THE MAN TO CALL WHEN YOU NEED A CIMBALOM. (A WHAT?) Chester Englander is a big name in a small world: he is playing

NEW KID DEPT.

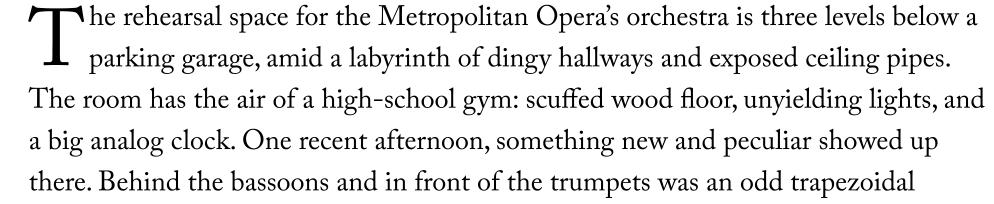
the cimbalom, a jumbo hammered dulcimer that resembles an inside-out piano, in John Adams's "Antony and Cleopatra" at the Met. By Jane Bua May 5, 2025

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Illustration by João Fazenda



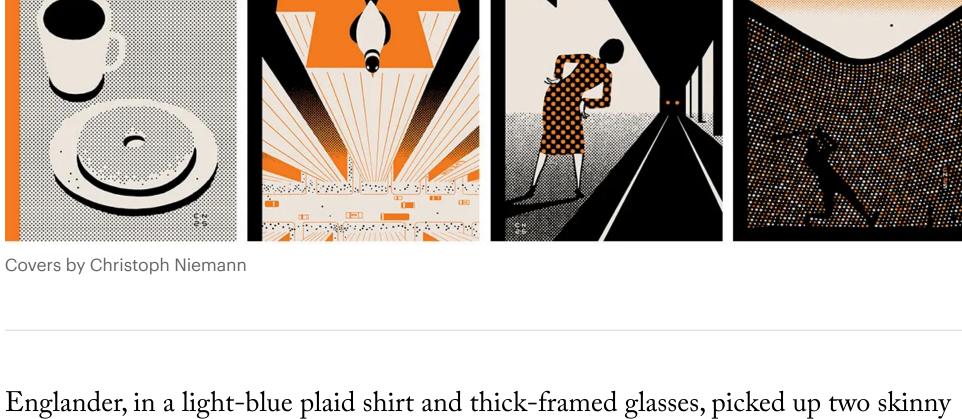
object, reminiscent of a baccarat table, its surface strung with strings like the innards of a piano laid bare. "I don't know that the cimbalom has ever been used here before," Chester Englander, the instrument's owner and player, said, as musicians filed into the room. They were

about to rehearse "Antony and Cleopatra," the opera composed by John Adams, which is making its Met début. A trombone burped; trumpets sputtered; violins squawked. New York: A Centenary Issue









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(He uses medical tape and sewing thread.) Two additional pairs sat at the ready on a dish towel to his left. The cimbalom, which weighs a hundred and eighty pounds, had been shipped by a freight company to New York from Englander's home in Nashville. It is one of three that he owns. Get The New Yorker's daily newsletter Keep up with everything we offer, plus exclusives available only to newsletter readers, directly in your in-box.

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wooden sticks with white ends like pussy willows—hammers that he uses to hit the

cimbalom's hundred and thirty-three strings. "I wrap the cotton tips myself," he said.

Englander, who is forty-eight years old, is a big name in a small world. It is estimated that there are fewer than twenty professional cimbalom players in the United States;

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conservatory in America offers formal study; either you learn from a Hungarian or you teach yourself.

Englander could think of only five (including himself) who play in orchestras. The

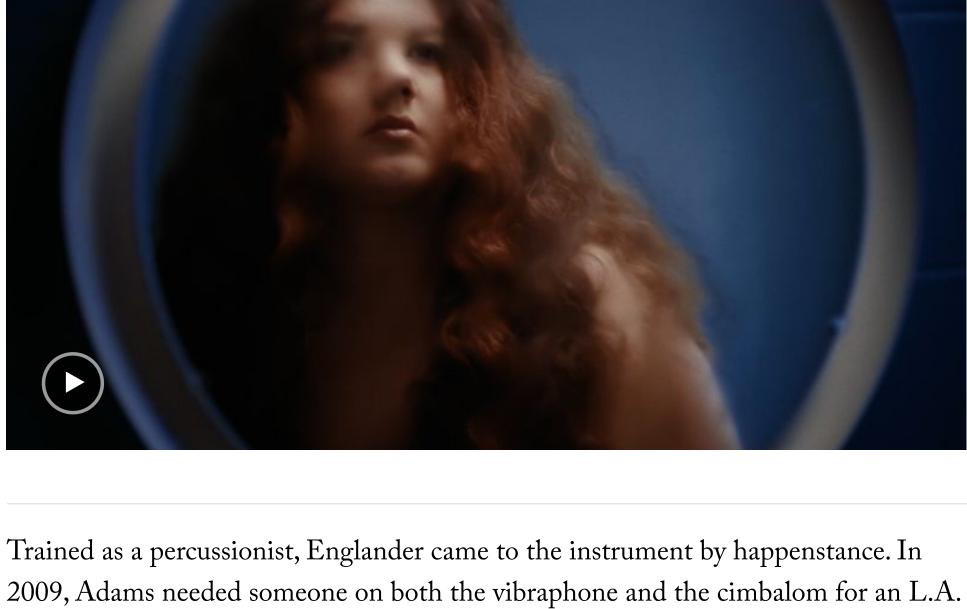
modern cimbalom, which is basically a jumbo hammered dulcimer, was created in

