



The chamber ensemble Russian Renaissance performs music ranging from tango and folk to classical and jazz. The group comprises balalaika, domra, contrabass balalaika, and accordion.

ANSEL AVETISYAN

# Instrumental Excursions

With orchestras and audiences increasingly open to exploring new combinations of sounds, solo virtuosos are bringing a diverse sonic palette to orchestral stages on instruments ranging from mandolin and harpsichord to accordion, ondes Martenot, and Theremin.

by Clive Paget



Ondes Martenot soloist Nathalie Forget demonstrates her instrument before the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's January 2019 performance of Messiaen's *Turangalila* Symphony.

Along with the overture and the symphony, the concerto is a much-loved part of the traditional orchestral concert program, an opportunity for a soloist to demonstrate feats of death-defying virtuosity. Repertoire from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries is weighted heavily toward violin and piano, and today soloists on these instruments still have full careers performing concertos by Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, and more. Other instruments get less of a look in—though cello concertos by Dvořák, Haydn, and Saint-Saëns are also favorites, and the flute, oboe, viola, double bass,

horn, and so on do get their occasional moments in the sun. But what about soloists who play *really* unconventional instruments?

These days virtuosity is not limited to traditional orchestral instruments, and it's becoming more common to find programs featuring a mandolinist, accordionist, or even more rarefied instruments like a Theremin or gamelan. Take the ukulele. Hawaii-born Jake Shimabukuro is both ukulele soloist and composer, and if you haven't heard him yet, you may soon. He plays everything from Hawaiian music

Right: In February, Adam Boyles conducted the Hartford Symphony in a program of Copland, Piazzolla, Márquez, and Gabriela Lena Frank, featuring Julien Labro on bandoneon.

and the Chinese pipa, while Chris Thile has given added visibility to the mandolin through his solo and Punch Brothers tours and now as host of National Public Radio's weekly "Live From Here" program. YouTube has allowed us to check out a whole smorgasbord of unusual instruments. Many of today's new breed



Accordion soloist Hanzhi Wang at a master class during her February 2019 residency with the Tennessee-based IRIS Orchestra (not pictured in photo).

to jazz, blues, bluegrass, folk, and classical music. He's performed twice—in 2016 and 2019—with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, and has collaborated with the likes of Yo-Yo Ma. And speaking of Ma, this winter he played a new double concerto by Zhao Lin with Chinese pipa superstar Wu Man and the New York Philharmonic.

So, how does a harpsichord wind up on a concert program, versus a concerto featuring piano or violin? And how are virtuoso mandolinists or accordionists engineering their way into the concert hall? Recent concert programs include more pieces being written or commissioned for non-Western instruments, in what might be described as the "Silk Road" effect, after two decades of Yo-Yo Ma's touring Silk Road Ensemble. Those tours gave added prominence to instruments including Galician bagpipes, Japanese shakuhachi,

of virtuosos choose to overcome a small existing body of solo works by actively commissioning new ones. For composers always looking for new creative outlets, these new sound worlds are appealing, especially given the astonishing skill sets of this very special group of instrumentalists. With both orchestras and audiences becoming increasingly open to exploring new combinations, it seems like the right moment to look at careers of some of the people who play these less conventional instruments, and the composers creating new repertoire for them.

### Accordion

Once the preserve of Parisian cafés and Russian folk bands, the accordion is making its way into concert halls, with a whole army of bright young instrumentalists on the scene. In 2017, Hanzhi

Wang, a native of China, became the first accordionist on the Young Concert Artists' roster in its 57-year history. Although the instrument was not introduced into China until 1926, where it was initially taught by Soviet Russian professors, nowadays the country reportedly boasts more accordionists than in all other countries combined. Wang's preferred repertoire includes many contemporary composers, including Sofia Gubaidulina's four concerti for accordion: two solo concerti, including the amazing *Fachwerk* (2009), a double concerto, and a triple concerto. "Gubaidulina's very special sound-sphere seems to fit the accordion very well," Wang says, going on to mention works for the instrument by Giya Kancheli, Krzysztof Penderecki, Darius Milhaud, Luciano Berio, and Per Nørgaard. "Plus, there are concerti from





Matt Dine

In November 2018, mandolinist Avi Avital and accordionist Ksenija Sidorova premiered *Monomachia*, a double concerto by Benjamin Wallfisch, with the conductorless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.



