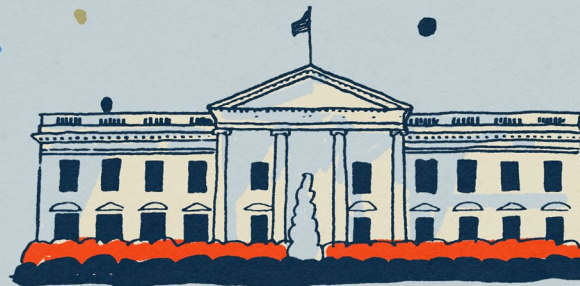


CELEBR



TREADING



ATING,



We the People



AND

To mark the 250th anniversary of American independence, how are artists and music presenters representing the country's classical music?

BY JEREMY REYNOLDS



LIGHTLY

With the national political climate so polarized and contentious, the classical music world is, by and large, treading cautiously when it comes to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In some cases, American musicians are avoiding the commemoration altogether.

Those that are participating in commemorative projects are tapping an enormously representative variety of composers to salute the occasion, albeit with some notable exceptions. Bachtrack, a U.K.-based online database and magazine that tracks performance data primarily

Mezzo-soprano and Curtis visiting faculty member J’Nai Bridges (’12).

at large orchestras around the world, found that some of the top echelon of America’s avant-garde and postmodernist composers like John Corigliano, George Crumb, Terry Riley, and Elliot Carter were all in the bottom half of the site’s list of the top-500 most-performed composers in 2025 and do not appear on many 250th anniversary programs announced around the country. (Although Bachtrack’s 2026 list will not be published until 2027, the 2025 data—published in January—provides some early clues to how the season was taking shape.)

For concertgoers hoping to discover neglected or more expe-

rimental American repertoire, the anniversary year is unlikely to be that occasion. “Elliott Carter’s not getting any attention, but that’s not surprising,” says Robert Spano (Conducting ’85), music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra and a longtime champion of American composers’ work in the States and abroad. “It’s not that I don’t love Carter’s music, because I do, but I think that the more hard-nosed classical heads like Carter and Milton Babbitt and Roger Sessions aren’t getting their due, even though they were really in charge in their day.”

So, who are the most popular composers appearing on anniversary programs this season? At the top of the 2025 list are the names you’d expect: George Gershwin (the 30th most-performed composer in 2025 overall), Leonard Bernstein (42nd) (Conducting ’41), John Williams (43rd), Philip Glass (53rd), Aaron Copland (54th), Samuel Barber (Composition ’34) ranked at number 56, John Adams (70th), and Florence Price (106th). (Williams probably has the most frequent performances of any composer alive, if you count all those at smaller and amateur orchestras, which Bachtrack does not track.) Curtis alumni and others involved in commemoration projects noted the popularity of minimalists like Steve Reich (148th) and Glass.

Along with the aforementioned Price, orchestras have been performing music by composers of color and women composers more broadly, says Lawrence Dunn, Bachtrack’s commissioning editor, stressing that the site’s data is somewhat limited and intended as a snapshot only rather than a comprehensive assessment.

There are quite a few living composers who fit those descriptors appearing on anniversary programs this year, with some writing new works to capture the flavor of the current era, like *American Promise* by Karen LeFrak, commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra un-





der the auspices of the nonpartisan America250 organization. (“Complex times” is the buzz phrase for much of the promotional material for these works.)

Additionally, major institutions like Carnegie Hall and the New York Philharmonic are exploring American music in a festival or multi-concert format, as are individual artists. In February, the Boston Symphony invited Johnny Gandelsman (Violin ’99) to perform his “This Is America,” project, a series of 28 works for solo violin that represent a slice of American contemporary creativity. He’ll reprise it at the Caramoor Festival in July alongside works by Tyshawn Sorey and Rhiannon Giddens.

The now-nomadic Washington National Opera revived the operatic take on Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (Robert Ward, composer; Bernard Stambler, libretto) in March, with Mr. Spano conducting. The string

Peruvian conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya (’91).

“THOSE THAT ARE PARTICIPATING IN COMMEMORATIVE PROJECTS ARE TAPPING AN ENORMOUSLY REPRESENTATIVE VARIETY OF COMPOSERS.”

quartet Brooklyn Rider, in which Mr. Gandelsman also performs, is touring its Citizenship Notes program, which pairs music by Haydn, Beethoven, and Bob Dylan with new commissions by American composers Don Byron, Ted Hearne, and Angélica Negrón that explore questions of citizenship and democracy. The Orchestra of St. Luke’s will perform music from the Broadway stage and American Songbook with headliner Kelli O’Hara in June.

The list is extensive, and artists have mixed feelings about the festivities in a polarized national climate. “It’s a strange time because I feel

like we want to be proud of being American, and we are—yet we are also collectively disheartened,” says mezzo-soprano and Curtis visiting faculty member J’Nai Bridges (’12), who sang the lead role of Elizabeth in the WNO’s *Crucible* and is also singing in other projects related to the anniversary. “I feel like, in a strange way, this is a moment in our history where we have the opportunity to come out on the other side more beautiful. So, I’m also programming my recital music like that as well—music that goes through every cycle of a storm and then comes out victorious.”

