

Mission:

Commission



Symphony Tacoma and Music Director Sarah Ioannides rehearse Daniel Ott's *Fire-Mountain*, a multimedia work inspired by nearby Mount Rainier, pictured on screen behind orchestra. *Fire-Mountain* debuted at Tacoma's Pantages Theater in May 2017.

by Janelle Gelfand

Smaller-budget orchestras are taking a chance on contemporary composers, involving their communities and appealing to the next generation of music lovers. Here are just a few of the smaller ensembles that are embracing new music with commissions.

At the conclusion of Symphony Tacoma's May 2017 world premiere of Daniel Ott's *Fire-Mountain*, a multimedia work inspired by nearby Mount Rainier, the audience in Tacoma's Pantages Theater sat, stunned, before erupting in applause. "There was an amazing silence, a quiet embrace of something coming from the grassroots, from the community, from the things so many care about," says Symphony Tacoma Music Director Sarah Ioannides. "There was the excitement that Symphony Tacoma has given life to something that wouldn't have existed otherwise."

It wasn't just the performance itself: Symphony Tacoma's community engagement was multi-pronged for *Fire-Mountain*, which commemorated the 2016 centennial of the National Park Service. The ambitious project conceived by Ioannides had involved 155 performers and multiple organizations, including the National Park Service. For example, orchestra students from a local high school explored Mount Rainier on snowshoes, where they learned about the glacial ecosystem and heard from the composer about his creative process. At a panel discussion prior to the world premiere, the conductor, composer, a climatologist, and a National Park deputy discussed the effects of climate change on the mountain.

Because Tacoma is also a center of art glass—glass artist Dale Chihuly is a na-



In 2017, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, a Florida native, wrote *Celestial Dance* for the Tallahassee Youth Orchestras, a collaboration with the Tallahassee Ballet. Alexander Jiménez, the orchestra's music director at the time, wanted the young musicians to experience working with a composer of Zwilich's stature first-hand.

tive—Tacoma's Museum of Glass and local artists got involved. The work was accompanied by a film produced by Derek Klein, multimedia director at the Museum of Glass, juxtaposing scenes of Mount

came together to connect the dots," Ioannides says. For a small orchestra with an annual budget of \$1.3 million, it was a big effort, but the result was something greater than the sum of its parts.

Across the American landscape, grassroots efforts by orchestras are broadening the horizons of established audiences while providing exposure for young composers.

Rainier's glaciers, melting at an alarming rate, against the molten imagery of glass being created with fire and ice by Hilltop Artists students in the museum's hot shop. Funding for the score and film came from orchestra patrons, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Park Service, and the Boeing Company, a major employer in the region. "All of these things

Tacoma is far from the only place where a regional or smaller-budget orchestra is discovering imaginative ways to commission new works, engaging the community in the process. Across the American landscape, grassroots efforts are broadening the horizons of established audiences while providing exposure for contemporary composers. Unlike ensembles and festivals like American Composers Orchestra in New York City, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, or the Cabrillo Festival of New Music in Santa Cruz, California—which exist primarily to incubate and perform new orchestral music—these orchestras are weaving new works into traditional programming, balancing Brahms and Beethoven with music by emerging com-



Last season, the conductorless ensemble Kaleidoscope in Los Angeles held its first international instrumental and vocal competition, with the winners to perform in three programs this season. One of the winners, mandolinist and domra player Ekaterina Skliar (seated at center), performed the U.S. premiere of Joseph Tamarin's *Domra Concerto* with the orchestra in October.



Symphony Tacoma's commission of Daniel Ott's *Fire-Mountain* commemorated the centennial of the National Park Service in 2016. As part of the project, orchestra students from a local high school explored Mount Rainier on showshoes, where they learned about the glacial ecosystem and heard from the composer about his creative process.

posers, often from their own region. These new works add refreshing diversity to the art form and challenge stereotypes about classical music. Perhaps most important, they offer a window into classical music that newer listeners may not have considered relevant to their lives. In the process, some orchestras say, they are nurturing the very future of classical music.