Avandea Costa

German Thereminist Carolina Eyck, also a composer and singer, has performed with groups ranging from the Apollo Chamber Players in Houston to singer/songwriter David Byrne and other bands. She premiered *Eight Seasons*, Finnish composer Kalevi Aho's Concerto for Theremin and Chamber Orchestra, with the Lapland Chamber Orchestra in 2011.

North America by R. Murray Shafer and Alan Hovhaness," she adds.

Michael Stern, music director of the Kansas City Symphony and Tennessee's IRIS Orchestra, first heard about Wang through Young Concert Artists. In an interview with Memphis's KWAM Radio earlier this year, he emphasized that Wang's artistry is "not like a novelty act—no, she is a musician through and through who happens to play this instrument and is elevating it to a different realm." At her concert with IRIS Or-

**The accordion is making its way into concert halls, with a whole army of bright young instrumentalists on the scene.**

chestra this February, Wang performed Bach's Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826, Piazzolla's *La Grand Tango* with violin, and Piazzolla's *Ave Maria*. Which brings up the topic of transcriptions, also key to Wang's training and career. "As an accordionist we do not have such a long history in classical music, but still must have the same academic knowledge as any classical musician," she says. "To play Bach, Tchaikovsky, and Grieg is a very important learning process." Stern says it was not difficult to attract audiences to hear this music. "First of all, she's playing Bach and second, it's such an immersive experience to hear her play."

Other accordionists of note include Bosnian Merima Ključo, who performed her own composition, *Sarajevo Haggadah: Music of the Book*, with CityMusic Cleveland in 2018; Latvian virtuoso Ksenija Sidorova, who in 2016 became the first accordionist to sign a recording contract

with Deutsche Grammophon; and Scotland's James Crabb, who gave the U.S. premiere of Sally Beamish's double concerto for violin, accordion, and strings with California's New Century Chamber Orchestra in November. Crabb so impressed composer Brett Dean that he wrote him an onstage accordion part in his 2017 opera *Hamlet* for the work's performances at the Metropolitan Opera in the 2021-22 season.

**Electronic Wizardry**

A pair of 20th-century electronic innovations are the ondes Martenot and the Theremin. The ondes Martenot was invented in 1928 by Maurice Martenot, whose aim was to replicate the accidental sounds of military radio oscillators in

an instrument with the expressivity of the cello. Its eerie tones are created by sliding a metal ring along a wire to create fluctuations in vacuum tubes (or via transistors in later models). Messiaen championed the instrument in his 1949 *Turangalila* Symphony, as well as in a number of chamber works, while other composers



Steven Nilsson

Ondes Martenot player Cynthia Millar has performed Messiaen's *Turangalila* Symphony hundreds of times—and is heard on the *Ghostbusters* soundtrack.

who have fallen for the ondes include Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Edgard Varèse, Charles Koechlin, and André Jolivet. Its otherworldly sound has entered popular consciousness as a staple of horror and science fiction films, while rock artists like Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood and Damon Albarn (Blur, Gorillaz) have welcomed it into their soundworlds.

One of the foremost players of the ondes Martenot is Cynthia Millar, who was first asked to research the instrument by composer Elmer Bernstein, who used it in a number of his film scores, most famously in *Ghostbusters*, with Millar on ondes. "I was a pianist, and continued to play piano in his film scores when the ondes was not appropriate," she says. Millar studied *Turangalila* under the work's first ondiste, Jeanne Loriod (1928–2001), and it's still the piece she is asked to play most often. She has performed it more than 200 times, most recently this January with both the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Millar played ondes at the Met in 2017 as well. "Thomas Adès wrote the ondes part in *The Exterminating Angel* with me in mind," she says. "It is a fabulous exploration of the outer reaches of the instrument." The public seems to respond positively to its unique voice, especially when combined with pre-concert talks, also a Millar specialty. "It can produce bewitching sounds and audiences like to know how they are made," she explains.



Harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani performed and conducted at the Seattle Symphony's "Baroque & Wine" concerts, January 2019.

An even less common instrument is the Theremin, named for its inventor, Soviet scientist Léon Theremin. The Theremin might be the only instrument that is played without physical contact. A pair of antennae respond to the relative position of the thereminist's hands—which wave about in the air, one controlling frequency, the other volume—and the resulting electric signals are passed to a loudspeaker to create its slippery, ethereal sound. Although less common than the Ondes, composers from Bohuslav Martinů to Fazil Say have

written for it, and most famously Percy Grainger used ensembles of four or six Theremins in his experimental *Free Music* compositions. A successful recent work is Finnish composer Kalevi Aho's Concerto

**The ondes Martenot, invented in 1928 by Maurice Martenot, aims to replicate the sounds of military radio oscillators with the expressivity of the cello. Messiaen championed the instrument in his 1949 *Turangalila-Symphonie*.**

for Theremin and Chamber Orchestra *Eight Seasons*, written for German thereminist Carolina Eyck in 2011.

### Mandolin

The mandolin, the harpsichord, and the recorder may have been upstaged in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries by their louder cousins the guitar, the piano, and the flute, but all three are making concert hall comebacks of late. In the case of the mandolin, that means coming up with more repertoire than the ubiquitous Vivaldi solo or two-mandolin concerti, and no one has been more tireless in creating new works for his instrument than Israeli mandolinist Avi Avital. "You can count the famous composers who wrote for mandolin



In April, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performed Amjad Ali Khan's *Samaagam*, with the composer and his sarod-playing sons Amaan Ali Bangash and Ayaan Ali Bangash joining him as soloists.



Douglas Dennis



Kulele soloist Jake Shimabukuro performs with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, led by Associate Conductor Caleb Young, January 2019.

the course of history, so I decided to go to composers to convince them, to ask them, and to commission them to write for the mandolin.”

To date Avital has been the driving force behind over 100 new works. But for those unfamiliar with the mandolin, Avital usually suggests beginning a concert with Vivaldi to familiarize the audience with the instrument, and then moving on to one of his favorite contemporary works by Avner Dorman or Anna Clyne. “Two big concerti I have coming up are by Giovanni Solima, this year, and by Jennifer Higdon, next year, which will premiere in the States,” he says. “Jennifer was top of my list. I approached her a couple of years ago but the only time we could meet was 20 minutes in a train station in Philadelphia! There, in the station, I played five notes and she said, ‘OK, I have it. I’ll write you a concerto’.”

In November, Avital and Latvian accordionist Ksenija Sidorova premiered *Monomachia*, a double concerto by English composer Benjamin Wallfisch, with

on one hand,” he explains. “Vivaldi wrote a total of four pieces for mandolin—and just to illustrate, for the bassoon he wrote 36! Something needed to be done to change

Does It Better • The Mirror Has Two Faces • What I Did For Love • If You Really Knew Me  
 My Song • Theme from Ice Castles • At The Ball • The Way We Were • The Last Time I Fell In Love • The Way  
 Last Time I Fell In Love • The Way We Were • The Last Time I Fell In Love • Chanukah  
 Someone • If You Really Knew Me • One Song • O  
 The Mirror Has Two Faces • For Love • If You  
 My Song • Theme from Ice Castles • Let • One •  
 Sophie's Choice • Ragtime • Falling •  
 I Finally Found • Remember Me • No  
 Nobody Does It Better • The Mirror Has Two Faces • What  
 They're Playing My Song • Ice Castles •  
 Take Me To Christmas •  
 I Cannot Hear The City • Nothing • I Finally Found  
 Ragtime Medley • Nobody Does It Better •  
 Me • Must Be • The Mirror • They're Playing  
 The Way We Were • Take Me To Christmas  
 Chanukah Lights • I Cannot Hear The  
 Ordinary Miracles • Ragtime  
 Has Two Faces • What I Did For  
 from Ice Castles • At The Ball  
 The Last Time I Fell In Love

