Universe in Ecstatic Motion” (2022/2024), the latter a flute concerto—and Aspen co-commission—written for Marina Piccinini, with punishing cadenzas placed

(almost perversely) at the beginning of the first two movements. The concert ended with a potent account of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony.

Mr. Spano's program included Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2, with Garrick Ohlsson as soloist, a piece with much pomp and little circumstance that Mr. Ohlsson admirably caressed rather than hammered through. But the big event, and the 75th festival's closing effort, was Act III of Wagner's "Die Walküre," with the soprano Christine Goerke spectacular as Brünnhilde and the bass-baritone Greer Grimsley suitably angry and anguished as Wotan. Tamara Wilson was to sing the key if small role of Sieglinde but was indisposed, so Alexis Seminario, one of the eight student Valkyries, substituted and made a most favorable impression. In truth, all eight Valkyries sounded as though they could already grace any opera stage. Mr. Spano conducted sensitively, bringing point to the various leitmotifs without overdoing it.

Next year's festival should bring more of the same, as Aspen intends to continue honoring, in its understated fashion, through 2026, the 75th anniversary of its incorporation. But anniversaries have meaning only when there's something worth celebrating. At Aspen, there always is.

—*Mr. Mermelstein is the Journal's classical music critic.*

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