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City Pulse's 2015 Arts and Culture

YEAR IN REVIEW

Awakened by sleepers

Jazz and classical highlights of 2015

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

This town is heated year round (summer festivals included) with native, student and visiting musical talent, thanks largely to the white-hot boiler room that is the MSU College of Music. With so much to take in, you have to cock an ear for the sleepers — the gigs that pop up so fast and hit so hard you can hardly believe what you've just heard.

My favorite concert of 2015 snuck into town on the spur of the moment way back on Jan. 14, with attendance largely driven by word of mouth. New York violinist John-

ny Gandelsman answered the Bach-signal from his father, MSU viola Professor Yuri Gandelsman, exploited a gap in his schedule and ran the jewels of the violin repertoire — a complete cycle of Johann Sebastian Bach's sonatas and partitas for solo violin — at MSU's newly remodeled Cook Recital Hall. He was fresh from climbing the same mountain at New York's Barge-music the Saturday before. I remember seeing the blurb in *The New Yorker* and wishing I could go. A few days later, I got my wish. Getting New York quality music in

East Lansing has become routine. The recital was free.

Intense but informal in casual street clothes, tapping into both his folk roots and unbelievable classical chops, Gandelsman danced through more than three hours of intricate, emotional and demanding music without losing anyone to the fidgets. On the contrary, he asked the attendees halfway through whether they wanted a break or if they wanted him to keep going.

"Keep going!" everyone yelled, as if they were afraid this miraculous bubble would burst.

The other big highlight of 2015, for me, was sitting on the grass outside the Broad Art Museum on a sunny June 20, a few feet away from the twinkly racket of jazz vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz and a stellar quartet of fellow Chicago avant-garde jazz musicians.

Adasiewicz's body language was almost as absorbing as his unique brand of percussive, ugly-beautiful jazz. His entire torso rebounded from the vibraphone as he banged away.

The Adasiewicz gig was not a big-tent thing at East Lansing's Summer Solstice Jazz Festival, but it finally brought brilliant, young, cutting edge jazz, chewy as Chicago deep dish, to an already rich festival. Other highlights included young trumpeter/vocalist Bria Skonberg, Rodney Whitaker's Soul-R-Energy and a guitar summit with Peter Bernstein, MSU's Randy Napoleon and Randy Stryker.

Not only do we have two jazz festivals, we have two excellent ones. On a tight budget, Lansing JazzFest, Aug. 7 and 8, offered

up a great slate of artists, highlighted by Detroit saxophonist Marcus Elliot, an expansive post-Coltrane spirit to reckon with, and the unlikely trio of hammy Italian organist Tony Monaco, serene guitar virtuoso Fareed Haque and MSU drum legend Randy Ge-lispie. Haque's own electronic group, Math Games, and soulful singer Betty Joplin stretched the variety to a pleasing church-practic soul crack...

MSU's music programs also draw internationally known musicians and composers for extended residencies. The work they do with students can be a life-changer, and, from the listener's standpoint, the new blood keeps the local scene from getting stale.

From Oct. 26 to Oct. 30, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Kevin Puts came to MSU and worked with several groups, from Musique 21 to the MSU Symphony Orchestra with flutist Richard Sherman. They performed several of Puts' works, including "Einstein on Mercer Street," "Millennium Canons" and Puts' Flute Concerto. It was a mini-festival, with a focus and excitement you rarely find in a big city. And there will be more.

The Jazz Studies program did the same only more so, with several residencies from icons of jazz, culminating in concerts with the top student orchestras.

One of my highlights was the glitzy arrangements led by one of the nation's top guitarists, Peter Bernstein, on a March concert, topped off by a four-guitar blow-

Courtesy Photo



Violinist Johnny Gandelsman's performance of the complete sonatas and partitas of J.S. Bach was one of Lawrence Cosentino's musical highlights of 2015.

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Courtesy Photo

Vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz brought an avant-garde edge to this year's Summer Solstice Jazz Festival.

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drummer Jimmy Cobb, the only surviving member of Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue" ensemble, Nov. 30 through Dec. 6.

On Dec. 1, trumpeter Hugh Masekela and pianist Larry Willis, longtime friends with a combined century of musical history in jazz and other forms, brought their chemistry to Wharton Center's Pasant Theatre.

Over at the Lansing Symphony Orchestra, pianist Ralph Votapek, 76, commanded the orchestra on Sept. 18, playing four Gershwin works and holding the stage all night. It was a solo workout on a scale we'll probably never see again. On Nov. 7, an American Festival featured a wriggly, schmalzy, bracingly weird concerto for

four saxophones by decorated Ann Arbor composer William Bolcom.

But the symphony's biggest stretch came on March 8 with "Mysterious Mountain," a 45-minute-long, brand new work by MSU-based composer Marjan Helms, featuring flutist Sherman as soloist. The piece took the symphony way out of its usual bounds — not so much because the music was avant-garde, but because it unfolded so quietly and deliberately, requiring real suspension of electronic-era impatience to stick with it.

The grand old classics were, of course, well represented. One of the high points was a real warhorse, a Jan. 10 performance of Beethoven's "Pastoral" symphony, with a big, juicy thunderstorm. Another was Stravinsky's "Firebird," a beast even big-city orchestras approach with caution, unleashed by the home team in all its plumage May 15.

One of the best LSO moments of the year happened in the dark, at the Lansing

Center, when the Capital City Film Festival ran a mashup of silent film clips with live and lavish accompaniment provided by an impressive team of LSO regulars and summer subs.

That same weekend, another sleeper gig — also inspired by film — snuck into my top three of the year. As part of MSU's Cello Plus series, Minnesota-based guest pianist Stephen Prutsman led a crack quintet through his own playful, brilliant score to comedian Buster Keaton's silent film, "Sherlock Jr."

The Keaton score, the Adasiewicz vibes concert and the Gandelsman Bach recital were all off the beaten track of major events, yet they are the three performances I shudder to think of having missed. I guess the lesson is that in this town, you just have to go to everything in order not to miss anything.

Good luck with that.