



College of Music
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

MSU Symphony Orchestra

Honors Concert

Octavio Más-Arocas, conductor
Zongheng Zhang, guest conductor

Winners of the 2026 Honors Concerto Competition
Wanwan Yang, piano
Diego Chapela-Perez, alto saxophone

Friday, March 20, 2026
Cobb Great Hall, Wharton Center, 7:30 p.m.

PROGRAM

Qué Xopá, Fanfare for Orchestra

Katahj Copley
(b. 1998)

The Sam and Mary Austin New Fanfares Project

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873–1943)

Moderato

Adagio sostenuto

Allegro scherzando

Wanwan Yang, piano
Zongheng Zhang, conductor

Intermission

Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra

Paul Creston
(1906–1985)

Energetic

Meditative

Rhythmic

Diego Chapela-Perez, alto saxophone

The Firebird Suite

Igor Stravinsky
(1882–1971)

Introduction

The Firebird and its Dance

Variation of the Firebird

The Princesses' Khorovod (Rondo)

Infernal Dance of King Kastchei

Lullaby

Finale

Octavio Más-Arocas, conductor

PROGRAM NOTES

The Sam and Mary Austin New Fanfares Project

MSU Symphony Orchestra concerts will open with a newly written fanfare composed by a current composition student. The selected students are assigned to write short works for a diverse group of players giving them the opportunity to present their work with the Symphony Orchestra audience. For their continuing support of new music at MSU, we are honored to name the fanfare project after Sam and Mary Austin.

“¿Qué xopá?” (sounding like *Kay So-Pah*) is a phrase I first heard in an unexpected place—Clarksville, Tennessee. While on residency at Austin Peay State University, I returned from a break and overheard music spilling out of another room. The sound felt instantly familiar, and I was drawn toward it.

Inside, a group of students were singing and playing Afro-Latin music. Horns, drums, and voices filled the space with vibrant energy. The last time I had played my saxophone in an ensemble like this was years earlier in Texas. When one of the students noticed me standing in the doorway, he called out, “¡Qué xopá!” Suddenly, everyone in the room echoed the phrase.

Confused and intrigued, I asked what it meant. He explained that it is a Panamanian expression meaning “what’s up?”

From that moment on, the ensemble handed me a saxophone, and for the first time in a long while, I played. I was transported back—to the feeling, the energy, and the love I had for this music born from the fusion of cultures.

Qué Xopá is my way of honoring that experience: the intersection of Latin music and African American musical traditions, and the creation of a sonic world that is vibrant, exciting, and—like the people who make this music—colorful.

- *Katahji Copley*

PROGRAM NOTES (cont.)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor – The teenaged Sergei Prokofiev, already a sharp-eared pianist and critic, summed up Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto with amused precision: “a very beautiful and famous concerto... it begins with chords, and then a broad theme do-re-do.” Indeed, the work opens with eight measures of tolling piano chords—like bells—before the orchestra surges in with the main C–D–C “do-re-do” idea in C minor. Fellow pianist-composer Nikolai Medtner called this sobbing motif, “one of the most strikingly Russian of themes,” not because it quotes folk material, but because it feels inseparable from a national spirit—“from the first bell stroke, you feel the figure of Russia rising up to her full height.”

In an unusual working order, Rachmaninoff completed and premiered the last two movements first, in Moscow in December 1900. He finished the opening movement in April 1901 and performed the full concerto that autumn. Its immediate triumph helped lift him from the depression that followed the disastrous 1897 premiere of his First Symphony. In gratitude, he dedicated the concerto to Dr. Nikolai Dahl, whose therapy helped him rebuild confidence and overcome crippling self-doubt. The concerto quickly secured Rachmaninoff’s reputation in Russia and found equal success abroad.

The first movement sustains its intensity while balancing a more lyrical second theme and a compact march-like motif that expands into a climactic *maestoso*, with the piano hammering rhythmic chords above the orchestra’s main theme. Notably, there is no traditional solo cadenza; instead, the music flows with continuous momentum, and key ideas return later at strategic points.

The slow movement turns pastoral—E major, broadly in 4/4—yet colored by subtle offbeat accents. The finale begins with a brisk march, then unveils one of Rachmaninoff’s most beloved melodies: a wistful, swooping theme shared between soloist and orchestra before a breathless coda snaps the dream away. Over time, the concerto also entered popular culture through songs, films, and countless quotations—proof that its melancholy lyricism speaks far beyond the concert hall.

- Harlow Robinson, LA Phil

PROGRAM NOTES (cont.)

