

# ARTS & LIVING



Designer Carley Brandaux explains the logistics of a dress she is making for a performance by violinist Melissa White through Chicago Sinfonietta at her home in Chicago. White will reveal the cocoon-to-butterfly dress section by section during her May 14 and 16 performances. **ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

## Can fashion be part of classical music?

At the Chicago Sinfonietta concert, a violinist's dress will transform onstage

By Hannah Edgar  
For Chicago Tribune

Melissa White has lost count of how many times she's performed with the Chicago Sinfonietta. Founder Paul Freeman took her under his wing when she was a precocious preteen violinist, her mom driving her all the way from Lansing, Michigan, to the Music Institute of Chicago for lessons.

Now, she's a founding violinist in the Harlem Quartet, a professor at New York University and a former winner of the esteemed Sphinx Competition whose performances take her around the globe.

On May 14 and 16, she'll return to her old stomping grounds for the Sinfonietta's "Limitless Horizon" event to play "The Butterfly Lovers," a 1959 violin concerto cowritten by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao that became an



Designer Carley Brandaux works on a piece of a dress.

early touchstone of traditional Chinese and European classical stylistic fusion.

"It's like coming back with family to perform," White says of the Sinfonietta.

Except there's a twist. White will perform the concerto in a dress specially designed for the occasion by local artist Carley Brandaux. Like a splitting chrysalis — or like the star-crossed Butterfly Lovers who transform into butterflies at the folktale's end — the garment changes shape as the concerto goes on.

Brandaux got on the Sinfonietta's radar after she won a Luminarts grant in 2018 for her graduate studio work at the School of the Art Institute. There, she studied with renowned artist Nick Cave, the subject of an MCA retrospective opening the same day as the Sinfonietta concert. Before moving to Chicago from North Carolina, Brandaux specialized in sculpture but found her calling designing pieces for the human form, starting with coiled, wearable wood artworks.

"This is kind of a dream commission for me. And I wanted it to change a lot through the performance," Brandaux says.

Her dress design for White sources a unique linen and rayon blend crafted to her specifications at The Weaving Mill in Humboldt Park, run by textile artist Emily Winter.

"I choose these greens, these yellows, these browns, and put them on the loom, then she helped me come up with this weave structure that allowed us to play with gradients," Brandaux says, showing off scraps in her Irving Park studio.

Stitched to the other side of the blend — and what the audience only spots gradually at first — is hand-painted silk. The colors and pattern evoke the orange-and-tawny wings of the American Painted Lady, a butterfly native to the Chicago metro area.

Unless you're a bug nerd, you've probably mistaken the American Painted Lady for the more recognizable Monarch, at least at a quick glance. That's a rookie move Brandaux won't be making any time soon, thanks to the hours of lepidopterological study she put into the Sinfonietta commission.

"Now, when I'm out and about, I'm able to recognize different butterflies because of this research," she says.

White says the idea for the perfor-

**Turn to Music**, Page 10

*"I choose these greens, these yellows, these browns, and put them on the loom, then she helped me come up with this weave structure that allowed us to play with gradients."*

— Artist Carley Brandaux



Cassidy Slaughter-Mason (Lissette) and Christopher Wayland (Peter) in "The Luckiest" at Raven Theatre. **MICHAEL BROSILOV**

### IN PERFORMANCE

## A powerful reminder of human mortality

'Luckiest' probes friendship amid one's fight for life

By Chris Jones  
Chicago Tribune

You might think a play about a young woman receiving a terminal medical diagnosis would make for grim viewing. But, in fact, a trio of excellent and defiantly unsentimental performances make playwright Melissa Ross' "The Luckiest," now at Raven Theatre, live up to the implications of its title.

Performed on an almost bare

stage and superbly directed by Cody Estle, the show continues the current renaissance at Raven, which plies its trade in a former supermarket on Chicago's Far North Side. Strange as it may seem, the piece would make a great date night out.

The core of the show is the superb work of Cassidy Slaughter-Mason, who plays Lissette. Lissette has a gay best friend Peter, played by Christopher Wayland, and much of the play probes their friendship, as continually stressed by Lissette's diagnosis. Slaughter-Mason's work

**Turn to Luckiest**, Page 10



## Music

from Page 8

mance was practically fully formed when music director Mei-Ann Chen pitched it to her during the Sinfonietta's 2019 gala. But, of course, the project's pupal stage turned out longer than expected.

"It was originally meant to happen in 2020, then we tried to do it again last season," White chuckles. "Third time's the charm."

By coincidence, the Sinfonietta's deferred concert arrives just weeks after a Guardian column last month that criticized classical music's usually monkish approach to fashion. Author Leah Broad's argument that a soloist's garb can — and even ought to — be considered part of their performance sparked a spirited debate among classical music fans. Soprano Rachel Nicholls' subsequent letter to the editor criticized Broad's *cri de coeur* for unduly burdening women, who, unlike men, lack the luxury of a default option. (See: tuxes and black suits.)

