

## Stockbridge Historical Society. Susan will be joined by double bassist David Heyes and soprano Sarah Poole, both traveling from the United Kingdom for the

This is part of our monthly series of interviews with musicians who perform in the Berkshires.

with several Boston-based chamber music groups.

concert, which is the final performance in a week-long series. Susan will be performing on the Karr Koussevitzky bass, once owned by Serge Koussevitzky, the Boston Symphony Orchestra musical director from 1924 to 1949. This year marks the 150th anniversary of Koussevitzky's birth and the 100th year since he joined the BSO. He played an important role in establishing Tanglewood, and the venue's Koussevitzky Shed is named in his honor. (See our sidebars on Koussevitzky and his connection to Tanglewood and the Karr Koussevitzky Bass). I had the opportunity to sit down with Susan over Zoom and learn about the concert, her music career, and this incredible opportunity to perform on this famous

Susan Hagen is the principal double bassist and a featured soloist of the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra, the first female ever to achieve this honor. In addition,

Susan has been the first call alternate bassist with both the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) and the Boston Pops Orchestra for the past 18 seasons. Susan has

performed in over 500 concerts with the BSO and more than 800 with the Boston Pops, as well as on multiple recordings with each orchestra. Susan also performs

On Saturday, April 27, Susan will perform a special concert, "Koussevitzky Connections," at the West Stockbridge Congregational Church, organized by the West

and historic instrument. The conversation has been lightly edited for clarity. You will perform a special concert titled "Koussevitzky Connections" at the West Stockbridge Congregational Church on April 27, sponsored by the West Stockbridge Historical Society. Can you tell our readers a little about the concert and what they can expect? The concert is in tribute to Serge Koussevitzky's 150th birthday. It also coincides with his 100-year anniversary of becoming conductor of the Boston Symphony, which is kind of a cool parallel. To me, it's just so significant to be able to play a concert out near Tanglewood because his presence is everywhere around there. We

Koussevitzky, each one is going to have some premieres.

curated a program called "Koussevitzky Connections," and we're doing a tour with 12 concerts. Each concert will be a little bit different because, in the spirit of

music that wouldn't have existed without him. We wanted to commission music for double bass, either solo or duo, and premiere it on this concert tour. We have saved six premieres for the concert in West Stockbridge – four of them are world premieres, and two others will be U.S. premieres. We felt like being near Koussevitzky and Tanglewood, we needed to do something extra special. The pieces are short. They're all melodic and beautiful. The nice thing is that if someone says, "That one's not my jam," you wait a couple of minutes, and it's over, and then there's gonna be something new. We received 20 new pieces that were commissioned for us, most of them for solo bass. So it's gonna be a really fun program. We are doing a piece by Giovanni Bottesini, who was a predecessor of Koussevitzky, and super influential

really excited!

and color to the concert.

Koussevitzky was the king of the commissions – he commissioned a ton of music for the Boston Symphony, including the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra. Great

happy to have pieces from some really great composers. Sidebar: Who is Serge Koussevitzky, and what is his connection to Tanglewood? Serge Koussevitzky (1874 – 1951) was a double bassist, conductor, and composer born in Russia but who emigrated to the United States in 1924 to become the musical director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Over the next 25 years, he was instrumental in building the BSO into one of the leading symphonies in the U.S.

Photo: NY Public Library

Have you played the Karr Koussevitzsky double bass before?

a great jazz musician can do and created this amazing electric bass part.

instrument. And it was magical! It was just so amazing!

only days after the recital, and again in public when she made the gift official."

instrument!

even lower."

Photo: International Society of Bassists

Koussevitzky's 150th birthday?

Do you feel Koussevitzky's presence when you play it?

right to get it to sing. But I do feel like the bass wants to sound great.

don't want anyone to get any ideas.

which is great. It's very difficult traveling with a bass.

thought I was going to die. And they took it back.

with you. Come on, pick an instrument."

hand it off to me.

people might recognize.

Is there a certain set of procedures and precautions associated with borrowing the bass?

Koussevitzky Music Shed."

Yes, I played it once before.

August 5, 1937.

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special.

- Susan Hagen

was so important year—we wanted to do it.