Undeniably, commissioning is part of the DNA of many of America's larger orchestras. The Louisville Orchestra, for instance, established a reputation for commissioning, performing and recording new music in the 1950s that has continued to the present day, under Music Director Teddy Abrams. And just up the Ohio River in Cincinnati, where I have reported on the arts for many years, new music plays a vital role for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, which has an extensive history of commissioning, including, notably, Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), which would later become the theme of the fourth movement of his *Symphony No. 3*. A significant time commitment is required to commission and perform new works, and smaller orchestras, with budgets ranging from \$200,000 to \$1.3 million,

may lack the resources for such large-scale projects. Yet by thinking creatively—by joining consortiums, taking advantage of grants, and by galvanizing their communities—these orchestras are succeeding, in the words of Ioannides, in allowing their audiences “to be part of that process of embracing something new and exciting.” The six orchestras profiled here are just a small sampling of smaller ensembles embracing new music with commissions.

The Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra's extended process of unveiling James Aikman's *Peacemakers* over two seasons sparked considerable interest, says Executive Director Elaine Eckhart.



Courtesy ICO

Multiple Partnerships

Since 2007, EarShot, a partnership of the American Composers Orchestra, the League of American Orchestras, American Composers Forum, and New Music USA, has worked with orchestras around the country in support of commissions and readings of new music. In Indiana, EarShot helped to ignite an ongoing commitment to commissioning new music for the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra. The orchestra has been in residence at Indiana State University's Contemporary Music Festival in Terre Haute for eleven years. (Previously, the festival's resident orchestras were the Indianapolis Symphony



Composer James Aikman (center stage) with the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra and Music Director Matthew Kraemer (standing left of podium) after the April 2016 premiere of Aikman's nine-movement work *Peacemakers*.

Courtesy ICO

Orchestra and the Louisville Orchestra.) The festival is a major regional force for new music, with hundreds of composers, performers, and conductors as participants over the years: several composers featured at the festival have gone on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music, and four have received the \$100,000 Grawemeyer Award.

The Illinois Philharmonic's new Classical Evolve competition for emerging composers

“was outside the box, but once we started communicating it more, people liked the idea of it,” says Executive Director Christina Salerno.



After Matthew Kraemer arrived as Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra's music director in July 2015, he planned for the ICO to host an EarShot call for scores in October 2016, to coincide with the ISU festival's 50th anniversary. The call for scores attracted more than 100 submissions of works for chamber orchestra. Five finalists were adjudicated by representatives of the American Composers Orchestra. The finalists received key input in two EarShot readings by ICO and an archival recording. The final reading before an audience was an eye-opener, says Elaine Eckhart, the ICO's executive director. Audience members gained an appreciation of the process of composing and developing a new work and, in turn, became enthusiastic about commissioning it. “EarShot was a major boon for visibility in the community,” says Kraemer. “It definitely put a spotlight on us, but it also enabled us to continue to program new works and get excited about it.” After the 2016 EarShot experience, Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra applied for funding through the League of American Orchestras' Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program, which is administered by Ameri-

can Composers Orchestra and supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. That resulted in the orchestra's January 2018 premiere of Chen-Hui Jen's *in eternal dusk*.

Separate from the EarShot partnership, this chamber orchestra with a budget of \$750,000 also has a longtime composer in residence, James Aikman. The ICO found a novel way to introduce *Peacemakers*, a new, nine-movement work by Aikman dedicated to nine twentieth-century figures ranging from Eleanor Roosevelt to Nelson Mandela. The work was unveiled, one movement at a time, at different concerts throughout the 2014-15 season. The entire piece was premiered in April 2016 with an accompanying video that included a rarely heard speech by Robert Kennedy in Indianapolis on the night Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The extended process over two seasons plus the local tie gave the orchestra strong social media content and sparked considerable interest from the community, says Eckhart.

This season, the ICO is participating in a consortium with New York's Albany Symphony Orchestra, Chamber Orchestra of the Springs (Colorado), Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra, Erie Philharmonic, and Tucson Symphony to commission Michael Torke's *SKY*, a bluegrass-inspired concerto for violinist

Tessa Lark, silver medalist in the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis in 2014. Lark premieres and records the concerto this January with the Albany Symphony Orchestra under Music Director David Alan Miller and performs it in April with the ICO. As an example of how “one door leads to another,” Eckhart says that an anonymous donor has provided a gift that will support continuing commissions for the next five to twelve years.

