

BY STEVE CARTER

# CHANGE OF SEASON

The 2016–17 *Soundings*: New Music at the Nasher lineup is brilliant, replete with its first-ever Composer-in-Residence.



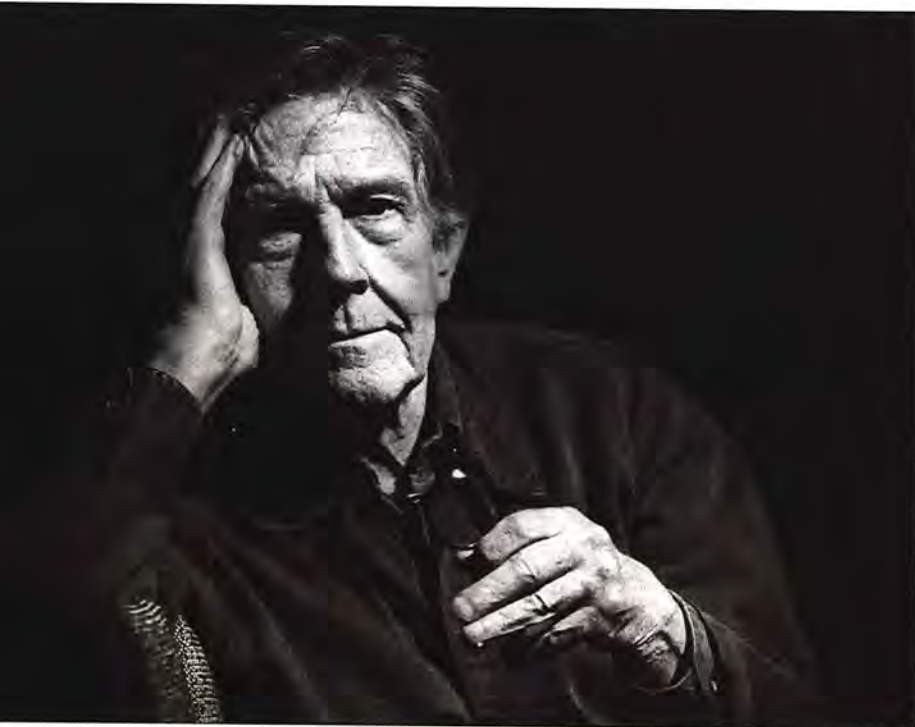


Without a doubt, one of Dallas's most revered musical crown jewels is the Nasher Sculpture Center's trailblazing concert series, *Soundings: New Music at the Nasher*. This month *Soundings* embarks on its seventh season, with five intriguing and challenging concerts scheduled between December and April. Under the knowing artistic directorship of Seth Knopp, this season represents a watershed moment for the series, with the April arrival of *Soundings*'s first-time-ever composer-in-residence, Jörg Widmann. Munich-born Widmann is a phenomenon, internationally acclaimed both as a groundbreaking contemporary composer and as a clarinet virtuoso. With a creative aesthetic that spans the avant-garde, classical, romantic, and other eras, Widmann is the perfect choice to be *Soundings*'s inaugural composer-in-residence, the very personification of the series' unique orientation of blending innovation and tradition.

*Soundings*'s founder and Artistic Director, Seth Knopp, and Widmann have worked together before, and their mutual admiration is palpable. In the summer of 2015, Widmann was in residence at Yellow Barn, the Vermont-based chamber music center; Knopp has been its artistic director since 1999. "Jörg's residency at Yellow Barn was really transforming for the festival, and we became very good

friends," Knopp recalls. "He seemed to be drawn to the kind of programming that was done there and very willing to come to Dallas to spend time there, both with his work and with his playing." For his part, Widmann enthuses, "My experience at Yellow Barn was one of the happiest times of my life. I spent several weeks there—I was composing a lot, and the sheer level of preparation of all the musicians was really amazing. And with someone like Seth, and his spirit—he *lived* it. It was a pure pleasure."

Widmann's *Soundings* residency is sculpted to highlight his versatility over three nights of concerts. Friday, April 7th's 7:30 performance at the Nasher is Widmann himself in a bravura solo clarinet recital. He studied clarinet with Gerd Starke in Munich and with Charles Neidich at the Juilliard School, and he continues to concertize with major orchestras around the globe. "His playing is so transformative in its beauty," Seth Knopp rhapsodizes, "It's quite wonderful. He's a complete musician, the likes of which we rarely encounter today. In that way he's particularly inspiring, because he speaks music so instinctively. His relationship with music is immediate and direct, to a very unusual degree." Widmann adds, "In my solo recital I'll be playing different pieces from the 20th century, and in particular, pieces that were written for me by contemporary



