Along with the overture and the symphony, the concerto is a much-loved part of the traditional orchestral concert program, an opportunity for a soloist to demonstrate feats of death-defying virtuosity. Repertoire from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries is weighted heavily toward violin and piano, and today soloists on these instruments still have full careers performing concertos by Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, and more. Other instruments get less of a look in—though cello concertos by Dvořák, Haydn, and Saint-Saëns are also favorites, and the flute, oboe, viola, double bass,
horn, and so on do get their occasional moments in the sun. But what about soloists who play really unconventional instruments?

These days virtuosity is not limited to traditional orchestral instruments, and it’s becoming more common to find programs featuring a mandolinist, accordionist, or even more rarefied instruments like a Theremin or gamelan. Take the ukulele. Hawaii-born Jake Shimabukuro is both ukulele soloist and composer, and if you haven’t heard him yet, you may soon. He plays everything from Hawaiian music to jazz, blues, bluegrass, folk, and classical music. He’s performed twice—in 2016 and 2019—with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, and has collaborated with the likes of Yo-Yo Ma. And speaking of Ma, this winter he played a new double concerto by Zhao Lin with Chinese pipa superstar Wu Man and the New York Philharmonic.

So, how does a harpsichord wind up on a concert program, versus a concerto featuring piano or violin? And how are virtuoso mandolinists or accordionists engineering their way into the concert hall? Recent concert programs include more pieces being written or commissioned for non-Western instruments, in what might be described as the “Silk Road” effect, after two decades of Yo-Yo Ma’s touring Silk Road Ensemble. Those tours gave added prominence to instruments including Galician bagpipes, Japanese shakuhachi, and the Chinese pipa, while Chris Thile has given added visibility to the mandolin through his solo and Punch Brothers tours and now as host of National Public Radio’s weekly “Live From Here” program. YouTube has allowed us to check out a whole smorgasbord of unusual instruments. Many of today’s new breed of virtuosos choose to overcome a small existing body of solo works by actively commissioning new ones. For composers always looking for new creative outlets, these new sound worlds are appealing, especially given the astonishing skill sets of this very special group of instrumentalists. With both orchestras and audiences becoming increasingly open to exploring new combinations, it seems like the right moment to look at careers of some of the people who play these less conventional instruments, and the composers creating new repertoire for them.

**Accordion**

Once the preserve of Parisian cafés and Russian folk bands, the accordion is making its way into concert halls, with a whole army of bright young instrumentalists on the scene. In 2017, Hanzhi Wang, a native of China, became the first accordionist on the Young Concert Artists’ roster in its 57-year history. Although the instrument was not introduced into China until 1926, where it was initially taught by Soviet Russian professors, nowadays the country reportedly boasts more accordionists than in all other countries combined. Wang’s preferred repertoire includes many contemporary composers, including Sofia Gubaidulina’s four concerti for accordion: two solo concerti, including the amazing Fachwerk (2009), a double concerto, and a triple concerto. “Gubaidulina’s very special sound-sphere seems to fit the accordion very well,” Wang says, going on to mention works for the instrument by Giya Kancheli, Krzysztof Penderecki, Darius Milhaud, Luciano Berio, and Per Nørgaard. “Plus, there are concerti from...
North America by R. Murray Shafer and Alan Hovhaness,” she adds.

Michael Stern, music director of the Kansas City Symphony and Tennessee’s IRIS Orchestra, first heard about Wang through Young Concert Artists. In an interview with Memphis’s KWAM Radio earlier this year, he emphasized that Wang’s artistry is “not like a novelty act—no, she is a musician through and through who happens to play this instrument and is elevating it to a different realm.” At her concert with IRIS Orchestra this February, Wang performed Bach’s Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826, Piazzolla’s *La Grand Tango* with violin, and Piazzolla’s *Ave Maria*. Which brings up the topic of transcriptions, also key to Wang’s training and career. “As an accordionist we do not have such a long history in classical music, but still must have the same academic knowledge as any classical musician,” she says. “To play Bach, Tchaikovsky, and Grieg is a very important learning process.” Stern says it was not difficult to attract audiences to hear this music. “First of all, she’s playing Bach and second, it’s such an immersive experience to hear her play.”

