

Boulder United States

Jeremy Pound admires both the mountains and the plains as he explores the various delights of this year's Colorado Music Festival



Chautauqua concerto:
Peter Oundjian conducts Anthony McGill
and the Colorado Music Festival Orchestra

Boulder. Great name for a place. It derives from Boulder Creek, which cascades down from the Rocky Mountains, through the city and into the Colorado plains. Every July, Boulder holds a Tube To Work Day in which hundreds of employees head down the Creek's fast-flowing waters in giant inner tubes, an activity that is also available to water-loving visitors all year round – I seriously wish I'd brought a wetsuit with me.

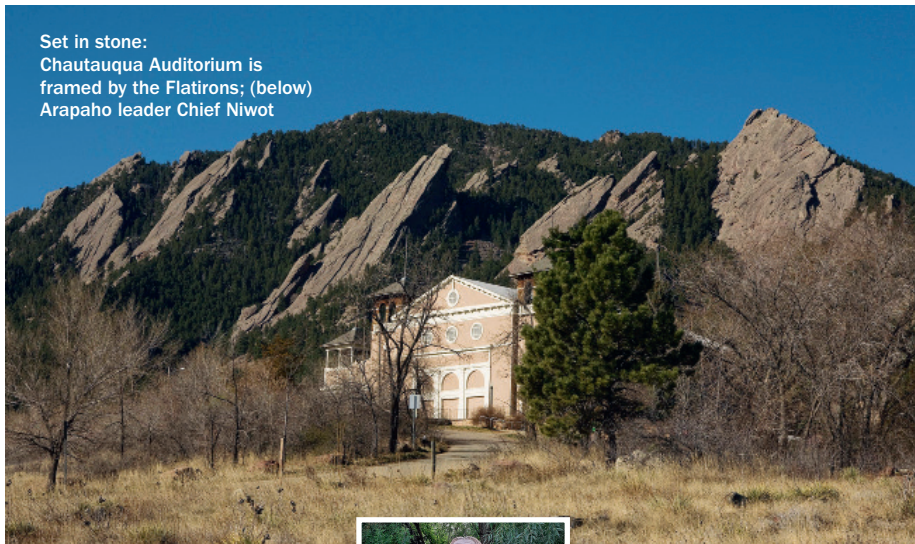
But I'm not here for splashy thrill-seeking. I'm here for the Colorado Music

Festival, which takes place from the end of June to the beginning of August. Founded in 1976 by the conductor Giora Bernstein, the festival began life as a five-concert chamber music event, but has since expanded in both quantity and scope: 2022's 21 concerts involve both string quartets and, alongside guest soloists, the symphony-sized Colorado Music Festival Orchestra (CMFO), made up of players from major ensembles across the US. The Colorado Music Festival website proudly displays a list of world and US premieres,

and a commitment to new music remains key – John Adams, no less, has been in town this year as composer-in-residence.

Everything takes place at the splendid Chautauqua Auditorium, a venue like no other. Built in 1898 entirely out of wood, inside it resembles an enormous barn, with a high, beamed ceiling and rustic slatted walls through which sunlight pokes here and there – on hot days, the lower slats can be raised to let a little air in. Though one wouldn't want to try to stage, say, Mahler's 'Symphony of a Thousand'

Set in stone:
Chautauqua Auditorium is
framed by the Flatirons; (below)
Arapaho leader Chief Niwot



here, the stage can comfortably fit a large ensemble, and the 1,300-or-so audience seats enjoy lots of leg room and generous aisles. Physics tells me that the auditorium's acoustics should be wretched – as wide as it is long, it is the wrong shape – but in fact the sound is warm, resonant and remarkably detailed.

And then there's the sight that greets you when you step outside at the interval. Set on a hill just outside Boulder, Chautauqua Auditorium is surrounded by lawns and framed by the Flatiron rocks, local landmarks that glow gloriously in the late-evening sun. During one mid-concert breather, a deer and her two fauns amble over to say hello to me. It's all very idyllic.

I attend three concerts, the middle of which sees the Danish String Quartet displaying versatility and virtuosity alike in a concert of Nordic folk music and Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet. Either side, the CMFO is conducted by Jean-Marie Zeitouni in Bizet's Symphony in C major and Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and then by music director Peter Oundjian in a programme including Weber's Clarinet Concerto No. 1, with Anthony McGill as soloist, and Stravinsky's *Firebird* Suite. Perhaps the highlight for me comes at the beginning of Oundjian's concert: the world premiere of *Flying On the Scaly Backs of Our Mountains* by Wang Jie. Inspired by the composer's love of rock-climbing, it paints a picture that is both dramatic and evocative, and fits the local landscape to a tee. Let's hope for a recording.

'A festival like this needs to be quite eclectic,' Oundjian tells me, 'and it also needs to have some element of risk and to stand for something. It's always interesting to find something to celebrate – this year it's been Vaughan Williams's

150th anniversary, and next year we will be marking Rachmaninov's 150th with

'Chautauqua creates such an atmosphere, and people really love coming into it'

pieces he composed in the US. But one of the things that makes the festival so extraordinary is Chautauqua. It's a space that conjures up such an atmosphere, and people really love coming into it.'

Geographically, Boulder is a city of two tales, depending on which way you turn.



Flying start: Peter Oundjian and composer Wang Jie



Local heroes

The Takács Quartet

Though the Takács Quartet (above) first got together in Budapest, Hungary, in 1975, the group has been based in Boulder for most of its life. In 1983, they were offered the post of quartet-in-residence at the Boulder-based University of Colorado and, eyeing a move to the US, promptly accepted. Though the line-up has changed – only cellist András Fejér remains of the original foursome – the Takács continue to combine global touring with playing an active part in their local music scene, and this year performed two concerts at the Colorado Music Festival as artists-in-residence.

Face east, and the landscape is flat, flat and flat again, as far as the eye can see – though just to the right, the skyscrapers of Denver promise a fun day out. Spin round 180 degrees and you have the Rockies. A couple of hours on the road in this direction and you're in ski resort territory. As for the city itself, the regular wafts of cannabis will tell you it has a distinctly hippy vibe, though it is also something of an academic powerhouse. Musically, too, it punches above its weight – outside festival time, the Boulder Philharmonic gives regular concerts, as does the lovingly run Boulder Bach organisation.

Beyond music, visitors shouldn't miss the new Museum of Boulder, which impressively details the area's Arapaho Indian heritage. The shops on Pearl Street are good too. As pianist Gabriela Montero, one of this year's festival performers, Tweets, 'I love Boulder, the festival and the relaxed people and vibe here.' I agree. ☺