

MUSIC

At Tanglewood and beyond: The joys of movement

A summer of unencumbered arts and culture at Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow and Mass MoCA



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LENOX and BECKET, Mass. — “I can’t dance,” Carlos Simon confided to a group gathered in a Tanglewood studio for a recent composer’s talk. “I’ve got two left feet.”

Lucky for Simon (and us), the Kennedy Center composer in residence was not at Tanglewood to dance but to present a Boston Symphony Orchestra performance of his “Four Black American Dances.” Premiered at Symphony Hall in Boston in 2022, the orchestra-commissioned suite offers a concise and combustible musical history lesson that vibrantly illustrates the centuries-long synchronicity between Black liberation and Black movement. And for the entirety of my two weeks in Western Massachusetts, movement was on my mind, in several scenes and at various scales.

First, there was all the moving: the near daily and quite hilly drives between North Adams (up in the top northwestern corner of the state) and the tony hamlet of Lenox, where the sprawling campus of Tanglewood drapes like a bright-green shawl over the broad, rolling shoulders of the Berkshires, as well as the town line of neighboring Stockbridge. There were the afternoons we spent moving between Tanglewood and Jacob’s Pillow, the enduring dance festival nestled into the dense woods of nearby Becket.

And there were the several long walks we took through the 250,000 square feet of gallery space at Mass MoCA, an erstwhile mill complex turned contemporary art hot spot back in North Adams. As someone more accustomed to quick Metro rides and long stationary stretches at my desk, suffice it to say I got my steps in. As a result of all this running around, there was also a decreasingly conscious movement between modes of art consumption. After a while, experiences and their attendant expectations begin to respectively blur together and melt away.

At MoCA, sound from the video of cellist Jeffrey Zeigler performing composer Paola Prestini’s “Zodiac: Poems for Cello” echoed through the cavernous installation of 105 of Sol LeWitt’s career-spanning wall drawings, yet felt like a private recital. An immersive virtual reality installation of Laurie Anderson’s “Chalkroom” allowed the sensation of flight from the seat of a swiveling chair, yet felt like a form of internalized theater. A massive custom pink roller coaster constructed by artist E.J. Hill was available to one rider per hour, each trip observed by a small gathering of people summoned by the sound of the winch’s crank, and it felt like a brief but thrilling piece of choreography.

At Jacob’s Pillow, I watched the lithe and adventurous dancers of the Complexions Contemporary Ballet, founded in 1994 by Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson, perform works spanning 17 years of company repertoire, and a

1994 by Dwight Rhodes and Desmond Richardson, perform works spanning 17 years of company repertoire, and a few centuries of musical inspiration. The group danced 2006's exuberant "Hissy Fits," set to interpretations of Bach by pianists Gabriela Montero ("Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor") and Glenn Gould ("Chromatic Fantasy in D Minor"). The duo of Chloe Duryea and Miguel Solano danced 2002's "Endgame/Love One" to the piece "Kyriena," an interpretation of Bach's "Prelude and Fugue in E minor BWV 855" by the Icelandic duo of composer Skúli Sverrisson and Víkingur Ólafsson.

The sparseness of Beethoven's classic "Moonlight Sonata" felt slightly at odds with the switchblade quickness of 2020's "Elegy," compellingly performed by Jillian Davis. And the afternoon-capping company number "Star Dust" (2016) was an electric tour of the music and spirit of one of the 20th century's most significant composers, David Bowie.

But I was most moved (and transported) the following week, taking in a generous suite of Grecian-inspired classics by the Martha Graham Dance Company, followed with high contrast by the excellent rave-inspired "Cave" (2022). Watching "Errand Into the Maze" (1947) and "Cave of the Heart" (1946) felt like watching old stills of Graham's dancers spring to life or, perhaps more appropriately, the figures from the sides of an ancient urn, their uncanny capture of stillness and motion. Dancers So Young An and Lorenzo Pagano offered intense, meticulous readings of "Errand," here stripped of its original Isamu Noguchi set (after damage from Hurricane Sandy) but intensified by its reliance on light, the dancers and Gian Carlo Menotti's angular score.

"Cave of the Heart," a spartan retelling of the Medea myth, felt especially alive and vital. Anne Souder's embodiment of the Chorus was helpless to stave off the detestable fate of Xin Ying's brooding, brutal and human Medea. But this far removed from its 1946 premiere, the dance also felt like a tribute to Samuel Barber's haunting score, which seemed itself to hang ominously from the rafters, the music teetering indefinitely on an unfathomable brink.