Regardless of gender, a number of prominent soloists have gone public with their collaborations with designers. Leif Ove Andnes — who served double-duty as pianist and conductor in Chicago



Designer Carley Brandeaux explains the logistics of a dress she is making for a performance by violinist Melissa White through Chicago Sinfonietta at her home on Monday in Chicago. ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Symphony programs last month when director Riccardo Muti contracted COVID-19 — is a noted sucker for Issey Miyake suits. Animated by her own youthful passion for classical music, designer Jenny Lai crafts what she calls "performance wear" for stars like violinists Jennifer Koh and Leila Josefowicz,

bass-baritone Davóne Tines and flutist Claire Chase. Perhaps most distinctively, Vivienne Westwood has been pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet's exclusive clothier for 20 years.

Next weekend's concerts will mark the first time White will wear a bespoke garment onstage. Even so, she says she often ties her

attire to her solo programs, if the shoe fits (pardon the expression). Recently, in a streamed concert with the Albany Symphony, she performed George Tsontakis' Violin Concerto No. 2 in a sleek cobalt gown, selected for its resemblance to the deep blue of the Greek flag.

"I thought it would be

perfect to wear this blue for a piece by an (American-born) Greek composer who's very strong in his identity. And when I do Mozart, I envision a full skirt," White says. "I think about the piece I'm performing as well as what experience I would want the audience to be having while they're watching me

play it on stage."

But this time, that creative vision is all Brandeaux's. White heads back to Chicago for her fourth and final fitting this week, at which point the two will finalize the flow of the dress's transformations — four so far, and counting.

"I want her to run wild with what she has in mind. I'm open for anything," White says.

Anything, you say? Looking over the dress in her studio, Brandeaux pats a stubborn ruffle of fabric at its flank. "I think I might add some sort of cape, actually."

"Limitless Horizon" also includes the world premieres of Michelle Isaac's "Moshe's Dream" and Derrick Skye's "To Be A Horizon." 8 p.m. May 14 at North Central College's Wentz Concert Hall, 171 E. Chicago Ave, Naperville, tickets \$17-\$62; 7:30 p.m. May 16 at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave., tickets \$17-\$101 at (312) 284-1554 and [chicago-sinfonietta.org/horizon/](http://chicago-sinfonietta.org/horizon/)

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## Luckiest

from Page 8

here is characterized by a series of bold, exuberant choices, invariably working against the obvious. And since the play, really, is all about a fight for life, that is highly effective.

Wayland, a regular on Chicago's smaller stages, has an almost cypher-like quality as an actor, the kind of baked-in kindness that (in this play, at least) makes you pull for this friendship. Add in Tara Mallen, playing a gruff Bostonian version of Lisette's mom, and you have a trio of nuanced, deeply honest perfor-

mances.

I've seen a lot of plays in my time about people discovering the mortality. This one is far better than most at exploring how we always find ways to carry on in such circumstances, how gentleness eases all of our transitions, whatever they might be, and how badly we need those that love us. This is a show about flawed but fundamentally decent people doing their best in difficult circumstances. We all can relate. "The Luckiest" is a most touching 90 minutes.

"The Luckiest" plays through June 19 at Raven Theatre, 6157 N. Clark St.,

running time about 90 minutes; tickets \$40 at 773-338-2177 and [raventheatre.com](http://raventheatre.com).

## 'Last Hermanos' at A Red Orchid Theatre

Meanwhile, some 7 miles south at A Red Orchid Theatre in Old Town, a much more action-oriented and thoroughly dystopian drama is on the boards. Here, too, you'll find strong acting from the trio of Esteban Andres Cruz, Chris Sheard and, especially, the fiery Roberto Jay.

The premise of "Last Hermanos" by the Chicago-based Exal Iraheta is

that it has become illegal to be in the United States of America as Latinx. We're at the remotely monitored border between the United States and Mexico and two brothers, played by Jay and Cruz, are waiting for someone, even as they avoid drones and other hazards. After a while, a mysterious third character shows up and one of the questions of the play is whether this character is an ally to the two brothers or someone out to destroy them.

As directed by Ismael Lara Jr. in this intimate theater, it's a tense affair that doesn't want to let the audience know too much, too quickly. I'd argue it goes

too far in that intentional obliqueness, given the play's simultaneous desire to be an action-oriented thriller requiring investment in plot. But if you stay with it, the payoff comes.

This level of physical action is tough to pull off in so small a space and only some of what transpires here is fully believable, partly because the show needs more internal shading and contrasts, rather than getting so stuck on the same constant level, which ends up diluting the play's ideological and dramatic impact. But the acting and the writing bespeak of considerable talent and,

especially in the case of Cruz, a beating heart. Here, too, you have characters probing resilient bonds in very different life-or-death circumstances of a whole other nature. So the shows are very different, but both are worth a look.

"Last Hermanos" plays through June 12 at A Red Orchid Theatre, 1531 N. Wells St., running time about 90 minutes; tickets \$30-\$40 at 312-943-8722 and [aredorchidtheatre.org](http://aredorchidtheatre.org).

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