



This spring, Robert Spano led the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Washington, D.C. premiere of *Creation/Creator* in a new staging by Daniel Arsham. Shown here: *Creation/Creator*'s first ASO performance in 2015.

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by Ian VanderMeulen

CAPITAL SHIFT

The creativity and range of American orchestras were showcased in the nation's capital at the inaugural SHIFT Festival in March and April, which brought orchestras from across the country to Washington, D.C. In addition to the concerts, which featured innovative repertoire, the festival shone a spotlight on each orchestra's community connections.

Ever wondered what it would be like to hear Beethoven's *Pastorale* Symphony in a National Park in the morning, then take in a new nature-inspired work in a concert hall that evening? Or imagine hearing a major choral work one evening and attending a Brahms *Requiem* masterclass with members of the chorus the next morning?

Look no further than Washington D.C.-based SHIFT: A Festival of American Orchestras, a week-long showcase of the creativity of North American orchestras co-sponsored by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Washington Performing Arts and presented in cooperation with the League of American Orchestras. It is inspired in part by Spring for Music, a festival highlighting adventurous programming at American orchestras with yearly events at Carnegie Hall from 2011 to 2014. Each spring from 2017 to

2019, SHIFT brings four or five North American orchestras to Washington to showcase their music, their local focus, and their work in community engagement. In the first edition, from March 27 to April 1 of this year, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Boulder Philharmonic, North Carolina Symphony, and Brooklyn-based The Knights descended on the nation's capital for a packed week of programs. The orchestras represent a wide range in terms of budget size, geography, and mission, but share a deep commitment to serving their communities and programming rooted in those local connections. The festival will be reprised in 2018 and 2019 thanks to a three-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. And talk about accessible: concert tickets cost a mere \$25, and many events are free.

SHIFT is built on the twin pillars of innovative mainstage programming and

community engagement. While the first of the two has resulted in an overall festival slate featuring nine living composers and two world premieres, it is the latter that has resulted in the festival's distinctive "residency" model. In addition to their individual full-orchestra programs on Kennedy Center's mainstage, each of the four institutions has adapted some of their own community engagement projects for the D.C. area.

The result is a celebration not only of the variety and enduring creativity of American orchestras, but also their undeniable connection and value to their local communities. "We wanted to emphasize why orchestras are unique hubs of cultural activity within their communities," says Jenny Bilfield, president and CEO of the concert presenter Washington Performing Arts and one of the festival's primary creative voices. SHIFT also serves as a timely

The nature connection figured prominently into the Boulder Philharmonic's offstage offerings. A partnership between the orchestra and Boulder's Open Space & Mountain Parks department has produced a series of guided "Musical Hikes," in Boulder (DIRECTIONAL) led by naturalist Dave Sutherland. At SHIFT, Sutherland led *Wings and Sound: Bird-watching and Music*, an educational tour of D.C.'s Rock Creek Park Nature Center.



celebration of American artistic creativity with the potential to bring together people from diverse backgrounds at a moment of intense political division.

Music With Community Roots

Bilfield was so taken with the energy and programming of the 2014 iteration of the Spring for Music, she says, that she found its closure “unfathomable,” and immediately began brainstorming how to revive it at her home institution of Washington Performing Arts in D.C. She found an ally in Deborah Rutter, who was at that time set to take the reins as president of the Kennedy Center after more than a decade as president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Before Rutter had even set foot in D.C., the two had begun a dialogue about how to “pick up” the Spring for Music idea “and give it a national spin and lens,” says Bilfield. By the end of their first meeting in the nation’s capital, Rutter says, “We were sort of finishing each other’s sentences.”

One of the key continuities with the erstwhile Spring for Music is a commitment to adventurous programming. Once the first round of applications for SHIFT came in, Bilfield recalls, the selection committee began by asking, “Were the programs exciting, were they reflective of some unique curatorial voice.” More important, Rutter emphasizes, “was



Michael Zinke

North Carolina Symphony Music Director Grant Llewellyn and musicians from the orchestra visit a North Carolina school. Community-focused events are a crucial aspect of the SHIFT festival.



