

A Weekend Music Trip 2015

by Carl Helmers

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Apparently Not Doable

At the start of the year, Jean and I started thinking about what to do for our 2015 “live classical music listening” vacation travel for August. At about the time we were looking for prospective things to do, we learned about this year's schedule for the University of Rochester's annual “Alumni, Parents & Friends” celebration of music with a Boston Pops concert at Tanglewood, the summer performance home of the Boston Symphony orchestra (and Boston Pops). Tanglewood is in the Berkshires, a wooded hilly region on the border with N.Y. where the east-west Interstate 90 changes identity from the N.Y. Thruway to become the Massachusetts Turnpike traveling west to east. Driving 8 round-trip-hours from Rochester NY to Tanglewood and back in one day for an evening performance is rather excessive to say the least! This judgment stands no matter how celebrated the orchestra, conductors, soloists and pastoral venue might be. We thus had never attended this event, nor had we ever considered it “doable.”

But This Time We Could Do It!

As a result of Jean's years (1971 to 1975) attending then graduating from Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs New York, Jean knows about the Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC). Just as our University of Rochester uses its Eastman Theater in downtown Rochester for advanced degree graduation ceremonies, Skidmore College uses the near by Saratoga Performing Arts Center for all its graduation ceremonies. Jean (with myself tagging along) participated in some recent Skidmore college alumni events. We made several trips to Saratoga Springs in the past year. Thus, we are quite familiar with Saratoga Springs' late 20th century wireless internet equipped Hampton Inn downtown. And we know the quite do-able 3.5+ hour drive to or from Saratoga Springs.

Jean also knows that just as the Boston Symphony has its bucolic Tanglewood summer music venue in Western Massachusetts, for some historical reason it turns out that the Philadelphia Orchestra restarted using the SPAC for its similar rural summer music setting. The SPAC was initially built circa 1966. SPAC's “Music Shed” has also been used as the graduation venue for Skidmore College since then.

Jean did some internet exploration in February. First was the crucial question of “how realistic is it to drive from Saratoga Springs to Tanglewood and back in an evening?” *Hmm: Tanglewood MA is not that far from Saratoga Springs NY.* Google research indicated a one way drive time of about 80 minutes. Fine, a quite reasonable trip, so we could combine a Friday SPAC event (Saratoga Springs Hampton Inn base) with attending the University of Rochester's dinner / Boston Pops concert event that Saturday evening at Tanglewood in a several day long weekend musical vacation trip.

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It turns out that the Philadelphia Orchestra at SPAC was holding “[An Evening with Joshua Bell](#)” on August 21. The main feature of an excellent orchestral program that Friday was Joshua Bell with the Philadelphia orchestra playing one of my favorites, the Max Bruch violin concerto. Well worth attending for the soloist, the orchestra, and the live music!

On Sunday evening, August 23, we found we could complete the weekend by attending a concert of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (NYC) at SPAC. The Sunday concert started with Beethoven's Quartet in E-flat major for Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello Op. 16. The second filler piece was an eminently forgettable circa 1990-91 modern music cacophony piece by a 20th century composer who shall remain nameless here. The chamber evening concluded with Robert Schuman's grand (IMHO) Quartet in E-flat major for Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello, Op. 47.

The plan would work out well. In our August 2015 musical vacation, we ended up hearing music performed by excellent classical music artistic music groups based in three major northeast cities! To carry out the plan we drove the three and a half hours east on the NY thruway on Friday morning August 21. We checked into our Saratoga Springs hotel room then ate dinner at the *Hall of Springs* at SPAC. Later Friday evening we walked to our reserved seats in SPAC's ~5000 seat open air “shed”.

The Friday evening Philadelphia Orchestra SPAC concert started with one of my favorite pieces, Antonin Dvorak's Op 22 Serenade for Strings. Then the Philadelphia Orchestra with Joshua Bell soloist performed Max Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 Op. 26. After the intermission, the program concluded with Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 3. in F major Op. 90. One distinctive feature of the Saratoga Springs Performing Arts Center this summer is that throughout the concert, a distinct “country” night-time sound of cicadas and other chirping summer bugs in the nearby woods added a soft background to the excellent romantic music! [Clearly live background “country music” of a sort. ;-)>]

Next evening on August 22, we drove the hour and a half of country highways to the Tanglewood Music Center in Lenox MA from Saratoga Springs NY. We had dinner at the University of Rochester “Alumni and Friends” tent on the grounds of the Tanglewood Music Center. The Tanglewood Music Center is similar sized to the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. Seating in their respective “sheds” is nearly identical at approximately 5000. The capacity of the surrounding lawns is nearly identical. However Tanglewood (with a Boston Pops program of movie music as bait) drew many more people from all over New England.

Tanglewood had none of the bucolic bugs chirping softly in the sonic background as SPAC had a 100 miles away the night before. Perhaps the much larger audience, the much louder Hollywood style movie music of the Boston Pops Concert and several decades more of summer concerts had driven out the western Massachusetts cicadas and crickets to descend on SPAC a hundred miles to the west northwest! ;-)>

We concluded our weekend by driving back home on Monday August 24.

