

The Delaware Symphony's chamber series takes place in the Gold Ballroom of Wilmington's Hotel du Pont. In photo: a concert last April featuring Bartók's *Divertimento*, Copland's *Quiet City*, and Mozart's *Symphony No. 40*.



Joe del Tillo/Moonloop Photography

# Up Close and Personal

**Chamber music series by orchestras give musicians additional creative outlets, provide audiences with fresh musical encounters in often unexpected settings, and balance the tried and true with the new and unusual. It's Haydn and Schubert and Beethoven—and a whole lot more.**

by Chester Lane

CHAMBER MUSIC CONCERTS have long been popular components of many orchestras' seasons, providing intimate musical experiences that are deeply satisfying to audience and musicians alike. A "chamber," of course, is a room, and the genre has its origins as private concerts in the homes of members of the aristocracy, but today's chamber concerts are held mostly in public spaces, many of them smaller than an orchestra's regular venue. Audience members range from discerning connoisseurs eager to hear works such as Schubert's "Trout" Quintet and the Dvořák Piano Quintet to newcomers seeking something novel, but the vibe can be quite informal, with some concerts taking place in pubs and other after-hours spaces. And lacking a conductor or a podium, chamber concerts allow the audience to get up close and personal with the musicians—and the music.

Today, the range of orchestra-sponsored chamber music activity is immense, and it's happening at orchestras from every region of the country. The benefits are multifold. Small-ensemble concerts spotlight the talents of individual players from the orchestra, often empowering them with choice of repertoire, choice of colleagues, and a chance to talk to the audience. With

smaller forces performing in smaller venues and informal settings, each musician is seen by audience members as individual and approachable. A chamber series can complement an orchestra's season with thematically linked programming, or reveal a fuller picture of a guest artist who is appearing in the main series. Orchestra musicians can collaborate intimately with outside artists in a variety of ways, exploring iconic Beethoven and Haydn string quartets as well as new pieces by living composers. And musicians in an orchestra's chamber ensemble can serve as ambassadors to the wider classical music world, while providing a creative outlet

for those musicians, who often are actively involved in curating programs. In many cases, there is a social component, with food, drink, and the opportunity to chat and hang out with the musicians. Here's a look at a cross-section of chamber-music happenings by orchestras nationwide.

## **Off the Main Stage, With and Without Food**

Chamber music is integral to the **Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra**, whose "Symphony Offstage" program regularly brings small ensembles to instrument petting zoos, farmers' markets, libraries, festivals, and local gathering spaces, as part of what



Rebekah Williams

The Greensboro Symphony's April 2019 casual "HOPS" concert at Preyer Brewing, a downtown pub, featured (from left) percussionists Peter Zlotnick, Wiley Sikes, and John Beck.

Executive Director Mary Steffek Blaske calls the orchestra's "grow with the A<sup>2</sup>SO" experience. In the same spirit of audience engagement, small ensembles figure prominently in the orchestra's subscription offerings. Five of the six weekend mainstage classical concerts at the Michigan Theater and Hill Auditorium are followed by a Monday afternoon chamber concert, performed for up to 130 patrons seated at round tables in the Jewish Community

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Center of Greater Ann Arbor. These hour-long events, with coffee and dessert at each table, often feature the guest artist from the weekend's mainstage concert; this season it's cellist Zlatomir Fung (recent cello-division winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition), pianist Anton Nel, and violinist Itamar Zorman. For the chamber series finale in April 2020—billed as "Gems from the A<sup>2</sup>SO Principals"—in-house talent is the headliner.