The unexpected highlight of the program was the counterpart "Cave," conceived during the pandemic by Israeli choreographer Hofesh Shechter and dancer Daniil Simkin and premiered in 2022. A full-company dance, it rides atop a four-on-the-floor sub-bass thump that shook the bolts of the barn and made its rave-inspired aesthetic feel raw and real.

It crammed vogues and jigs and breaks and ballet and endless other styles into an ever-shifting murmuration of bodies, offering an exciting showcase of individual dancers as well as affirming a sense of company continuity across a gulf of nearly a century, i.e. the whole thing was still very Martha. (Next spring, the company comes to Virginia at the Modlin Center for the Arts in Richmond on March 22 and the Hylton Performing Arts Center in Fairfax on April 13.)

On paper, the marquee performance at Tanglewood earlier this month was maestro Andris Nelsons leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra and guest pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet in a pair of concertos: his countryman Camille Saint-Saëns's Piano Concerto No. 5 in F (better known as his "Egyptian" concerto) and George Gershwin's sinuous, sensuous 1925 concerto in the same key.

But in person, it was the opener of Simon's "Four Black American Dances" that left the deepest impression and hung around the longest in my head. Its four short movements (a "Ring Shout," a "Waltz," a "Tap!" and a "Holy Dance") were bound together by an intoxicating episodic energy, each a rich chapter advancing the same story. Simon is a composer as inspired by a lineage of such Black classical composers as Florence Price and William Grant Still as by

such pop producers as Quincy Jones and Leon Ware, so a keen sense of rhythm and movement are always baked into bars that also reflect his fondness for deep harmonic hues and rich dynamic play.

The “Ring Shout,” for instance, was a nimble negotiation of stomping rhythm, hollering horns and fiery fiddling. All at once, it seemed to kick up a cloud of dust and cast shafts of chromatic light. The elegant “Waltz” that followed, intended to evoke the cultural emergence of Black affluence in the 1930s, showcased Simon’s skills with rising, diving strings. The movement felt carpeted in lush, plush textures, yet drawn tight and tense by formal rigor.

Racing marimbas and strings and a clatter of percussion brought the third “Tap!” movement to fleeting life. And the final movement, “Holy Dance,” brought everything to a busy, urbane and exciting conclusion. A trio of trombonists stood for the passage that was revealed earlier by Simon in his talk to be a tribute to his mother, a trombonist with a penchant for generously slathered vibrato. As the kids might say: iconic.

This final evening of my visit to Tanglewood rounded out with the two concertos, both of which were delights in their own way. If Thibaudet’s glossy embossed blazer offered the audience what felt like a hint of a showy presence, his handling of the Saint-Saëns was a conscious demonstration of his ability to play well with others.

The composer was the soloist at its 1896 premiere, and Thibaudet’s modern performance signaled a similar care and reverence for the orchestral material around him, which often seemed to bloom effortlessly from the edges of his playing. He lent appropriate froth to the first movement, apropos of its evocation of a sea voyage. He coaxed beguiling sonic character from the instrument in the Andante movement, which winnows through its approximation of Egyptian-inspired scales. And he handled the complex rhythms of the “Molto Allegro” finale with a fine balance of grace and showmanship.

After intermission, Thibaudet made dazzling work of the jazzy contours and blue moods of Gershwin’s concerto, which I opted to listen to on the lawn, on my back, on a blanket, gazing up at the sky, parsing the passage of dark languid clouds across the darker night sky, notes be damned. The concerto’s “Charleston rhythm,” as Gershwin called it, made a fine foil to its nocturnal softness and ease, the latter deeply and lovingly indulged in what was a near-perfect “Andante Con Moto” centerpiece movement. The limber melodies of this concerto, its stunning lightness and the golden thread of Thibaudet’s gentle lines stitching the whole thing together seemed devoutly in service of pleasure.

At Tanglewood, freedom of movement characterizes the entire experience, giving one the ability to stretch and wander or sit and think and listen. This is the appeal of any of the semi-outdoor classical music festivals that crop up over the summer, with the way they authorize you to inhabit the music the way you see fit, and with the degree of liberation they grant from the self-regulations of the concert hall.

On the lawns, where the music roams free along with its listeners, every rule feels relaxed and thus more earnestly respected. If I miss the misty hills and the tranquil woods and the choruses of birds and occasional bats and critters of the country, I miss even more the opportunity to loosen the proverbial collar of concertgoing, to let one experience turn into another, to move freely about the music.