



Katellé Photography

Composer Katherine Balch

# Pathfinders



Alex D. Rogers

Harpist Angelica Hairston

**What's ahead for the classical music field? How do today's emerging artists plan to make their marks? Do today's upcoming musicians expect to be artists as well as entrepreneurs? Six musicians currently forging career paths share their visions for the classical music world.**

by Vivien Schweitzer



Concert Artists Guild

Violist Jordan Bak



Kate Lamon

Conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya



Violinist Stella Chen



Flutist Beomjae Kim

Arthur Moeller

concert of the future, how to attract more diverse audiences, and how to keep all listeners engaged.

When possible, classical music should be used to advocate for social change, they say. They're largely optimistic about the future of the genre, yet acutely conscious of the competition from myriad other forms of entertainment, a lack of public education about classical music, and dwindling attention spans. These young artists believe that elements of the concert experience need tweaking to create concerts that offer a welcoming and communal experience relevant to modern audiences. Above all, they are certain that it's essential to champion the music of our time.

As violist Jordan Bak says, "I think the future for classical music is bright, but we need to keep adjusting."

#### JORDAN BAK

Jamaican-American violist Jordan Bak, 25, a winner of the 2019 Concert Artists Guild Competition, seeks to break barriers. "Diversity needs a huge push," says Bak, an alumnus and laureate of the Sphinx Organization, a Detroit-based nonprofit that works to increase black and Latinx representation in classical music. When children never see people like themselves on stage, adds Bak, they drop out due to lack of

role models—a problem he hopes to help address.

Bak, who is currently enrolled in the Artist Diploma program at the Juilliard School, envisions the classical music concert of the future as less formal. He mentions Groupmuse, a series that brings small ensembles of musicians to perform in people's homes, as a great example of an informal but high-quality experience. "There's no performance-audience barrier without a stage," he explains. Given the diminishing attention span of modern audiences, he says concerts could be shorter and feature individual movements of

symphonies and a mix of styles and time periods that would "give a diverse overview and complete concert experience." Bak, who has performed as a recitalist and chamber musician at (among others) Alice Tully Hall, the Verbier Festival, and the Helsinki Musiikkitalo, will premiere James

**"I think the future for classical music is bright, but we need to keep adjusting," says violist Jordan Bak. "Diversity needs a huge push."**

Ra's Concerto for Three Solo Violas on April 3, 2020 with the New York Classical Players. Bak says it's important to perform new music, and additional highlights of his 2019-20 season include a Young Artist Residency with Minnesota Public Radio's *Performance Today* program, recitals in New York and Tel Aviv, and performances with two venturesome ensembles that tackle wide-ranging repertory: the conductorless ensemble A Far Cry, based in Boston, and The Knights, the Brooklyn-based chamber orchestra.

Linking a concert with a cause can resonate with audiences, Bak says, citing violist Kim Kashkashian's Music for Food Initiative (which addresses hunger in local communities) as an inspiring example. In addition, Bak states, audience awareness of what goes on beyond the stage, facilitated by artists sharing personal posts on social media, is a positive development. But when it comes to cellphones in the concert space, this millennial believes that while there's nothing wrong with taking a photo before or after the concert, "to really appreciate the art the musicians are sharing, you should live in the moment and appreciate it instead of capturing every single second."

#### KATHERINE BALCH

Katherine Balch always knew she wanted to be both a composer and a teacher, which she attributes in part to her extroverted personality. "I learn from my students, from bouncing ideas off them and seeing what sparks their interests. I feel energized from teaching," says Balch, 28, currently on faculty at the Mannes School of Music and a former faculty member of Bard College

**T**he current generation of young classical musicians must navigate many of the same hurdles as their predecessors, while facing fewer traditional performance opportunities—but at the same time they can take advantage of 21st-century ways to innovate and experiment. Today's emerging artists must train to be superb technicians—that's a given—while also learning how to be activists and entrepreneurs able to forge their own career paths. The passionate and forward-thinking young artists profiled here have distinctive ideas about the ideal classical



The Juilliard School

Jordan Bak performs Jacob Druckman's *Viola Concerto* with the Juilliard Orchestra and conductor Gerard Schwarz at Alice Tully Hall in 2017.