The **Delaware Symphony Orchestra's** four-concert chamber series is performed on Tuesday evenings in the Gold Ballroom of Wilmington's Hotel Du Pont, with champagne, coffee, and dessert included in the \$62 general-admission price. Repertoire is largely selected by Music Director David Amado in consultation with Executive Director Alan Jordan and Principal Librarian/Personnel Manager Joshua Kovach. The 2019–20 season honors women composers past and present: Missy Mazzoli's *Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)* opened the orchestral series on September 27, and the chamber series extends the

tribute with works by Jennifer Higdon, Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, Caroline Shaw, and Joan Tower. An ongoing objective of the chamber series, Jordan says, is to utilize the talents of Concertmaster David Southorn whenever a solo violin is called for; this season, aside from ensemble playing and helping to

plan the chamber series, he's the soloist in Piazzolla's *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*.

California's **Berkeley Symphony Orchestra** presents its five-concert chamber series on Sunday afternoons in neighboring Piedmont, in an intimate space at Piedmont Center for the Arts where the musicians are semi-surrounded by an audience of up to 120. BSO Executive and Artistic Director René Mandel, a violinist, is the rare executive director who performs

in his own orchestra's chamber series, playing in at least one concert and moderating the onstage conversations at all five. The series, Mandel says, is "certainly a way for Berkeley Symphony musicians to perform more, but also a way to present other musicians from the Bay Area and sometimes beyond." For 2019–20 he has invited San Francisco Symphony violinist Florin Parvulescu to perform Ysaye's *Six Sonatas for Solo Violin*. A "Beethoven to Rindt" concert will include a work written by Berkeley Symphony violist Darcy Rindt, one of the five musicians performing in that concert. The March 15 "Gershwin to Adams" program (that's Samuel Adams, not John Adams or John

Luther Adams) will feature BSO violinist Matthew Szemela. For the April 19 series finale, Mandel will take up the violin for one of his favorite string quartets, Shostakovich's Eighth.

Another series with hands-on participation from the orchestra's leader happens at North Carolina's **Greensboro Symphony Orchestra**, whose music director, Dmitry Sitkovetsky, is also a violinist. "Sitkovetsky & Friends" is presented in a 350-seat venue, Greensboro's newly built Well Spring Theater. Sitkovetsky selects most of the repertoire and performs in all five concerts, collaborating with his Greensboro Symphony colleagues and guests. For the 2019–20 season-opener on September 20, the four violin parts in Spohr's *Double String Quartet* were handled by Sitkovetsky, GSO Concertmaster Marjorie Bagley, and two guests, Mayuko Kamio and Risa Hokamura. Other guests this season include pianist Julia Zilberquit, guitarist Artyom Dervoed, and—in a star turn that also showcases three of his own duo compositions—double bassist Xavier Foley. Foley will collaborate with Sitkovetsky in *Hibernation*, with a pianist in *Gravity Waltz*, and with a cellist in *Cranberry Juice*.

Greensboro Symphony ensembles reach audiences in quite a different way with "HOPS," a new Sunday series at Preyer Brewing, a downtown pub. "HOPS" started last season with performances by a string quartet, a jazz trio, and a percus-



David S. Welland

René Mandel (above speaking), the Berkeley Symphony's executive and artistic director, hosts and sometimes performs in the orchestra's chamber series at Piedmont Center for the Arts. Performers in February 2018 included pianist Markus Pawlik, violinist Karsten Windt, violist Deanna Badizadegan, and cellist Angela Lee.

sion trio. The ticket price includes a drink. "People listen for 20 minutes, then mingle and drink and buy drinks for the musi-



North Carolina Symphony Principal Bass Leonid Finkelshteyn addresses “Soundbites” patrons at Raleigh’s Humble Pie restaurant, March 2018; his duo partner is North Carolina Symphony Principal Second Violin Jacqueline Saed Wolborsky.

icians,” says GSO President Lisa Crawford. “Then another 20 minutes of music, more mingling, and a third set. ‘HOPS’ was designed for people in the GSO’s young professionals group, but those people are known for buying tickets at the last minute, so the audience for this has mostly been our regular subscribers, who buy tickets early. Seating is limited to 130, and we’ve had to have a bouncer to keep people out.”