Koussevitzky composed over 30 works. He was also known as a publisher and commissioner of modern classical music. His publishing company, Éditions Russes de Musique, published works by Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, and Stravinsky, along with his own compositions. All royalties went to the composers. He commissioned over 400 works by composers such as Bartók, Bernstein, Copland, and Stravinsky. In 1936, Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra were invited to play a three-concert series in the Berkshires at Holmwood, an estate built by Margaret Emerson Vanderbilt, the widow of Alfred G. Vanderbilt. The

Fox Hollow resort and condominiums now sit on the site where Holmwood was located. After the successful 3-series

concert, Mrs. Gorham Brooks and Miss Mary Aspinwall Tappan offered Tanglewood, the Tappan family estate, as a

At the recital, Steve said to me, "The audience is either going to love it, or there's going to be a riot." I said

So I got to sneak away with the bass a couple of times for an hour because it's in very high demand at those

Koussevitzky was playing it, he wasn't playing it as an orchestral player, which has all the low low low

notes; he was playing it as a soloist, which is always the higher, more singing, more lyrical part of the

conventions. And I swear that bass wants to play Koussevitzky's music. You can tell that when

gift to Koussevitzky and the orchestra. Under a tent on the property, the first Tanglewood concert took place on

in the world of bass. And he was a favorite of Serge's. We thought it'd be nice to show the history of the

bass and do the piece by Bottesini, a couple of pieces by Koussevitzky, and then a bunch of pieces inspired

by Koussevitzky. It's a little bit of a tutorial and tracks the history of the bass, because we're expecting the

audiences are probably not all super knowledgeable about this crazy instrument that we play and love. I'm

David Heyes's wife, Sarah Poole, will be singing a few Russian songs that tie in really nicely with

Where did you get the funding to pay for the commissions?

couple of people asked for a little bit of money. We paid them out of our pockets. David and I pooled our money together to do that because we just felt that this

And what I think is also really cool is that we both know Gary Karr, who took ownership of the bass after it was given to him by Koussevitzky's widow, Olga (see

enticing for some of the composers to know that their music is going to be premiered in honor of Koussevitzky on his bass – it's kind of a cool thing. We are very

our sidebar on the Karr Koussevitzky Bass). Gary heard about this project, and he said, "You have to use the bass; you have to!" So I think that made it more

Koussevitzky. She's a soprano-highly trained, highly sought after, very well known in Europe-and we

We asked, "What can we pay you?" Many people said, "Nothing; we're happy to be involved in this." A

think it will be nice for people to have a break from listening down low to the bass. It adds another texture

to him, "I think Koussevitzky would love it because he loved new music. He loved making music modern, accessible, and popular. We are modernizing one of his pieces, and I just don't think he would have disliked that." We played it, and it was a big hit. When they heard that I was coming out to play Koussevitzky, Madeleine (Crouch, General Manager of the International Society of Bassists) got in touch with me and said, "Could we ask you to play it on the Karr Koussevitzy, and if you say yes, we'll pay for your hotel?" I was like, "Hold on a second. I get to play the

I was holding the bass thinking I have so much history in my hands right now. It was Koussevitzky's bass. Then Gary Karr played hundreds of concerts on it. It's a

printed on the page. So it's not just bass; it's doubly so because it's extra low. Also, for a long time, before the bass was invented, the cello was considered

responsible for the baseline. And then some crazy person came up with the idea for a bigger instrument that was even lower. And so it was doubling the baseline,

The double bass that Koussevitzky played is believed to be of French origin, c. 1800. After Koussevitzky's death in 1951, his widow Olga Koussevitzky kept the base

until 1962. She was invited to attend a recital by the acclaimed soloist Garr Karr at Town Hall in New York. Karr has written that "During the concert Mme.

Karr kept the bass for over forty years and then donated it to the International Society of Bassists (ISB), a non-profit that he founded. The ISB now loans the

historic instrument out to qualified members. I connected with Madeleine Crouch, General Manager of the International Society of Bassists, to learn more about

the process for loaning the bass out. Crouch said the bass is typically loaned out three to four times a year, usually for around a month at a time, often depending

to the collective history of this wonderful instrument."

