

The Magnificent Violin

Looking ahead to the Chamber Music Society's 2025–2026 season with David Finckel.

By Jack Slavin



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CMS violinists performing in Alice Tully Hall.

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center recently announced its 2025–2026 season, a central theme of which is the violin and its long history within classical music. I sat down with CMS Co-Artistic Director David Finckel to discuss the season. Our conversation is condensed and edited below.

Jack Slavin: CMS is renowned for its unparalleled commitment to chamber music. What sets it apart, however, is the sense of playfulness that permeates not only the concert

experience but also the programming choices. Next season, for example, audiences can enjoy an all-Ravel program, as serious a musical project as any, alongside Bach's satirical "Coffee" Cantata and Beethoven's "Eyeglasses" Duo. This balance of depth and levity is truly refreshing. Is this a deliberate approach that you and Wu Han embrace, or does it arise more organically as part of your creative process?

David Finckel: Classical music is a representation of the complete

spectrum of human emotions. If you name any emotion—jealousy, hatred, ecstasy—I can find you a piece of music and a moment within it that perfectly expresses that emotion. It's all there. So as classical music presenters, if we are to be faithful to the art form then we need to program it all.

When I was growing up, my mother, a wise soul, sat me down with Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. There's a chapter in which a woman says to the Prophet: "Speak to us of joy and sorrow." The Prophet responds: "When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you such joy." In music it's the same way.

How do we balance everything in our programming? It's simple: I think the composers themselves have already balanced it for us because they have laid bare their own souls in times of trouble and in times of joy. At the core of what we do is to present classical music for what it really is—a total representation of the human spirit in all of its extremes.

JS: With such an impressive roster of talented musicians, do you program with specific players in mind? If so, what is that process like?

DF: We generally will make the programs first and then fit the artists to the pieces. That said, one of the great things about having this big family of artists is that we do have individual conversations about their projects, interests, specialties, and passions. We don't want to be in a position of dictating, "You've got to play this, you've got to play that." When we make artist choices, we ask them: "Would you like to play this?" We try to give our musicians the artistic

opportunities that they really want. Wu Han and I are part of the band. When we go to a rehearsal, we're not artistic directors—we are equal colleagues. Because the family is so large, we've seen relationships develop between artists who would hardly know each other if it weren't for CMS. That's one of the most rewarding parts of the whole enterprise.

JS: The violin is a central theme of the 2025–2026 season. Not only the Winter Festival, but many programs throughout the year showcase the instrument. What inspired this choice?

DF: The first part of this answer has to do with the instrument itself: the violin as we know it was invented in the 1500s by the Amati family in Cremona, Italy. These new instruments were more powerful than their viol counterparts because the higher angle of the strings directed more pressure



Soprano Joëlle Harvey sings Bach Cantatas on December 9, 2025, as part of CMS's annual Baroque Festival.

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CMS musicians on the Alice Tully Hall stage. From left: Benjamin Beilman, Yura Lee, David Requiro, Nina Bernat, David Byrd-Marrow, Marc Goldberg, and Sebastian Manz.

into the instrument. And without frets [raised bars on the fingerboards of earlier string instruments that marked the positions of notes], there was the possibility for variation of touch and even vibrato in the left hand, which opened the door for more expressive potential.

Name me a piece of technology or machinery that has not been improved in 500 years! This miracle of technology is inextricably linked to the music itself.

The reason Arcangelo Corelli, one of the great violinists of his time, was able to write such exceptional violin music was that he was surrounded by the violins of Stradivari, Amati, and Guarneri. These fiddles could do stuff that couldn't be done before. When the Romantic Age came along in the 1820s, the world realized that the violin was capable of imitating the human voice. Later in the 19th century came the great Romantic violin tradition with violinists like Pablo de Sarasate, Henryk Wieniawski, and Eugène Ysaÿe. Ysaÿe redefined what expressive playing was, only to be eclipsed by Fritz Kreisler (featured in next season's Winter

Festival), who brought expressive violin playing to a height that has never been surpassed. And, of course, there's the virtuosity of the violin, beginning with Niccolò Paganini in the 1820s—what he did on stage made people think he was inhabited by the devil! That's one reason to pay tribute to the instrument: it's because of this gadget and its incredible capabilities—expressive and technical—that we have this unbelievable music.

The second part of the answer is just as important. When we looked at our roster and the spectacular violinists on it, I thought, "Who has a collection of violinists like this anywhere in the world? Nobody." Our love of the instrument itself, combined with my astonishment at the level of violin playing at CMS, created this season—a celebration of the instrument, the repertoire, and our players. I wrote to every violinist on our roster, asking, "If you want to get up and play a solo next season (a sonata with piano or an unaccompanied piece), give me your first five choices." I managed to give

Continued on page 27

THE MAGNIFICENT VIOLIN

Continued from page 12

every one of them a piece they had ranked.

It might be fashionable to say that the individuality of 19th-century musicians is gone, that today's musicians all sound the same. But that is not true of this group of violinists. One of the things I'm most looking forward to next season is going into the hall and hearing, one after another, their different voices, their different human approaches to the instrument. The season will give people the opportunity to hear the future of the art of the violin in the hands of 20 or more unbelievable violinists.

JS: Many of the titles of next season's programs are pairs of composers: Brahms and Dvořák, Beethoven and Britten, Liszt and Bartók, among others. When placing such towering figures of the classical canon together in a single program, what elements do you look for? Do you focus more on contrast, cohesion, or something else?

DF: This question brought to mind Steve Allen's *Meeting of Minds* show. If Beethoven and Britten had sat at a table and talked to each other, what would they find they had in common? What would they find in opposition? How would their words possibly resonate together? In pairing composers, you could look for contrast, but in the back of my mind is always cohesion. We are grouping these composers, whenever and wherever they lived, into some grand family of people speaking essentially the same musical language. That's what's fun about composer pairs for me.



Violinist Leila Josefowicz performs on CMS's Sonic Spectrum series, January 22, 2026.

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As for the pairs featured next season, Brahms and Dvořák were friends. Brahms helped and admired Dvořák, which was very unusual for Brahms, who rarely liked anybody else's music. Beethoven and Britten are together because of their intense craft and their respect for skill. Liszt and Bartók were of course countrymen, albeit of different eras and sensibilities. One of the most brilliant festivals in the days of Charles Wadsworth (CMS's Founding Artistic Director, whom we celebrate this spring in a "Wadsworth Legacy" program on May 1–2) was one which ingeniously paired the works of Haydn and Stravinsky. Grouping composers of contrasting styles is part of a CMS tradition that goes back to the 1970s and 80s that we are privileged to inherit and to continue to develop.

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