

**Sun Valley's Chilly Chamber Music Festival**

By Thomas May, *Musical America*

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KETCHUM, Idaho—In the 1930s, an ingenious combination of marketing and new technology (the design of modern chairlifts) transformed this former mining town and sheep-farming center into the country's first destination ski resort—as well as a magnet for Hollywood celebrities.

But the spellbinding beauty of the Sun Valley region's setting in the Rockies of south-central Idaho has also attracted prominent musicians from across North America for decades. Ever since the founding of what is now called the Sun Valley Music Festival (SVMF) in 1985, they've been paying regular visits at the height of summer to play more than three weeks of concerts—mostly orchestral, a few of chamber music. The SVMF Orchestra consists of a handpicked ensemble of musicians “on vacation” from their usual responsibilities with the likes of the San Francisco, St. Louis, or Toronto symphonies.



*Winter in Sun Valley, Idaho*

In 2019, SVMF introduced a much shorter winter season with a chamber music focus. “There was a clear interest in the community with having something to bridge the long gap between festivals, from one summer to the next,” Alasdair Neale told me in a conversation just before the opening night performance of the 2024 winter season, devoted entirely to music by Johannes Brahms.

The winter season ran March 6-9 at the Argyros Performing Arts Center, a 462-capacity black box space in downtown Ketchum. Neale, who celebrates his 30th anniversary as music director of the SVMF this summer, said that the impetus to launch a winter interlude became viable with the opening of the Argyros in 2018.

From the start—long before the current debate about abolishing the gateway of paid tickets so as to obtain the holy grail of increased access—SVMF has stood apart from other classical festivals by virtue of its policy of free admission. This is the case for the winter season as well. The festival coffers are mostly replenished through donor support and an annual gala event.

The SVMF's usual home in summer is the open-air Pavilion located about 30 minutes away by foot, next to the Sun Valley Lodge, the iconic resort that opened in 1936 to accommodate the first wave of star guests (including Ernest Hemingway, who completed *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in Suite 206). Summer audiences not only fill the Pavilion (1,600 capacity) but stake out positions on the large lawn to its side, taking in views of the surrounding mountains as they enjoy state-of-the-art audiovisual projections of the performance.



The dramatically altered guise that the Sun Valley region takes on in winter naturally calls for an indoor venue—and seems especially well-suited to chamber music. The scale of operations for the winter season overall is much more modest than in summer, representing about 5 percent of SVMF's annual budget of roughly \$5.0 million.

Neale and Executive Director Derek Dean invite a selection of musicians from the SVMF Orchestra, with a view to rotating among those available so that as many as possible can experience this other face of the festival. A total of 14 players participated this winter, joined by guest artist pianist Jon Kimura Parker. They were divided up into two separate programs that had been curated by Neale, each of which received two performances.

The Argyros is a highly flexible space outfitted with sophisticated lighting and projection equipment and a Meyer Sound Constellation acoustic system. For the first several editions of the winter season, according to Neale, SVMF experimented with the wildly variable formats this enabled, from a “nightclub atmosphere for classical music” to (last year) a showcase for the orchestra's brass and percussion members.



“All of these models are still in the repertoire for the winter season,” Neale said. But they decided to follow a more conventional style of presentation this year, with a small platform stage at one end of the space. “Brahms's chamber music doesn't need any bells and whistles, just a comfortable seat.”

Why Brahms? On the evening before the first concert, the SVMF presented a public conversation about the composer's enduring appeal led by Neale with three of the musicians—Jeremy Constant and Amos Yang (concertmaster and principal cello, respectively, of the Festival Orchestra), along with Parker. Each artist shared deeply personal stories of why their earliest encounters with Brahms proved so indelible. What they said clearly struck a chord with the audience members, who had braved the fresh covering of snow and ice to fill the lecture hall in the Ketchum Community Library.

The speakers' direct, down-to-earth manner set the tone for the two evenings that followed. It communicated a sense of genuine connection not only with the music but with an audience hungry to understand more; many listeners indicated that they would be hearing these “chestnuts” for the first time.

Neale, who was not performing, served as MC. The Scottish-born conductor, who spent a formative period working with Michael Tilson Thomas in San Francisco and Miami, has a naturally compelling stage presence that has endeared him to Sun Valley audiences for decades. He introduced each piece with vivid commentary that made solid musical points while also illuminating the festival's larger issues of Brahms-ian ambivalence and inspiration from tradition.

It all kicked off with an extra dose of unexpected drama: at lunchtime, Neale and Dean learned that violinist Jeremy Constant had been suddenly hospitalized with anaphylactic shock, necessitating a last-minute replacement of the B major Trio filling the program's second half. After working through several possible scenarios, pianist Parker and cellist Amos Yang agreed to perform the Op. 99 Cello Sonata No. 2 in F major, though neither had played it live for years.

## Chamber music at its purest

This almost inevitably became the highlight of what had already been a very fine concert, including an accent of the First String Quintet that flowed and ebbed with animated ensemble playing. Parker and Yang listened with yoga-like concentration to each other's gestures, delivering a crash course in the essence of chamber music. The cellist's articulation of the Adagio's pizzicato textures had a hauntingly mystical quality that sounded almost avant-garde.

Parker, a veteran chamber musician who has a deep affinity with Brahms, told me the next day that the hours beforehand made for "an adrenaline-filled afternoon." He pointed out that it seemed to make the audience palpably aware of the fact that "chamber music is about listening—musicians are supposed to be able to very quickly learn to listen to each other and adapt. We had already been rehearsing the Trio, but with Amos we became hyperaware of listening to each other. It felt like breathing together."

Parker also played the soloist in the opening sections of both concerts. On the first program, he offered an intimate account of the A major Intermezzo from Op. 118, translucent but flecked with memories of pain. Parker prepared a condensed version of the Op. 24 *Handel Variations* for the second night, teeing up a spectacularly full-bodied, fully emoted interpretation of the massive concluding fugue. He was also an alert and sympathetic partner to Erin Schreiber's duskily phrased violin in the Violin Sonata No. 3—another of Brahms's time-stopping Adagios. The Sextet No. 2 in G major closed the second program, in which the players opted for intimate sophistication of texture rather than sweeping orchestral effects.

Middle photo: Alasdair Neal; bottom: Jon Kimura Parker

Top photo by Kit Cannell