



It's Alive

Creating and performing new music is imperative for today's emerging artists, who seek to balance a passion for the here and now with a fervor for the classics.

Above, the Argus Quartet, from left: violinist Clara Kim, violist Dana Kelley, violinist Jason Issokson, and cellist Joann Whang

By Lucy Caplan

The death of classical music is fake news. Claims of its demise have been around a long time—as the musicologist Charles Rosen wryly noted, “the death of classical music is perhaps its oldest continuing tradition”—but they are regularly disproven. A sort of counter-tradition has sprung up, in which each supposed obituary generates a barrage of exasperated tweets and anxious think pieces assuring us that classical music is still alive.

One of the most vital elements of this resilient tradition is the creation and performance of new music. Today, as in every era before ours, people write, play, hear, and are profoundly moved by the music of our time. But this vibrancy can be hard to discern when one looks at bird’s-eye-view assessments, which tend to spotlight dispiriting trends. (According to a survey by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, during the 2016-17 season only 12.3 percent of music programmed by the 85 American orchestras in the survey was by living composers; the average date of composition was 1888.) The interests and passions of individual artists paint a more vivid picture. The emerging artists featured here—the Argus Quartet, flutist Annie Wu, violinist Gareth Johnson, trumpeter Brandon Ridenour, and oboist Olivier Stankiewicz—engage with new music in richly varied ways.

A few common threads link these artists’ approaches. Eager to integrate old and new, they aren’t interested in isolating contemporary works from other repertoire. In addition, they draw inspiration from myriad non-classical genres: not only in terms of musical material, but also in how they collaborate with other artists and interact with audiences. They value new music’s ability to introduce diverse voices into a tradition that historically has been

“When you set up the concert experience so it’s obvious that you believe in the music,” says Jason Issokson, violinist in the Argus Quartet, the audience “will come with you for just about anything.”

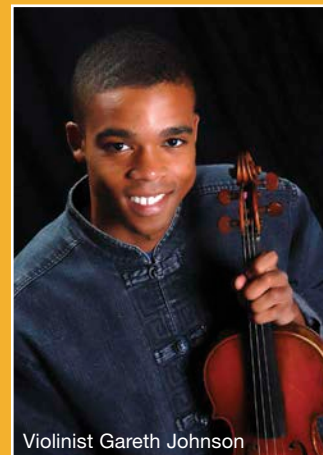
dominated by white men. And they share a conviction that what was once a typical career trajectory—say, winning an orchestra job or performing mostly standard repertoire—is not the only way forward.

Many of the featured artists emphasize that individual dedication can’t substitute for structural change: institutions and individuals alike need to embrace new music, and existing organizations have a responsibility to provide support. Asserting that



Ryan Brandenberg

Flutist Annie Wu



Violinist Gareth Johnson



Concert Artists Guild

Trumpeter Brandon Ridenour



Kalupo Kikkas

Oboist Olivier Stankiewicz



The Argus Quartet



Concert Artists Guild

Above: The Argus Quartet performs at the 2017 Ravinia Music Festival as part of the Steans Institute. They make their official Ravinia debut this summer, in a concert with pianist Misha Dichter.

classical music isn't dead, then, isn't sufficient; it's imperative that we create conditions under which it can thrive. These artists offer a range of compelling possibilities for what that might look like. Individually and together, they demonstrate that the future of the art form is excitingly uncharted.

Argus Quartet

The members of the Argus Quartet don't want to be pigeonholed as new-music specialists. "We don't think of ourselves that way," violinist Jason Issokson explains. Rather, they see new music as a means of "rebalancing programs to make them live both in the present and in the tradition." To that end, their repertoire strikes a 50/50 balance between new and traditional works.

That balance means that new music is integral to the group's mission. Just months after their formation in Los An-



Kentucky Symphony Orchestra

Annie Wu during a 2015 concert with the Kentucky Symphony Orchestra, performing Lukas Foss's *Renaissance Concerto*.

