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By [Scott Cantrell](#)

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Commentary: A different kind of musical warmth in an Austin Symphony concert

Conductor Peter Bay and pianist Anton Nel are clearly beloved figures there.



Pianist Anton Nel and music director Peter Bay take a bow after a concert with the Austin Symphony Orchestra at the Long Center for the Performing Arts in Austin on Feb. 10, 2024. (Scott Cantrell)

AUSTIN — I can't remember a symphony concert that felt quite like the one the Austin Symphony Orchestra played Feb. 10.

The 2,400-seat Dell Hall at the Long Center for the Performing Arts was packed for an unusual program including two choral works and a rarely played piano concerto. Even more unusual was the affectionate connection between the audience and music director Peter Bay and piano soloist Anton Nel. You could really feel it. What follows is not a review, but a personal reflection.

I speak of both conductor and pianist on first-name terms, as I've known them to some extent since all three of us were in Rochester, N.Y., in the late 1980s. Peter was assistant conductor of the Rochester Philharmonic, Anton a piano professor at the Eastman School of Music, I the music critic of the since-folded *Times-Union*.

Peter has been music director of the Austin Symphony since 1998 — a long stretch these days. Although he has guest conducted numerous other orchestras and led the summertime Britt Festival Orchestra in Oregon for 19 years, his only other main season position now is with the Arizona Philharmonic.

He's an emphatically resident conductor to a degree rare in this age of baton wavers jetting among appointments on several continents. He conducts pops as well as classical concerts, even Ballet Austin performances. _____

Anton, too, has been generous to Austin with his time and enthusiasms. A University of Texas piano professor since 2000, after an earlier stint in the 1980s, he performs regularly as a soloist and chamber music player, on harpsichord and fortepiano as well as “normal” Steinways. He has done piano programs and fundraising pitches on the local public radio station. He’s also in demand as a chamber musician and guest teacher on both east and west coasts.

Both these guys are as un-maestroish as you can imagine. They’re friendly, outgoing, eager and warm. Before the Feb. 10 concert, a thoroughly relaxed Peter spoke to the audience as if a good friend to everyone there. You could tell the audience adored him — and Anton.

[When I last heard the Austin Symphony, in 2015](#), it struck me as a good orchestra, but without the last bit of polish. What a difference nine years have made! This time, the orchestra sounded fantastic.

Major rhythmic challenges of Benjamin Britten’s Piano Concerto and Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms* were dispatched with razor-sharp precision, with especially impressive playing from brasses. Peter’s fastidious conducting wasted no motion, telling the musicians exactly what they needed and no more. If I wanted to study conducting, I’d go right to him. It’s a shame the Dallas Symphony hasn’t booked him as a guest since a one-off performance 30 years ago.

Having learned the Britten at Peter’s request, Anton supplied the required brilliance, but also coloristic marvels in more introspective passages. It was their 18th collaboration on a piano concerto, and their utter comfort with each other was unmistakable.

It was emblematic of Peter’s unassuming character that he had Ryan Heller, conductor of Chorus Austin, which performed the Bernstein and Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Serenade to Music*, conduct the concert-opening Barber *Adagio for Strings*. As Peter pointed out, chorus directors prepare singers for orchestra conductors to lead in concert; he figured turnabout was fair play.

The chorus did itself proud, especially in the tricky Bernstein, with particularly beautiful (but unidentified) soprano solos in the Vaughan Williams. Peter Jurski was the confident boy soprano in the Bernstein.

Back in Rochester, both Robert Palmer, then the critic of the other Rochester newspaper, and I admired the precision and natural musicality of Peter’s performances with the Rochester Philharmonic. Although I knew him only slightly, when word was out that I was moving to the Kansas City Star, Peter called to say how sorry he was that I was leaving.

I enjoyed meeting Anton at a party, but after that I’m not sure we ever said much more than “hi” at the occasional Rochester concert. I heard him play quite a lot, though: solo performances and chamber music. Fresh from winning the prestigious Naumburg Competition, he had a competition winner’s fastidious technique and good taste, if not the last bit of personality.

After moving to Dallas, I ran into Anton one day at DFW Airport, and was surprised to learn we both now were in Texas. We occasionally have a meal when he’s in Dallas.

The first time I heard him play again after many years was in a 2011 Dallas Winds concert. He brilliantly dispatched the Stravinsky Concerto for piano and winds, then played the Scriabin Nocturne for left hand with coloristic nuances scarcely imaginable with *two* hands. It was ravishing.

The next year, he joined violinist Anne Akiko Meyers and cellist Bion Tsang in a dazzling, elegant chamber music concert. He subsequently played Beethoven and Mozart concertos with the Dallas Symphony under former music director Jaap van Zweden. He’s booked to play Haydn’s D major Piano Concerto and Schumann’s Introduction and Allegro with the Dallas Chamber Symphony on April 30.

To maintain objectivity, critics need to be cautious about fraternizing with artists they may review. But it’s another world on the other side of the footlights, and I gain so much understanding in occasional lunches with musicians I respect. There can be fun gossip, too, although what’s off the record stays there.

So, yeah, I admire — and like — both these guys. As, clearly, does Austin.



[Scott Cantrell](#), Special Contributor. Former staff classical music critic Scott Cantrell continues contributing as a freelance writer on classical music and art. His classical music reporting is supported by the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation. The News makes all editorial decisions.