

# Aspen Festival Journal, Part I by Jackson Harmeyer

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For two weeks classical music and mountains surrounded me. For two weeks I was nowhere else but Aspen, Colorado for the Aspen Music Festival, one of the world's leading classical music festivals. In my next series of MusicCentral blogs, I will recount my experiences in Aspen, discussing what I heard as well as my impressions on those concerts. While I will focus primarily on the music, certainly the Rocky Mountain scenery and day trips to Independence Pass, Maroon Bells, neighboring towns, and other points of interest made for a well-balanced trip.

In overview, the Aspen Music Festival and School consists of some 630 student musicians plus artist-faculty and guest artists who together present approximately three hundred concerts over an eight-week span each summer. Most concerts take place at either the Benedict Music Tent or Harris Concert Hall – the tent seats about two thousand while the concert hall seats six hundred – while other events like masterclasses and competitions are held at the nearby Bucksbaum Campus and operas are staged at the historical Wheeler Opera House. The 2014 Festival is led by President and CEO Alan Fletcher and Music Director Robert Spano; employs resident composers including Steven Stucky, Sydney Hodkinson, and George Tsontakis; and hosts eminent guest artists like violinist Joshua Bell, violinist Gil Shaham, and the Takács Quartet. These were all people who I saw throughout the festival – and you would see most on a regular basis – reinforcing that I was amidst quite the musical community.

My stay in Aspen began Tuesday, July 1, when I arrived just in time for a 4:00 PM concert of the American Academy of Conducting at Aspen. This Conducting Academy and its orchestra which performs each Tuesday features aspiring young conductors who each direct one movement of a composition. Naturally with this scheme, it is the conductors who become the center of attention as their different conducting styles shape the music in different ways. The program July 1 featured Berlioz's Overture *Le corsaire*, Stravinsky's *Jeu de cartes*, and Brahms' Symphony No. 2. The following Tuesday, I attended a second Conducting Academy concert featuring Dances from *Powder Her Face* by contemporary British composer Thomas Adès, Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24, Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*, and Debussy's *Iberia*. With its engagement with the big band era of the 1930s, the Adès composition proved to be an exciting exposition, later matched by the two Spanish-flavored pieces by Ravel and Debussy.

The evening of July 1, I attended a chamber recital by violinist Philip Setzer, cellist David Finckel, and pianist Wu Han. While Finckel and Wu Han lead the festival's new chamber music program, Setzer is part of the highly-praised Emerson String Quartet – as was Finckel until recently. Their program that evening consisted of one of Beethoven's early piano trios (Op. 1 No. 2) and Dvořák's *Dumky Trio*, but, for me, the real highlight was Shostakovich's Piano Trio No. 2 with its tremendous sorrow throughout, particularly macabre fourth movement, and the novel layout of having the cello begin and end the piece identically with a phrase in a higher register than that given to the violin.



**Above:** The Benedict Music Tent where I heard many orchestral concerts. **Below:** Benedict Music Tent (interior view). **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

The next evening, Wednesday, July 2, the Aspen Philharmonic Orchestra presented Brahms' *Tragic Overture*, Saint-Saëns' Violin Concerto No. 3 with Aspen student and rising soloist William Hagen, and what could have been my favorite orchestral performance in my entire time at the festival: Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 with conductor Hugh Wolff. The uncontainable exuberance of this symphony's first movement and finale were perfectly captured by Wolff and his players, but, in this interpretation, the second movement – which so often becomes a death march of sorts – was flooded with the same energy so that it fit-in with its companions better than I could have ever imagined.

After the triumph of this orchestral concert, the other concert that evening – a piano recital by Stephen Hough – was unfortunately my least favorite. While I enjoyed the *Little Piano Pieces* by



**Left:** The Harris Concert Hall where I heard many chamber recitals. **Right:** Harris Concert Hall (interior view). **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Schoenberg which opened the concert, the Strauss/Wagner/Bruckner medley which followed consisted of three insignificant piano pieces by composers more accustomed to working with orchestral if not operatic forces. After only half his audience bothered to return following intermission, Hough played his own Piano Sonata No. 2, but, any initial hope of discovering a new masterpiece soon evaporated as Hough revealed a disorganized showcase of his virtuosic ability to pound-out dissonances, ultimately leaving even his poor page-turner unable to make sense of the noise. Hough imposed these same attributes to Robert Schumann's *Carnaval* which under better circumstances is a joyous and lyrical piece, but here inappropriately sounded more like a rhapsody by Liszt. Unfortunately, this was one of those concerts I was looking forward to, owning a brilliant rendition by Hough of two piano concerti by Johann Nepomuk Hummel – a noted contemporary of Beethoven. Perhaps fortuitously, someone in the audience had already screamed-out “ugh” in the very first measure of the Schoenberg.

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Well, I have covered the first two days of a ten-day stay in Aspen. Each day was filled with music – and, outside of the Hough recital, the rest was well-received – so check back soon

for more of my report. In the meantime, be sure to tune-in to Performance Today which is in residence at the Aspen Festival throughout this week. Thursday and Friday, you can even hear the programs I watched host Fred Child and his crew tape live... more to come on this and other topics in my upcoming blogs.

JSH 14.07.15

*Jackson Harmeyer is a graduate of the Louisiana Scholars' College – Louisiana's designated honors college located on the campus of Northwestern State University. There, he studied music history, completing an undergraduate thesis entitled “Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers.” Now living in Alexandria, he continues to pursue his musical interests through individual research, original compositions, writing program notes for the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, and as director of the new Abendmusik Alexandria music series. He is also one of the founding members of TicketCentral.*

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Read more about Jackson's musical travels at [www.JacksonHarmeyer.com](http://www.JacksonHarmeyer.com).