**The accordion is making its way into concert halls, with a whole army of bright young instrumentalists on the scene.**

Other accordionists of note include Bosnian Merima Ključo, who performed her own composition, *Sarajevo Haggadah: Music of the Book*, with CityMusic Cleveland in 2018; Latvian virtuoso Ksenija Sidorova, who in 2016 became the first accordionist to sign a recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon; and Scotland’s James Crabb, who gave the U.S. premiere of Sally Beamish’s double concerto for violin, accordion, and strings with California’s New Century Chamber Orchestra in November. Crabb so impressed composer Brett Dean that he wrote him an onstage accordion part in his 2017 opera *Hamlet* for the work’s performances at the Metropolitan Opera in the 2021-22 season.

**Electronic Wizardry**

A pair of 20th-century electronic innovations are the ondes Martenot and the Theremin. The ondes Martenot was invented in 1928 by Maurice Martenot, whose aim was to replicate the accidental sounds of military radio oscillators in an instrument with the expressivity of the cello. Its eerie tones are created by sliding a metal ring along a wire to create fluctuations in vacuum tubes (or via transistors in later models). Messiaen championed the instrument in his 1949 *Turangalîla Symphony*, as well as in a number of chamber works, while other composers...
who have fallen for the ondes include Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Edgard Varèse, Charles Koechlin, and André Jolivet. Its otherworldly sound has entered popular consciousness as a staple of horror and science fiction films, while rock artists like Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood and Damon Albarn (Blur, Gorillaz) have welcomed it into their soundworlds.

One of the foremost players of the ondes Martenot is Cynthia Millar, who was first asked to research the instrument by composer Elmer Bernstein, who used it in a number of his film scores, most famously in *Ghostbusters*, with Millar on ondes. “I was a pianist, and continued to play piano in his film scores when the ondes was not appropriate,” she says. Millar studied *Turangalîla* under the work's first ondiste, Jeanne Lorio (1928–2001), and it's still the piece she is asked to play most often. She has performed it more than 200 times, most recently this January with both the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Millar played ondes at the Met in 2017 as well. “Thomas Adès wrote the ondes part in *The Exterminating Angel* with me in mind,” she says. “It is a fabulous exploration of the outer reaches of the instrument.” The public seems to respond positively to its unique voice, especially when combined with pre-concert talks, also a Millar specialty. "It can produce bewitching sounds and audiences like to know how they are made," she explains.

An even less common instrument is the Theremin, named for its inventor, Soviet scientist Léon Theremin. The Theremin might be the only instrument that is played without physical contact. A pair of antennae respond to the relative position of the thereminist’s hands—which wave about in the air, one controlling frequency, the other volume—and the resulting electric signals are passed to a loudspeaker to create its slippery, ethereal sound. Although less common than the Ondes, composers from Bohuslav Martinů to Fazil Say have written for it, and most famously Percy Grainger used ensembles of four or six Theremins in his experimental Free Music compositions. A successful recent work is Finnish composer Kalevi Aho’s Concerto

The ondes Martenot, invented in 1928 by Maurice Martenot, aims to replicate the sounds of military radio oscillators with the expressivity of the cello. Messiaen championed the instrument in his 1949 *Turangalîla-Symphonie*.

for Theremin and Chamber Orchestra *Eight Seasons*, written for German thereminist Carolina Eyck in 2011.

