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Orchestra Musicians Head Off to Summer Camp



Lake Tahoe SummerFest in 2014.

The event is becoming a destination for musicians, including principal players with orchestras.

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By **MICHAEL COOPER** JULY 5, 2015

At this time of year it is a common fantasy for wage slaves who slog to the office in the city: If only work could be relocated to the mountains, or the shore, or maybe a lake. But it is a reality for many orchestra musicians, whose talents are sought by music festivals at desirable spots around the country when their concert halls and opera houses go dark for the summer.

That is why more than a dozen members of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra — about half of whom are principal players — will find themselves playing together some 2,700 miles west of Lincoln Center this month on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe, where the four-year-old Lake Tahoe SummerFest has been establishing itself as a destination for musicians and music lovers.

It also explains why players from top orchestras around the country are converging this month in Jackson Hole, Wyo., as the Grand Teton Music Festival begins its 54th season. And why some members of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's brass and woodwind sections are trading the Southeast for the Pacific Northwest this month to join other musicians from

ensembles around the nation as the Bellingham Festival of Music in Washington gets underway.

For American music fans, these festivals offer opportunities to hear top-flight musicians in idyllic settings much closer than, say, Salzburg, Austria, or Lucerne, Switzerland. But the festivals offer musicians not just extra work in the summer, but also changes of scenery and of colleagues and a chance to stretch out artistically — along with plenty of ancillary benefits.

For Nathan Hughes, a principal oboist at the Met, it is the chance to squeeze in some yoga on the shores of Lake Tahoe when not rehearsing or performing with the SummerFest orchestra. For Christina Smith, the principal flute in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, it is boating in Bellingham Bay with friends she has met through the festival there. And for Jennifer Ross, the principal second violinist of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, it is the chance to go hiking and trail running in the Tetons and to reconnect with friends from other orchestras around the country each summer — what she described as “the summer camp aspect of it.”

“Everyone is in a different mind-set,” Ms. Ross said of the Grand Teton Music Festival, where Donald Runnicles has been the music director since 2006. “Everyone has either just come from a great hike or is planning their next big hike, so everyone is high on endorphins and mountain air. It doesn’t feel like regular work. It feels like something special and unique to the summertime. I think a lot of my colleagues in Pittsburgh probably wonder why in the world I would take my vacation time to sit in the same spot and play the same music. And I ask myself the same question — except when you get out there, it’s instantly asked and answered.”

Most orchestras go on some kind of hiatus in the summer — a remnant, perhaps, of the days before reliable air conditioning. Some have their own summer homes: The Boston Symphony Orchestra has Tanglewood, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has Ravinia, the Cleveland Orchestra has the Blossom Music Festival. Others lack summer homes but are able to travel: The New York Philharmonic is performing and teaching in Shanghai, and will play in Vail, Colo., at the end of the month. Still others take a break from performing.

That allows many orchestra musicians to branch out. Mr. Hughes, the Met oboe player, said that each summer he packs a suitcase and travels from one festival to another.

“I think it’s a great thing to go and perform and study and learn and be inspired by all these different people and places and environments,” Mr. Hughes said in a telephone interview from the Verbier Festival in the Swiss Alps, one of his stops this summer before playing at the Tahoe festival. “There are a few things that every place has to have: great music, fabulous musicians and a stunning atmosphere.”

Joel Revzen, the artistic director and principal conductor of the Tahoe festival, said it had been created to try to make the area a classical music destination. He asked Laura Hamilton, who is now the acting co-concertmaster at the Met, to become the concertmaster of the new chamber orchestra and to help him choose its players, who come from the Met orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, the Seattle Symphony and the Dallas Symphony, among other ensembles.

“It’s a rare luxury to be able to start from scratch, and try to invite players that we knew would be outstanding musicians,” Ms. Hamilton said. “And it’s not very difficult to convince people to come out to Lake Tahoe.”

Mr. Revzen, an assistant conductor at the Met who has been the artistic director of Arizona Opera and the Berkshire Opera, said he was gratified that so many of the players have come back each year. “We have a 98 percent return rate of musicians,” he said.

Many musicians make the summer festivals a longstanding part of their lives. Ms. Ross said she had been going to the Grand Teton festival since she was a student, more than three decades ago. “It’s almost embarrassing to say it, except if you’ve ever been there you’d know there was a reason to keep going back,” she said. “How could you not?”

Correction: July 8, 2015

Because of an editing error, an article on Monday about festivals where some orchestra musicians play in the summer misidentified the state in which the Lake Tahoe SummerFest is held. It is Nevada, not California.

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