How does it feel to you to be entrusted to play this famous and historical instrument, particularly in this most significant year of

It feels incredibly exciting, one of the biggest honors of my life, and a very, very large responsibility. I want to keep it safe. I want everyone to get a chance to hear

it and sound absolutely wonderful, which means I need to sound good on it. My heart starts racing when I think about the fact that I'm going to be able to play a

whole series of concerts using this bass. It's thoroughly exciting. I'm really feeling the heavy weight of responsibility at the same time, but not in a bad way.

Bass."

Koussevitzky saw the ghost of her husband embrace me, which she interpreted as a sign that I should be the recipient of his double bass. She presented it to me

bass, and you want to pay for my hotel?" Which was amazing.

Later that summer, heavy rain and thunder interrupted a performance. At the intermission, Miss Gertrude Robinson Smith, one of the festival's founders,

Stockbridge engineer Joseph Franz. The shed was inaugurated on August 4, 1938, and on its fiftieth anniversary in 1988, it was rededicated as "The Serge

appealed to raise funds for a permanent structure for the concert series. The architect Eliel Saarinen designed the structure, which was subsequently built by

In 2015, I was out at the International Society of Bassists convention to perform with my boss, Steve Bailey, from the Berklee College of Music, where I teach.

Steve is the very first six-string fretless electric bass player. He's super famous in the electric bass world. He was giving a recital at the convention and he was

piece together? Double Bass and electric bass?" And he said, "And wouldn't it be crazy if we did one of the Koussevitzky salon pieces?" So we did one called

playing with all the jazz greats, Rufus Reed, John Clayton, Victor Wooten, and others. And he looked at me and he said, "Wouldn't it be great if we could play a

"Chanson Triste," which is French for sad song. I played the bass part, and Steve took the piano accompaniment and didn't play it note for note – he did what only

legendary instrument, and I'm kind of giddy with excitement about being able to play on it again. We're going to have it for a little over a week. It's gonna be amazing. And I'm excited for people to get to hear the bass, and if anyone says, "You sound beautiful," I'm going to say, "Um, it's the bass." It's just such a magical Sidebar: History of the Karr Koussevitzky Double Bass Serge Koussevitzky played a number of instruments but was most known for playing the double bass, which is a large string

instrument also known as the upright bass, acoustic bass, contrabass, or simply the bass. In our interview, Susan Hagen told us,

"The reason why the classical world will oftentimes call it double bass is because what you hear is one octave lower than what's

on scheduling the mode of transportation to get the instrument to its next destination, by plane or by car. Crouch said that the farthest the bass has traveled on loan was to Trondheim, Norway, where ISB member and Trondheim Symphony Orchestra principal bassist Aaron Olguin performed the Koussevitzky concerto with his orchestra. Ogquin recently took second prize in the prestigious Sphinx competition, competing against all other string instruments. The bass has also been loaned to Alex Hanna, principal bassist of the

Crouch said, "The Karr Koussevitzky bass is simultaneously a link to the past and a bridge to the future, as

the gifted young artists of today, like Susan Hagen, who borrow it add their own particular brand of magic

One humous fact that Crouch shared is that "Back in the good old days when bassists could buy a bulkhead

seat for their instrument and fly in the seat next to it, Gary Karr would always order a meal for "Mr. D.

Chicago Symphony, and Nina Bernat, 2023 recipient of an Avery Fisher Career Grant.

in being a double bass player. I just feel like that connection is definitely very strong. Is it different from playing other bases? I read that it was harder to play than other double basses. It's just so different. The shape is very conducive to being able to get all around the fingerboard, which is

I'm not a person who goes around believing in ghosts or whatever. I don't know how to say this without

sounding completely insane. But when I was playing his music on his bass the last time, I almost felt like

he was guiding my hand to the right spots to get the notes in tune and to be able to phrase as beautifully as

I could. There is this legend about the spirit of Koussevitzky. People see his ghost at Saranac. And Olga

Koussevitzky saw him hugging Gary Karr. There are all these happy ghost stories, not creepy, scary ones.