Michael Zinke

ecutive Director Sandi Macdonald calls a “Symphony kid,” one of countless young people who have grown up experiencing orchestral music through the Raleigh-based institution’s state-wide music education program. Composer Sarah Kirkland Snider’s 2015 commissioned work *Hiraeth*, featuring film accompaniment, “finds its creative roots in Sarah recalling her childhood visits to her grandparents in Salisbury, North Carolina,” says Macdonald. Mason Bates’s *Rusty Air in Carolina* and two works by Robert Ward (1917–2013), an American composer who spent his last decades in North Carolina, rounded out the orchestra’s “Americana-style” main-stage SHIFT program.

The Atlanta Symphony’s festival itinerary, meanwhile, not only showed off the orchestra’s broader programming mission, but also found close connections in the festival’s D.C. environs. According to Vice President for Artistic Planning and Operations Evans Mirageas, the continuity of Robert Spano’s sixteen-year music directorship has allowed the Atlanta Symphony to develop what the organization affectionately calls the “Atlanta School,” a stable of high-profile composers whom the orchestra regularly engages for new

commissions. Featuring one of the Atlanta School, in this case Christopher Theofanidis, was a natural choice. But the scale of Theofanidis’s *Creation/Creator*, which deploys vocal soloists, narrators, and the full Atlanta Symphony Choral, also allowed the institution to show off Spano’s “theater of a concert” concept, which, Mirageas says, “takes pieces that are not necessarily theatrically composed” and emphasizes “the dramatic element that they have latent within them.”

Bilfield and Rutter also wanted to highlight the work orchestras do outside their concert halls. The solution was to fashion the festival around a set of residencies, having each of the orchestras adapt some of its most distinctive community engagement activities—“transpose” them, in Bilfield’s words—for Washington, D.C. The model can be traced in some ways to the “Citizen Musician” concept Rutter helped spearhead at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Having worked previously at the Seattle Symphony and Los Angeles Phil-

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the program being put together because they thought it would get greater interest or it was really authentic to the kind of work that they do in that community?” In other words, SHIFT wanted programs that weren’t simply unusual for the sake of being unusual, but whose uniqueness was somehow rooted in the orchestra’s institutional identity or local culture.

The North Carolina Symphony’s program, for example, features music by five composers with deep roots in the state. Caroline Shaw—whose composition *Lo* was performed during the festival—is what North Carolina Symphony Ex-

harmonic, Rutter says she began to understand how each orchestra reflects its home community. The “Citizen Musician” initiative, responding to a wide range of social needs throughout the Chicago metropolitan area, became such a hallmark of the CSO that they started implementing it on

“SHIFT creates an opportunity to tell a more complete story of orchestras and their breadth across the country and the connections they have with their communities,” says League of American Orchestras President and CEO Jesse Rosen.

tour, not only in places like New York but as far afield as Russia and Shanghai.

The North Carolina and Atlanta symphonies thus brought their own distinctive brands of community engagement work to the festival, while adapting them to D.C.’s cultural landscape. Musicians from the North Carolina Symphony—which Macdonald says travels some 18,000 miles per year presenting educational and other community concerts throughout the state—showed off their eclecticism in “un-CHAMBERed,” a program blending classical and indie rock styles at the Smithsonian Museum, and participated in some of the Kennedy Center’s educational activities. The Atlanta Symphony, meanwhile, integrated its own rich choral tradition with that of the D.C. metro area, featuring its mainstage soloists in a recital of vocal works on the theme of creation by Britten, Poulenc, Porter, and Gershwin—and one by Spano himself—and offering a masterclass led by Spano and ASO Director of Chorus Norman McKenzie for D.C. choral directors.