**CONCORD**  
 THEATRICALS  
*proudly welcomes*  
**MARVIN HAMLISCH**  
 TO OUR CONCERT LIBRARY  
*home of*  
 RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN  
 ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER  
 IRVING BERLIN  
 COLE PORTER  
 JERRY HERMAN

CONCORD THEATRICALS CONCERT LIBRARY  
 229 W 28th St., 11 Fl., NY, NY 10001  
 theatricals@concord.com • 212-699-6568  
 concordtheatricals.com

MARVIN  
 HAMLISCH'S  
 DIAMOND  
 ANNIVERSARY  
 75  
 Years



"I decided to go to composers to convince them, ask them, and to commission them to write for the mandolin," says mandolinist Avi Avital.

the conductorless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. "I want to make sure we offer variety, and we wanted to play with Avi, but I thought it might be more interesting to combine him with another incredible soloist," explains Orpheus Executive Director Alexander Schierle. "After we had put this concert in place, we realized there was literally no repertoire for these two instruments and orchestra." In Schierle's view, Carnegie Hall is "a very traditional audience. Most soloists are either pianists or violinists, but we can't keep doing just that. We have a responsibility for our audiences and other artists," he says. "And anyway, the audience loved it, so now we have a new piece in the repertoire."

### Harpichord

The harpsichord faces a slightly different dilemma. The meatier tone of 19th-century orchestras increasingly favored the piano, and it wasn't until the 20th century, when composers like Manuel de Falla and Francis Poulenc took an interest in the instrument, that it started to regain a toehold in the concert hall. American-Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani leads a new breed of players embracing both ancient and modern, as much in demand for contemporary repertoire as he is for Bach and Rameau. "When people are adventurous enough to program harpsichord, which is itself an issue, they want Brandenburg Five and/or the Poulenc concerto," he laments. "It's frustrating, because not only is the repertoire for harpsichord massive, major composers wrote concertos for harpsichord. When I play the Martinů concerto with

Orpheus in May, it will be the first time in ten years I have been asked to play it."

Esfahani has eclectic tastes. His favorite work is Czech composer Viktor Kalabis's 1975 concerto, which he describes as "the single greatest thing written for harpsichord and orchestra," and his list of must-hears includes concertos by Michael Nyman and Francisco Coll, the latter one of Esfahani's own commissions, and Pen-

derecki's 1971 *Partita*, which also features two electric guitars. He's also helped boost the recorder's presence in the concert hall, collaborating with celebrated recordist Michala Petri in contemporary repertoire by Axel Borup-Jørgensen and Daniel Kidane.

The range and scale of recent concerts featuring unusual instruments would seem to suggest limitless possibilities. In February, Symphony Tacoma performed



*"The results have been inspirational and we will be forever grateful for their partnership and support."*

Anne Parsons, President and Executive Director  
Detroit Symphony Orchestra

**Partners in Performance, Inc.**  
Building resilient, adaptive, human-centered organizations

[www.partnersinperformance.us](http://www.partnersinperformance.us)





Armen Eliott

With her 23-year Density 2036 project, Claire Chase is commissioning a series of works for solo flute—standard flute, plus its rarer cousins the bass flute (in photo) and contrabass flute—each year until the 100th anniversary of Edgard Varèse’s groundbreaking 1936 flute solo, *Density 21.5*.