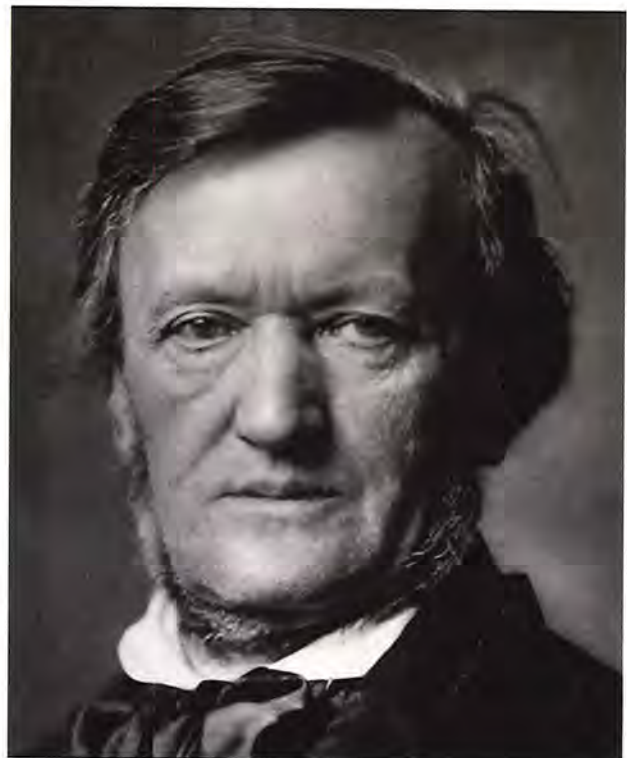
Clockwise from left: American composer John Cage, courtesy of the artist. Erwin Schulhoff was a Czech composer and pianist. Photograph courtesy of the artist's estate. Late German composer Richard Wagner. Photograph courtesy of the artist's estate.



composers. So it's a very personal program. You don't hear a lot of solo clarinet recitals—it's very special."

Shifting musical gears, the next night's concert is a different stripe of special, featuring Widmann's complete cycle of five string quartets. While they're played frequently as individual quartets, it's unusual to hear them back-to-back in concert. Germany's acclaimed Minguet Quartett, who recorded the entire cycle last year, will be performing the works. Widmann based each of the quartets on one movement of a classical quartet: the first is an introduction, the second, the slow movement, the third is a scherzo, the fourth, andante, and the fifth quartet is a fugue. "It's really a challenge to play them all in an evening," Widmann acknowledges. "That's very special, for a composer in general, but for me in particular to hear these five quartets. And it's special for an audience too because it's a journey you make together in this piece." Astonishingly diverse, the quartets explore and expand the boundaries of the genre, swinging from absurdity to somber, elation to introspection—they're ambitious, demanding, revealing, and rewarding. "They're so incredibly different," Knopp says, "and it gives you a sense of his universe, how varied and how connected all the different parts of his musical personality are. But through all the varieties of his music, his voice is unmistakable."

The closing matinee concert of the residency, Sunday, April 9th at 2:00, is a coup: it's the North American premiere of Widmann's first song cycle, *Das Heisse Herz*. Written for piano and baritone voice, on this occasion that of William Sharp, the cycle's eight songs are settings of poems by Clemens Brentano, Klabund, Heinrich Heine, Peter Härtling, and selections from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, a three-volume work of German folk poems collected in the early 1800s. Widmann explains that the texts all deal with different aspects of love—new love, as-yet-to-be love, unrequited love, and so forth. "I created a new story by combining these things," he says. "That was exciting for me, because it's traditional to have only one author for a song cycle. But to have different authors from different



centuries made a lot of sense to me. And the oldest texts are the most radical! That's an important aspect of what I'm doing—when I go back to the music or poetry of the past I don't do it in a nostalgic way. Independent from the fact of when it was written, there can be conversation between the centuries."

Although Jörg Widmann's residency represents the capstone of the season, the first two *Soundings* offerings for 2016–17 are also don't-miss, revelatory programs. *Music from Yellow Barn: Schulhoff, Reich, and Wagner* opens the season on Thursday, December 15, and it's emblematic of what *Soundings* does best: fusing unlikely



musical bedfellows into a provocative concert experience. While Steve Reich's iconic *Different Trains* (1988), Czechoslovakian composer Erwin Schulhoff's controversial *Sonata Erotica* (1919), and Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder* are disparate at first glance, the Holocaust casts a variously telling shadow over the program's parts. Then on Saturday, February 18th, *Soundings* presents John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*; the work is a seldom-heard-in-its-entirety masterpiece performed by pianist Boris Berman. The 16 sonatas and four interludes are performed on a prepared piano—it's a hypnotic journey informed by Cage's fascination with Indian music and thought. All in all, with the richness of the musical tapestry, the stellar launching of its composer-in-residence initiative, and the unswervingly sagacious guidance of Seth Knopp, *Soundings: New Music at the Nasher* for 2016–17 will make a season to remember. **P**

Acclaimed Russian pianist Boris Berman. Photograph courtesy of the artist. Right: Steve Reich was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2009. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Kris Cox

*What Do I Know*

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Thursday, January 19, 2017

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