Flutist Annie Wu



geles in 2013, the quartet (which, along with Issokson, comprises violinist Clara Kim, violist Dana Kelley, and cellist Joann Whang) received a grant from Chamber Music America to commission a work by Eric Guinivan. That piece, the composer's first string quartet, has become a collective favorite, and they will return to it this winter in a performance at the DiMenna Center in New York. They've also recently commissioned works by Donald Crockett, Thomas Kotcheff, and Juri Seo. Another longstanding priority is to program music by a diverse array of composers. "There is so much great music by people who are not just white guys," notes Issokson. "And

Flutist Annie Wu says that new music "questions the norm," allowing "preconceived ideas to be poked and prodded. A lot of new music today breaks down not only aesthetic forms, but social ones as well."

it gets underrepresented. That may not be our fault, but if we don't look hard enough, that part is our fault."

Previously in residence at Yale University, the Argus Quartet is currently the Graduate Quartet in Residence at the Juilliard School. Awarded first prize at the University of Michigan's 2017 M-Prize Chamber Arts Competition, they were also selected as one of three performing ensembles for the Kronos Quartet's "Fifty for the Future" commissioning project. At their Alice Tully Hall debut in May 2018, they will present a characteristically wide-ranging program that includes works ranging from Josquin to Lutoslawski.

Performers often approach new music with what Issokson calls an "execution-based approach," especially when playing works by composers who employ highly precise notation and make unconventional technical demands. Rather than getting lost in the technical weeds, though, the Argus Quartet devotes the bulk of its rehearsal time to understanding a work's underlying structure and emotional scope. Whether they're collaborating with established figures or mentoring first-time student composers, their goal

remains the same, says Issokson: "understanding the artistic concepts, rather than just trying to take whatever we see in front of us and just put the thing in the right place."

In turn, this approach helps the quartet develop thematically cohesive programs. Issokson gives the example of a program that juxtaposes a Haydn quartet with Andrew Norman's whimsical set of miniatures, *Peculiar Strokes*, illuminating both pieces' humor in order to create an "overarching journey." Most essential to the

Violinist Gareth Johnson tackles the electric violin.



group is that they convey their dedication to a new work to listeners. “When you set up the experience so it’s obvious that you believe in the music, that there’s some reason that it needs to be in this program,” says Issokson, the audience “will come with you for just about anything.”

Annie Wu

Flutist Annie Wu is fascinated by what new music makes possible. First, there’s the pure excitement of hearing music by

“We have to continue to grow, continue to evolve, continue to change,” says violinist Gareth Johnson.

composers who live in the same world that we do. Then there’s the way that new music lets us re-imagine that world. Wu explains that new music “questions the norm,” allowing “preconceived ideas to be poked and prodded. A lot of new music today breaks down not only aesthetic forms, but

social ones as well. It hopefully makes space in the classical realm for more women, people of color, and people of different backgrounds, which challenges some of the constructs in place.”

Wu, 21, has performed widely as a soloist and an orchestral player. She is also a student in the Harvard College/New England Conservatory dual-degree program, from which she will earn an undergraduate degree in comparative literature and a graduate degree in flute performance. Her recent engagements include a performance of Mozart’s Flute Concerto No. 1 with the California Symphony, as well as appearances as principal flutist with the New World Symphony and the Music Academy of the West Festival Orchestra.

Wu has also explored new music in various contexts. In 2011, when she was fifteen



Trumpet player Brandon Ridenour

years old, her rendition of Greg Pattillo’s *Three Beats for Beatbox Flute* went viral; it now has over two million views on YouTube. More recently, she performed Lukas Foss’s *Renaissance* Concerto, which she calls “rarely performed but incredibly rich,” with the Kentucky Symphony Orchestra. Currently, she’s pursuing a thesis project for her degree in comparative literature: she commissioned Boston-based composer Charles Tarver to write a new work based on the songs of the character Mignon from Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Appren-*

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ticeship (Ambroise Thomas's 1866 opera *Mignon* was also based on the novel).

