

75 YEARS OF NEW MUSIC AT THE TANGLEWOOD MUSIC CENTER

by Robert Kirzinger

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

The very first work performed in the first summer of the Berkshire Music Center, during the inaugural Opening Exercises on July 8, 1940, in the Shed, was a world premiere: Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*. The origin story of that piece for unaccompanied mixed voices on the sole word "Alleluia" is a virtual template, almost a cliché at this point, for premieres to this day, at Tanglewood and otherwise. As retold in Herbert Kupferberg's *Tanglewood*, head of choral activities G. Wallace Woodworth recalled that the music had not yet arrived as of two days before the event, and no one had heard from Thompson. By telephone, Thompson assured them the score had been printed and was on its way from Philadelphia; it arrived scarcely in time for the event, and Woodworth prepared the 250-member chorus in under an hour. Its success made Thompson—not Copland or Hindemith, his fellow composition faculty—a kind of cult hero among the young musicians. *Alleluia* is still performed to close each summer's TMC Opening Exercises, and remains a popular work of the choral repertoire at large.

If it hadn't happened *like* it did, *when* it did, it might now seem quixotic, to say the least, for a conductor of a major orchestra to say, "Let's start a Music Center," and to invite the single best-known composer in America, Aaron Copland, to run a composition program there. But it had been largely due to Koussevitzky that Copland was, at age forty, as famous as he was. QED, Koussevitzky was the foremost advocate for American new music within any mainstream institution. Koussevitzky had met Copland in Paris prior to the former's first season as conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and virtually insisted that the composer write a new piece to feature in that first year. Following the BSO's performances of Copland's *Organ* Symphony, the fruitful collaboration continued, and was the model for others of its kind, with other young Americans. By 1940 the BSO was already a major proving ground for new American orchestral works (and no slouch with European works), and Koussevitzky sought to formalize that further with the composition program at the new Berkshire Music Center.

Koussevitzky had every intention, from the very beginning of the BMC (for simplicity's sake, Tanglewood Music Center or TMC from this point on), to *sustain the entire range of classical music culture* through his own and the Boston Symphony Orchestra's resources. In addition to performance, it meant training the next generation of composers who would rejuvenate the repertoire of the BSO and other American ensembles. It was a stunning ambition, and continues to be a stunning achievement, likely beyond its founder's wildest dreams. Calling the Tanglewood Music Center merely

his “legacy” is damning with faint praise.



Koussevitzky speaks with Aaron Copland, the first head of faculty at the TMC, while Bernstein looks on.

And so Koussevitzky stocked his first Berkshire Music Center faculty with several major composers of the day: Copland, the obvious choice; Paul Hindemith, a well-known refugee from war-torn Europe, who had arrived in the U.S. in spring 1940, needed a job, and was already a known educator; and Randall Thompson, a product of Harvard and Eastman whose Symphony No. 2 Koussevitzky had programmed with the BSO on several occasions. The least known of the group, Thompson had begun teaching at the Curtis Institute in 1939, and unlike Copland or Hindemith offered Koussevitzky a direct line to student composers. Both of the most famous students in the first class of the Tanglewood Music Center arrived there from Curtis: twenty-one-year-old Leonard Bernstein and seventeen-year-old Lukas Foss. To have *two* such geniuses—precociously skilled pianists, conductors, and composers—in the inaugural class was immeasurably significant. Along with the presence of Copland, their return as superstar young performers and faculty members virtually guaranteed the TMC as a destination for ambitious young composers.

In 1946, Benjamin Britten arrived for the U.S. premiere, by TMC Fellows, of his opera *Peter Grimes*, commissioned by Koussevitzky. Erstwhile Fellow Leonard Bernstein conducted, and it was a resounding success. These days we speak of that premiere and how marvelous it was, but *what a risk!* On some level we forget, now, that *Peter Grimes* was *new music*. Britten was hardly unknown, but he was not the composer of *Peter Grimes* yet, either—it was his first true opera.



Paul Hindemith at Tanglewood as a faculty member in the TMC's inaugural year

Meanwhile, Koussevitzky and Copland restocked the composition faculty each year with such composers as Bohuslav Martinu° and, in 1949, Olivier Messiaen, whose *Turangalîla-Symphonie* would have its loud premiere with the BSO the following December. Luigi Dallapiccola arrived in 1951 for a two-year stint. These were not only composers of worldwide reputation; they lent to Tanglewood a real sense of the new artistic vistas in the postwar air. In Messiaen's year, Fellows included Jacob Druckman, the sixteen-year-old wunderkind Easley Blackwood (later a pioneer of alternative tuning systems), and Martin Boykan, all of whom would have an impact on what made new music new.