At the **North Carolina Symphony**, the synergy with informal chamber music lies more with food than beer. The Monday evening “Soundbites” concerts are performed at two Raleigh restaurants, Humble Pie and Cantina 18, and an additional “Soundbites” took place last season in Fayetteville, one of five other cities where the orchestra presents an orchestral series. “The original idea was that ‘Soundbites’ would happen in bars and appeal to younger audiences,” says North Carolina Symphony Director of Communications Meredith Laing, “but for a number of years it’s been at restaurants. A lot of our classical series subscribers attend, and typically the ‘Soundbites’ concerts sell out. Held on days when the restaurant is closed to the general public, or in a space reserved for ‘Soundbites’ patrons, these are very intimate events. A huge benefit for the audience is having the musicians talk and share insights about the music. And it’s really important to the musicians that they can curate these programs themselves.”

### DIY Ensembles in the Orchestra’s Home

The **Des Moines Symphony’s** “Spotlight at the Temple” concerts are on Tuesday evenings in the Grand Hall of the Temple for Performing Arts, a restored Masonic temple that houses the orchestra’s offices and its affiliated Des Moines Symphony Academy. They are presented in a nightclub atmosphere: special lighting, patrons seated at café tables in close proximity to the musicians, wine and a full bar and hors d’oeuvres.

Now in its third season, “Spotlight at the Temple”—one concert in October, the other in May—grew out of the organization’s five-year plan, which Executive Director Richard Early says calls for “establishing a musician-curated chamber music series that provides a really high-quality opportunity for our musicians.” All orchestra members and Academy faculty are invited to submit ideas for repertoire, the makeup of the ensemble, and how to engage listeners in a unique way, says Megan Helmers, director of marketing and public relations. “Our staff looks over the applications—we’ve had as many as 30 per season—and we discuss what fits thematically and musically, what we think are going to be the most interesting and enriching programs,” says Helmers. Concerts have included such venturesome offerings as Lou Harrison’s *The Perilous Chapel* for cello, flute, harp, and percussion; a flute-and-harp version of Piazzolla’s *Histoire du Tango* performed with a pair of dancers; and Kodály’s Duo for Violin and Cello

played alongside an improvised piece inspired by Kodály’s ethnographic research.

The **Minnesota Orchestra’s** Sunday afternoon chamber series takes place four times each season in a 200-seat atrium adjoining the lobby of Orchestra Hall. “It’s very much a musician-curated series,” says Director of Communications Gwen Pappas. “An invitation goes to the whole orchestra. Musicians organize themselves and come up with their own programs. An advisory group of musicians looks over the proposals, and together with our artistic department makes some choices.” Occasionally an outside musician is needed—a guest pianist recently performed Bartók’s *Contrasts* with Associate Concertmaster Susie Park and Principal Clarinet Gabriel Campos Zamora, and a saxophonist joined five orchestra members in a suite from Walton’s *Façade*—but basically these concerts let Minnesota Orchestra musicians shine in programs of their own devising. “Typically one of the players will speak to the audience about the music, why they like it and chose to program it,” says Pappas. “These concerts are under the orchestra’s auspices and take place in our hall, but in a smaller setting where the musicians can show their personality a little more.”

On the main stage at Walt Disney Concert Hall, small ensembles from the **Los Angeles Philharmonic** get to shine and individual players get to talk. “The hall has fabulous acoustics, and is designed in such a way that it doesn’t have to be small to be intimate,” says Phillipa Cole, the orchestra’s associate director of artistic planning. Cole believes that ensemble playing is “an essential way of making music, of working closely with your colleagues in a way that can only benefit the orchestra as a whole.

And we try to feature all of the instrumental sections in the chamber series.”



Des Moines Symphony Principal Harp Erin Brooker-Miller and Principal Flute Kayla Burggraf perform Piazzolla’s *Histoire du Tango* in a restored Masonic temple during the orchestra’s inaugural “Spotlight at the Temple” chamber concert, May 2018.



