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## A Road Trip to Sample America's Many, Many Music Festivals

With a minivan and a three small children in tow, a critic spent 12 days discovering classical music offerings among the Rocky Mountains.

By David Allen



Patrons filing in last month to the Colorado Music Festival in Boulder.

Four classical music festivals. Three children. Two exhausted parents, with a brave grandfather in tow. One bedraggled minivan.

It'll be fun, my wife promised me. Surprisingly, it was.

While some of my colleagues have been taking in the mighty festivals of Europe over the past few weeks — premieres in Aix-en-Provence, France, and the charms of Salzburg, Austria — the revival of programming after the darker days of the pandemic affords the

adventurous a fresh chance to get better acquainted with the summer offerings here in the United States.

There are plenty of them, after all. Several of our major orchestras benefit from their own vacation homes, whether Tanglewood for the Boston Symphony or Blossom for the Cleveland Orchestra, Ravinia outside Chicago or the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. Others, not so fortunate in padding their bottom lines with picnickers, play on in



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John Adams leading a performance of his composition “City Noir” at the recent Colorado Music Festival.

their usual halls, or piece together short residencies in various climes.

Then there’s Ojai, and Ravinia, and Spoleto, and Caramoor, and Bard, and Cabrillo and many, many more festivals; if your budget stretches and your stomach is strong, you can even take a jet boat down the Colorado to hear “Quartet for the End of Time” in a riverside grotto outside Moab.

The opportunities are endless, but for anyone interested in combining soundscapes with scenery, as our Junior Rangers demand, one road trip through the mountains begs to be explored.

My family and I — including children aged 6, 3 and not quite 1 — started with the up-and-coming Colorado Music Festival in Boulder, which is within easy reach of Rocky Mountain National Park. Then it made sense to a climb up to the ski resorts west of Denver — first to Bravo! Vail, then to the next valley for the Aspen Music Festival and School. Jackson Hole, Wyo., didn’t look all that far away, really. There, the Grand Teton Music Festival plays just outside the park of the same name, with Yellowstone National Park an hour to the north. Why not?

Of course, we could have left at that, and that would probably have been wise.

Still, there’s also an alluring route back south, down through the Canyonlands of Utah and on toward Santa Fe Opera. Tempting.

With the rest of the family flying home, I reported on “Tristan und Isolde” and “M. Butterfly” there recently. But what about the other four festivals, which we visited over 12 days in July?

They are all quite different, serving discrete audiences in distinct atmospheres even if spending time at some of them is expensive, whatever the ticket price. Each has its own idea of what — and whom — a summer festival should be for, and each turned out to be valuable in its own way.

#### *Colorado Music Festival*

Glance at it from a distance, and you might mistake the auditorium of the Colorado Chautauqua, where this 44 year-old, five-and-a-bit week festival is based, for Wagner’s temple in Bayreuth. Built in 1898, it is perched on Boulder’s southwestern flank, the Flatiron rock formations brooding behind it with hiking trails all around. Get there at the right time, and you can just about hear a rehearsal from the playground down the hill. Our youngest watched deer wandering the grounds from his swing, while I eavesdropped on some John Adams.

Fetchingly ramshackle, the wooden hall offers an acoustic that is as comfortable for string quartets as for the festival’s orchestra, and it draws an audience that listens closely. It’s a solid platform, one from which the music director, Peter Oundjian, who has recently taken over the Colorado Symphony in Denver, hopes to turn this festival from a primarily local event to something with broader reach.

That’s an easy enough mission to believe in if you have friends like Adams. Contemporary scores are dotted through even the more traditional evenings here, which this season included commissions from Wang Jie and Wynton Marsalis, and there’s a flair to the programming that mixes slightly unusual works with cornerstones of the canon.

Even so, my visit coincided with the start of a new music week that Adams



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took part in organizing as composer in residence, albeit without offering any novelties himself. The Attacca Quartet came in for a night to feast on works by Philip Glass and Gabriella Smith, but of the three concerts I heard, the two orchestral programs were most revealing of this festival's virtues.

Take the second: a brief premiere from Timo Andres, "Dark Patterns," prefaced Samuel Adams's Chamber Concerto, a violin concerto in disguise that smartly refracts Baroque forms and was played amazingly by the soloist Helen Kim, before Samuel's father, John, stepped up to conduct his own, pulsating "City Noir."

Adams visibly enjoyed himself on the podium, and with good reason: The festival ensemble is an admirable one. The players mostly hail from regional orchestras — the wind soloists, for instance, include regular-season

principals from Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii and Florida — and they come together each summer to play with terrific commitment and no shortage of virtuosity.

They can play pretty much anything, too. The first program I heard was one of three that intriguingly paired the piano concertos of Beethoven with works by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Oundjian busily drew crisp, energetic support for Jan Lisiecki, who was a rather clangorous soloist in the "Emperor" Concerto, but the real shock was the rarefied eloquence that his orchestra lavished on the Vaughan Williams's World War II-era Fifth Symphony. I'm still thinking about it, weeks later.