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Pianist Jeremy Denk is the SPCO's newest artistic partner

By [Pamela Espeland](#) | 03/18/14



Photo by Michael Wilson

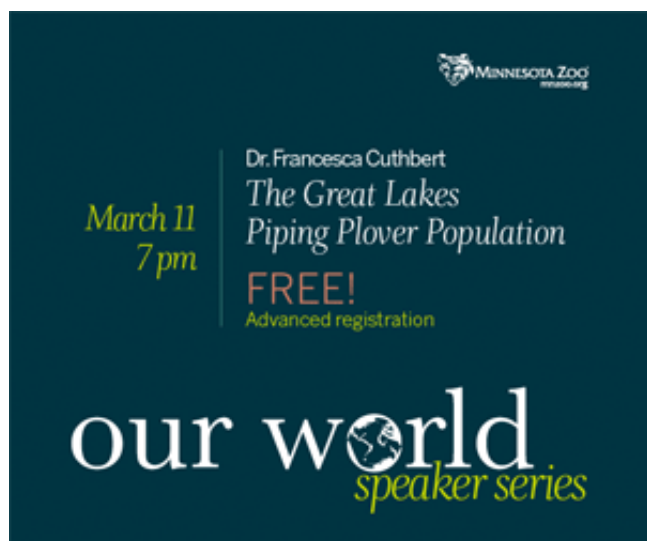
Jeremy Denk is a thoroughly modern classical musician.

Jeremy Denk has been called the “hippest, hottest classical pianist.” He’s certainly one of the most celebrated. This week he received the Avery Fisher Prize for “outstanding achievement and excellence in music.” In November, he was named Musical America’s 2014 Instrumentalist of the Year. In 2013, he received a MacArthur “genius” grant for his “extraordinary originality, dedication in his creative pursuits, and a marked capacity for self-direction.” OUT magazine included him in its “Out 100” list of the most compelling people of 2013.

We’re going to see a lot of him starting later this year, because he was just named the Saint Paul

Chamber Orchestra's newest artistic partner.

Denk is a thoroughly modern classical musician, which is not an oxymoron. He blogs and tweets (@jeremydenk). He has written about music for the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. He has degrees from Oberlin, Indiana University and Juilliard. He's writing a memoir for Random House. He has penned the libretto to a new comic opera by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Steven Stucky in which Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart play Scrabble. He's artist in residence at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and directs the Ojai Music Festival in California. He has played with some of the best orchestras on the planet, including (several times) the SPCO. Most recently, in late November and early December, they performed Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25 and Brahms' Piano Quintet in F Minor. You can listen to the complete concert here.



Denk's 2013 recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations reached No. 1 on Billboard's classical chart. (He calls the Goldbergs "the biggest jazz riff ever written.") Already there are plans afoot for the SPCO to record with Denk (their first recording since 2007) and tour North America together (their first multicity tour since 2008). Denk's 2014-15 SPCO season performances will include Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20, music by Bach and Janáček, collaborations with vocal artists and new commissions by American composers. He'll work with the SPCO for three years, although that term is flexible. (Roberto Abbado has been an artistic

partner since 2005.)

Snagging Denk is a coup for the SPCO. It's also a unique opportunity for the artist, who regards the musicians as having "the kind of openness and freedom that I have always dreamed of in a relationship with an orchestra." According to a statement issued by the SPCO, Denk is "excited to pursue various musical curiosities and enthusiasms with them, to create interesting programming, and, most importantly, to have fun."

With the addition of Denk, and earlier this year the Moldavan violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, the SPCO now has six artistic partners (the other four are Abbado, Christian Zacharias, Edo de Waart, and Thomas Zehetmair) and no full-time music director. It's the only American orchestra that uses the artistic partner model, which the SPCO adopted in 2004, during Bruce Coppock's first term as its president and managing director. (Coppock retired in 2008 because of illness, then returned as president and CEO in May 2013, shortly after a 191-day lockout of the musicians

ended.) We've been wondering, "What exactly does an artistic partner do?" We thought you might want to know, too, so we spoke with Coppock.

MinnPost: Can you give us some background on how this model came about and why? We've read that it had to do with a financial crisis at the SPCO.

Bruce Coppock: There was a financial dimension to the 2003 contract [with the musicians], but really, it was an existential question: Who are we? What are we about? What's important to us? We came out of that process thinking about involving the musicians much more deeply. Within six months of the completion of that negotiation, the new committee – three musicians and two members of management – agreed on a plan to eliminate the music directorship and create the artistic partner system. That's when the first crop of partners – [Nicholas McGegan], Douglas Boyd, Joshua Bell, and Stephen Prutsman – came into being.