Smaller Ensembles, Too

In addition to applying a residency model, Bilfield and Rutter wanted SHIFT to welcome orchestras from a wide range of budget sizes. Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, which serves an advisory role for the festival, remembers an early phone call with Bilfield in which she wondered whether to restrict applications to orchestras of a certain budget category. Rosen recalls, “I said, ‘Why don’t you just make it open to everybody? They’ll either fit your criteria or they

won’t. Why put that filter on it?’” SHIFT organizers agree that the decision to open applications to orchestras of all sizes has had a huge impact on the festival’s representation of American orchestras. “People tend to think of orchestras as these iconic institutions in big cities, but orchestras really come from all over,” Rosen points out. “So from our standpoint it creates an opportunity to tell a more complete story of orchestras and their breadth across the country and also the connections they have with their communities.”

Two orchestras in this year’s SHIFT festival, the Boulder Philharmonic and Brooklyn-based The Knights, bear out Rosen’s points about the vitality of smaller-budget ensembles. Since a strategic planning initiative eight years ago, the Boulder Philharmonic has carried out a mission of what Executive Direc-

a composer on the faculty at the University of Colorado, was planning to write a piece about the Rocky Mountains at the same time that the Geological Society of America was making plans for a splashy 125th-anniversary celebration. The resulting co-commission, Nytch’s Symphony No. 1 (“Formations”), premiered in 2013 under Music Director Michael Buttermann, set a precedent for the “Nature and Music” program the orchestra decided to bring to SHIFT. That concert featured Stephen Lias’s *All the Songs that Nature Sings*, commissioned by the orchestra and featuring projections of the Rocky Mountains commemorating the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service, rounded out by Jeff Midkiff’s Mandolin Concerto, Steve Heitzeg’s *Ghosts of the Grasslands*, and Aaron Copland’s majestic *Appalachian Spring*.

The nature connection figures prominently in the Boulder Philharmonic’s off-stage offerings. One of the Boulder’s biggest sources of pride, Shuck notes, is the



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tor Kevin Shuck calls “Boulder-centric” programming, both in terms of the content of its concerts and the organization’s community collaborations. Shuck notes that “the physical presence of the mountains and the scenic views is something that very much characterizes our community.” As fate would have it, Jeffrey Nytch,

Open Space and Mountain Parks initiative, the result of a vote in the 1960s to devote tax dollars to the maintenance of natural parks around the city. A partnership between the orchestra and the parks department has produced a series of guided “Musical Hikes,” led by Dave Sutherland, a naturalist who integrates orchestral

Michael Buttermann leads the Boulder Philharmonic's 2014 world premiere of Stephen Lias's *Gates of the Arctic*. The performance was accompanied by images of Alaska's Arctic National Park, synchronized with the music.



Renée Palmer

Boulder Philharmonic Music Director Michael Buttermann

excerpts—played on a portable speaker—into educational tours of Boulder's natural surroundings. As part of the Boulder Philharmonic's SHIFT slate, Sutherland led a similar hike, titled *Wings and Sound: Birdwatching and Music*, through D.C.'s Rock Creek Park Nature Center.

The Knights, a chamber ensemble founded by brothers Eric and Colin Jacobsen, is no stranger to such multi-venue performing, having begun as a crack outfit performing classical scores in unusual settings. The orchestra's strong sense of community and innovative approach to programming, which Colin describes as "honoring the grand orchestral tradition going back centuries, and bringing that into the present," shines through on the orchestra's Kennedy Center program. The program features the San Francisco Girls Chorus in works by Brahms, Knights Artistic Director Lisa Bielawa (who is also artistic director of San Francisco Girls Chorus), Aaron Jay Kernis, and Vivaldi's *Gloria* in D Major, a work that Colin notes

was originally written for girls chorus but rarely receives that treatment today. The concert closes with *...the ground beneath our feet*, "co-conceived by about seven members of The Knights, taking this idea of an old *passacaglia* or ground bassline from Baroque times and transforming it through a number of different styles into something for the present," Colin says.

The orchestra's other activities, says Eric Jacobsen, are "really similar in style and in terms of the connection with the community to what we do in Brooklyn," including a professional development workshop and a club show with singer-songwriter Christina Courtin at The Hamilton in downtown D.C. The Hamilton gig, featuring all Knights members, "shows the fluid, really boundary-less way that orchestral music is being presented and can be presented," says Knights Executive Director Shruti Adhar. And, Adhar adds, "I think we're just really excited to make our debut at the Kennedy Center, too."