Paul Creston's *Concerto for Alto Saxophone* (three movements) is widely regarded as one of his major works, demanding refined technique, stamina, and tight coordination between soloist and ensemble. Composed originally for saxophone and orchestra, it received its first performance in 1944 with the New York Philharmonic, featuring saxophonist Vincent Abato. Creston later rescored the concerto for symphonic band in 1963, helping it become a staple of the wind repertoire.

Creston's affinity for the instrument grew in the late 1930s, when he served as accompanist to saxophone virtuoso Cecil Leeson. After writing Leeson a sonata and suite, Creston dedicated the concerto to him, making a persuasive argument for the saxophone as a serious solo voice—capable of both brilliance and deep lyricism.

The opening movement, *Energetic*, is in sonata form. It begins with a bold ensemble statement of the first theme, then the saxophone bursts in with virtuosic flourishes. The soloist introduces the more lyrical second theme alone before it is taken up by winds (notably oboes and clarinets), setting up a clear contrast between driving momentum and singing line.

The second movement, *Meditative*, highlights the saxophone's cantabile character. A plaintive principal melody—first heard in flute and then bassoon—unfolds in 5/4, but its phrasing resists the bar line, creating a floating, dreamlike feel. Midway through, the soloist delivers an extended cadenza that recombines earlier melodic fragments and accompaniment figures. The movement returns to its opening calm and closes in a serene F-sharp major sonority.

The finale, *Rhythmic*, is a rondo built from contrasting episodes: an urgent, vigorous A theme, a flowing melodic B theme, and a more impassioned, martial C idea. It drives to a final, frenetic solo cadenza—marked “as fast as possible”—and an exuberant, sharply punctuated finish.

- *Program Note from liner notes of
BIS CD La Création du Monde*

PROGRAM NOTES (cont.)

Firebird Suite – It is tempting to imagine how differently 20th-century music might have unfolded if the ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev had not gambled on a young, relatively unknown Igor Stravinsky. Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, newly established in Paris, was electrifying Western audiences and needed a major new production to crown its 1910 season. Plans involving more famous composers fell through, and on instinct Diaghilev commissioned Stravinsky—then in his late twenties. The risk was real: The *Firebird* would be the company’s first ballet with a wholly new score.

Stravinsky received a scenario (shaped in part by choreographer Michel Fokine) drawn from Russian folklore. The story centers on Kastchei the Deathless, an ogre-like tyrant who imprisons princesses and turns rescuing knights to stone. Prince Ivan captures the magical *Firebird*—her feathers glittering like flame—then releases her and gains her help in defeating Kastchei and freeing the captives.

You can hear how Stravinsky’s imagination ignited. Setting aside work on *The Nightingale*, he fused the orchestral craft learned from Rimsky-Korsakov with the vitality of Russian folk material to create music of shimmering color and theatrical drive. Stravinsky remained fond of *The Firebird* and fashioned three concert suites; the most frequently performed is the 1919 suite, which uses less than half the ballet and streamlines the orchestration.

The suite’s language pivots between chromatic, supernatural sonorities and the plain, singsong contours of folk-like melody for the human world. It opens in shadow: low strings conjure Kastchei’s enchanted realm. In a magical garden Ivan meets the *Firebird*, painted in radiant trills and opulent orchestral color. A pastoral interlude follows with imaginative woodwind writing, as the captive princesses dance the Khorovod (round dance) and Ivan falls in love.

To protect him, the *Firebird* bewitches Kastchei and his monsters, driving them into the savage, rhythmically explosive “Infernal Dance”. The frenzy dissolves into the “Berceuse”, a lullaby led by bassoon that lulls Kastchei to sleep. Ivan smashes the egg that contains Kastchei’s soul; the spell collapses, and a noble horn theme heralds sunrise. The finale swells into a radiant celebration, showing Stravinsky poised between the brilliance of his Russian inheritance and the rhythmic revolution soon to erupt in *The Rite of Spring*.

- Thomas May, LA Phil

ARTIST-FACULTY BIO

Octavio Más-Arocas is Director of Orchestras at MSU. He is the Music Director and Conductor of the Mansfield Symphony in Ohio, the Marquette Symphony in Michigan, the Clinton Symphony in New York, and Conductor-in-Residence at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, California. Previous positions include Principal Conductor of the Green Bay Symphony Orchestra, Resident Conductor of the Unicamp Symphony Orchestra in Brazil, Director of Orchestras at Ithaca College, Lawrence University, Baldwin Wallace University, and at Interlochen Arts Academy. He has also been Resident-Conductor of the Sewanee Summer Music Festival and Assistant Conductor of the National Repertory Orchestra. An award-winning conductor, Más-Arocas was chosen by Kurt Masur for the Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Award working as Maestro Masur's assistant with the Leipzig Gewandhaus and Helsinki Radio orchestras. Más-Arocas is the winner of the Robert J. Harth Conducting Prize at the American Academy of Conducting at Aspen, Thelma A. Robinson Award from the Conductors Guild, Prize Winner of the Third European Conductors Competition, and winner of the National Youth Orchestra of Spain Conductors Competition. He has appeared with orchestras and taught masterclasses throughout the world.

