



# BACK TO NATURE



Set against the stunning backdrop of Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, Susan Elliott visits a festival which combines breathtaking natural beauty with world-class musicians

**N**avigating the narrow, occasionally dirt road that meanders through Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, cars are warned, 'As You Drive, Keep Them Alive' and 'A Fed Bear Is a Dead Bear'. Located about 50 miles south of Yellowstone National Park, and far less well-known, is Grand Teton National Park, 485 square miles of untouched flora and fauna, bordered and named for the spectacular mountain range that rises, at its highest peak, to 13,700 feet. The Park, protected from man's greedy hand and chainsaw by a 1929 Act of the United States Congress, is home to literally thousands of species; in winter months, when temperatures reach 1.2 degrees fahrenheit and below, and the snow drifts to 600 inches and above, there are said to be more elk in the valley than humans.

That time of year, well-to-do ski bums and bunnies hit the slopes and convene upon Teton County's small but high-toned city of Jackson Hole (oddly named, since it rises 6,200 feet above sea level), where cowboy boots can cost \$3,000 and celebrities like Sandra Bullock and Ralph Fiennes roam

the sidewalks. Come summer, the hikers, backpackers, bikers, fishermen and urban cowboys come into the Park itself, where the wildflowers are as spectacular as the views from the top of the mountains, when mama bear and her cubs may venture out to the roadside to sample the huckleberries.

At any given time in Grand Teton National Park, you might come across antelope, bison, elk, moose, deer, mountain goats or even cougars. Stand still and you'll hear water rushing from one of the Teton Range's glacier lakes. Closer listening might reveal the call of that wildest of beasts, the string quartet, escorted by a forest ranger with a flock of listeners in tow.

**BEAR WITH YOU:** (main) Grand Teton National Park; (left) Grand Teton's Walk Festival Hall; (right) a familiar guest...



Music in Nature, as that particular programme is officially known, is a component of the Grand Teton Music Festival, a favourite seven-week work-play holiday for some of this country's finest musicians – and audiences lucky enough to know about it.

'I first heard about it through the players in the San Francisco Opera Orchestra,' recalls Donald Runnicles, music director of the SFO and, since 2006, of the festival. The 53-year-old Scotsman and I are seated on the back porch of the modest cabin he shares with his partner, pianist Adelle Eslinger, and his two daughters. It is on an Alpine meadow in the Park and the view on this crystal clear, sun-drenched August morning is breathtaking – the grassy field spreads out before us; to the west, the Grand Tetons rise suddenly, with no foothills to prepare the eye for the shock of such grandeur; to the east, a Snake River tributary gurgles by.

Runnicles' first visit was during the summer of 2003, when he accompanied his ex-wife Elizabeth Gilles, a SFO orchestra violinist who had been invited to play in the

festival orchestra. 'I went along with her to a rehearsal of the Bruckner Seventh Symphony under Eiji Oue [at that time, the festival music director]. I found it quite staggering,' he continues. 'Here, in the middle of this unbelievable mountain range was a large, incredibly fine symphony orchestra playing in a proper concert hall. It was just astonishing.' It still is.

## Stand still, and you'll hear water rushing from one of the Teton's glacier lakes

The festival's origins date to 1962, when, as part of the Jackson Hole Fine Arts Festival, one Baroness Consuelo von Gontard came up with the resources for a series of summer concerts. At first they were held in the Jackson Hole High School gymnasium, with chamber concerts on the lawn of St John's Church. (The latter came to be known as the



**GREAT SCOT:** Donald Runnicles has brought a freshness back to the Grand Teton Festival

'watermelon concerts', named for the snack served at intermission.)

Every summer, the Baroness and her well-to-do friends in the Fine Arts Society would invite different guest conductors; Otto-Werner Mueller was one, so was Ferde Grofé, who led his *Grand Canyon Suite* here in 1965. When Ling Tung became the festival's first music director in 1968, he brought his wife Margaretha Walk with him from Philadelphia to serve as business manager. Ling Tung in turn invited musician friends from back east. 'His whole philosophy,' explains executive director Tracy Jacobson, 'was that the festival was about friends making music with friends.' It's a philosophy that remains firmly in place. ▶



JUST GRAND: (above) 2008's closing concert; (right) Ling Tung, the festival's first director



In 1969, the Jackson Hole Ski Area donated a plot of land, on which the festival erected a carnival tent, moving the concerts, finally, out of the high school gym. By 1974, work had begun on a concert hall at the base of the Teton range in Teton Village, where it stands today, newly renovated in the last year.