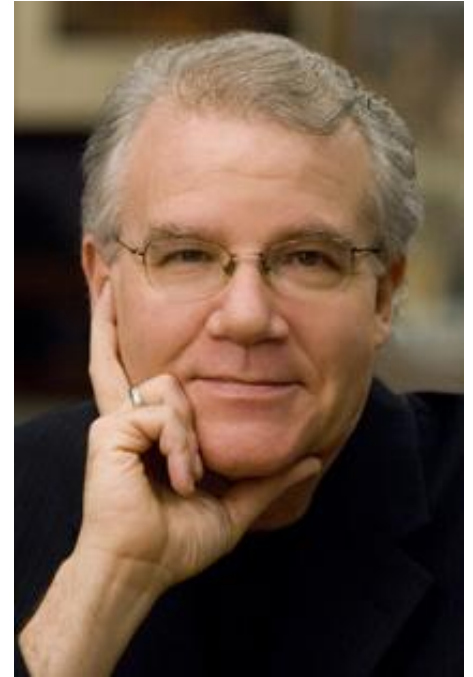


Photo by Ann Marsden

Bruce Coppock

One of the biggest challenges is that a music director can become the very symbol or embodiment of the institution. And when, for whatever reason, that person leaves, it leaves the orchestra in a huge identity crisis. It was true of the Cleveland Orchestra when Szell left in 1970. It was true of the New York Philharmonic when Bernstein left in 1958. It was true of the St. Louis Symphony when Slatkin left in 1996. Those organizations had to go through huge examinations of who they were.

Every time there's a major shift, especially after a wildly successful run, most orchestras end up with somebody who has a completely different profile. That certainly happened to the SPCO, if you consider the lineage of [former music directors] Dennis Russell Davies, Pinchas Zukerman, [Christopher Hogwood], Hugh Wolff and Andreas Delfs – it was all over the map. So we decided that in the interest of a continually evolving artistic profile for the orchestra, it would be much better – both from an artistic perspective and, perhaps most importantly, from the perspective of the community's sense of ownership and understanding of what the organization is about – to create this system of artistic partnerships. Which, quite frankly, is nothing new. We stole it from the Vienna Philharmonic. We stole it from the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. We stole it from the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. A lot of our most admired colleagues use this system.

MP: But not in America.

BC: We're the only ones in America. The Pittsburgh Symphony tried it for a little while and it

didn't work for them. They have a very traditional music director model now.

MP: Were most of the musicians amenable to this system from the start, or did it take a while to settle in?

BC: It has evolved over time. Some musicians were uncomfortable that some of their colleagues would now have a greater measure of responsibility and control than in the old system. It created a whole bunch of dynamics within the orchestra. But I think on balance the system worked well. The orchestra started playing much better.

I would say in general that the orchestra plays much better when it is self-directed or led by a playing partner. As the orchestra has gotten stronger and stronger over the last decade, we have increasingly engaged musicians for whom *not* having a conductor is as important or perhaps more important than having a conductor. That's the direction we're heading with [Patricia] Kopatchinskaja and Jeremy Denk, in addition to Thomas Zehetmair and Christian Zacharias.

MP: What exactly does an artistic partner do?

BC: It depends a lot on who the artistic partner is. The conductor Roberto Abaddo is a specialist in the music of Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert, Haydn and some early 20th-century masterpieces, like the Schoenberg chamber symphonies and modern Italian works. By contrast, Stephen Prutsman is a pianist, jazz musician, composer, arranger, and chamber music player. He has extraordinarily diverse and eclectic tastes, and his programming reflected that. We build projects around each partner's strengths and interests.

MP: What does the SPCO look for in an artistic partner?

BC: We don't look for generalists, for starters. Which is what a music director generally is – someone who can do the classical repertoire, the romantic repertoire, the modern repertoire. We're looking for people who have what we refer to as distinctive artistic profiles, who are clearly about a certain kind of approach to music, a certain set of ideas, a certain set of ideals.

Take, for example, Thomas Zehetmair, an ultra-serious guy who focuses on a very narrow part of the classical repertoire and some newer German, Austrian and English composers. I wouldn't ever ask Thomas to conduct the Adams Chamber Symphony. It's just not his voice.