Letting the Audience Vote

In Park Forest, Illinois, the appointment of Stilian Kirov as music director has provided an opportunity for the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra (which has an annual budget of \$940,000) to establish itself as “a place for new music,” says Executive Director Christina Salerno. As a centerpiece of his first season in 2017-18, Kirov

Composer Benjamin Ash (right) won the Illinois Philharmonic's inaugural Classical Evolve competition for composers age 35 and younger in May 2018, with his composition *Hraun*, inspired by an Icelandic saga. The competition includes a 2018-19 composer residency for Ash at the orchestra.



The Illinois Philharmonic and Music Director Stilian Kirov during the orchestra's inaugural Classical Evolve competition, May 2018.

initiated Classical Evolve, a competition for new music by composers age 35 and younger. The winner would become resident composer for a year, during which he or she would be commissioned to write three works during the 2018-19 season. And, in an unusual twist, the audience observed rehearsals and performances for the three competition finalists and voted for their favorites, together with a jury. The winning composition was Benjamin Ash's *Hraun*, Icelandic for "lava," inspired by an Icelandic saga.

The orchestra reports that the idea of using a competition as part of the commissioning process enthralled audience members, some of whom were initially skeptical. "It was outside the box, but once we started communicating it more, people liked the idea of it," Salerno says. "Our audience tends to like Eastern European and European masters. Music that is newer might be a little more challenging for their ears. But a longtime supporter, who tends

The Northwest Symphony aims "to be connected at a high level with the community," says Music Director Anthony Spain.

to be conservative in her musical tastes, came up after the competition and said, "This is fantastic. I learned so much and I think it's going to build, and I'm so excited we're doing this."

One orchestra-goer stepped up to support Classical Evolve for multiple seasons. The process, says Kirov, "is one way of breaking down this wall between performers and public." Winning composer Ash, a 27-year-old Seattle native, initially was drawn to writing film scores, but fell in love with composing chamber and orchestral music as a student at New York University. He sees the future of orchestral music as being strongly influenced by film and video games. "People who never would have gone to a symphony concert suddenly have orchestral music of their favorite songs on Spotify. Maybe it's from a videogame soundtrack, but it still involves an orchestra," he said. "I think the term classical music may be dead, but orchestral music can only grow."



The Northwest Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Anthony Spain perform a program that includes the world premiere of *Forestia* by local composer Brent Irwin in October 2018. The concert, marking the 25th anniversary of Washington's National Park Fund, also included Dvorák's Symphony No. 9 ("New World") with visuals by Adrian Wyard featuring imagery from the state's national parks, plus "The Entry of the Gods into Valhalla" from Wagner's *Ring* cycle, featuring photos by 100 area photographers.



Northwest Symphony Orchestra Music Director Anthony Spain (left) with composer Samuel Jones, as they prepare for the world premiere of his *Fanfare for a Joyous Occasion* written for the orchestra's 30th-anniversary concert in April 2017. The orchestra says it has performed some 150 works by area composers.

Being willing to take a risk on a young, lesser-known composer could have a payoff. Kirov views Ash's fresh approach to classical music as something that might attract young professionals in their twenties and thirties. "It's important to find music that speaks to them," he says.

Focus on Local Composers

In the Seattle area, premiering and commissioning new work has been part of the Northwest Symphony Orchestra's mission since its beginnings in 1987. On an annual operating budget of less than \$200,000, founding Music Director Anthony Spain says he has led more than 150 works by both established and emerging composers from the Pacific Northwest. Of those, 67 have been world premieres and ten have been commissioned by the orchestra. New works are supported by the NEA, grants, and orchestra patrons.

