



**MOST INSPI**



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In collaboration with our editorial staff, contributors, and music writers polled from across the nation, *Listen* offers our highly subjective list of the Fifteen Most Inspiring People in Classical Music Today. Taking “inspiring” as our watchword, we found ourselves often drifting beyond the terra firma of usual-suspect musicians and rediscovering stories we feel compelled to share. Ultimately, we are confident that all the inspiring men and women on our list are making classical music all the richer for their contributions.

LISTEN CELEBRATES THE PEOPLE WHO LIFT OUR ART HIGHER.  
ILLUSTRATION BY YUKO SHIMIZU

**F**ew orchestras headlining Carnegie Hall include former drug dealers, addicts and hustlers among their ranks; you won't find many clarinetists who have been locked up repeatedly for armed robbery, or French horn players with a former crack habit. But when the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela (SBYO) came to New York on its 2007 tour, many of its two hundred musicians had traveled a long way from lives of desperate poverty and crime. Their rendition of Leonard Bernstein's "Mambo," now a widely seen YouTube clip, was downright ecstatic, complete with swaying, singing, dancing, spinning basses and twirling trumpets.



The SBYO is the flagship ensemble of El Sistema, a Venezuelan music education system that takes underprivileged children from decaying slums and bullet-scarred shantytowns to a vast network of regional music schools and youth orchestras. The program is the brainchild of **Dr. José Antonio Abreu**, an economist and classical musician who believes that music can help children from impoverished circumstances achieve their full potential and thus promote social change. Since its founding in 1975, the program

has taken more than one million children between the ages of two and eighteen, the majority of them poor, and provided them with instruments and free lessons.

El Sistema is also the story of one prodigy, himself from a lower-middle-class family on the outskirts of Barquisimeto in the Venezuelan interior. **Gustavo Dudamel** entered the program and took up the violin at age ten. By eighteen he was the SBYO's music director. Now twenty-nine, he recently became music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he is putting a young, multicultural face on an art form often perceived as graying and elitist. He's also helping to bring the model of El Sistema to other countries. He has started working with Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (YOLA), an initiative to build youth orchestras in underserved communities throughout Los Angeles.



The Inter-American Development Bank has calculated that every dollar invested in El Sistema has reaped about \$1.68 in social dividends, given the falloff in school dropout rates and a decline in crime. Dr. Abreu has put its impact another way: "Poverty means loneliness, sadness, anonymity. An orchestra means joy, motivation, teamwork, the aspiration to success. It's a big family dedicated to those beautiful things that only music brings to human beings." — *Brian Wise*



**Marin Alsop** frequently credits Leonard Bernstein as the mentor who inspired her to become a conductor. But it's not hard to imagine the aging maestro being buoyed in turn by the potential he must have sensed in his

Tanglewood student as she was just setting out on her pathbreaking career. Alsop, now fifty-three, would go on to become the first woman to helm a leading American orchestra when she took up the position of music director of the Baltimore Symphony in 2007. [*Maestra JoAnn Falletta was named music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic in 1998 — Ed.*] For all its historical significance, though, breaking the gender barrier is merely one aspect of Alsop's charismatic role as a conductor for the twenty-first century. Her style of creative collaboration emphasizes music-making not as a self-absorbed art — a dead end amid the cultural noise of our era — but as a powerful and inclusive social act. What Alsop has above all inherited from Bernstein — and carries forward — is a passionate sense of the conductor as a storyteller who is driven to rekindle the curiosity of musicians and audiences alike.

— *Thomas May*

**Martha Argerich** became an inspiration to half the world's population — at the very least — when she upset the male-dominated piano circuit by winning the seventh International Frederic Chopin Piano Competition in 1964. Her prodigious technique and imaginative playing drew comparisons to past titans of the keyboard. But her free-spirited personality has since transcended gender issues to inspire generations of performers and audiences to listen deeper to great music. When she plays Chopin, Liszt, Beethoven, Prokofiev and many others, it is as if she is composing the music on the spot. Her willingness and courage to interpret music as she feels it — putting herself out to be judged — is more inspiring even than the conviction that drove her to quit the jury of the 1980 Chopin Piano Competition in protest when



pianist Ivo Pogorelich was eliminated. Today, Argerich not only continues to perform and record, she literally inspires by supporting young artists. But the greatest element of Argerich's playing? She makes the music sound young and fresh, too.