Dinuk Sijeratne’s 2011 tabla concerto, with tabla soloist Sandeep Das; the same month, the Symphony Orchestra of India performed tabla master Zakir Hussain’s *Peshkar* concerto while on tour in London, with the composer as soloist. Sitarist Anoushka Shankar has widely performed four sitar concertos by her father, Ravi

**American-Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani leads a new breed of players embracing both ancient and modern, as much in demand for contemporary repertoire as for Bach and Rameau.**

Shankar, with orchestras including the London Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Lucerne Symphony, and Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. In April, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performed Amjad Ali Khan’s *Samaagam*: A Concerto for Sarod, Concertante Group, and String Orchestra, with the composer and his sarod-playing sons Amaan Ali Bangash and Ayaan Ali Bangash joining him as soloists. Other non-Western traditional instruments featured in recent or upcoming concerts include the Egyptian oud—Joseph Tawadros will perform his own oud concerto with Australia’s

Sydney Symphony in June 2019—and the Argentinian bandoneón, featured in recent concerts by the Alabama Symphony Orchestra and the UC Davis Symphony Orchestra. Meanwhile, George Friedrich Haas’s Concerto Grosso No. 1, co-commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2017, features a quartet of alphas. Concertos even exist for the Indigenous Australian didgeridoo, most famously one by composer Sean O’Boyle. The Balinese gamelan has been incorporated into works by Steve Reich, Philip Glass and Lou Harrison, and even Benjamin Franklin’s crazy glass harmonica is getting in on the act, with 20th-century works by Bernd Alois Zimmerman and Heinz Holliger as well as recent pieces by German composer Harald Genzmer and American Garry Eister.

And consider the flute, a standard of the modern symphony orchestra. The virtuoso Claire Chase—who also plays the instrument’s far less commonly heard cousins, the bass flute and contrabass flute—is in the midst of a 23-year project called Density 2036, through which she is commissioning an entirely new body of repertoire for solo flute each year until the 100th anniversary of Edgard Varèse’s groundbreaking 1936 flute solo, *Density 21.5*. **S**

CLIVE PAGET is a freelance arts writer and critic, and Editor at Large for Australia’s *Limelight* magazine.

Adrian Wyard, Visual Artist..... 12

Akustiks, LLC ..... 4

Astral ..... 28

Boosey & Hawkes ..... 32

Classical Movements ..... C4

The Cliburn ..... 29

Diane Saldick ..... 47

Dispeker Artists ..... 18

G. Schirmer ..... 2, 7, 16

Greenberg Artists ..... 3

InsideOut Concerts ..... 19

International Violin Competition of Indianapolis ..... 38

Dan Kamin Comedy Concertos ..... 11

Kanzen Arts ..... 33

KMI Presents ..... 13, 15

League of American Orchestras ..... C3

Marilyn Rosen Presents ..... 14

McCall Music Society ..... 52

New Music For America ..... 53

New Orleans Own  
Dukes of Dixieland ..... 41

Onstage Publications ..... 14

Oregon Bach Festival ..... 40

Parker Artists ..... 5

Partners in Performance ..... 59

Propulsive Music ..... 1

R&H Concert Library/  
Concord Theatricals ..... 58

Rogue Valley Symphony ..... 17

Schott Music Corporation/  
EAMDC ..... 17

TRIO: A Novel Biography of the  
Schumanns and Brahms ..... 22

Video Ideas Productions ..... 61

Word Pros, Inc. .... 12

Yamaha Corporation of America ..... c2

Young Concert Artists ..... 27



# Captivate your Audience



NOW OFFERING  
DOUBLE FEATURE  
PRICING

Watch the Moon Landing  
**ONE SMALL  
STEP**

Explore Our Solar System

**& VOYAGE  
OF DISCOVERY 2**

Present a Cinematic  
Experience Cued in Real Time  
to Your Live Symphony  
Performance.



Learn More Online:  
[www.FilmScoreInReverse.com](http://www.FilmScoreInReverse.com)

For Rental information contact :  
[jerryw@videoideas.com](mailto:jerryw@videoideas.com) or call 423.894.2677