Conservatory Prep and the Walden School. Balch, who completed her Bachelor of Arts in history and political science and Bachelor of Music in the Tufts University/New England Conservatory joint-degree program, has sought out teaching artists in her own career and tried to learn from composers across the aesthetic spectrum.

Balch, who also has a Master of Music from the Yale School of Music, is on the roster of Young Concert Artists and a Doctor of Musical Arts candidate at

**As one might expect from a composer, Katherine Balch is confident that audiences crave new music.**

Columbia University (where her mentors include George Lewis, Georg Haas, Fred Lerdahl, and Marcos Balter). She is composer in residence at the California Symphony, a three-year position that began in 2017 and wraps up in 2020. This March, Music Director Donato Cabrera will lead the world premiere of *Illuminations*, a song cycle for three voices and orchestra featuring a libretto inspired by the female characters of Rimbaud's poems and Balch's favorite women poets. In January, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra premieres Balch's *Impromptu*, which it commissioned for a program featuring Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Balch's music has also been

performed by the Minnesota, Oregon, and Tokyo symphony orchestras, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, and the American Composers Orchestra.

Her advice to young composers building their careers is to engage with their community. Perhaps surprisingly for someone of her generation, she believes that social media marketing and personal branding won't pay off unless aspiring composers go to concerts, hear other musicians play, and make vital connections in person.

As one might expect from a composer, Balch is confident that audiences crave new music. She cites a recent exchange in the *New York Times* between chief classical music critic Anthony Tommasini and a listener regarding a concert of repertory staples performed by the New York Philharmonic. Tommasini criticized the programming as unadventurous, while the reader pleaded for more repertory staples. "Most listeners are not like that listener," says Balch. "Most are open minded and open to new experienc-

es. Some orchestras, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic is an obvious model for this, are assuming that their listeners are intelligent, curious people who want to hear new music alongside the masters."

**STELLA CHEN**

Violinist Stella Chen, 27, a graduate of the Harvard/New England Conservatory Dual Degree Program, received a Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Harvard and a Master of Music from New England Conservatory. She is one of the recipients of the 2020 Lincoln Center Awards for Emerging Artists and won the 2019 Queen Elisabeth International Violin Competition. While on the one hand she believes that competitions are indeed for racehorses, she says they are also a great way to get exposure. "The only way to do competitions is to do it for yourself and present who you are," she adds. "I played repertory that is very much me and not typical competition pieces."

Chen, who is completing her Doctor of Musical Arts at Juilliard, also believes musicians should speak about the music they are performing during concerts. It shouldn't be a lecture, she explains, but should offer "some sort of hook or story so that the audience can come along with you." When a performer suggests passages for listeners to listen for, she adds, the audience often listens more attentively.



California Symphony

Katherine Balch, composer in residence at the California Symphony, with the orchestra and Music Director Donato Cabrera at a rehearsal for the May 2019 world premiere of her *Artifacts* violin concerto.



Violinist Stella Chen won the 2019 Queen Elisabeth International Violin Competition in Brussels. In photo, Chen performs the Beethoven Violin Concerto with the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège led by Pablo González at the Centre for Fine Arts–Brussels.

Programming creatively is key to engaging audiences, she says: “I think it’s important to play music of contemporary composers and my peers. Otherwise I don’t know how much people will listen to the same stuff and grow.” Chen, who has performed with ensembles including

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the Belgian National Orchestra, Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, Brussels Philharmonic, Orquesta Filarmónica de Medellín, London Chamber Orchestra, and Welsh National Symphony Orchestra, will perform the U.S. premiere of Jörg Widmann’s Violin Concerto No. 2 on March 27 with the Juilliard Orchestra at Alice Tully Hall, with the composer conducting. If she could commission a piece, Chen says Caroline Shaw, Joan Tower, and Shulamit Ran would be among her top choices, as she wants to support female composers.