Organisers were savvy enough to hire a fine acoustician – Christopher Jaffe – but amenities such as rest rooms were still three decades off. Jacobson recalls how, when she first arrived in 1986, ‘it was still very rustic, very much a man’s world. They’d just go in the bushes’. In 1987, the New York Philharmonic was brought to town to help raise funds. Many of the musicians were smitten, including double bassist Jon Deak and former principal oboe Joseph Robinson, who called the 800-seat Walk Festival Hall ‘my favourite stage in the world: as much a wonder as the scenery.’

Oue succeeded Ling Tung as music director in 1997 and left in 2003. When Runnicles returned in 2005 as a guest conductor, the search for a music director was well under way. He was asked ‘rather sheepishly,’ he says, if he would be interested in the job. Management’s timidity was understandable: Runnicles’s schedule was booked to the hilt, and still is. Next season, he assumes the top artistic jobs at the BBC Scottish Symphony and Deutsche Oper Berlin, as he exits similar posts with the San Francisco Opera and the Atlanta Symphony, where he has been principal guest conductor.

‘For me, this is as good as it gets,’ he says explaining his decision. ‘You’re working with the finest musicians in this country on the

finest repertoire in a congenial, relaxed, spiritual place. It’s not well known – some might wonder [he puts on a snooty accent], “Maestro Runnicles why aren’t you in Salzburg? Why aren’t you in London? Bayreuth?” But it’s the chance to make a difference, the chance to have – without wishing to sound arrogant – my music festival, where I can programme works that I think will be of interest to a

## ‘Players’ motivation is work and play, making great music with great friends’

young audience, to bring soloists, friends, colleagues, to be with my family.’

The festival generally offers three chamber and two orchestral concerts a week, performed, these days, by musicians from the major orchestras of Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Dallas, among others; from the opera orchestras of New York’s Metropolitan, the Chicago Lyric and San Francisco; from chamber orchestras such as St Paul’s; and from conservatory faculties.

In any given seven-week season, upwards of 250 musicians rotate in and out of the Festival orchestra. All are chosen by invitation, directly from the music director and/or through one another; the festival’s database has accumulated the names of some 1,300 string, woodwind, brass, and percussion

players over the last four decades. Artistic and operations director Liz Kintz is charged with slotting specific instruments into specific weeks for specific works – a huge feat, as she also has to coordinate with individual musicians’ summer schedules and find complimentary accommodation in a town where housing is scarce (97 per cent of the County’s 4 million acres are protected by law).

Says section principal Gail Williams, a 16-year veteran of the Festival and one of the few who stay all summer, ‘It’s a challenge, because every two or three weeks it’s a different orchestra.’ The former Chicago Symphony co-principal says the festival musicians ‘play for each other’ as much as they do for the audience.

That latter group is a very mixed bag: 60 per cent year-round valley residents (Teton County full-time population is about 20,000); 25 per cent from the rest of Wyoming as well as neighbouring states such as Idaho and Utah; 15 per cent tourists. The orchestral concert I attended was the last of the season, and there wasn’t an empty seat in the house. One of Runnicles’s goals is to make it that way all summer long. But with the

festival artistic and programming budget at under \$3m, funds for the Big Name soloists and high-profile marketing campaigns are scarce. Musicians’ salaries, too, are low. Then again, few if any are here simply because it’s a gig. ‘Their motivation to come here isn’t financial,’ says Runnicles. ‘Their motivation is work and play, making great music with friends and great colleagues and then on Sunday and Monday going hiking or biking or be with their family or get mauled by bears.

‘Plus they get to play with great artists. Lynn Harrell is a soloist but he also leads the cello section for several weeks.’ He points out, too, that full-time professors and chamber players in the band rarely have the opportunity to play the orchestral repertoire professionally, much less Runnicles’s own stock-in-trade, opera. A programme of R Strauss’s *Rosenkavalier* highlights this summer was a hit. ‘For many of them this was the missing link,’ he explains, since symphony musicians ‘play the big Strauss tone poems but never get to play the actual operas. The principal viola of the Chicago Symphony came up to me afterward and gave me a huge hug, saying it was unforgettable.’ Which seems to be the consensus, all round. ■

For further information on the Grand Teton Music Festival visit [www.gtmf.org](http://www.gtmf.org)