

# A World We Can Aspire To

David Finckel and Wu Han, co-artistic directors of the Chamber Music Society, introduce the organization's 2026–27 season.

By Nicky Swett



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Pianist Gilles Vonsattel will perform Beethoven's Piano Sonatas in a cycle spanning eight concerts: two in Alice Tully Hall and six in CMS's Rose Studio.

**Nicky Swett:** This year marks the 250th anniversary of the United States. What is CMS doing to celebrate this occasion? What are aspects of American music that you want to bring out?

**Wu Han:** This July, every Summer Evenings concert includes a piece by an American composer. American music is very hard to pin down because it's so varied. To name a few, there are the very distinct styles of Aaron

Copland, Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin, and Wynton Marsalis, who all incorporate jazz into their music, but with different, amazing sounds. You also have composers like Samuel Barber and John Corigliano, who have very distinct voices.

For opening night in the fall, we are presenting Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, a suite of numbers from the film *Psycho*, a quintet by Amy Beach, a pioneering female composer influenced

by European music, as well as William Bolcom's delightful rags. It represents a kaleidoscopic view of American music, and the possibility for that kind of variety is something that makes America incredible.

**David Finckel:** The Americans whom we've selected all have parallels with composers from other cultures. You have somebody like Copland writing a tone poem about life in the Appalachian Mountains. But then you have Antonín Dvořák painting pictures of America through his American works, as well as of his native land. It's fantastic to collect this range of composers, who were inspired by some of the same things that have inspired musicians all through history. We're doing for America what we do regularly for other cultures, countries, and eras. The history of American classical music is short compared to the tradition in Europe, yet in that time

we've managed to cover pretty much all the bases.

**NS:** This season is the first time that CMS presents a cycle of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas, which will be performed by Gilles Vonsattel over eight concerts. How did this landmark series come about?

**DF:** Gilles has been immersed in these Beethoven sonatas now for years. We've heard him play them and it's just getting better and better. We knew that at a certain point, he was going to give birth to a Beethoven cycle, and both of us feel it's important for CMS to present comprehensive bodies of music like the Beethoven Quartets, the Shostakovich Quartets, the Bartók Quartets, and the Beethoven Piano Sonatas.

**WH:** Gilles has been working on the cycle since the pandemic. So it's a Covid baby! During the pandemic,



Clarinetist Tommaso Lonquich will join a large cast of CMS musicians in a performance of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto at the end of the 2026–27 season.

we played solo repertoire for each other often. When I heard him play the Beethoven, I said, “Gilles, you really should finish it and learn all the sonatas.” CMS musicians are outstanding players, and we want to showcase their solo capabilities. It is very important for us as an institution to give a young American pianist this kind of project.

**NS: What will audience members get from listening to all of these sonatas over the course of a season?**

**DF:** The piano sonatas cover roughly the same span as the string quartets in terms of number of years, but Beethoven rarely stopped writing them. The longest interval between any two sonatas is just a few years. They are like a smooth carpet right through his creative life.

**NS: The music of W. A. Mozart features on many concerts during the 2026–27 season, and the Winter Festival features four all-Mozart programs. What brought you to Mozart for this year?**

**WH:** We anchor the festival on Mozart not only because he’s one of the greatest composers who ever lived, but also because this is a time when the whole world is mad, uncertain, chaotic, violent, and uncivilized in so many ways. It is important to have spaces for us to focus on good things, on the wonderful accomplishments of human beings, on collegiality, beauty, and hopefulness. This music can remind us that the world can be a cohesive and a logical place. To put on our Mozart Festival at this juncture gives me such joy.

**NS: What is it about Mozart’s music that fills you with that sense of profound beauty?**

**DF:** Whereas Joseph Haydn dances and laughs with everyday people, Mozart observes and takes you to his world and returns you to yours in a better place. Even though his music is touching and personal, there’s a kind of an objectivity to it that gives it the quality of having come from somewhere other than Earth—from heaven, from outer space. So many people throughout history have expressed the desire for Mozart to be the last music they hear. It’s almost as though his music offers a transition to a better world. It opens the curtains to give us a vision of a world that we can aspire to.

**NS: The Rose Studio concerts always feature interesting works from lesser-known composers alongside pieces from the canon. This season, for example, we’ll hear compositions by Carl Czerny, Johann Baptist Wanhal, Zdeněk Fibich, and Bernhard Crusell. What’s your process for finding this less-familiar repertoire?**

**DF:** A lot of research goes on in programming. The other thing that happens is that pieces come to you through musicians. For example, our beloved horn player Radovan Vlatković has probably played everything ever written for the horn. If you sit down with him and start talking about wind chamber music, you’d better take notes! We draw on the incredible knowledge of our musicians to help us with this.

**WH:** In the Rose Studio, the capacity is smaller, so the repertoire can be quite adventurous. It’s a place where we test-drive pieces. If we have programmed it, we’ve listened to it enough to know that it’s worth listening to. But we might not know exactly what it feels like to sit and listen



CMS musicians in Alice Tully Hall.

to a live performance. Until you hear it in a concert, you just don't quite know what the effect is, what the future of it is, and where it could go from that performance to the next.

**NS: What are some of the other highlights of the season for you?**

**WH:** We are very proud of our Quartet Series. This year it features The Takács Quartet, the Quartetto di Cremona, the Schumann Quartet, and the Escher String Quartet. If people want to hear string quartet concerts in New York, this is a great series to join us for. The Baroque Festival features a fascinating program about Bach and his sons. There is an all-piano concert on November 7 that is so interesting. It includes Alexandre Tansman's *Night Train* for Two Pianos. I tried to get that music for two and a half years! It was not published, and for a long time we had only the manuscript.

**DF:** That piece is like no music you've ever heard. It's so wild. We listened to it in the car once. We almost drove off the road four times.

**WH:** There is so much to discover and experience. We hope when newcomers join our concerts for the first time, they learn to trust me and David. The things we put on any program are always of great quality, and they are always executed with the highest degree of sophistication and excellence. That's the basic principle at the Chamber Music Society: when people give a few hours to us, they can trust us to create a meaningful experience for them and to inspire an appreciation for chamber music.

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