The Northwest Symphony aims "to be connected at a high level with the community," Spain says. About fifteen years ago, the orchestra made new music

a central component of its education programs in underserved schools. Composer Glenn Crytzer worked with students in Pacific Middle School in Des Moines, Washington to help them write music, and the orchestra performed the resulting compositions together with the

school's wind band. A 2015 commission for the orchestra's regular concert season was Pacific Northwest composer and jazz pianist Sumi Tonooka's *For Malala*, about Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani student who survived being shot in the head in 2012 for championing girls' education, and accepted a Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. The orchestra has performed it twice and made a recording. The project came about after Spain asked Tonooka what she'd like to write.

"I try to give the composer as much



Los Angeles-based ensemble Kaleidoscope rehearses with composer/performer/media artist Pamela Z.

latitude as possible," Spain says. "Tonooka uses jazz and classical idioms in her compositional style. We started a dialogue and she expressed an interest in writing a piece about Malala. So it's not only to let a composer compose freely, but to take their ideas that they have a passion about." Some of those passions are closer to home. This October, the orchestra premiered *Forestia* by Brent Irwin, a native of Everett, Washington. Two concerts—one at

Benaroya Hall in Seattle and one a family program in Federal Way, Washington—featured visuals by Adrian Wyard from the state's national parks in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of Washington's National Park Fund.

California Creations

In Los Angeles, Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra, a flexible ensemble now in its fifth season, is adding to the wave of adventurous programming that already exists in Southern California with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and others—but has an evolving commitment to music by women and composers of color. Kaleidoscope presents a varied menu ranging from Bach and Mahler to Alison Yun-Fei Jiang and Kaija Saariaho. Among composers it has commissioned so far are Billy Childs, Viet Cuong, Gabriella Smith, Alyssa Weinberg, and Pamela Z.

Founder Benjamin Mitchell, a violinist, became interested in contemporary music after working with Pierre Boulez and Ensemble Contemporain at the Lucerne Festival a decade ago. Inspired by conductorless groups such as Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and A Far Cry, he established Kaleidoscope in 2014. Its size varies, depending upon the instrumentation required. Kaleidoscope's annual budget has grown from \$55,000 in the first two years to about \$500,000. Two years ago, after struggling to attract more than 200 people to concerts, the group implemented a pay-what-you-can admission model of the kind used by many museums. The move caused attendance and individual donations to soar almost overnight, Mitchell recalls.

Kaleidoscope programs prominently feature world, U.S., and West Coast premieres. Mitchell and an artistic team of six other musicians find many new works through calls for scores. Submissions have swelled from an initial 450 applicants for the three works that were chosen for the ensemble's second season, to 2,200 applications from composers in 76 countries for the current season. Last season, Kaleidoscope conducted its first international instrumental and vocal competition, with the winners to perform in three programs this season. The first winner to be featured, Philadelphia-based mandolinist and *domra* player Ekaterina Skliar, performed the U.S. premiere of Joseph

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich thought of her 2017 composition *Celestial Dance* commissioned by the Tallahassee Youth Orchestras as "communal effort. I ended up writing a real trombone solo, because they had a great kid who plays trombone. It was an experience that meant a lot to me."



Tamarin's *Domra Concerto* in October concerts in Santa Monica and Glendale. Many programs this season feature music by women, most of them not yet widely known. Composers in Kaleidoscope programs this season include Valerie Coleman, Emily Doolittle, Chiayu Hsu, Karen Lemon, and Ingrid Stölzel.

Commissions have become increasingly important to the orchestra's mission. Kaleidoscope is commissioning twenty composers—ten women and ten men—for 2020: Julia Adolphe, Andy Akiho, Krists Auznieks, Christopher Cerrone, Billy Childs, Anna Clyne, Natalie Dieterich, Melissa Dunphy, Stephen Hartke, Will Healy, Ted Hearne, David Hertzberg, Joel



The Tallahassee Youth Orchestras at the 2017 world premiere of *Celestial Dance* by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, written for the orchestra and Tallahassee Ballet.



Members of the Tallahassee Youth Orchestras in performance. The orchestra commissioned Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich to write *Celestial Dance* for the orchestra and Tallahassee Ballet in 2017.

