

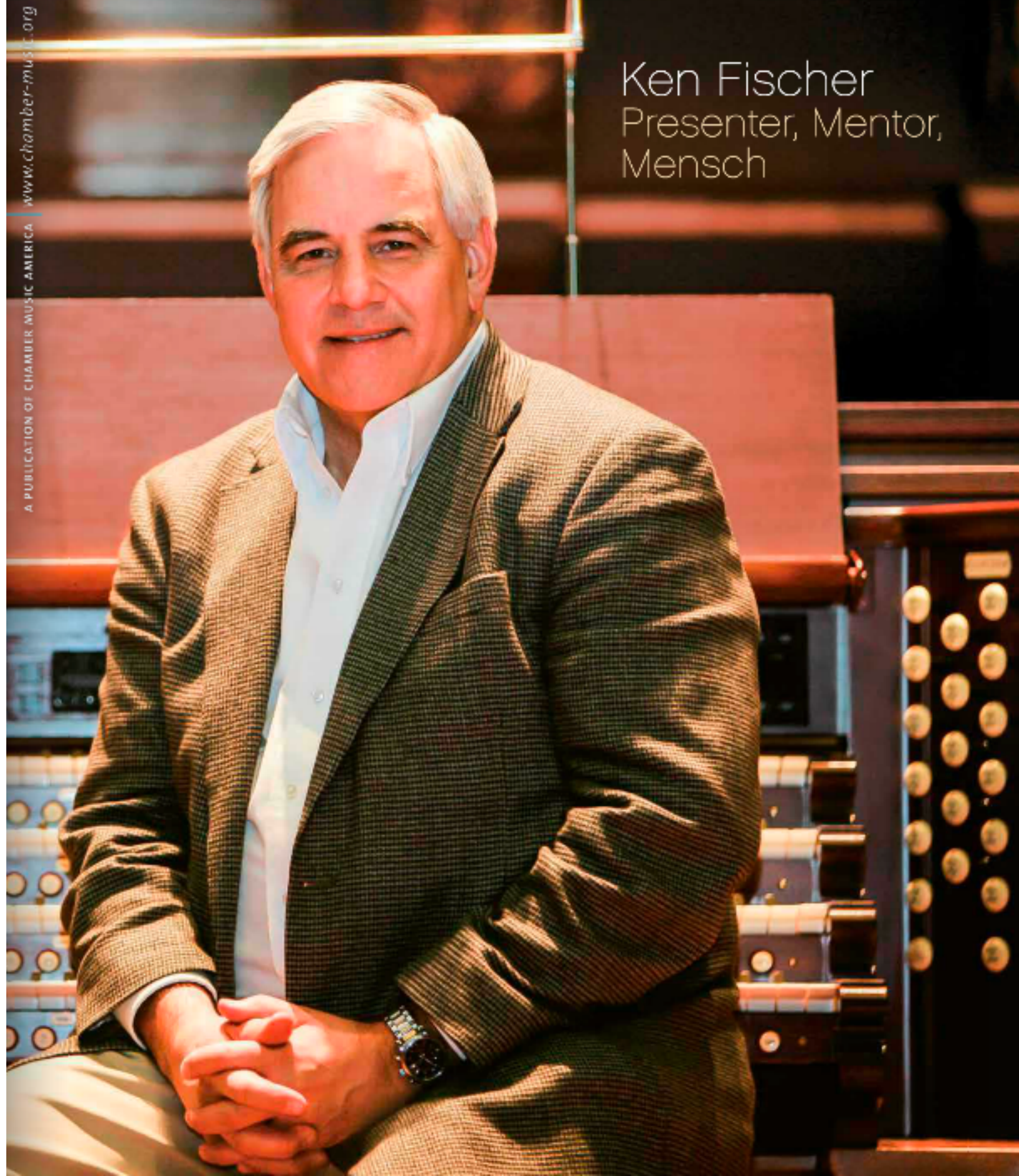
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At just about every turn, The Playground Ensemble flouts classical music world convention. The self-presenting Denver-based, new-music group, founded in 2006, proclaims its maverick status most obviously through its repertoire, which consists solely of music from this century and forward-looking pieces from the last one, with a generous helping of commissions and premieres, many of them featuring the work of area composers. But it isn't just the music that's unusual; it's the way it's offered: the ensemble's founder and director, composer Conrad Kehn, has found that the best way to reach an audience is to ignore custom.

The time-honored ritual of breaks between sets, with performers treading off and on to acknowledge applause, has no place in a Playground concert. "We like pieces back-to-back," Kehn says. The necessary gear for the whole concert—from laptop stands to percussion sets—sits onstage for the whole concert; as the musicians move from one to another, it seems like they're indeed romping through a playground.

Kehn has also discovered that the standard practice of pulling together unrelated pieces to form a concert program is less effective at attracting audiences and media attention than arranging each evening around a unifying theme. "Instead of building concerts, we're building *events*," he says. This season, Playground presents concerts built around two modernist classics: Louis Andriessen's *Worker's Union* and George Crumb's *Black Angels*. The season ends with the tenth iteration of a concert that has become a Playground tradition: "CoCoCo"—the Colorado Composer's Concert.

Local composers send in pieces for possible inclusion in the concert and over the seasons the concerts have included almost ninety works by sixty different composers. In recent years, Kehn reports, the field has become "hypercompetitive," with 30 to 40 works submitted annually, fed by a growing composers' community in the area. "The mountains and the outdoors make this a good place to be creative," Kehn says. The ensemble awards a commission to at least one of the composers in the concert, for a

work to be performed the following season.

Playground reserves a place in its "CoCoCo" concerts for a piece by a K–12-age composer, and earlier in the season presents "Youth CoCoCo": a concert made up entirely of works by students. These endeavors grow out of the ensemble's educational outreach program, "Young Composers Playground," inspired by Jon Deak's Very Young Composers initiative with the New York Philharmonic. It's a typically innovative Playground project, in which students compose music to accompany stories they've written themselves. The musicians come in to demonstrate instruments, then later in the process help the kids get their compositions into notation. The students control the music content. "I don't know why you would go into a school that's seventy percent Latino and tell them Brahms is the thing they need to know," says Kehn. "What we're telling them is 'male, female, LGBT, black, white — you can do this.' It gives students creative power and a real experience." ■ playgroundensemble.com



Watch the Playground Ensemble perform at www.chamber-music.org/extras

Iconoclasts



Playground Ensemble