— Andrew Druckenbrod

When Ohio-born tenor **Lawrence Brownlee** won the Met National Council Auditions in 2001, he was called a “splendid lyric tenor who gave rousing performances” (*Opera News*) and was praised for, among other things, his “bright, clear, focused voice and engaging stage personality” (*The New York Times*). Presumably sitting on top of the world, he was then told by many people in the business that because he was short and an African-American tenor, he would not have a career. (While it's true that African-American sopranos and mezzos are widely accepted, there still are issues with leading men.) “I cannot change who I am,” Brownlee has said. “I am a very proud African-American man who is not tall.” And his career is booming. He has surpassed his icon, tenor George Shirley, in fame and acclaim. Of course, it doesn't hurt that he has a gorgeous voice — round, handsome tone up to Cs, Ds and higher — but he's his own man, his own tenor, his own star. And he salsa dances in his spare time. — *Robert Levine*



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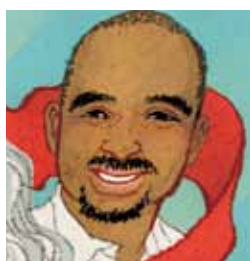
Transcendent interpreter. Musical champion. Superb teacher. American-born conductor and harpsichordist **William Christie** has managed

to embody all three designations in his stellar four-decade career. The Buffalo native moved to France in 1971 and, eight years later, founded the now-revered period-instrument ensemble Les Arts Florissants. Building an unusually close-knit musical kinship, Christie and his fellow musicians have made dozens of what are often definitive recordings. They have almost single-handedly resurrected seventeenth-century French music and, beginning with a celebrated production of Lully's *Atys* in 1987, breathed new energy into Baroque opera. Along the way, Christie has

unselfishly mentored an array of musicians who have gone on to significant careers of their own, notably Emmanuelle Haïm, founder of Le Concert d'Astrée. Christie became a French citizen in 1995 and was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 2008. — *Kyle MacMillan*

*'She wants to work with directors who direct singers as if they were actors.'*

French soprano **Natalie Dessay** has finally put to rest the notion of high, coloratura sopranos as “canary fanciers.” A.C., that is, *After Callas*, it became clear that the *bel canto* repertoire had a musical and emotional depth untapped in living memory, but few high, light sopranos subscribed to these notions. Dessay first wanted to be a dancer, then an actress, and only began her opera training in her early twenties. After just a year she was singing professionally and soon became a superstar, as respected for her flawless singing as her riveting onstage presence and commitment to her roles. At her absolute peak, in mid-2001, her voice stopped working the way she wanted it to and in July of 2002 she went through surgery on one of her vocal cords; she returned to the stage but soon needed further surgery. A cyst, then a polyp almost ended her career. By mid-2005 she was back and better than ever. In addition to her usual *Lucias*, *Maries* (in *La fille du régiment*) and *Zerbinettas*, she recently sang *Mélisande*, a role that lies much lower than her other repertoire. Why? Because she can focus as much on acting as singing; the character interests her. She wants to work with directors who direct singers as if they were actors. Boundless energy, curiosity and courage set Dessay apart. — *R.L.*



**Aaron Dworkin** founded the annual Sphinx Competition for black and Latino string players a dozen years ago to address the minuscule number of minorities in classical music. Personal experience drove home the point: As a violinist, he was almost always the only African-American in his school orchestras growing up in New York. As a graduate student at the University of Michigan he decided to act upon the isolation he felt. The impact has been swift and wide-ranging.

Some Sphinx alums have been finalists in international competitions, and others have

won spots at Juilliard, Curtis and other top conservatories. In recent months, the best and brightest Sphinx artists have appeared on *The Today Show* and *Good Morning America* and have been received at the White House. The Harlem Quartet, comprised of former first-place laureates in the Sphinx Competition, is making inroads at major concert halls. While the number of minorities in the ranks of symphony orchestras remains appallingly low — about two percent of musicians are black and Latino — Sphinx has brought much needed attention to the cause. — *B.W.*

In an era in which the music scene is dominated by hype and corporate conglomerates, it's inspiring to note an independent label driven by one person's vision, taste and sensibility, especially when executed with such excellence. **Manfred Eicher** founded ECM (the letters stand for Edition of Contemporary Music) in 1969 with an LP of jazz pianist Mal Waldron. The thousand-plus records he's produced since bear the stamp of his eclectic taste, ranging from American and European jazz groups to classical music that runs the gamut from medieval to avant-garde, with rewarding stops in between — Till Fellner's Bach, Andras Schiff's Beethoven sonata cycle, the Zehetmair Quartet's Schumann and Bartók. Eicher has also pioneered composers such as Arvo Pärt, Valentin Silvestrov, Erkki-Sven Tüür and many more. Many of his releases cross cultural borders, exemplified by *Silwan*, an album featuring North African and American soloists with a baroque string band in music inspired by medieval Al-Andalus. As if all this weren't enough, Eicher's productions are a class act, with beautiful covers and typography and state-of-the-art sound. — *Dan Davis*



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Philip Glass and Steve Reich supported themselves as taxi drivers during their formative years. But they got off easy compared to the Chinese composer **Ge Gan-Ru**. At seventeen, with the Cultural Revolution underway, he was forced to give up his violin

studies and was sent to work on a farm on the outskirts of Shanghai. There he would work in the rice fields from dawn to dusk, then walk

forty-five minutes to practice his violin at a remote water station until late at night, evading authorities who forbade Western music.

When the Cultural Revolution ended, Ge attended and later taught at the Shanghai Conservatory. In 1983 he was accepted to the doctoral program at Columbia University. Arriving in New York with just forty dollars in his pocket, he spoke barely a word of English. He supported himself as a Chinese food delivery boy while living in a basement in Queens.

