

MUSICAL DESTINATIONS

Saratoga Springs US

Brian Wise visits an old-world spa town where Copland and Bernstein once took inspiration, and where exciting developments are now afoot



For a Victorian-era resort town founded on the relaxing pleasures of mineral baths, Saratoga Springs, NY can certainly keep a visitor on the move.

Museum-goers alone can choose among venues devoted to contemporary visual art, classic automobiles, dance, children's activities and the local trade – horse racing. Hoof it down Broadway, the leafy central thoroughfare, and one can spend hours perusing small shops specialising in flamboyant hats, fancy food items, toys, cigars, golf-wear, and books (the latter category includes the labyrinthine Lyric Ballad Bookstore, containing some 100,000 titles). History buffs, meanwhile,

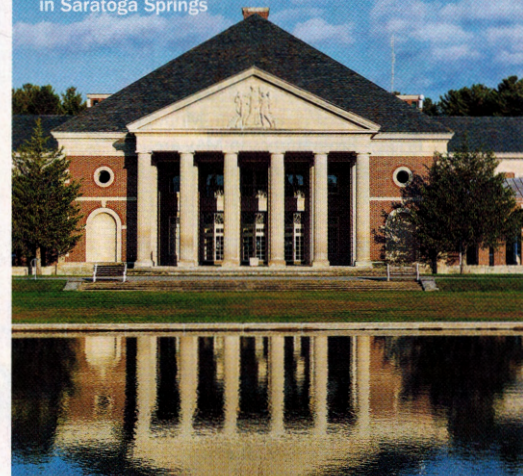
can spend a peaceful morning among the green hills of the Saratoga National Historical Park (the site of a pivotal Revolutionary War battle) and an afternoon at the Saratoga Springs History Museum, a former 19th-century casino that evokes an Edith Wharton novel.

The town, located some 200 miles north of New York City, draws hikers and architecture fans too, but its largest cultural attraction has remained curiously low on classical music lovers' radar screens. The Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC) gets some 85 per cent of its patrons from the immediate area, says Elizabeth Sobol, SPAC's president since 2016. 'Saratoga has

a problem in that people in the cultural sphere don't really know about the place,' she says over dinner at Salt and Char, a buzzing downtown restaurant. 'People go from all over the country or the world to the Berkshires. That doesn't happen here.'

Sobol refers to the neighbouring region of Massachusetts that is home to Tanglewood and other cultural meccas. But she maintains that Saratoga Springs has a greater concentration of attractions, and sits conveniently on a train line to Manhattan. 'Here I can walk to independent bookstores, jazz clubs, great restaurants – the Berkshires don't have that concentration.'

Historic splash:
the Roosevelt Baths
in Saratoga Springs



Roosevelt Baths & Spa Waters of Saratoga

Underground rock fissures caused naturally carbonated springs in the area, which companies have bottled and sold for decades. Today, a visitor can take a tasting tour (either guided or DIY) of the roughly 20 springs that gurgle up under downtown pavilions and in Saratoga Spa State Park. Or to sample it another way, enjoy an old-world soak at the 1935 Roosevelt Baths & Spa, which is a stone's throw away from the SPAC Amphitheater.

Across town, Yaddo, an artists' colony that counts Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland among its alumni, is renovating the 1893 mansion at the center of its 400-acre campus.

Still, Saratoga's history lies on the surface of its stately neighbourhoods, graced with stunning examples of Queen Anne, Greek Revival and Georgian architecture – all grand porticos, flamboyant gables and stained glass windows. After ogling the houses on elegant Circular Street and strolling through Congress Park, I climb to the third floor of the History Museum. Amid the overstuffed furniture, a blackjack table, and gambling paraphernalia, it is possible to imagine for a moment that it was 1870 all over again. 📍

Further information:

Saratoga Springs www.saratoga.com
SPAC spac.org
Universal Preservation Hall
www.universalpreservationhall.org

Beginners, please!
Yo-Yo Ma holds a cello
class at Saratoga's SPAC



The Saratoga Performing Arts Center opened in 1966, centered around a 5,200-seat amphitheatre tucked in a pine grove of Saratoga Spa State Park. Its first summer season featured the New York City Ballet, helmed by George Balanchine, and the Philadelphia Orchestra led by Eugene Ormandy (who was so annoyed by an adjacent waterfall that he ordered a damn to be built to quell the noise). Both organisations have anchored the two-month season ever since, joined by rock, pop and jazz performers. The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center began an annual residency in 2015.

While big-name soloists can still draw near-capacity crowds – as when, last August, Yo-Yo Ma performed Dvořák's Cello Concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra and conductor Marin Alsop – festival officials are trying entice newcomers. SPAC on Stage, a new series devoted to hybrid 'cross-genre' artists, is launched during my visit with a rollicking performance by the jazz band Hot Sardines, with musicians and 300 listeners all sat on the amphitheatre stage. Sobol wants to create a less generic, more intimate experience: 'If you're trying to get people excited about something, there has to be a sense of festivity and celebration.'

Teddy Foster, a director of Universal Preservation Hall, a Saratoga nonprofit arts venue, believes that SPAC is doing more to build ties among local cultural groups. 'SPAC used to be very much the castle on the hill', she said. 'That's quickly changing.'

SPAC was founded as an urban renewal project to revitalise the faded spa district. Indeed, the town's rise and

fall was dramatic. It was settled by Native Americans who believed that the area's natural springs had therapeutic properties. Then came the European settlers in the late 1700s, followed by bathhouses, luxury hotels, the Saratoga Race Course (founded in 1863), casinos, speakeasies and jazz clubs. A new railroad carried influential and scandalous figures from New York City seeking sinful good times. Saratoga's gilded-age heyday came crashing down

'SPAC used to be very much the castle on the hill. That's quickly changing'

after World War II, as the famed gambling houses were shut down and at least two grand hotels were demolished. Meanwhile, public interest in the 'healing' properties of mineral spas declined after the discovery of the polio vaccine. By the 1960s, many of Saratoga's crumbling mansions had become seedy boarding houses.

Today, there's a feeling that another cultural renewal is afoot. Universal Preservation Hall, a former 1871 Methodist church, is being transformed into a 700-seat concert venue and community centre, expected to open in 2019. Further uptown is the sleek Arthur Zankel Music Center on the campus of Skidmore College, which from June 4-18 will host the inaugural Mostly Modern Festival, a contemporary music festival and teaching institute.