STUDENT BIOS

Diego Chapela-Perez is a sophomore at Michigan State University pursuing a Bachelor of Music in Saxophone Performance with a minor in Jazz Studies. An accomplished soloist, he has earned top honors in major competitions, including First Prize in both the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) Competition and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's Young Artist Competition. A dedicated chamber musician, Diego has performed with award-winning saxophone quartets recognized at the Fischhoff, Barbara Wagner, and Houston Underground Competitions. He currently serves as the alto saxophonist of the Kivo Quartet. His primary teachers are Joseph Lulloff, Scott Plugge, and Abraham Nuñez.

STUDENT BIOS (cont.)

Georgia native **Katahj Copley** (he/him) premiered his first work, *Spectra*, in 2017 and has since composed more than 100 works for chamber ensembles, wind ensemble, and orchestra. His music has been performed and commissioned by universities, organizations, and professional ensembles, including the Cavaliers Brass, California Band Director Association, Admiral Launch Duo, and “The President’s Own” Marine Band, with performances in Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, China, and Australia. Copley earned Bachelor degrees in Music Education and Composition from the University of West Georgia in 2021 and a Master degree in composition from UT Austin in 2023. He currently studies at Michigan State University.

Wanwan Yang has been praised for her expressive range, bringing both delicate lyricism and fiery intensity to her performances. She has appeared internationally in venues such as Harris Hall in Aspen, Van Cliburn Hall in Fort Worth, George Enescu Hall in Bucharest, Studzinski Hall in Maine, and major concert halls across China and Asia. A Truax Darlington Fund Scholarship recipient, she earned her BM from Oberlin Conservatory and MM from the Peabody Institute, studying with Matti Raekallio, Angela Cheng, and Boris Slutsky. Since 2022, she has pursued her D.M.A. at Michigan State University as a graduate assistant under Dr. Eric Zuber.

Zongheng Zheng is a second-year Doctoral student in Orchestral Conducting at Michigan State University, studying under Professors Octavio Mas-Arocas and Kathrine Kilburn. He holds a Master degree in Orchestral Conducting from UT Austin, where he served as Assistant Conductor for the UT Symphony Orchestra and Music Director of the UT University Orchestra. With the passion of opera music, Zhang has worked with Austin Opera, Butler Opera Center, and Berlin Opera Academy. He has conducted operas like *La bohème* and *Carmen* and premiered *Le faucon* by Dmitry Bortniansky in 2024. From 2016 to 2021, Zhang was Concertmaster for The Orchestra Now and Bard Conservatory, collaborating with renowned conductors.

PERSONNEL

Violin I

Farangiz Takhirova**
Qingzhuo Li
Diya Dong
Hsin-Jen Yang
You-Jung Hsu
Runqi Weng
Leonid Tsoy
Xinying Hu
Jungmin Lee
Lyudmila Gofurova
Noah Walter
Alison Birmingham

Violin II

Chonghua Zuo*
Amy Chang
Yulin Zhou
Tadan Baartz-Bowman
Kieran Venugopal
Wang Liang
Layang Ka
Selin Samsar
Zenan Li
Dana Hardy
Mabel Ciske
Ashwin Innuganti

Viola

Qiongwen Zhang
Tirian Cooper
Xinye Xu
Yifei Wang
Endi Chen

Cello

Weigen Jiang*
Ruiyang Xie
Weian Gu
Cheng-Hung Chung
Jingyuan Zhang
Cheng-Lin Yu
Nolan Wiebenga
Jiayu Bai