Those harsh years eventually paid off. Performers like the Kronos Quartet and the Ying Quartet, pianist Margaret Leng Tan and conductor Jose Serebrier have recorded his colorful, semi-autobiographical works that include *Chinese Rhapsody* and *Six Pentatonic Tunes*. — *B.W.*

**Marilyn Horne** is indisputably the greatest mezzo of the second half of the twentieth century. Her performances of the trouser and other coloratura mezzo roles of Rossini, Handel, Bellini and other composers are now the gold standard. The voice — rich, dark, agile, seemingly invulnerable — is instantly recognizable. She could have rested on her vocal and dramatic laurels but instead opted to keep active: appalled by the lack of arts education in our schools and the cutbacks in government funding for the arts, she launched The Marilyn Horne Foundation in 1994 (on her sixtieth birthday) to preserve the art of the vocal recital by way of encouraging gifted young vocal recitalists and vocal accompanists. Carnegie Hall will assume the core programs of the Foundation in July, with Horne as artistic advisor. — *R.L.*



If you saw **Klaus Heymann** in an airport lounge, the Frankfurt-born, globe-trotting seventy-three-year-old would hardly seem like a revolutionary, even if you looked



close enough to see the intrepid glint in his eye. But the classical record industry has seen no bigger radical in the past two decades-plus. Founding Naxos Records in 1987 — when big stars and major labels ruled — Heymann shook up the industry with his focus on economy, a

wide-open approach to repertoire and a roster of hungry, lesser-known performers. Early on, his budget retail prices and modest production values stirred scoffing resentment among bigger indie labels — many of whom would come to him when the industry imploded and Naxos became a global distribution leader. Heymann was a classical pioneer on the internet and has remained devoted to educational products. But most importantly, his label has documented vast swaths of music that would have never ended up on record — and proved that, at the right price, consumers would buy up obscure European symphonists, contemporary chamber music and an entire series devoted to American composition. Revolutionaries aren't always universally liked, but Heymann deserves the affection of all music lovers.

— *Bradley Bamarger*

**Yo-Yo Ma** began his career as a child prodigy. Once he negotiated the tricky transition to adult artist, he could have built a comfortable career playing a handful of well-known cello concertos in the traditional repertoire: no one's better at Dvořák or Beethoven. And no one would have faulted him for staying there.

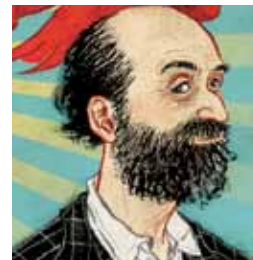


But a devouring curiosity has carried him far beyond that comfort zone. Ma is omnimusical, taking on Bolcom and bluegrass, tangos and his “Silk Road” project. He has gone back, into the music of the Baroque, and forward, into new commissions. He has collaborated with artists ranging from Renée Fleming to Diana Krall, from Emanuel Ax to Dave Brubeck, from pianists to pipa players.

Ma adapts himself to other idioms, then takes what he's learned to deepen and enrich his work in the core repertoire. He speaks passionately about everything from educational initiatives to the importance of empathy. Always learning, always growing, Ma is the essential artist of the twenty-first century. — *Sarah Bryan Miller*

With its ringing, rolling syllables, “tintinnabulation” is one of the most melodious of all words. Fittingly, it's the word **Arvo Pärt** uses to describe the music he has made since 1976, when he emerged from five years of silence. In earlier times, Pärt composed serial music that fit with twentieth-century trends,

but then this Estonian reinvented himself. He turned toward older forms, including Gregorian chant, and rediscovered the beauty of simplicity. Ever since, Pärt's glowing, serene music has been both minimalist and mystical, medieval and modern.



“I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played,” he once explained, comparing the simple triads at the core of his music to the ringing of bells — tintinnabulation.

Pärt, who turns seventy-five in September, is often described as a sort of monk. He says his beard is the only monk-like thing about him, but his compositions do sound like revelations achieved through prayer.

In a 1999 interview, Pärt said his process is like looking through an electron microscope. He zooms in on music's molecules, magnifying the complicated surfaces until he sees the building blocks beneath it all. “What you can see now,” Pärt said, “is a cool geometry: very particular and very clear.” — *Robert Loerzel*

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In many ways **Michael Tilson Thomas** has assumed the mantle of Leonard Bernstein in American musical life, even if he could never replicate that iconic polymath's cultural impact. Tilson Thomas — a sixty-five-year-old California native, though he seems half that age and has an East Coast lineage — has been music director of the San Francisco Symphony since 1995, raising that ensemble's status so much that the old Big Five orchestral standing should be revised to the Big Six. Tilson Thomas and his group have been at the forefront of the twenty-first century's post-Bernstein Mahler boom, winning fistfuls of Grammys for their cycle, produced in-house. Like Bernstein, Tilson Thomas tirelessly promotes such American pioneers as Ives, Gershwin and Copland while devoting himself to a younger generation of performers — founding both the New World and YouTube symphonies. And no one after Bernstein has produced such quality edutainment programs as Tilson Thomas's *Keeping Score* series for PBS (also on DVD, CD and download), which elucidates masterworks with a manner as engaging as it is erudite. — *B.B.* ■