1874, in Budapest, which is where the world's best cimbaloms are still made. No

scale, so a half step between notes can necessitate a giant leap across the instrument. Unlike with a piano, notes can increase in pitch from right to left. Some strings even have three different notes each. (Englander does all the tuning himself.) There's a single foot pedal, which controls two damper bars. At the Met rehearsal, Englander worked the pedal with his right foot, which was shod in a running sneaker and a sock imprinted with a U.F.O. abducting a cow. Adams, the composer, came over to take a look at the instrument. "The way it's

The cimbalom is, in fact, often the instrument of choice to accompany sinister characters—its tinny flourishes can be heard, for example, in Howard Shore's

played the whole cycle at least twice in concert," Englander said. "That's three movies VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER Arrested for Singing While Female, in "My Orange Garden"



Philharmonic performance of "The Yellow Shark," by Frank Zappa. "There was nobody in greater Los Angeles who could play the cimbalom and count rests," he said. Englander already knew the vibraphone, and Adams asked if he would take on the cimbalom, too. He'd never tried it before, but he was game. After spending a few weeks teaching himself the basics, Englander made his cimbalom début, starting a partnership with Adams that has continued for more than fifteen years. "I love the sound," Adams said. "It's like adding a certain kind of spice to a dish." Adams conducts the orchestra for "Antony and Cleopatra" himself. Seated at a red

came to a series of rests and turned the page of his score to see what was next: more rests. He held the hammers in his left hand like ill-placed chopsticks. Adams called on the orchestra to jump to Act I, Scene 1. No cimbalom there, so

Englander cooled his heels, occasionally scrolling on his phone to pass the time. A half hour went by, then forty minutes. Finally, Adams instructed the players to switch to another scene. Englander spun his pages. The section started with several bars of cimbalom, in prominent fortissimo. Englander locked in with focus, hitting the strings as if he were playing Whac-A-Mole. His mouth was tightly closed, quivering as he attacked the notes. Then—

few." ♦ Published in the print edition of the May 12 & 19, 2025, issue, with the headline "Hammered."

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Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.

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organized is absolutely insane," he said. "It must've been made by Dracula." soundtrack for the "Lord of the Rings" movies when Gollum pops up onscreen. "I've each."

Englander took the latter path—a herculean feat. The cimbalom is no tambourine; operating it is anything but intuitive. Its layout doesn't follow a regular chromatic

velvet podium, he told the rehearsal room's occupants to turn to Act II, Scene 4—a particularly dramatic moment for Cleopatra. (As Englander put it, "You can tell things are evolving badly for her.") On cue, bright, metallic outbursts rang from the cimbalom, winning the approving nod of a nearby French-horn player. Englander

eleven measures of rest. The orchestra would soon be rehearsing upstairs in the opera house, bringing Englander into the Met pit for the first time. "This is definitely one of the pantheon ensembles I've ever played with," he said. "Once you get to the top, there's only a

Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff who covers classical music for

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rock bio-pic.

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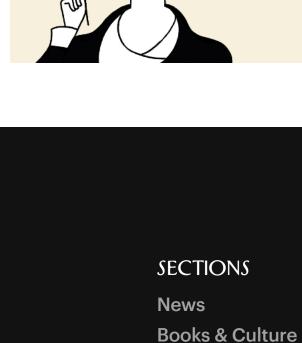
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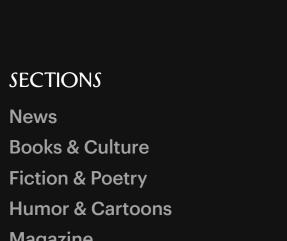
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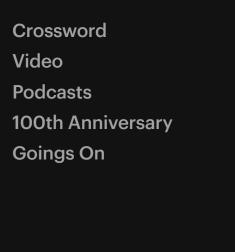
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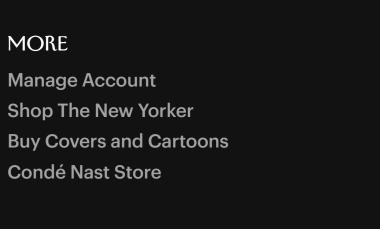
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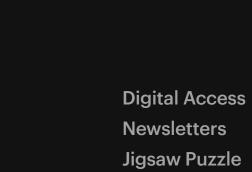
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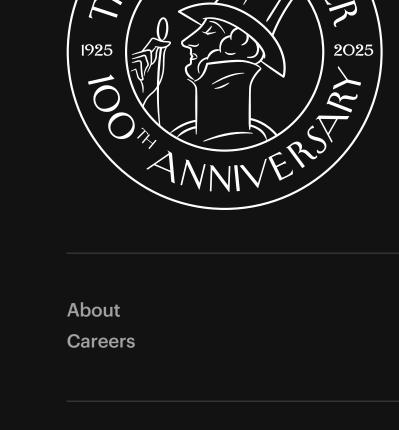
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