Courtesy/Perry

Minnesota Orchestra Principal Flute Adam Kuenzel shares his thoughts on Janáček's wind sextet *Mládí* at a recent "Chamber Music in the Target Atrium" concert in the lobby of Orchestra Hall.

The LA Phil presents eight Tuesday evening chamber concerts at Disney Hall each season, offering programs that musicians have put together themselves and vetted with the artistic planning department. Patrons enjoy a complimentary glass of wine before each performance. Ensemble members talk from the stage, introducing the music and proffering gentle reminders about the silencing of cellphones. More than 85 LA Phil musicians will be represented over the course of the 2019–20 season, in works ranging in scale from Martinů's Duo No. 1 for Violin and Cello to Richard Strauss's Serenade for 13 Winds. About once per season, the LA Phil players collaborate with a guest artist. Last spring it was Marc-André Hamelin in the Dvořák



Ryan Miller/LA Phil

Los Angeles Philharmonic violinist Stacey Wetzel and cellist David Garrett perform onstage at Walt Disney Concert Hall in October 2018 during one of the orchestra's chamber music events. LA Phil violist Minor Wetzel, not in photo, completed the string trio.

Piano Quintet. This season it's conductor and composer Thomas Adès, who will join them for a chamber concert during his guest-conducting week with the orchestra: he'll perform his own Piano Quintet on a program rounded out by Schubert's "Trout" Quintet and *Quartettsatz*.

### Guest Curators and Branded Ensembles

In Costa Mesa, California, **Pacific Symphony** chamber ensembles perform in the 320-seat Samueli Theater, adjacent to the orchestra's much larger main venue at Segerstrom Center for the Arts. The three-concert "Café Ludwig" series (the name is a nod to Beethoven) takes place on Sunday afternoons, with coffee and pastries at cabaret-style tables. Its most distinctive feature is an outside curator who hosts and performs in each concert. Since 2008 the curator has been pianist Orli Shaham. Much of the repertoire during her tenure has involved piano, including major solo pieces, but Pacific Symphony musicians have taken center stage with such works as Dvořák's String Quintet in G Major, Holst's Fugal Concerto for Flute, Oboe and Strings, and Haydn's Clarinet Quartet No. 3. Last May, the pianist/curator/host donned a fourth hat—narrator—for Alan Ridout's *Ferdinand the Bull*, a setting for solo violin of the classic children's story; the musical protagonist was Concertmaster Dennis Kim.

"Orli and I program 'Café Ludwig' together, but we have input from the musicians," says Eileen Jeanette, the Pacific Symphony's senior vice president of artistic planning and production. "It's 98.5 percent principals, because we want those musicians to participate. They never turn you down; it's the kind of work they absolutely love. And the series has basically been sold out since Orli came on board."

The **New York Philharmonic** offers a range of chamber offerings, from guest-curated concerts to events featuring a variety of orchestra musicians—and the New York Philharmonic String Quartet, launched in 2017. Guest-curated chamber concerts include two new series, "Sound ON" and "Nightcap," that de-

buted last season. Both are hosted by Nadia Sirota, the violist and podcast producer who was named the orchestra's creative partner in 2018. "The strategy behind both series," says Vice President of Artistic Planning Isaac Thompson, "is to bring contemporary chamber music into the core of what we do here at Lincoln Center." The three-concert "Sound ON" series, presented Tuesday evenings in Jazz at Lincoln Center's glamorous Appel Room overlooking Central Park, features music related to mainstage subscription concerts; this season's "Telling Tales" program, for example, is keyed to the previous week's concert staging of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. The



Pacific Symphony/Bryan Flores

Pacific Symphony Concertmaster Dennis Kim performs Alan Ridout's *Ferdinand the Bull* at a May 2019 "Café Ludwig" concert, with pianist Orli Shaham, who curates and performs regularly in the series, as a very engaged narrator.

popular 10:30 p.m. "Nightcap" concerts—seven this season, up from six the first year, when all of them sold out—take place in a cabaret setting at Lincoln Center's Kaplan Penthouse following Saturday evening orchestral concerts. This season's curators include the composers whose work is being given a world or New York premiere by the Philharmonic earlier that evening.