But definitely the spirit of Koussevitzky lives on, and I do feel it attached to that bass. I don't know if it's

invested in that instrument. Before he came to America to become an orchestral conductor, his heart was

just that we all know the stories and so we just imagine it, or if it really, truly is that part of his soul is

How did you and David select the pieces that you're going to perform? Oh, my gosh, it took a lot of meetings! We meet every week online. The first provisionary list of pieces had about 40 different pieces on it. And so we had to narrow it down and weed it out. It's hard to say "No" to a piece, but we want to give a nice overview of some new music, some old music, and some music that

You've been performing as a bassist with the BSO for over 18 years now and have a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in double bass

I'm a little stubborn. I come from a musical family. Both of my parents are professional musicians, and my mom was a piano teacher. I started taking piano

When I was about three, when I was starting piano, they gave me a violin. I tried it. I think I played it for maybe two weeks. Finally, I came back to them, and I

Later on, both of my sisters had just joined the Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra, and they were just loving it. They said, "Oh, Susan, you've got to play

something that's in an orchestra. You're missing out. It's just so much fun. You get to go into Boston every week and meet kids who have something in common

After trying a few other instruments, I finally said to my parents, "I'd really like to play bass." There was

one in the house because my dad played electric bass and double bass in a band. They said, "Please play the

cello. It's so much smaller, and some people would say it's more lady-like." And people said, "Women don't

The first time I took my dad's bass, and I just played one note. I'm sure, in retrospect, it probably sounded

gross. But I remember those low tones, and I fell in love. This was like home. And that's why I believe that

everyone has an instrument that is for them. And if you're not loving what you play, then switch because it

I still play piano. I'll accompany my students, but I don't play at the level I used to do because I just don't

practice it as much as I wish I could. I still sing – like in the church choir and that type of thing. I don't

think I'm very good, but I enjoy it, and it's really fun. The bass, and any instrument really, is supposed to

play the bass." And that was it! That made me think, "I'll show you!" I was definitely a little stubborn.

said, "It hurts my ears. It hurts my head. It's not comfortable to hold. I don't like it." I know beginning violins are scratchy, but this was just so high-pitched that it

performance from Boston University. How did you first get into playing the double bass, and what drew you to the instrument?

lessons when I was three. Both of my sisters are older than I am, and they're both violinists-they started with the Suzuki method.

good. The size is a little bit smaller than some instruments and quite a bit smaller than my instrument. To put it in perspective, the length of the strings that I play

on my bass are 42 inches, which is three and a half feet of ground to cover. His string length is around 39. So that means if I have a distance of three or four inches

I'm not letting it out of my sight. At some of the places where we're playing, I haven't even told them that we will actually have the bass in our possession because I

We'll be keeping an eye on the bass at all times because we don't want anything to happen to it. And, of course, it needs to be transported in a certain way. It's

I was planning on driving it back to Michigan, where it's kept when it's not being played, but it seems like I'll actually be able to hand it off to the next person,

coming here from Los Angeles, and the person who has it is going to be flying with it to make sure it gets through luggage and all that stuff safely. He'll physically

from an A to a B on my bass, then on his bass, it's going to be maybe two and a half to three inches. So it takes an adjustment. And you've got to get the bow just

be an extension of your voice. So when I'm practicing, I'll be singing to see how I should phrase the music I'm playing. You mostly perform classical music, but do you enjoy or play other kinds of music? I basically stick with classical. But I play with the Boston Pops, and those concerts have some classical music, but there are jazzy and dance tunes and Broadway

songs. And I've played some Broadway shows that have come into Boston. Do I play jazz? I would say not well. I can teach it. At Berklee, some of my students are

jazz players, and they'll come to me with the jazz tunes they're working on. I'm really there as a classical player to teach the students technique, how to play in

tune, and how to avoid getting injured. They'll play their jazz or their bluegrass or their Americana or their folk for me, and as a musician, I can say, "Check that

phrasing," or, "How about adding this couple of other notes here?" or, "That's too many notes – let's weed it out," – that sort of thing. But I wouldn't say that I play

When I'm listening to classical music, it's like studying. I'm listening with a purpose. But like a lawyer probably doesn't read law books just for fun, I like to listen

I try to stay current. I want to know what's popular. I want to know what my students are listening to. I want to know what my friends my age who aren't classical

just might not be the right instrument for you.

Do you play other instruments?

