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## Tanglewood Fest Aims Wide Lens At Modern Music

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TMC Fellows performed Kui Dong's 'A Night at Tanglewood' during the 2017 Festival of Contemporary Music.  
(Photos by Hilary Scott)

By **Keith Powers**

LENOX, Mass. — You wondered if it would work. With three performers as curators, this summer's [Festival of Contemporary Music](#) at Tanglewood — always an amalgam of styles — might just turn its normal swirl of ideas into a blinding blizzard.



TMC Fellows performing Phyllis Chen's 'Chimers,' with toy piano and tuning forks.

But the Festival, which ran Aug. 10-14, worked well. The curatorial trio — [Jacob Greenberg](#), [Nadia Sirota](#), and [Kathryn Bates](#) — drew on an assortment of composers not just from their own 30-something generation, but a generously representative span of music written over the past century.

The toy pianos of [Phyllis Chen](#) took the Ozawa Hall stage alongside mid-century song settings by [Kurtág](#) and the Bach-inspired ensemble work of [Sofia Gubaidulina](#). Whistling string players, shuffling their feet, were followed in a program by Thomas Adès' gloriously grave *Court Studies*. The *Amazing Grace* quartet of [Ben Johnston](#) (b. 1926) got a beautiful reading. A balance between the new-new, the relatively new, and the older new was achieved. If you're accustomed to unchanged vistas on your musical journeys, this wasn't for you. If you like mountains followed by seascapes and then wide savannas, you belonged at FCM.

The real reason this festival succeeds has as much to do with the undeniable health of contemporary composition as it does with the rich performance skills of the Tanglewood Music Center Fellows. These auditioned players, almost all of whom have finished conservatory studies, spend the summer studying and performing with Boston Symphony Orchestra members and leading performers on the TMC faculty.

Afternoon concerts followed evening presentations, which then were followed by morning concerts, all of them realized by TMC fellows. Their skills truly state the case for the future of music; the programs showed there are multiple composers at work who can challenge them in fruitful, imaginative ways. All the performances took place in Ozawa Hall.



Elizabeth Dorman and Léon Bernsdorf played works by Amy Williams.

Greenberg, Bates, and Sirota each curated one chamber program and then collaborated on the music for the Aug. 14 finale, an orchestral evening. A prelude concert Aug. 12 and multiple panels, lectures, and informal chats filled out the festival. Greenberg, a pianist (keyboardist), is a longtime member of the [International Contemporary Ensemble](#). Bates is best known as the cellist of the [Del Sol String Quartet](#). Violist Sirota performs with the sextet [yMusic](#) and with the chamber orchestra [Alarm Will Sound](#). All three are also active collaborators with other musicians and advocates for education and for new music.

Greenberg chose multiple settings for voice on the opening program Aug. 10. Kurtág, Gubaidulina, and [George Lewis](#) represented an older side of Greenberg's influences; [Anthony Cheung](#), Chen, and [Nathan Davis](#) are his contemporaries.

Chen's toy piano deconstruction *Chimers* — she disassembles a toy piano, sets the innards upright on a stand, and has performers strike them with tuning forks — created a world of sound only an artist could imagine. That work began it all, immediately stating the festival's implied approach: make it new.

The program was most notable, however, for the prolix text settings of Davis (*The Sand Reckoner*, for six voices and celeste) and Cheung (*All thorn, but cousin to your rose*, for soprano and piano — a non-fiction approach to art song. Both works — world premieres — failed to capitalize on the talent onstage. An overwhelming volume of words can be successful — David Lang's *just* would show that later in the weekend — but in these cases, the verbosity outlasted the stamina of the musicians and the interest of the audience.

Bates' program on the afternoon of Aug. 11 brought out new voices in [Rene Orth](#), [Kui Dong](#), and [Lei Liang](#), the largely unknown work (in America at least) of the late New Zealand composer [Jack Body](#) and terrific earlier pieces by Johnston and [Terry Riley](#).



TMC Fellows performed David Lang's 'just' during the festival.

Kui Dong's premiere, *A Night at Tanglewood*, was an elegant structure: quiet, moving, engaging. A string quartet had their instruments, glass globes of water, and small player piano rolls with home-made crank instruments at their disposal. Three of the players began by rubbing glass globes, accompanied by cello drone. After setting the mood, they migrated to their stands and performed as a quartet, but in the same sonic purview. Gentle textures, with little variation in range, and modest volumes were interspersed with the player piano rolls. The cellist ([Francesca McNeeley](#)) capped off the work by wandering over to the globes, revisiting their eerie sound. It was quiet but dense. Still but complex — simultaneously.

On the same program, [Moritz Eggert's](#) *Croatoan II* added percussionist to string quartet and required the string players to shuffle feet, ring bells, and tap their instruments. The overtaxed string players were obviously relieved when the piece was over. The work had some interest, but the gymnastics required of the quartet made the performance more of a mission to acquire the double bar than anything else.

Sirota's Aug. 13 program felt like the most perfectly imagined combination of works. Perhaps it was the hour: Sunday at 10 a.m. is more commonly reserved for hymns and chants. In any case, works by Lang, Adès, [Nico Muhly](#), and [Donnacha Dennehy](#) (and others) gradually progressed from introspective to boisterous, drawing us into the day.