Music that heralded the kinds of experimentation and stylistic fragmentation already happening in Europe had some, but not much, exposure: Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, eight years old but visionary in impact, was paired with Robert

Schumann's First String Quartet in July 1949. The third song of Dallapiccola's bleak *Canti di prigionia* was performed alongside works of Bernstein and Copland. Charles Munch performed new music with the BSO but was less hands-on with the Music Center; this perhaps left Copland and his colleagues with more leeway to accept a proposal from the philanthropist Paul Fromm, who had established the Fromm Music Foundation in 1952, to fund Tanglewood concerts specifically for the promotion of new music in 1956. These led to the "Seminars in Contemporary Music," featuring concerts as well as lectures and works by invited composers, among them Luciano Berio, John Cage, and Elliott Carter; Aaron Copland hosted a July 1959 concert on "Recent European Music" that featured Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* and Boulez's Sonata No. 1. Berio's *Circles*, with soprano Cathy Berberian, was premiered by members of the BSO in August 1960. The Fromm Fellowship Players was established especially for the purpose.

When Erich Leinsdorf succeeded Charles Munch in 1962, he was given a mandate to revitalize the Music Center. In his first summer, 1963, he brought in the thirty-seven-year-old composer/conductor Gunther Schuller to join Copland in the composition department. Schuller—who collaborated with many of the jazz greats of the day, wrote twelve-tone works, and was voracious in his musical curiosity—became deeply involved in all aspects of the Music Center. In that first summer, he led TMC musicians in a jazz concert and, during the Seminar, joined in a round table discussion with the formidable avant-gardist Iannis Xenakis. The pianist Paul Jacobs, a fund in whose honor still supports commissions of new music at Tanglewood, was named Fromm Instructor in Contemporary Music. Four concerts were given by the Fellowship Players, "hosted" respectively by Copland, Schuller, Lukas Foss, and Xenakis and featuring music by each, as well as works by Ives, Boulez, Alexander Goehr, Mauricio Kagel, and Varèse, to name a cross-section.

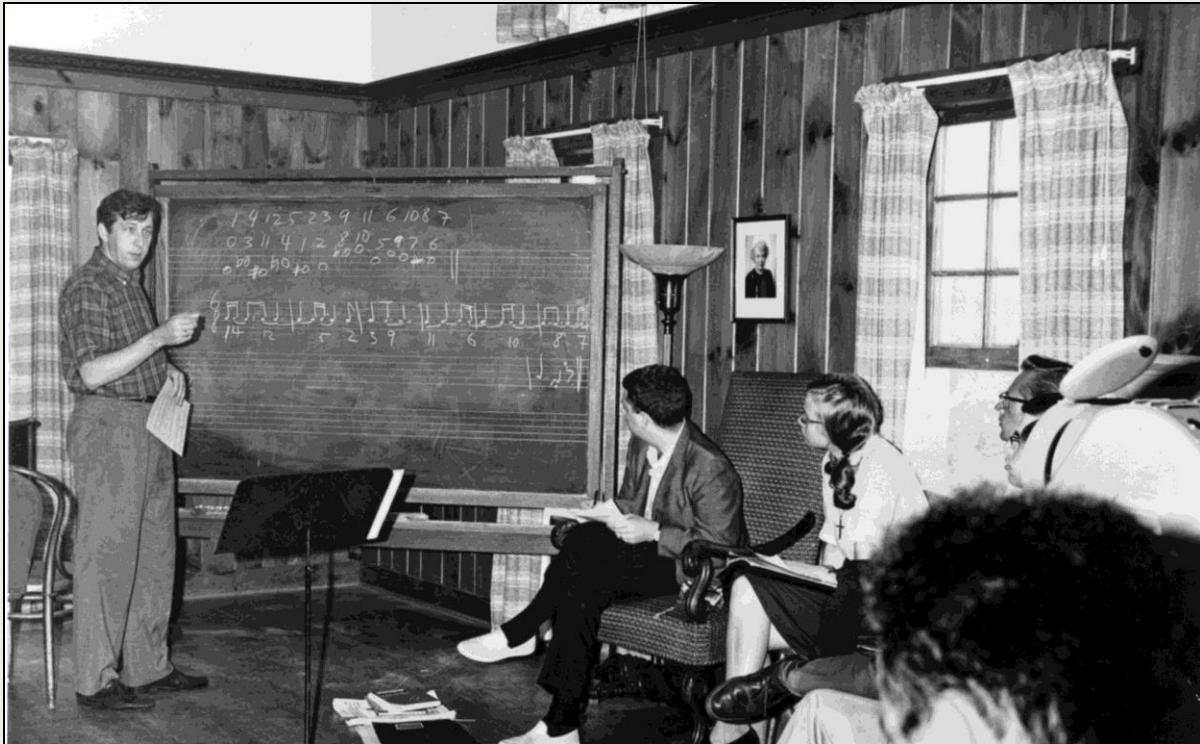
The following year, upon the foundations laid by the Seminars and still funded generously by the Fromm Music Foundation, the first Festival of Contemporary American Music took place at Tanglewood, establishing the tradition that continues in today's FCM. It came with a manifesto, which read in part: "This Contemporary American Music Festival is specifically designed to provide a rallying point for the young professional composer who, after having enjoyed the benefits of fellowships, prizes and grants as a student, finds himself abandoned at the very moment he is ready to make his contribution to his art." There followed a list of nine composers who had received Fromm Music Foundation Commissions, which made up of the bulk of the FCAM that year. Their ranks included Charles Wuorinen, Mario Davidovsky, David Del Tredici, and Donald Martino; all the composers were represented not only by their Fromm works but with another piece in addition. Improvisation and electronic music were featured in