Take Edo de Waart. Edo's programming has been focused on Stravinsky. He's a master of that. He's conducted all the Strauss operas. The programs he was meant to conduct last week, before he threw his back out, was Strauss' suite from "Le Bourgeois gentilhomme." He brings to that music enormous experience.

MP: It sounds like part of your process is thinking, "We want to perform a

particular composer or type of music. Let's go find someone who's good at that." As if you're creating a palette of sounds.

BC: That's one reason we gravitated toward these two [most recent] appointments, Patricia Kopatchinskaja and now Jeremy Denk. If you look at the quartet of [current artistic partners] Edo, Roberto, Thomas Zehetmair and Christian Zacharias, it's mighty central European. Kopatchinskaja is completely sui generis – genre-bending. And Jeremy brings unbelievable intellect, a sense of intimacy, a sense of joy, a sense of ownership and belief in the music he's playing that is overpowering. The appointments of Kopatchinskaja and Denk provide balance for us.

Here's the key point about the artistic partner system: at the macro level, it's about creating an ever-evolving group of partners who will, as a group, along with the musicians of the SPCO, embody that special interactive communicative quality that is unique to chamber orchestras.

MP: Do you ever have a big artistic partners meeting or sleepover where they all get together and talk about what they're doing?

BC: Some partners have occasionally overlapped. To get them all together at the same time, we'd have to arrange a date about six years in advance.

MP: You started out with four artistic partners, and now you have six. Will you keep six, or is someone running out his term? Is there a set term for artistic partners?

BC: There's a principle, but there's not a rule. The basic principle is three weeks a year for three years, give or take a week or two. Or, in Edo's case, four years, because he has a concept about Beethoven's symphonies that he wants to pursue. And it depends on the mutuality of it as it goes along. With Roberto Abbado, I think it's been eight or nine years now, because it continues to be great. Dawn Upshaw was three plus two. There's no point in being rigid about it, because you can't predict a long time in advance how much steam a relationship has. But here's the most essential thing: from the community's perspective, there's never one of those wild shifts in the identity of the SPCO.

MP: Why would someone like Jeremy Denk want to be an artistic partner with the SPCO?

BC: Because it's a fantastic, flexible platform on which he can make music with a group of musicians that he respects and who respect him and they know each other. ...

MP: For an artist like Denk, being appointed artistic partner to the SPCO must feel like being handed the keys to a candy store. For a period of time, it's his orchestra.

BC: The SPCO is not an orchestra. It's a group of musicians that form a chamber orchestra, but there's also the opportunity to play chamber music. In Denk's case, there's opportunity to play music for piano and small ensembles that you could never play on a symphony concert. So it's really a deck of cards to play with, and from our perspective it's a chance to get away from, on the one hand, the grind of one person after another coming in week after week, and, on the other, the tedium of the same person being there week after week, which is what happens when there's a music director. So it's a fantastic balance of enough time together to make real music together, but not so much that it gets stale, plus it's flexible and can evolve according to how things go.

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Pamela Espeland

Pamela Espeland writes the Artscape column for MinnPost. She also writes for the Star Tribune, National Public Radio and mnartists.org, blogs at bebopified.com, and is an Art Hound for Minnesota Public Radio.

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COMMENTS (2)

Thanks

SUBMITTED BY DONNA FLOYD ON MARCH 18, 2014 - 11:25AM.

Thank you for the informative article and interview. I've attended SPCO concerts for several years, but feel like I now have a much better understanding of the artistic partnership model. Jeremy Denk's partnership bodes very well for the SPCO.

Excellent Interview

SUBMITTED BY JIM MILLION ON MARCH 19, 2014 - 10:58PM.

Thank you, indeed. Questions are excellent and answers are mostly straight forward, while both both Espeland and Coppock keep to the course. I remain a fan of SPCO for several reasons, one of which certainly is the artistic partnership model. While I appreciate the organizational values of this scheme, Coppock skates past the benefits of audience interest and subscription. The varieties of style and repertoire brought by multiple partners keep the concerts fresh and stimulating for our differing tastes.

While I do not personally care for Edo's Beethoven interpretations, others do, and I very much like the offerings of other partners. As long as Coppock sees this model as "variation within a theme," the musical and market future of SPCO appears to be good. All stakeholders should benefit.

Also, as we keenly observe elsewhere, a singular baton may be a magic wand for some and lightning rod for others. It seems much better to walk softly and carry several "sticks."