[David Lang's](#) minimalist art song, *just*, employed only a half-dozen pitches; it sets repetitive, slightly altered phrases — “just your mouth/just your eyes; and my beloved/and my soul” — over repetitive, slightly altered music. The lyrics were interpreted by a seated trio: two sopranos ([Mary Bonhag](#), [Fotina Naumenko](#)) and a mezzo-soprano ([Jazimina MacNeil](#)). The instrumentalists — percussion, viola, and cello — barely broke a sweat.



Vinay Parameswaran conducting Nathan Davis's 'The Sand Reckoner.'

It was a lengthy excursion into implied meaning and expectation. Phrases only extended when the syllables demanded. Delicate melodies moved from cello to viola, but always as accompaniment. The work is quite lengthy, without any crescendo semantically or musically. Simply a normalizing of the phrases, with the expectation of its alluring repetition, and the unachieved expectation of some intervening change. Art song at its contemporary pinnacle.

Some of the most substantial music of the entire festival came at the Aug. 12 evening's prelude concert, with compositions by [Caroline Shaw](#), [Amy Williams](#), and [Julian Anderson](#). All the works were mature, idiosyncratic, and appealing. Williams' *Abstract Art, 1 and 2* stood out.

The two short movements are written for overlapping pianists — four-hands on one piano. [Elizabeth Dorman](#) occupied the treble end, but [León Bernsdorf](#) spent quite a bit of time there too. And they both lingered for awhile in the middle of the keyboard, intertwined, as well. It wasn't about gymnastics, though, it was about the musical possibilities of doubling the available fingers. The first *Abstract* was really scales, playful and tuneful. The second brought an entirely different mood, chordal, sometimes dissonant, with slower tempos, luxuriant in its reach. All of the music evoked deep possibilities for this approach — four hands in search of real music.

The orchestral finale Aug. 14 had the feel of the last day of camp — as one can imagine, with such an intimate ensemble, and the intense music-making that had taken place. [Stefan Asbury](#) and TMC fellow [Vinay Parameswaran](#) conducted works by [Ligeti](#), [Dutilleux](#), [Anna Thorvaldsdottir](#), [Huang](#)

Ruo, and Dai Fujikura. Lorelei Ensemble joined the TMC Orchestra to sing in Ligeti's *Clocks and Clouds*, and three child vocalists from the [Music on Norway Pond](#) program sang in Dutilleux's *The Shadows of Time*.

Realizations of both Ligeti and Dutilleux were breathtaking. Of the newer works, Ruo's *Confluence* was a fully imagined concerto for orchestra. Solos for the fifteen performers — a string quintet, piano, winds, percussion, and French horn — were blended into the texture. Two gongs at the rear of the hall, and a decorative black bowl — rubbed along the edge for harmonics — created a theatrical climax. But the beauty of this work was in its seamless integrity.

*Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to [keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com](mailto:keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com)*



A view of Tanglewood's Ozawa Hall during the performance of Donnacha Dennehy's 'Surface Tension.'

Date posted: August 17, 2017

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John Fleming  
MCANA President

Welcome to Classical Voice North America, the online journal of the Music Critics Association of North America, of which I was elected president in July. I have been a member of MCANA for 25 years, joining after I became performing arts critic of Florida's *St. Petersburg Times* (now the *Tampa Bay Times*).

I remember fondly the first MCANA annual meeting I attended, organized around the Lyric Opera of Chicago's 1992 premiere of *McTeague*, with score by William Bolcom. That meeting gave me – then new to music criticism – the invaluable opportunity to get acquainted with leading journalists in a specialized field. Many newspapers and magazines sent their staff critics, a far cry from the situation today when traditional print is severely stressed. Still, our meetings continue to be a great way to exchange ideas and hear top-notch performers together.

Under Barbara Jepson, my predecessor as president, and other MCANA leaders, CVNA was launched in September 2013 to provide a new outlet for classical music coverage. With readers in 90 countries it has shown consistent growth, recently passing half a million page views on 1,100 stories by 123 authors, the great majority of whom are members of MCANA.

This year saw the first annual MCANA Award for Best New Opera, which went to composer Missy Mazzoli and librettist Royce Vavrek for *Breaking the Waves*, premiered by Opera Philadelphia. Click on an article about the award [here](#).

Thank you for reading CVNA, which seeks to convey the richness of musical life in North America and elsewhere, with reviews and commentary by expert MCANA members and occasional guest contributors. If you happen to be a writer with experience in classical music, please consider this an invitation to [join us](#).

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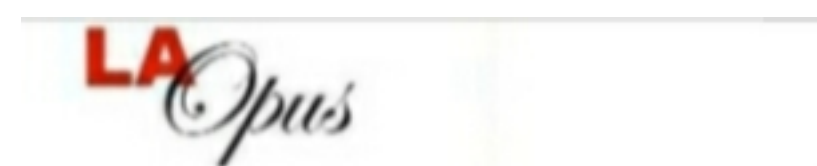
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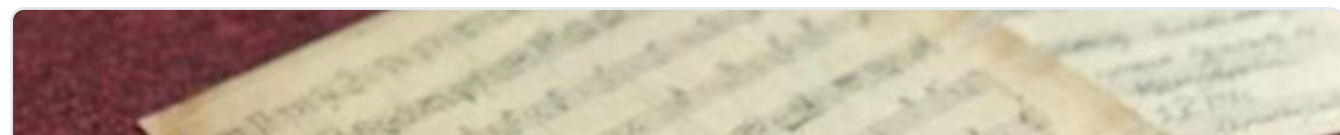


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| 9  | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 |
| 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
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