several works, as Tanglewood began to absorb some of the most modern currents of musical thought.



Aaron Copland stands with Erich Fromm, Lukas Foss, and Gunther_Schuller

The FCAM, by 1968, had dropped the “A” so as to include the best new music of Europe (and, now and then, the world), and meanwhile the significant determination was made that the general population of TMC musicians, not a designated new music subset, would participate significantly in the event. Gunther Schuller led entire new music concerts with the Berkshire Music Center Orchestra, which included current BSO double bassist Lawrence Wolfe, a TMC Fellow from 1967 to 1969. Wolfe recalls a sense of wide-eyed wonder among some of his colleagues. “The ‘new’ was a new experience to instrumental Fellows then; now, Fellows have a broader range of experience in new music when they arrive at Tanglewood,” Wolfe relates. Much of what they encountered might not survive the hothouse environment, but “It was the most fertile ground available for innovation and individuality.” He recalls Schuller’s omnipresence, and among performances recalls in particular the premiere of Stanley Silverman’s absurdist, bewilderingly eclectic, rock-music infused theater piece *Elephant Steps*, which ultimately found its way to the New York stage. It shared the concert with Schoenberg’s *Die glückliche Hand*. The same year, a concert of electronic music was given in the Formal Gardens beside the Theatre-Concert Hall.



Gunther Schuller with a group of composition fellows at Tanglewood, ca. 1965

Schuller's presence was a major part of Tanglewood's identity during the 1970s; he became co-Artistic Director in 1970 and was Director from 1975 until 1984, but he continued to act as director of the Festival of Contemporary Music throughout this time. Among his own composition students was the brilliant teenager Oliver Knussen, who arrived at Tanglewood first in 1970 and returned for two further summers as a Fellow. Other fellowship composers of the era included Gerald Levinson, Simon Bainbridge, and Louis Karchin. In the first few years of the decade there was a concentration on new theater works as part of a special Music Theater Project directed by Ian Strasvögel; productions included the American premieres of Harrison Birtwistle's *Down by the Greenwood Side* and Bruno Maderna's *Satyricon*. Maderna had been on the composition faculty in 1971 and returned in 1972 to direct the FCM while Schuller was on sabbatical. Stylistically, though, the headiness of 1960s experimentation had died down, and craft-concentrated, "pure" instrumental music was once again dominant; Schuller's *Tre invenzione* was premiered in 1972, and that year Jacob Druckman's *Windows*, which later won the Pulitzer Prize, was also performed. Druckman—a Fellow in 1949—was back for his first stint as a faculty member, alongside Elliott Carter and Earl Kim.

BSO Assistant Personnel Manager Bruce Creditor was a TMC Fellow as a clarinetist in 1976 and 1978; he would stay on as orchestra librarian for several years after that. (As President of the New England Conservatory from 1966 to 1976, Schuller naturally was

able to identify talented prospects for Tanglewood, and vice versa, much as Randall Thompson had done at the start. Creditor was one such student.) He recalls Schuller having brought the Greek-born composer Theodore Antoniou in to help guide the composition program, although Schuller remained very hands-on. By that time, new music was an integral part of the Tanglewood performance experience. “Everybody gravitated toward new music. You didn’t escape it.” He remembers Gunther Schuller leading HK Gruber’s *Frankenstein!* in 1980, and, with Joseph Silverstein, leading the combined BSO and Music Center Orchestra in his own *Dea’i* in 1978. Betsy Jolas had several works performed as a visiting faculty member in 1976, and Yehudi Wyner, then in his first year as TMC faculty, was represented by his *Intermedio*.