Wu notes that while it's vital to honor musical traditions, those traditions come with "a lot of social baggage that becomes integrated and unchanged even as our social fabric demands otherwise." She wants to see orchestras place works by diverse composers at the center of programs, rather than on the margins. And Wu has a lot of questions she'd like answered. "Why

aren't orchestras programming Asian American composers?" she asks. "Why does it have to be noteworthy when a woman composer is featured?" Ultimately, she says, orchestras have a duty to foster the aesthetic *and* social worlds they want to cultivate: "Symphony orchestras are really the groups with the most means and support to make this happen, and in many ways, this makes them the group that is most responsible. I hope that orchestras

soon accept that they are in a position of exciting and necessary change."

Gareth Johnson

"We can't remain in the past," says violinist Gareth Johnson. "We have to continue to grow, continue to evolve, continue to change." For Johnson, it's essential that new music appeals to listeners: "If you don't have that audience," he says, "we really don't have much going on here. So you truly have to find what people are looking for, what they are feeling." In practice, he finds that this often means turning to popular genres, New Age music, and "more recognizable things that people are really into." Johnson remains an active performer of standard repertoire: he's appeared as a soloist with orchestras, and this January

"You want to interact with repertoire works as you would with a piece your friend has written," says oboist Olivier Stankiewicz. "You tend to sacralize works less, to see them less as Greek statues."

he will perform Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy* with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in Connecticut. But he is committed to working outside that tradition as well.

Johnson, 31, is originally from St. Louis, and he has appeared as a soloist with orchestras including the Boston Pops and the National Symphony Orchestra. A repeat prizewinner at the Sphinx Competition, he has been a dedicated member of the organization, teaching at the Sphinx Performance Academy and touring with the Sphinx Virtuosi and Sphinx Symphony Orchestra. A graduate of the Lynn University Conservatory of Music, he is now based in southern Florida, where he performs in settings that range from recitals to gallery openings to awards shows.

A composer as well as a violinist, he is especially interested in music that uses technologies like loop pedals and sound-effect machines. Johnson is also a dedicated educator who works with over 200 students each week in his various capacities as a private teacher, artistic director of a community music school, and in-school teaching artist. In each context,



Oboist Olivier Stankiewicz

Kaupo Kikkas



Olivier Stankiewicz performs the Zimmermann Oboe Concerto with the Orchestre National de France.

he aims to create a fun environment in which students play music that excites them: “If it’s ‘Despacito’ that they want to play, then I’ll teach them how to play ‘Despacito,’” he says, mentioning the hit tune of 2017.

Johnson believes that music schools would do well to broaden their curricula and encourage students to expand their musical horizons. While a conservatory student, he found himself supplementing his formal training with other educational sources: YouTube videos were an especially useful resource for learning about different technical approaches and musical styles. Rather than assuming that each student aspires to be an orchestra player or soloist, music schools could more fully “support people that are starting their own original ideas.” Ultimately, Johnson says, young musicians today don’t want to be “just another fish in the sea.” Instead, “you have to find your own route.”

Brandon Ridenour

Like many young musicians, the trumpet player Brandon Ridenour entered a conservatory with the intention of one day joining an orchestra. But his artistic interests soon led him elsewhere. “I had a weird route,” Ridenour explains. After studying at Juilliard, he joined the quintet Canadian Brass, with whom he performed for seven years. During that time, he began to arrange and compose music, and to listen

extensively to music outside the classical tradition.