Chen says she’s optimistic about the future of classical music, in part because “I’m right in the middle of it. I am in love with the music.” The trouble may lie with the next generations, she says, musing whether

kids who have an iPad at age five will be able to sit and listen to a whole symphony when they’re adults.

#### ANGELICA HAIRSTON

Atlanta-based harpist Angelica Hairston, 27, was studying at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto when Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin were killed by police. Sitting in her practice room, she felt helpless. “I could talk

about a Baroque trill all day,” she says, “but I didn’t know how to have a conversation about what was happening in my own country.” The conservatories of the future, she hopes, will “find ways to not only train students to be incredible technicians, but to find the ways our music creates impact.”

In 2016 Hairston, who has performed concertos with the Atlanta and Nashville symphony orchestras, founded Challenge the Stats, a concert series primarily in Atlanta that features conservatory-trained Black and Latinx musicians and attracts a diverse audience. Hairston holds a Master of Music Industry Leadership from Northeastern University, where as a recipient of the 2015 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Graduate Fellowship she researched nonprofits serving communities of color and began brainstorming for Challenge the Stats.

In addition to its concert series, Challenge the Stats offers workshops in schools and aims to enable musicians of color to use music as a tool for social change. “We look at the landscape of Atlanta and look at the issues facing communities of color and speak into those spaces,” says Hairston, a former member of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra’s Talent Development Program, which trains young Black and Latinx musicians. She also serves as artistic director of the Urban Youth Harp Ensemble, where she provides free harp



Harpist Angelica Hairston founded Challenge the Stats, a concert series featuring Black and Latinx artists. At the inaugural Challenge the Stats concert, in Boston in 2016, Hairston performs with dancer Michael Morris.

instruction to more than 80 students in Atlanta. Hairston is eager to dispel stereotypes about the instrument and its performers both on stage and in her studio, where 90 percent of her students are young men and women of color.

When planning concerts, she says, it's important to actually ask audiences what

**“There is such a broad swath of what classical music can look like,” says harpist Angelica Hairston. “Seeing people of color performing together is very powerful.”**

they want. “People have an expectation that classical music equals Bach,” she points out. “Yet there is such a broad swath of what classical music can look like and be presented as. Seeing people of color performing together is very powerful. Families will say ‘I’ve never seen a black harpist on stage.’” Hairston was inspired by her mentor Ann Hobson Pilot, an African American harpist and former principal harp of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

As for the concert of the future? Perhaps concerts won't be so long, she muses, or there might be better food than now. Most important, Hairston believes that it's essential to “break down the idea of the stage and audience” and emphasize “that we're all in this together. It's a human and communal experience.”

### **BEOMJAE KIM**

For flutist Beomjae Kim, who recently performed music by Gabriela Lena Frank, Viet Cuong, Robert Sirota, and Andrew Norman at a Music from Copland House concert in upstate New York, the greatest advantage of playing works by living composers is that he can ask them questions. “When I feel like I'm hitting a wall, I can email them or call to ask what they envisioned when they wrote the piece,” he explains.

Kim, also a visual artist whose photography, painting, and installations are influenced by the Fluxus and Minimalism movements, holds Master's and Artist Diploma degrees from the Manhattan School of Music. He is a former member of Ensemble Connect, a two-year New



Ryan Brandenburg

Flutist Beomjae Kim backstage at Philadelphia's Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts at the 2017 Astral National Auditions Winners Concert. Kim played Paul Taffanel's *Fantaisie sur Jean de Nivelle* at the concert.

York City-based fellowship that combines performance opportunities, community engagement, entrepreneurship, and professional development. He describes the fellowship (a program of Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School, and Weill Music Institute in partnership with the New York City Department of Education) as an invaluable experience, because, while his conservatory training helped make him the musician he is, Kim recalls that he “never

**Flutist Beomjae Kim's ultimate goal as a musician, he says, “is to tell a story and not just play an instrument.”**

learned how to be a musician who can communicate with other people or express myself outside of music.”

