

76 YEARS OF CHAMBER MUSIC AT TANGLEWOOD

by Pamela Feo

Written in 2015 in honor of the 75th anniversary of the Tanglewood Music Center

Chamber music concerts at the Tanglewood Music Center draw Fellows out from the orchestra and into the spotlight. What audiences do not see, however, is the transformative process that occurs on the path to the stage: intense coaching sessions whose lessons last well beyond that week's concert. For eight weeks every summer, instrumental Fellows work closely with coaches and with each other in trios, quartets, and larger ensembles, refining skills vital to true musicianship. This invaluable experience of developing as performers together encapsulates Serge Koussevitzky's original vision of interpretation through collaboration at Tanglewood.

That chamber music holds a unique appeal for Fellows was already evident in 1940, during the first summer of the Berkshire Music Center, as it was then called. While it had always been envisioned as part of the instrumental program, no one among the founding faculty anticipated the absolute zeal with which it was pursued. Students are on record as rehearsing in spontaneously formed groups "at all possible hours and in all possible places," and showed "amazing" eagerness when working with BSO musicians. In response, the Center's second year brought with it an official branch dedicated specifically to chamber music studies, led by Gregor Piatigorsky, with the newly built Chamber Music Hall and Theatre-Concert Hall providing rehearsal and performance space.

Chamber music continued to thrive with Richard Burgin, William Kroll, Gilbert Kalish, and Joel Smirnoff each at the helm over the years. Coaches such as violinist Louis Krasner, who had premiered Berg's Violin Concerto, and BSO violist Eugene Lehner, former violist of the Kolisch Quartet, provided an invaluable and direct link to the music of such composers as Bartók, Schoenberg, and Berg. Larger chamber music works offered particularly rewarding experience; as former BSO concertmaster Joseph Silverstein, who chaired the faculty for over thirty years, points out, "It was only in a festival that students got the opportunity to perform such marvelous pieces as the Brahms and Dvořák sextets or the Schubert and Enescu octets. It is very difficult to assemble a group like that at a conservatory, whereas here everyone is available to put together those larger works." More pieces were studied during those years than could be performed: with at least fifteen coaches rehearsing two groups at a time, over thirty groups might be working on a new piece each week, of which only three were selected for Sunday concerts. And yet even without the promise of performance, chamber music

remained a compelling reason to study at Tanglewood precisely because of the rewards of the coaching process.

In 1963 incoming BSO Music Director Erich Leinsdorf became the Berkshire Music Center's new director and proclaimed a renewed emphasis on chamber music. In his first address to Tanglewood students, he eloquently highlighted the spirit of collaboration that is so effectively developed through chamber music studies: "To play chamber music you should alternately assert and submerge your individuality. Chamber music played without personality is a dead letter. Chamber music played as a competition for maximum attention to oneself is no longer chamber music." Leinsdorf's belief in the value of chamber music enabled it to flourish during his tenure, and it has continued to develop throughout the years since. Even with the demands of regular orchestra rehearsals, seminars, and master classes that make up the TMC experience today, Fellows must carve out time for rehearsals and coaching sessions to keep up with a demanding chamber music concert schedule. In addition to the longstanding Sunday-morning concert series, Fellows now also perform in Saturday-evening Prelude concerts prior to BSO Shed performances, as well as in numerous other concerts throughout the summer, with certain programs dedicated solely to brass, percussion, or woodwinds. In 1994 the completion of Seiji Ozawa Hall gave these concerts a new home in a world-class performance space particularly suited to the acoustics of a small ensemble, while its open back wall allows the music to carry over the grounds in iconic Tanglewood fashion. Fellows share this space with such illustrious guest artists as Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax, who also act as coaches.



TMC chamber music today is shaped by its focus on specific repertoire, highlighted through the String Quartet Seminar and similar activities. In the seminar's intense week of daily coaching under the direction of Norman Fischer and faculty enlisted from prominent professional quartets, works by Haydn and others, encompassing multiple time periods and styles, are prepared for a culminating "Marathon" performance. Through this process, Fellows sharpen listening and timing skills that inform every aspect of their playing, and by the end of the week are primed to enter orchestra rehearsals with greater attunement to their peers.

Contemporary music is another significant area of focus, as it has been since developments implemented by Leinsdorf; in addition to the Fromm Players, who worked exclusively on new music, Leinsdorf drew regular chamber music students into these activities as well, under the direction of Gunther Schuller. The inauguration in 1964 of the Festival of Contemporary American Music (now the Festival of Contemporary Music), along with the frequent presence of prominent composers as coaches, has led to some of Tanglewood's most exciting collaborations. Pieces by the Composition Fellows, previously segregated into their own concerts, have been integrated into the weekly chamber music series since 1965.

The many current BSO players who are TMC alumni consistently claim that they have carried the skills developed through their Tanglewood chamber music experience to Symphony Hall. Many have become coaches in turn, and count both sides of the intimate coaching relationship as among their most cherished learning experiences. BSO violinist Ronan Lefkowitz, who was a Fellow in 1972 and has been coaching for over twenty years, voices the sentiment of his colleagues when he says, "I was a student at Tanglewood; I am still a student at Tanglewood." The TMC's 75th anniversary last summer, marked by an abundance of commissioned works by former Composition Fellows as well as former and current faculty members, enlivened the chamber music program with the best that Tanglewood offers: collaborations among performers, coaches, and composers that inspire and elevate, filling each summer with the camaraderie of reaching new heights of music-making together. It is through the alchemy of this collaborative process that musicians learn how truly to listen to one another; where, in the absence of a conductor, hesitant performers emerge as leaders; and where an ensemble, in working together, can create an offering greater than the sum of its parts.

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