**Mandolin**

The mandolin, the harpsichord, and the recorder may have been upstaged in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries by their louder cousins the guitar, the piano, and the flute, but all three are making concert hall comebacks of late. In the case of the mandolin, that means coming up with more repertoire than the ubiquitous Viv-aldi solo or two-mandolin concerti, and no one has been more tireless in creating new works for his instrument than Israeli mandolinist Avi Avital. “You can count the famous composers who wrote for mandolin

In April, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performed Amjad Ali Khan’s *Samaagam*, with the composer and his sarod-playing sons Amaan Ali Bangash and Ayaan Ali Bangash joining him as soloists.
on one hand,” he explains. “Vivaldi wrote a total of four pieces for mandolin—and just to illustrate, for the bassoon he wrote 36! Something needed to be done to change the course of history, so I decided to go to composers to convince them, to ask them, and to commission them to write for the mandolin.”

To date Avital has been the driving force behind over 100 new works. But for those unfamiliar with the mandolin, Avital usually suggests beginning a concert with Vivaldi to familiarize the audience with the instrument, and then moving on to one of his favorite contemporary works by Avner Dorman or Anna Clyne. “Two big concerti I have coming up are by Giovanni Solima, this year, and by Jennifer Higdon, next year, which will premiere in the States,” he says. “Jennifer was top of my list. I approached her a couple of years ago but the only time we could meet was 20 minutes in a train station in Philadelphia! There, in the station, I played five notes and she said, ‘OK, I have it. I’ll write you a concerto’.”

In November, Avital and Latvian accordionist Ksenija Sidorova premiered Monomachía, a double concerto by English composer Benjamin Wallfisch, with
Orpheus in May, it will be the first time in ten years I have been asked to play it.”

Esfahani has eclectic tastes. His favorite work is Czech composer Viktor Kalabis’s 1975 concerto, which he describes as “the single greatest thing written for harpsichord and orchestra,” and his list of must-hears includes concertos by Michael Nyman and Francisco Coll, the latter one of Esfahani’s own commissions, and Penderecki’s 1971 Partita, which also features two electric guitars. He’s also helped boost the recorder’s presence in the concert hall, collaborating with celebrated recordist Michel Petri in contemporary repertoire by Axel Borup-Jørgensen and Daniel Kidane.

The range and scale of recent concerts featuring unusual instruments would seem to suggest limitless possibilities. In February, Symphony Tacoma performed

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Dinuk Sijeratne’s 2011 tabla concerto, with tabla soloist Sandeep Das; the same month, the Symphony Orchestra of India performed tabla master Zakir Hussain’s Peshkar concerto while on tour in London, with the composer as soloist. Sitarist Anoushka Shankar has widely performed four sitar concertos by her father, Ravi Shankar, with orchestras including the London Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Lucerne Symphony, and Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. In April, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performed Amjad Ali Khan’s Samaagam: A Concerto for Sarod, Concertante Group, and String Orchestra, with the composer and his sarod-playing sons Amaan Ali Bangash and Ayaan Ali Bangash joining him as soloists. Other non-Western traditional instruments featured in recent or upcoming concerts include the Egyptian oud—Joseph Tawadros will perform his own oud concerto with Australia’s Sydney Symphony in June 2019—and the Argentinian bandoneón, featured in recent concerts by the Alabama Symphony Orchestra and the UC Davis Symphony Orchestra. Meanwhile, George Friedrich Haas’s Concerto Grosso No. 1, co-commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2017, features a quartet of alphorns. Concertos even exist for the Indigenous Australian didgeridoo, most famously one by composer Sean O’Boyle. The Balinese gamelan has been incorporated into works by Steve Reich, Philip Glass and Lou Harrison, and even Benjamin Franklin’s crazy glass harmonica is getting in on the act, with 20th-century works by Bernd Alois Zimmerman and Heinz Holliger as well as recent pieces by German composer Harald Genzmer and American Garry Eister.

With her 23-year Density 2036 project, Claire Chase is commissioning a series of works for solo flute—standard flute, plus its rarer cousins the bass flute (in photo) and contrabass flute—each year until the 100th anniversary of Edgard Varèse’s groundbreaking 1936 flute solo, Density 21.5.
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