

BY BRETT CAMPBELL



Portland pianist brings free classical music to Mt. Pisgah and other Oregon outdoor spots

A few years ago, Oregon-born pianist **Hunter Noack** was scheduled to play Arnold Schoenberg's famous 1899 composition *Transfigured Night* at London's Barbican Center. Since the original poem was set in a dark forest, Noack brought in 50 trees, playing the music as audience and actors dramatizing the story wandered through the impromptu indoor arbor.

“People responded to hearing classical music in a different environment,” Noack recalls, “so I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be cool to use the actual outdoors?’” in a performance.

This month, the 28-year-old Noack is realizing that idea with “In a Landscape” — 13 free performances of classical and contemporary music in outdoor locations around Oregon, including Mount Pisgah Arboretum next Thursday, Sept. 14. Repertoire ranges from music by Liszt, Schubert, Brahms and Ravel to longtime Oregon resident Ernest Bloch and the luminous John Cage composition that gives the series its title.

Some performances feature various guests, from Pink Martini founder-pianist **Thomas Lauderdale** to former **Miss America Katie Harman Ebner**, members of **Portland Chamber Orchestra**, **Eugene Symphony** and more. The series uses today's technology to augment the musical experience and connects today's listeners (including many new to classical music) to a vital part of Oregon's — and America's — artistic heritage, and to its perpetrator's own childhood.

Nature and classical music were the two most important parts of the Newport-born Noack's life growing up in Sunriver and Bend. His mother directed the Sunriver Music Festival, which brought classical musicians, including medalists from the famous Van Cliburn piano competition, to his hometown every year. "Those are the people I looked up to," remembers Noack, who started playing piano at age 4. "When I wasn't practicing, I spent all my time outside."

Those idyllic Oregon days ended when the 13-year-old Noack departed for high school at Michigan's renowned Interlochen Arts Academy to develop his prodigious pianistic talents, then to college and graduate study at San Francisco Conservatory of Music, University of Southern California and London's Guildhall School.

Noack's path back to Oregon began when a mutual friend introduced him to Lauderdale after Pink Martini's 2013 London show. The two pianists' friendship blossomed, they began dating, and Noack moved to Portland, where he now lives with Lauderdale. Last year, he played Liszt's music onstage with Oregon Ballet Theater and Chopin's music with Northwest Dance Project.

Noack really wanted to bring music out of expensive urban concert halls and set it free outdoors, so last summer he created the first run of “Landscape” performances in various Portland-area venues.

Alfresco acoustics can pose challenges, with the sound dissipating or distorted by amplification. Noack's solution: passing out wireless headphones to attendees who want to use them, beaming the music he's playing to them, even enhancing it with digital magic to make it sound even more like a concert hall. "There's no barrier between your brain and the headphones," Noack explains. "There's something powerful about having a personal experience but also sharing it with other people. It's not isolating."

Thanks to public and private grants, admission is by donation. (Tickets are still needed; check HunterNoack.com for reservations and the full list of locations.) Noack's goal of making high level classical music accessible to new audiences was inspired by the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, which helped fund artists during the Great Depression, helping them survive and bringing their work to broad audiences via free and low-cost performances and exhibitions. Noack wanted to remind today's listeners of the role public support can play in the arts.

“In the spirit of the WPA, I wanted everything free or donation based,” he explains. “I think it’s important for it to be non-exclusive from a both financial and location perspective. We cruise around the state from Steens Mountain to the desert to the coast and bring classical music to Oregon. We roll into a park or town square or schoolhouse, and do what I love to do. It’s so wonderful to have a reason to be at a place where I want to be.”

If indoor classical music is your jam, catch the so-called “People’s Diva” **Renée Fleming** with the **Eugene Symphony** Sept. 19, singing songs and arias by Dvorak, Faure, Delibes and others, including Samuel Barber’s poignant American classic *Knoxville Summer of 1915*. The orchestra plays Aaron Copland’s *Down a Country Lane*, music from operas by Verdi and Bizet and more. ■

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