As soloist, Ridenour seeks out new repertoire. He will soon premiere Gregory Spears’s concerto for two trumpets and string orchestra, a co-commission of the BMI Foundation and Concert Artists Guild. In April, he’ll perform Michael Gil-

“The classical music scene could use a little more of a band mentality,” says trumpeter Brandon Ridenour—a willingness to collaborate, experiment, and bounce ideas off one another.

bertson’s new Trumpet Concerto with the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra in Wyoming. In his experience, audiences tend to respond enthusiastically to new works. In recent years, he’s sought out alternatives to the standard trumpet repertoire, and as a result has played “less and less traditional music” in his appearances with orchestras. “If it’s up to me, then I come in with my own repertoire or transcriptions,” he says. “The audience reactions are always stronger for new pieces.”

Ridenour, 32, has appeared as a concerto soloist with orchestras including the National Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Indianapolis

Symphony Orchestra. Currently based in New York City, he has performed at major concert halls and at smaller, more offbeat venues, such as National Sawdust in Brooklyn and the Church of the Intercession Crypt in Harlem. He notes that one of the advantages of living in New York is the ability to hear an immense variety of live music. After leaving Canadian Brass and returning to the city, he says, “I really took advantage of that to hear more than just contemporary classical music, to hear what was happening with music everywhere. It intrigued me and inspired me to start my own non-traditional group.” That group is Founders, a five-person songwriting collective comprised of classically

trained musicians who work across genre boundaries. In December, the group premiered Ridenour’s song cycle *Sacred Space*, which sets poetry by Edgar Allan Poe.

Working in collaborative settings has taught Ridenour that “the classical music scene could use a little more of a band mentality,” a willingness to experiment and bounce ideas off one another. He notes that it can be difficult for orchestras to adopt this sort of approach, given their large size and resulting need to “get everybody comfortable and on board with the same artistic vision.” In his experience, though, pursuing a multifaceted musical path has been deeply rewarding: “I just realized how fun and endless it can be.”

Olivier Stankiewicz

For oboist Olivier Stankiewicz, collaboration is at the heart of new music. “I find it essential,” he says. Collaboration can yield important technical insights, as when performer and composer work together to figure out precisely what sounds they want to create. Even more important, though, the process “ideally leads the instrumentalist to think in ways that he is not used to thinking,” thus shaping the future of the repertoire.

In 2015, at the age of 25, Stankiewicz was appointed principal oboist of the London Symphony Orchestra. Originally from Nice, France, he previously served as principal oboe of the Orchestre National



Olivier Stankiewicz

Performer-oboist collaborations have a long history. A prime example is Berio's landmark *Sequenza VII* for the instrument, for which the composer worked closely with Heinz Holliger; Stankiewicz notes the piece established both "a grammar in terms of sound, and also a certain approach to the instrument that is based on experimentation with the composer." Stankiewicz regularly commissions new music for his instrument. Recent and upcoming projects include Benjamin Attahir's concerto *Nur*, Laurent Durupt's concerto for oboe and wind band, a solo piece by Januibe Tejera, and Tonia Ko's *Highwire* for oboe and electronics. He also finds that working with composers helps illuminate the standard repertoire in new ways. "You become more practical and you tend to sacralize works less, to see them less as Greek statues," he explains. "You want to interact with repertoire works as you would with a piece your friend has written. If you feel more free with a new piece, you also feel more free with the repertoire."

Stankiewicz believes that the process-

es by which new music gets performed "should be challenged a bit more." Traditional performance conventions "create a lot of expectations, which sometimes are irrelevant to the repertoire we're playing." For this reason, he enjoys playing new music in alternative venues, such as the Café OTO in London. In addition, length and orchestration requirements for commissions, coupled with limited rehearsal time, sometimes create a situation in which "works are not performed at their optimum." The "pressure for results" can supersede deep engagement. Ideally, he would like to see more opportunities for in-depth collaboration with composers and multiple performances of new works. As he puts it, "The more interesting the piece, sometimes, the more you need to spend a lot of time with it." **S**

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du Capitole de Toulouse, and has also performed with the Royal Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. As a soloist, he has appeared with the French National Orchestra, Monte-Carlo Philharmonic, and Tokyo Sinfonietta, among others.



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