

# **Boston Conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya Juggles Many Roles — And, Now, A Circus Piece**

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March 22, 2017 By [Keith Powers](#) 



If there were a futures market for classical music, the touts would be pushing Lidiya Yankovskaya. For many reasons.

She's been chorus master for multiple gigs with the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood Festival Chorus. A prime part of the ambitious [Ouroboros Trilogy](#) last fall. Guest conductor in Flagstaff, Sarasota, New York. Leader and founder of the Refugee Orchestra Project, performing in New York, Washington, Boston. And still more in Boston: artistic director of the Juventas New Music Ensemble and conductor of the Commonwealth Lyric Theater.

She's busy. She's busy because she's good.

In Boston, Yankovskaya's work in contemporary music gets the most attention,

and it's what brings her before local audiences again this week. Juventas, which performs only new work, presents [“Music in Flight” at Oberon](#) in Cambridge on March 22 and 23.

It's an unusual collaboration with aerialists, acrobats and jugglers — but that's nothing unusual for Juventas, which Yankovskaya has directed since 2014. Every year, the group presents a series called “Project Fusion” — coupling the group's music with live painting, or with puppets, once with robots. So, sure, bring on the clowns.

“In America, the circus is not seen so much as an art form,” says Yankovskaya, a native of St. Petersburg. “But in Moscow there are many famous circus schools.”

Yankovskaya studied piano and voice in Russia and played the violin. She began conducting as a teenager, studied music as an undergraduate at Vassar, then took a master's at Boston University. Her conducting mentors are many: Lorin Maazel, Ann Howard Jones, Marin Alsop, JoAnn Falletta, David Hoose.

As a chorus master, she was a finalist to replace John Oliver in the permanent position with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus — that went to James Burton — and has led the TFC in numerous performances, both before and after her audition. Just this month she prepared the men to sing in Busoni's piano concerto, then the women for Debussy's wordless “Nocturnes.”

“I was honored to even be considered for the permanent job,” Yankovskaya says. “My background is not the same as the other candidates' — I've studied more contemporary music, and opera and chorus only in recent years. Still, I felt great that they asked me back.”

### **An Orchestra Of Refugees**

And then there's her work with the Refugee Orchestra Project. She founded the group in 2016 with concerts in Boston and New York, in direct response, she

says, to the Syrian crisis.

“I came here as a refugee, and for me now, as a naturalized citizen, I find it all very scary on a personal level,” Yankovskaya says. “It started with the Patriot Act under Bush, but then it was strengthened under Obama. It’s been going on a long time now, under different administrations.”

But as the political environment has changed, the way the group is perceived has changed as well.

“We’ve tried hard not to be a politically charged organization,” Yankovskaya says. “We are focused on just celebrating the contributions of refugees to our culture. I’m not a policy maker, and I make a point of not endorsing candidates or specific policies. When we started this project, it wasn’t the political statement that it is now.”

The Refugee Orchestra is not one ensemble but many, changing with each city where the group performs. Last year, two different orchestras played, one in Boston and one in New York. This year, there will be three: in Brooklyn April 1, in Washington April 10 and finally in Boston May 22.

“We started out in Boston,” Yankovskaya says, “and most of our staff members are in Boston. But in every city we go to, we collaborate with mostly local musicians. And we don’t want to be exclusive; we invite musicians who came as refugee children, or who are supporters, or whose parents are refugees. Being exclusive would somehow defeat the purpose.”

While it’s not directly related to the Refugee Orchestra, Yankovskaya’s work with the Commonwealth Lyric Theater does involve the close-knit Russian community in greater Boston. Over the past few seasons, the troupe has staged works that are well known in Russia and its environs but hardly ever see a spotlight in the United States. They include Rachmaninov’s “Aleko” and Hulak-Artemovsky’s “Cossack Beyond the Danube” — a seminal work in Ukraine.

Commonwealth moves to a bigger stage this spring, with another work that needs introducing to American audiences: Anton Rubinstein's opera "The Demon." Performances are May 18 and 20 at the Cutler Majestic Theatre.

"It's in the standard repertory in Russia," Yankovskaya says. "The Rubinstein brothers founded the Moscow and St. Petersburg conservatories and are very well known. But only so many Russian works can make it into the repertory here.

"It all comes out of a community effort," she says. "For the Russian community, it's their first venture into a theater the size of the Majestic."

### **Bridging Two Worlds**

But first, there's the circus. And Yankovskaya sees "Music in Flight" as another chance to introduce different communities to one another – in this case, the worlds of music and the circus, which she finds less connected here than in Russia.

"Here, people in the music world don't know anything about circus feats of physical skill. And in the circus world they don't create new music for what they need — they see it as sort of a surface endeavor," she says. "So we're bringing the two together."

To Yankovskaya's mind, the art forms in this performance complement each other in a significant way.

"We're presenting music by composers who are not that well known," she says. "And with artists interpreting the music through aerials, acrobatics and juggling — maybe those connections will be helpful. Both sets of artists discover new things."

"Music in Flight" features almost a dozen contemporary compositions, including several premieres. Composers include Scott Wheeler, Alex Williams,

Oliver Caplan, Dan Shore, Laura Schwendinger, Nate Tucker and Tim Ellis. The circus performers are directed by Alexis Hedrick.

Yankovskaya and Hedrick met as undergraduates at Vassar, where Hedrick — among other things — led the on-campus circus troupe The Barefoot Monkeys. Hedrick has since done professional work with Splash Circus in Oakland and the San Francisco Youth Circus, as well as at Australia’s National Institute of Circus Arts.

In "Music in Flight," some circus feats are choreographed, with music as accompaniment. But in a few instances the composition and the physical skills go hand in hand — literally.

“Tim Ellis and Nate Tucker’s new piece is incorporating juggling into the percussion,” Yankovskaya says. “The juggling balls make noise, and it’s amazing to hear and see.”


Another piece, Oliver Caplan’s “You Are Not Alone,” was commissioned by a breast cancer survivor “and follows the stages of feeling,” Yankovskaya says. “The last movement has some beautiful aerials, like a kind of transformation.”

She’s happy to be performing that work at Oberon, she says, because the space is unusually well suited to it.

“Oberon does a lot of work with aerials, which is great for us since you don’t often have a stage where you can do that and play music as well,” she says.

The circus. The opera. A refugee orchestra. A world-famous chorus. Anything is possible in the musical world of Lidiya Yankovskaya.

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