You mentioned performing at Tanglewood. Do you recall what it felt like the first time you played at Tanglewood?

was so excited. I drove out the next morning, and I stayed the week. I couldn't believe that I was playing with the orchestra out at Tanglewood and it was just mind-boggling! I thought, "How did I get here? This is just so exciting." I play out at Tanglewood pretty much every summer – some summers, I play almost the whole season, some summers, I only play a concert or two; it just depends on the BSO's needs. But I always

He and his wife are going to land on a Thursday night, and we'll have all day Friday to rehearse. Then, on Saturday the 20th, we start performing. So we will hit the ground running. We already know each other's playing from listening to each other online, but I'm really excited to finally be performing together.

> somebody's wife had gone into labor, and they needed me out the next morning to play Ein Heldenleben, which is a Strauss tone poem and one of the most difficult double bass orchestral pieces. I'm looking at my stained hands, thinking, "How am I going to swing this?" I said, "Absolutely! Not a problem, I'll be there." I

Koussevitzky, it wouldn't exist. Well, maybe it would have – but without him, it may not be what it is today.

to be playing there and to be bringing this truly special program and sharing the double bass, and the Koussevitzky double bass. On our way to the concert, we plan to pay our respects. Koussevitzky is buried at The Church on the Hill in Lenox, and if the weather is good, we'll take the bass

Is there anything else that I did not ask that you'd like to share with our readers? out and play something for him and lay a bouquet of flowers on the grave. We just thought that would be a nice sign of respect because we're just going to be right

those genres well. And what kind of music do you like to listen to?

Tell us a bit about David Heyes, who is coming in from the United Kingdom. How long have you been playing with David? This will actually be our first time playing together. We have collaborated on lots of projects. I've commissioned music for him and from him. He's written a ton of music just as gifts for me. We have the podcast; we're great friends. But our friendship started in about 2019, and then we started meeting on Zoom at the beginning of the COVID lockdown. And we have a lot in common bass-wise and musically.

I do. I'll never forget it. The first time I performed at Tanglewood, I was a fellowship student there. It was a Brahms Symphony with Seiji Ozawa conducting, and it

was at the Ozawa music hall. Then that summer, we got to play the Rite of Spring at the Koussevitzky shed. As a kid, we would go to Tanglewood all the time, so it

wasn't a foreign place to me, but I was always a spectator. So when I was there as the fellowship student, I knew what hallowed musical ground I was walking on

Susan and her father, Roy Hagen

just of huge importance to me. But it was when I was a freelancer that I played there for the first time professionally. They called me just after I graduated from graduate school. I was in the middle of staining a big cabinet and had mint green

I am so excited to be playing this concert out in West Stockbridge. It's really an honor. David and I are both just beside ourselves with gratitude and are so happy

just delighted!

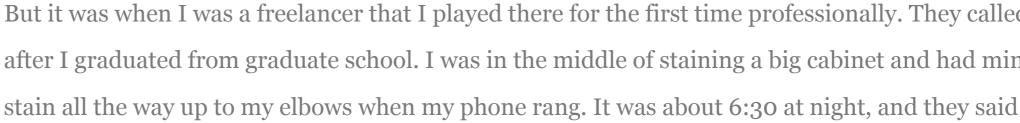
Learn more about Susan at www.susanphagen.com. Her podcast "Bass Talk with Hagen and Heyes" can be found here. You can also listen to her perform on

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there.

YouTube.





musicians are listening to. I want to be able to know the artists at the GRAMMY Awards. I'm kind of a sucker for a lot of the Top 40 music. I like Olivia Rodrigo. I like Miley Cyrus. I like Taylor Swift. She's great. My dad is a guitar player and electric bass player, and we have a duo, and we give a lot of recitals together. He and I always have a segment of what I call popular music, and our next one is going to have a Miley Cyrus song and a Taylor Swift song. I like to listen to all different types of music.

to other kinds of music for fun.

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love being out there. And it's never lost on me what a special, special place Tanglewood is. And without

And I'm really glad the West Stockbridge concert is at the end of the tour because I feel like everything else will have been leading up to this performance. We're

and how important it was. But to be performing, there was a whole other side of things and to be going backstage as a player, all those little, little things that were