Schuller stepped down as Director of the TMC in 1984, the end of an era. Following a year with Leon Kirchner as director of FCM, Oliver Knussen arrived as Coordinator of Contemporary Music Activities in 1986. Kirchner was back as a member of the faculty, along with Toru Takemitsu and frequent guest George Perle. Fellows that year included Michael Gandolfi as well as Marti Epstein, Detlev Glanert, and Andy Vores, all of whom are represented in the 2015 Festival of Contemporary Music in the concert curated by Gandolfi. Epstein recalls the experience as life-changing. She was particularly drawn to Toru Takemitsu’s work, and when she was invited back in 1988, she encountered composition faculty member Hans Werner Henze, who commissioned her to write a piece for his Munich Biennale. Gandolfi received a commission for an orchestral work, *Transfigurations*, that Knussen subsequently added to his conducting repertoire. Gandolfi returned to the TMC as a faculty member in 1997, and has been here ever since.

Knussen, well-connected in Europe, increased the international participation in the composition program, as well as a certain amount of cross-pollination of faculty and fellowship composers with other festivals, including especially Aldeburgh. John Harbison, who was a first-time TMC faculty member in 1980 and returned in 1984 when he led his own First Symphony at Tanglewood with the BSO, directed the FCM for the first time in 1992 during a Knussen sabbatical. Harbison was FCM director in 2005 and joined the faculty permanently as chairman of the composition program in 2006. He directed the FCM in 2007 and has also been a co-curator of the event, including this summer.

Since 1993, the last year of his titled position with the TMC, Knussen has returned on several occasions as faculty, conductor, and director of the FCM. His own works have featured prominently on the programs in the past thirty years, notably his operas *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* in 2012 and *Where the Wild Things Are* in 2010. Knussen represents an English connection that also includes the longtime TMC faculty conductor

Stefan Asbury. He was FCM director in 2006, when the TMC gave the U.S. stage premiere of Elliott Carter's opera *What Next?* George Benjamin was FCM director in 2000 and has been a frequent guest composer; his opera *Written on Skin* received its U.S. premiere in a concert performance in 2013.



Oliver Knussen conducts a rehearsal of the TMC Orchestra

During the post-Knussen era and largely corresponding to the leadership of TMC Director Ellen Highstein, there has been no one designated FCM director over the course of many seasons; instead, longtime associates and newer colleagues revitalize the programming yearly. Reinbert de Leeuw was a presence in the late 1990s. The Chinese composer Tan Dun was director in 1999, bringing composers' work from locations as far-flung as Indonesia (Tony Probowo), Hong Kong (Victor Chan), and Serbia (Aleksandra Vrebalov). Three years later the Chinese-born composer Bright Sheng curated a festival of entirely American music. The following year, outside the confines of the FCM, the world premieres of operas by two former Fellows were presented by the TMC: Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* and Robert Zuidam's *Rage d'amours*.



Elliott Carter in class with TMC Composition Fellows in 2007

Overall, the FCM has continued to have a very strong American presence. Typically more than half the works in a given year are by American composers. Other directors in the recent past have included conductor Robert Spano, composers Augusta Read Thomas and Charles Wuorinen, and pianist Pierre Laurent Aimard, all bringing new ideas, dynamics, and relationships to a festival-within-a-festival that's all about dynamic relationships with the new. In this year of the TMC's 75th anniversary year, the FCM has a retrospective sheen in some ways but remains solidly grounded in the new, with fifteen (!) works commissioned to celebrate the Music Center's 75th anniversary. Curated by three TMC new music mainstays—Michael Gandolfi, John Harbison, and Oliver Knussen—it also features a concert tribute to Gunther Schuller, who was expecting to be here but who died this past June, making this a bittersweet celebration of his legacy. Michael Tilson Thomas, such a strong Tanglewood presence as a young conductor in the 1960s, returns with a tribute to the three Tanglewood icons Aaron Copland, Lukas Foss, and Leonard Bernstein, as well as the godfather of American new music, Charles Ives. Most importantly, we have the participation of and collaboration among past and present TMC Fellows, bringing with them their enthusiasm, skill, and irreplaceable creativity.

ROBERT KIRZINGER is a composer and the BSO's Associate Director of Program Publications



A performance during the 2015 Festival of Contemporary Music