

# Aspen Festival Journal, Part III by Jackson Harmeyer

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*For two weeks classical music and mountains surrounded me. For two weeks I was in nowhere else but Aspen, Colorado for the Aspen Music Festival, one of the world's leading classical music festivals. Here is Part III in a continuing series recounting my stay in Aspen...*

Every Saturday afternoon, visitors to the Aspen Music Festival are encouraged to take the gondola to the top of Aspen Mountain for a special concert series fittingly called “Music on the Mountain.” I knew I did not want to miss this experience, so Saturday, July 5, I took the relaxing fifteen-minute gondola ride to the top where there were beautiful views to complement the pleasant music. The featured artists that Saturday were a brass quintet consisting of two trumpets, French horn, trombone, and tuba with members drawn from the Dallas and Houston areas. As the young musicians explained, few composers wrote for brass quintet until the explorations of the Russian composer Victor Ewald (1860-1935) in his four quintets. For this reason, their program would consist of both originals and arrangements – the former included selections by Ewald and British composer Malcom Arnold (1921-2006) while the latter included familiar selections from Bernstein’s *West Side Story* in arrangements for brass quintet. Their program also spanned a great deal of music history – from anonymous fanfares by forgotten masters of early music to a medley of popular songs arranged by one of the quintet’s own members.

Saturday evening, I was back in the Benedict Music Tent for a concert by the renowned solo violinist Gil Shaham with Robert Spano conducting the Aspen Chamber Symphony. Shaham played Bartók’s Violin Concerto No. 2 – a work with plenty of modern flavorings, but by no means inaccessible to the amateur listener. Shaham succeeded in dancing his way through this folksy concerto, lightheartedly approaching many of the surrounding string players in a competition which his bright smile revealed as nothing more than a game. Besides Bartók, Beethoven was the other composer on Saturday evening’s program. The concert began with his familiar *Coriolan Overture* and ended with his even more familiar Fifth Symphony. Both were rousing performances but they simply could not compare with the performance of Beethoven’s Seventh I had just heard on Wednesday, or, for that matter, the two Beethoven quartets played by the Takács.



**Above:** Atop Aspen Mountain was the scene for Saturday’s Music on the Mountain.

**Right:** In addition to Joshua Bell, Sunday also featured a visit to Maroon Bells — two mountains near Aspen.

**Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.



Sunday's concert featured one of the few violinists even better-known than Shostakovich – Joshua Bell. Bell played Max Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1, but, for me, the real show-stoppers were the other pieces on the program. Manuel de Falla's *Three-Cornered Hat* opened the concert with lively shouts of "Olé" and a whole battery of castanets; from there, the colorful piece only continued to build in excitement with each successive dance. To close Sunday's program, the Aspen Festival Orchestra played Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony*. As the Benedict normally contains no organ, special arrangements were made to fill the part: namely, a keyboard with the ability to synthesize the sounds of a pipe organ was linked to a large array of loudspeakers set-up in the choir loft in imitation of each group of pipes. Although I had my doubts upon seeing the makeshift organ, this innovative solution seemed to work just fine – the sound quality was not compromised and the collective ensemble gave a stunning performance of a composition I have been waiting to hear live for many years.

Although full of great music, Monday evening's chamber recital was special for another reason. Scanning through the program a few days earlier, I had discovered that my friend Zalman Kelber would be one of the featured performers Monday evening. Those who have followed my MusicCentral blogs for a few months may remember that Zalman was the pianist with the Shreveport Opera Xpress when they toured Alexandria schools last September. Zalman and I first met at that time, but have maintained a friendship since then – I had no idea he would be in Aspen this summer though. After that lucky discovery, the two of us found several occasions to catch-up between his tight rehearsal schedule (in the one week, Zalman was rehearsing not only for Monday's recital, but also as chorus master for the approaching weekend's production of *Eugene Onegin*).

Monday night, Zalman was to play *Nachtstück* by the German modernist composer Aribert Reimann (b. 1936). As Zalman clearly understood, Reimann's atonal *Nachtstück* for baritone and piano with its musings on death, darkness, and abandonment was no crowd-pleaser, but it was in fact well-received by that audience, and, for me, the music sounded as if buried in the fog – its larger musical gestures shadowing and concealing the individual pitches and progressions that might have sounded ugly in a different context. Elsewhere on Monday's program, the jazzy Septet by the young British composer Mark Simpson (b. 1988) seemed to rectify the complex rhythms of Pierre Boulez with the unstoppable energy of John Adams, especially in its percussion-propelled final movement. And, the Shostakovich Piano Quintet which closed the program was no disappointment either. Renowned pianist Steven



**Above:** Aspen's Wheeler Opera House where Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* would be staged later in the week. **Photo credit:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Osborne joined promising young violinist William Hagen and others to play this Shostakovich composition with its meditative Prelude and Fugue opening, romping Scherzo, transcendent Intermezzo, and the tremendous release of its Finale.

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My stay in Aspen would last another three days with even more excellent music still to come. So, check back soon for the final entry in my Aspen Festival Journal.

JSH 14.07.23

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