For smaller-budget orchestras, SHIFT offers national exposure—and plenty of challenges. The Boulder Philharmonic, Shuck notes, is not accustomed to touring so far afield. Not only did they have the longest way to travel for the festival, but the number of "moving pieces," as Shuck puts it, present significant logistical challenges. In addition to the musical hikes and a mainstage concert that Shuck admits is "about as complex as it gets, with aerial dancers and multimedia projections," the organization invited its youth ensemble, the Greater Boulder Youth Orchestras, to perform on the Kennedy Center's Millen-

nium Stage prior to the professional outfit's mainstage program. The opportunities quickly came to outweigh the challenges. "Once I learned more about the goals of the SHIFT festival, it transformed into being not just an opportunity to show off the Boulder Phil but also to add to the national conversation about how to re-imagine what an orchestra can be and how it relates to its community," Shuck says. "I think we really quickly realized that we *have* to take this on."

A Place at the Table

One thing that has changed since planning for SHIFT got underway in 2015 is the city of Washington, D.C. itself. Just before this article was published, for instance, the new administration had released its proposed budget, which aimed to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities. According to the League's Rosen, the NEA has "broad bipartisan support." For arts leaders, that



Nermette Bichway

Washington Performing Arts President and CEO Jenny Bilfield, Kennedy Center President Deborah Rutter, League of American Orchestras President and CEO Jesse Rosen, and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Program Officer Susan Feder at the 2015 announcement of the SHIFT festival at the League's 2015 Conference.

does not diminish the ongoing importance of strong arts advocacy. Atlanta's Mirageas notes, "It's always appropriate, whatever the administration is in power in our country, that in our nation's capital the arts have a place at the table." To that end, Rosen says, the League helped broker meetings between orchestra officials and their respective elected representatives during SHIFT, and presented a panel dis-



The Brooklyn-based ensemble The Knights, which performed at the inaugural SHIFT festival in Washington, D.C. this spring.

cussion at the Library of Congress on the role of orchestras in society.

“One of our outreach events is having chamber groups perform outside during the national Cherry Blossom festival, by the Jefferson Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial—these icons in American history and

Brothers Eric and Colin Jacobsen, co-founders of the Brooklyn-based ensemble The Knights, which performed at the inaugural SHIFT festival this spring in Washington, D.C.



American values,” says Boulder’s Shuck. “On the other hand, it’s hard to ignore the politics of today. One of the funders for our project is the National Endowment for the Arts; we received a National Parks grant to commission the first work on the program. So there is a very tangible element to this project that would not have happened without national funding for the arts. It is important as a nation to place value on the performing arts and artistic expression.”

In another sense, however, the festival’s timing also gives orchestras and symphonic music an opportunity to play a unifying role after a particularly difficult national election. Colin Jacobson suggests that The Knights’ performance of Kernis’s work, originally written in response to mass shootings in San Bernardino and Paris, and the Vivaldi *Gloria* offer opportunity for healing and uplift. The Knights’ Adhar points out, “Orchestras and arts organizations and musicians in general are in this unique place in terms of gathering people physically together—a hub of people sitting next to each other. It’s really an opportunity for dialogue, for connection. There aren’t a lot of these kinds of places in our communities anymore.”

The Kennedy Center’s Rutter says, “Each orchestra provides a service to its community, and each is incredibly valuable. This is

about orchestras serving their community and being deeply embedded in their community.” Bilfield at Washington Performing Arts agrees. “This is about people making a living in their hometowns doing what they do best and connecting with their neighbors in powerful ways to support the economy. And that creativity is worthy of celebrating at a very national level.” **S**

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SHIFTING AHEAD

The second annual SHIFT: A Festival of American Orchestras will take place at the Kennedy Center and other locations around Washington, D.C. from April 9 to 15, 2018. Chosen from a pool of applicants from across the country, the four selected orchestras each will offer a Kennedy Center Concert Hall performance and citywide residency. The 2018 orchestras are the **Albany Symphony**, **Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra**, **Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra**, and **National Symphony Orchestra**.