The Seoul-born Kim, who moved to the U.S. in 2008 to study with Michel Debost at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, says that one of the most important things he learned at Ensemble Connect, in addition to benefiting from professional development and marketing sessions, was “how to develop entrepreneurial skills as a 21st-century musician.” Part of being a modern musician, he adds, is developing good public speaking skills, which he learned through Ensemble Connect and his management, Astral Artists. Kim says he loves sharing his personal experiences about a piece and helping the listener understand the context, which he believes is especially important when performing contemporary music. But since English is his second

language, it has proved a particularly difficult challenge.

On his blog, Kim candidly shares other hurdles he's faced during his career, such as the removal of all of his wisdom teeth in July 2018—a particularly difficult roadblock for a flute player. After the surgery Kim suffered pain when he played the flute, writing: “I am practicing everything slowly from the beginning in order to retrieve where I left off. So in a way I am re-learning everything in both physically and emotionally painful ways.”

His ultimate goal as a musician, he says, “is to tell a story and not just play an instrument.”

### **LIDIYA YANKOVSKAYA**

“People want to see and hear artistic work that reflects them and their lives and the things around them,” says conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya, 33, music director of Chicago Opera Theater and a champion of operatic rarities, contemporary works, and Russian masterpieces. “Audiences are looking for new experiences. Going to a concert or opera is not just about hearing the music. It's a communal experience that somehow ties into your own world view and life and makes you think about new things in a new way.”

Yankovskaya's 2019-20 season includes conducting works by Dan Shore, Joby Talbot, and David T. Little at Chicago Opera Theater and Ricky Ian Gordon's *Ellen West* at the Prototype Festival in New York. She conducts Stravinsky's *Firebird* at the Illinois Philharmonic, Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony at the Chicago Philharmonic, and will make her Glimmerglass Festival debut leading Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Yankovskaya took part in the League of American Orchestras' 2018 Bruno Walter National Conductor Preview, a two-day showcase for conductors on the rise.

Over the next ten years, Yankovskaya believes that new work will take precedence over the warhorses. It's not about rejecting the standard repertory, she explains, but about embracing the new. She also believes that the classical world will eventually figure out how to best manage mobile devices and other distractions in the concert space. “The attitude now tends to be extreme,” she says. “On one end, it's ‘please clap and live tweet and film ev-



NICK RUTHER

Lidiya Yankovskaya leads the Refugee Orchestra, which she founded in 2016. The ensemble consists of instrumentalists and singers who are themselves refugees or whose family and friends came to the U.S. as refugees.

everything.' On the other end, the conductor will stop the performance if anyone coughs. I think there's a happy medium."

Yankovskaya, an alumna of the Dallas Opera's Hart Institute for Women Conductors and Marin Alsop's Taki Concordia Fellowship, hopes that regulations

about making recordings will evolve. After all, she points out, it's important for institutions to create shareable content, but orchestras can't easily make a 30-second clip for social media. Right now, she says, "Opera companies are better than orchestras at finding ways to create content that audience members want to share."

Yankovskaya, who was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, and came to America as a refugee, founded the Refugee

Orchestra Project in 2016 to highlight the contributions of this country's immigrants and to advocate for tolerance. The ensemble, which consists of instrumentalists and singers who are themselves refugees or whose family and friends came to the U.S. as refugees, has performed at the

**"People want to see and hear artistic work that reflects them and their lives and the things around them," says conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya.**

United Nations headquarters in New York City, at the Barbican in London, England, and in various venues in New York, Chicago, Boston, and the Washington, D.C. area. "Artists interact with so many different people and cultures," says Yankovskaya. "I work in major cities and places I might otherwise never have visited. That places artists in an unusual position and it's our responsibility to share that perspective." **S**

VIVIEN SCHWEITZER is a music journalist and pianist. She is the author of *A Mad Love: An Introduction to Opera*, which was published in September 2018 and named one of the Ten Best Books of September by the *Christian Science Monitor*. She was a music critic at the *New York Times* from 2006 to 2016 and now freelances for publications including *The Economist*.



Randall Goosby  
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