Bass

Manyi Zhang *
Otto Krueger
Samuel Stover
Grace Kovacs
Parker Duncan

Flute

Ivana Chacon
Lizzy Meendering
Morgan Page

Oboe

Geoffrey Madge
Ari VanderLaan

Clarinet

Chang Shu
Jake Basil
Tingrui Zhang

Bassoon

Madeline Wilks
Rosalie Truback

Horn

Reed Fitzpatrick
Alexander Delperdang
Alden Leonard
Caden Dennie

Trumpet

Natalia Vela
Calvin Pfund
Evelyn Szilagyi

Trombone

David Grimes
Jordan Dove

Bass Trombone

John Danziger

Tuba

Brian Wiik

Percussion

Colin Chandler
Kayla Mears
Taryn Parry
Jonah Schertz
Klaire Thomas

Harp

Iris Ho Lin

Piano

Ruoyang (Rena) Wang

Assistant Conductors

Daniel Jaggars
Zongheng Zhang

Librarians

Aaron Longuski
Tadan Baartz-Bowman

***Denotes Concert
Master*

** Denotes Principal*

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- **Kevin and Amy Guskiewicz** (Alegría Navideña)
- **Hamilton-Dodson African Diaspora Endowment for the College of Music** (Musekiwa Chingodza, Oct. 2)
- **Lauren Harris** (Symphonic Dialogues; Celebrating the Spectrum)
- **Anne Hiller** (Celebrating the Spectrum)
- **Stanley and Selma Hollander Endowment for Chamber Music** (Gems for Cello)
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- **Hari Kern and the late Ralph R. Edminster, M.D.** (Votapek, Mar. 23)
- **Henry Kopek and Patricia Foreman** (Red Cedar Organ Series)
- **Michael and Paula Koppisch** (Votapek Piano Festival, Aug. 15-17; Spectrum Festival)
- **Lansing Chapter of the American Guild of Organists** (Organist Nicole Keller, Sept. 14; Organist Peter Sykes, Mar. 22)
- **Jill Canny and Robert Last** (MSU Federal Credit Union Jazz Artist in Residence, A. Cohen, April 18; Jazz Spectacular Finale Concert)

- Eleanor H. and Harold E. Leichenko Opera Endowment established by Lauren Julius Harris (Fall and Spring Opera)
- Ann, John and Abby Lindley (Alegría Navideña)
- Merritt Lutz (Celebrating the Spectrum)
- Joseph and Jeanne Maguire (A Jazzy Little Christmas)
- Marshall Music Co. (Symphonic Dialogues)
- Pat and Mary McPharlin (Jazz Infusion; Jazz: Spirituals Prayer and Protest)
- Friends of Jay D. Meetz (Fall Opera)
- Dr. Roy and Christine Meland (Four Seasons)
- Gordon E. Miracle (Four Seasons; Votapek, Mar. 23)
- MSU Federal Credit Union (Showcase Series; Spartan Spectacular; Celebrating the Spectrum; MSU Music on The Road in Detroit)
- George Orban and Rae Ramsdell (Jang/Moriarty, Feb. 8)
- Liz and Tony Raduazo (Pass a Good Time, Oct. 5; Sensory Friendly Spartan Concerts)
- Charles and Nancy Seebeck (Bagratuni, Mar. 16)
- Leonard and Sharon Tabaka (Jazz Spectacular Finale Concert)
- TechSmith (Celebrating the Spectrum)
- Dr. Robert W. Uphaus and Dr. Lois M. Rosen (Symphonic Dialogues; Four Seasons; Beethoven; Happy Birthday Mozart!; Yehuda/Warren, Jan. 29; Bagratuni, Mar. 16; and Bagratuni, Mar. 31)
- Linn Van Dyne and Mike Knox (Happy Birthday Mozart!)
- Barbara E. Wagner (Wagner Chamber Music Competition)
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3/23 Monday

Artist-Faculty and Guest Recital Series sponsored by WKAR

Schubert's Last Sonatas – Ralph Votapek, piano

Cook Recital Hall, 7:30 p.m. \$

3/25 Wednesday, 3/27 Friday, 3/28 Saturday, 7:00 p.m.

3/29 Sunday, 3:00 p.m.

Worthington Family Foundation Opera Theatre Season

Opera: Rossini and Puccini

Fairchild Theatre \$\$\$

3/26 Thursday

Artist-Faculty and Guest Recital Series sponsored by WKAR

Eriyans String Quartet

Cook Recital Hall, 7:30 p.m. \$

3/30 Monday

Artist-Faculty and Guest Recital Series sponsored by WKAR

Piano Etudes: A Musical Journey Through Time

Cook Recital Hall, 7:30 p.m. \$

3/31 Tuesday

Artist-Faculty and Guest Recital Series sponsored by WKAR

Bach Cello Suites

Alumni Chapel, 7:00 p.m. \$

4/2 Thursday

Viridis & Campus Choir

Fairchild Theatre, 7:30 p.m. \$

4/7 Tuesday

Mosaic & Singing Spartans

Fairchild Theatre, 7:30 p.m. \$

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music.msu.edu/events

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\$\$ \$19 Adults, \$17 Seniors, \$9 Students with ID and anyone under age 18.

\$\$\$ \$24 Adults, \$22 Seniors, \$14 Students and those under age 18.

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