A Wide Swath of Contemporary Music

Orchestras' and other musical institutions' particular focus on American composers in this anniversary year also fits into a larger trend of more performances of contemporary and living composers, a "marked increase over the last decade," according to Mr. Dunn. After the canonical names like Bernstein, Gershwin, and Williams, composers like Caroline Shaw, Jessie

Arlen Hlusko (Cello '15, ArtistYear '16) blends classical with folk and jazz idioms in her programs.

Montgomery, and Carlos Simon begin to appear (although often as concert openers rather than in the main slots of a program). David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Wynton Marsalis appear soon after—Lang and Wolfe, together with composer Michael Gordon, co-founded Bang on a Can, an organization dedicated to performing new music.

"I've been working on a solo recital program that is derived from folk music sounds, as well," says Ca-

nadian cellist Arlen Hlusko (Cello '15, ArtistYear '16), whose recital programs in 2026 regularly feature American composers like Gabriel Kahane and Crumb. She says she especially enjoys programming composers who write with a blend of classical and folk or jazz idioms.

Some scholars have tossed out minimalism or certain strains of contemporary music as definitively "American," but anniversary programming reveals no single dominant genre. "I'm not sure that there are any styles that appear more often than others," Ms. Hlusko says. "The range of composition in the States is so interesting and compelling. It's the variety in the voices and how many different sounds people are coming up with as the 'American' sound. I wouldn't say that there is a single classical American sound."

Miguel Harth-Bedoya (Conducting '91), director of orchestras at Rice University in Houston, concurs. When asked what sort of American music he's programming and hearing most on programs this year, he pauses before pondering, "Well, what's the definition of American? Every composer is unique, but you would have to give me a parameter of what do you call an American."

Mr. Harth-Bedoya regularly collaborates with living composers, including some who emigrated to the United States like Jimmy López, born in Peru and based in San Francisco, and Osvaldo Golijov, a composer born in Argentina who has built his career largely in the U.S. These are, of course, *American* composers, he says, but American composers who bring with them some of the traditions of their native countries. "What impresses me about these composers is [how] they all sound completely unique and bring their own style, and they even develop new styles for new pieces all the time," Mr. Harth-Bedoya says.



AROUND PHILADELPHIA

Starting late June, Curtis Studio presents *We the Artists*, a streaming series celebrating the 250th anniversary. Each episode is hosted by students and faculty, and features a musical journey from Philadelphia to the frontiers of music.

The nonprofit **ArtPhilly** has organized a five-week festival called *What Now: 2026* that aims to spotlight Philadelphia's cultural talent as visitors come to the area for the 250th and the FIFA World Cup. More than 30 works in a variety of disciplines are planned. In music, the **Mendelssohn Chorus of Philadelphia** commissioned several new works, including those by Leigha Amick (Composition '24) and Ted Babcock (Timpani and Percussion '15, Community Artist Fellow '21), to be presented on June 6 at the synagogue Rodeph Shalom. Also planned is a program of new works by jazz composer and vocalist Ruth Naomi Floyd, inspired by Marian Anderson's life and activism.

Elsewhere, Marin Alsop led the **Philadelphia Orchestra** (May 28–31) in Wynton Marsalis' Symphony No. 4, as part of a concert that honors "the voices of those who helped shape our country but were not fully heard in 1776." And **Tempesta di mare**, the early music ensemble, presented a program (May 14) of songs, dances, and instrumental works that were heard in Revolutionary-era Philadelphia.

Views from Abroad

While American institutions and artists are hesitatingly saluting the anniversary, there doesn't seem to be much interest abroad in the U.S. milestone. "American composers' anniversaries are celebrated—John Adams' 80th, Steve Reich's 90th, Philip Glass' 90th next year, for example—but I have not seen events commemorating the 250th anniversary of the U.S. this coming July," says Bachtrack's Dunn, who lives in Manchester in the U.K. There are a few exceptions, including the Edinburgh Festival's 2026 theme, "All Rise," which will explore the "friction and energy of America's melting pot," according to the festival's website.

Mr. Dunn also notes that the current political climate could be contributing to the lack of festivities. "I really think that European arts organizations are basically uninterested, beyond a few official government events." That conflict is playing out in the States as well, of course, with news breaking almost round-the-clock about the

political football that is the Kennedy Center.

Complicating matters is the fact that the National Endowment for the Arts, which provides small amounts of federal money for arts projects, tied its funding directly to the anniversary. Large institutions are less reliant on NEA funds, but this kind of overt push does affect smaller organizations, which had to adjust programming to fit into the celebratory nature of the anniversary or miss out on funding. "We're not celebrating, exactly," says Ms. Bridges, the singer. "For me, the silver lining is the fact that we have music that can help us heal and move forward. It's not comfortable, but I just think this is how you get through it. You have to trudge through the mud, you know? It's uncomfortable, but I think it's necessary."

Jeremy Reynolds is the editor of OPERA America Magazine. He also writes for the New York Times, Symphony Magazine, and Opera Magazine.

Robert Spano ('85), music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra.