Hoffman, Libby Larsen, Hannah Lash, Peter Shin, Sarah Kirkland Snider, Augusta Read Thomas, Melinda Wagner, and Pamela Z. The idea, Mitchell said, is for the twenty new works to be performed during a four-day festival tentatively planned for late spring 2020. “For most orchestras, about 98 percent of programming is by white men,” Mitchell says. “In general, we want to program the music we’re most excited to perform but also have it be more gender-balanced and diverse with different ethnicities, so it’s not all music from one group of people.”

Youth Orchestras, Too

It’s important to play music of our time, no matter the size of the orchestra or the age of the players, says Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. In 2017, Zwilich, a Florida native, wrote *Celestial Dance* for the Tallahassee Youth Orchestras, whose parent organization is the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra. The piece was a collaboration with young dancers from the Tallahassee Ballet. Alexander Jiménez, who was the youth orchestra’s music director from 2000 to 2017, wanted the young musicians to experience working with a composer of Zwilich’s stature first-hand.

Zwilich accepted, delighted with the idea that young musicians would be exposed to music written by a living composer and “not necessarily somebody 300 years ago.” She interacted with them during rehearsals and asked for their feedback. She considered it a “communal effort,” remarking that it was her music, but that

the students breathed life into it. “It was my pleasure to do that, and just the idea that these are young people—I’m always imagining the performers as I’m writing,” says Zwilich, who had not composed for a youth ensemble since writing for her own high school band. “I would never ‘write down’ to anybody—oh, this is just for kids. No, it’s my music. I ended up writing a real trom-

bone solo, because they had a great kid who plays trombone. It was nice to write for them, and to be there when they were working on it, interacting with them. It was an experience that meant a lot to me.”

The community response was “excep-

tionally positive,” says Jiménez, who is professor of conducting and director of orchestral activities at the College of Music at Florida State University. It was the orchestra’s second commission by a woman: last year, they premiered *Moving Pictures* written by a Tallahassee Youth Orchestras alumna, Brianna Rhodes, now a violinist in the Tallahassee and Pensacola symphony orchestras. Jiménez praised the youth orchestra for having the vision to make such an investment. “It was and continues to be my hope that more youth orchestras can commission our leading composers to write exceptional works for younger orchestras,” Jiménez said. “This was truly a community endeavor and one that I believe will have a positive impact on the lives of everyone involved.” **S**

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Concerted Consortia

The League of American Orchestras has long supported the creation of new music. Among other initiatives, in 2004 the League and New Music USA (then named Meet The Composer) launched **Ford Made in America**, a commissioning program for smaller-budget orchestras. Ford Made in America enabled more than 65 smaller American orchestras—in all 50 states—to co-commission a new work by a prominent American composer. Described as the largest orchestra commissioning consortium in U.S. history, Ford Made in America was made possible by Ford Motor Company Fund.

Joan Tower’s *Made in America* received its world premiere by the Glens Falls Symphony Orchestra in October 2005, and then was performed more than 80 times nationwide. In 2008, *Made in America* won a Grammy as Best Contemporary Classical Composition, and the Nashville Symphony’s recording, led by Leonard Slatkin, won Grammy Awards as Best Classical Album and Best Orchestral Performance. In 2008, Ford Made in America featured Joseph Schwantner’s *Chasing Light...* The Reno Chamber Orchestra gave the world premiere that September, and the score was performed by smaller orchestras in all 50 states.

Inspired by Ford Made in America, a consortium of smaller orchestras established **New Music for America** to commission new works. On October 3, 2015, the Plymouth Philharmonic Orchestra and Music Director Steven Karidoyanes gave the world premiere of Christopher Theofanidis’s *Dreamtime Ancestors*, with subsequent performances by orchestras in multiple states. For 2019, New Music for America is working with Jennifer Higdon on a new score.

The League of American Orchestras continues its ongoing support of new music. **Music Alive** fosters composer residencies that strengthen relationships among creators, music-makers, and audiences. Music Alive is a program of the League and New Music USA. The League’s **Women Composers Readings and Commissions** support women composers and their creation of new orchestral works. The Women Composers program is administered with American Composers Orchestra and supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. Visit Artistic Programs at <https://americanorchestras.org/> for more.

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