Just up the street from the Lincoln Center campus, at 450-seat Merkin Concert Hall, the long-running New York Philharmonic Ensembles program presents a six-concert series on Sunday afternoons that Thompson describes as "really musician-driven. Anyone in the orchestra can propose repertoire and put together an ensemble. The musicians' chamber music committee takes those requests, then



Music Director Jaap van Zweden leads a chamber ensemble of New York Philharmonic musicians in Louis Andriessen's *Symphony for Open Strings* at the Appel Room, a few blocks from the Philharmonic's home at Lincoln Center, in the orchestra's first "Sound ON" chamber concert, October 7, 2018.

works with us to program the concerts. Each group decides on one person who will speak from the stage. It's a great way for the audience to hear directly from the musicians." A typical Ensembles concert might involve a dozen or more Philharmonic players and perhaps a guest pianist; this season's repertoire ranges from string duos to octets, and from novelties to the canonic.

Apart from the "Sound ON," "Nightcap," and New York Philharmonic Ensembles series, the string quartet literature



The Boston Symphony Chamber Players, comprising principal musicians of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, regularly performs at Jordan Hall and other Boston venues, at Tanglewood, and elsewhere in Massachusetts. The group also tours internationally; pictured above is a performance at Dublin's National Concert Hall in spring 2019.

is largely the province of four individuals—Concertmaster Frank Huang, Principal Associate Concertmaster Sheryl Staples, Principal Viola Cynthia Phelps, and Principal Cello Carter Brey—per-

forming as the New York Philharmonic String Quartet. The NYPSQ debuted in May 2017, performing with the Philharmonic in *Absolute Jest*, John Adams's concerto for string quartet and orchestra. Brey says he finds working in a quartet with his orchestra peers "incredibly gratifying." When he and his colleagues were invited to form the ensemble, he recalls, "there was no hesitation. We'd already played together in various iterations, and we understood immediately that being officially sanctioned as a Philharmonic brand was a very big step for them, and very significant for us." Largely in charge of its own repertoire, the NYPSQ performs annually at New York's 92nd Street Y—typically with a pianist—and in a domestic touring program that carries the Philharmonic name to about ten U.S. cities each year.

**Boston Symphony Orchestra** musicians form ensembles and choose repertoire through a Community Chamber Music Concerts program, performing free lunchtime concerts at Fenway Center, a 175-seat venue close to Symphony Hall, and repeating those programs in communities as far from the home city as Worcester—a total of about 26 concerts per season, according to BSO Artistic Administrator Anthony Fogg, whose office administers the program along with a musicians' committee. "Typically the players are passionate about the music, offer spoken introductions, and talk about their careers," he says. "It's a great way of connecting with audiences."

A group of ten BSO principals—five strings, four woodwinds, principal horn—constitutes the *grande dame* of orchestra-based chamber ensembles, the Boston Symphony Chamber Players. BSCP performs a four-concert

series at Jordan Hall, appears regularly at Tanglewood, and burnishes the orchestra brand with its BSO Classics recordings and international tours. Last May in Europe, during the eighteenth overseas tour in its 54-year history, the ensemble reprised its 2018-19 season collaboration with Garrick Ohlsson by partnering with him in the Brahms Piano Quintet; utilized all ten players in Jean Françaix's 1987 composition *Dixtuor*; and brought American chamber music to Europe with Michael Gandolfi's *Plain Song, Fantastic Dances*—a work commissioned for the BSCP in 2005. **S**

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