



# A LETTER FROM *Seattle*

Thomas May reports on an intimate performance space that boasts a range of audiovisual technologies



**M**y last dispatch (7/19) mentioned the opening in March 2019 of Octave 9: Raisbeck Music Center, a brand-new Seattle Symphony performance space. Tucked away in a corner of the orchestra's Benaroya Hall complex in downtown Seattle, the \$6.7m Octave 9 was established with the aim of offering more than an intimate venue in which to make music.

Though tiny – typical capacity is 80-85 – the space is equipped with sophisticated audio and visual systems. Nested within the ceiling's honeycomb design and throughout are 62 speakers and 10 subwoofers, all part of an intricate constellation by Meyer Sound that allows the room to be adjusted to a vast range of desired acoustical effects and manipulated in real time. Prefer the neutral, dry impression of a classroom for lecturing or the aural expanse of a vast cathedral?

Either sonic environment, and countless ones between, can be readily configured. Visuals can be projected on to a total of 13 encircling screens.

A series of recent events at Octave 9 underscored this initiative's potential to enrich Seattle's musical life. I initially referred to the space as an aspiring 'mini-IRCAM', in which composers and performers can experiment with new interdisciplinary projects. No one to date has explored this facet with more determination than the adventurous cellist Seth Parker Woods. Also an admired new-music curator and educator based at the University of Chicago, Parker Woods concluded his year as Octave 9's inaugural artist-in-residence with a richly rewarding programme in February.

The cellist performed in the first-ever Octave 9 concert and also played an integral part in a 24-hour marathon held there shortly after it opened in March last year. The event at the end of his residency resembled a mini-marathon packed with new discoveries. Parker Woods curated and performed a concert of six contemporary works, five of which were world premieres and one a Seattle premiere. All six composers were present.

Chanting lines from Dudley Randall's poem *Primitives*, Parker Woods opened the programme with Fredrick Gifford's new piece *Difficult Grace* (the title uses a phrase from the poem), which is scored for speaking cellist and multichannel electronics to create a multi-textured dialogue between the rhythms and sounds of the Randall text and Parker Woods's voice and cello as a kind of mega-instrument. A new video enhanced the enraptured state of Monty Adkins's *Winter Tendrils* for cello and tape, while Ryan Carter's *Default Mode Network for Cello, Electronics, and Audience* enlisted everyone with mobile phones as participants.

Nathalie Joachim's *The Race: 1915* had Parker Woods recite a newspaper's chronicling of brutal racism while underscoring striking images from painter Jacob Lawrence's brilliant *Migration*

*Series*. The most affecting piece was *My Heart is a River* by London-based Freida Abtan, which married the cellist's most introspective playing with an affecting visual narrative of liberating dance. French-Canadian Pierre Alexandre Tremblay's *asinglewordisnotenough3 (invariant)* had Parker Woods – who signs his emails 'cellist and movement researcher' – draw raw, gritty gestures from his instrument.

'I wasn't sure what Octave 9 would be at first – there were so many moving parts,' Parker Woods told me after the concert. His residency, which began with his work as a consultant on the initiative while it was under construction in 2018, has involved learning 'how to harness the space as an instrument and to play the room – not just with special effects'.

In fact, two other concerts early this year illustrated the powerful experiences that can unfold in Octave 9 even without deploying its array of bells and whistles. Both cases

involved guest artists at Seattle Symphony in town for concerts in the big hall.

Patricia Kopatchinskaja, who would give a searing, deeply personal account of Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto the following night, devoted her Octave 9 programme entirely to the *Kafka Fragments* of György Kurtág. The violinist was joined by the soprano Ah Young Hong, with whom she will record the work later this year.

With the most minimal of staging – a little movement around the playing area, which was bathed in a purplish light reminiscent of an old-fashioned darkroom, as a friend pointed out – the duo captured the sense of life-altering epiphanies that make Kurtág's settings so endlessly fascinating, whether in the single stroke of a bow or in the sustained intensity of 'The True Path'.

The following week, Gidon Kremer tuned up his audience for his subsequent Seattle Symphony engagement as the soloist in Mieczysław Weinberg's Violin Concerto by playing a dozen of his own transcriptions for violin of the composer's 24 Preludes for cello as well as the First Sonata for solo violin. Bridging the Weinberg selections with a breathtaking account of Bach's Chaconne in D minor, Kremer, in this intimate setting, seemed to distil a lifetime of experience.

As part of his artist residency, Seth Parker Woods will return in June to make his own Seattle Symphony debut in the world premiere of composer-in-residence Tyshawn Sorey's newly commissioned Cello Concerto. At the end of his year with Octave 9, he says the venue's essential strength is that it enhances 'the possibilities for storytelling. All work can exist there, not just new works. It's about how you realise new interpretations and can create drama and theatre. Octave 9 is a place where people can take the time to make it a unique experience.' **G**

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