The first movement of Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto ended, and Carnegie Hall erupted in applause. Joshua Bell, whose dazzling solos and severe good looks had fired the crowd, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it theatrically across his brow. The audience remained enthralled, but Alex Ross ’90, sitting in the critic’s traditional perch halfway up the left aisle, jotted down his thoughts in a small black notebook.

Ross was less interested in Bell than in how conductor Kent Nagano was molding his new group, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Already, Ross heard hints of Nagano’s signature sound: a cool, elegant balance. But the concerto itself, he noted during the intermission, wasn’t quite together. “Bell performed very brilliantly. But I didn’t feel he and Nagano and the orchestra were totally in sync,” Ross said. “Bell seemed to be in his own world a bit, and the orchestra was a little eeeehhh...” He made a nervous motion with his hands, as if someone were trying to hand him a small, rambunctious animal.

Ross wasn’t planning to review the concert for the New Yorker, where he is a staff critic. He simply wanted to keep up with a favorite conductor and hear the American premiere of a piece by Unsuk Chin, a Korean composer whose opera he had reviewed favorably the previous summer. “Absolutely essential to my mission as a critic is talking about living composers,” he said. “It wouldn’t be interesting to me to spend all my time evaluating the right way to play Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. I enjoy writing that kind of column, but the greatest excitement is when works come into being.”

Ross’s approach is both thorough and adventorous. He once spent three months listening to Mozart’s complete works (180 CDs) for a single essay, but he’s just as likely to seek out music that breaches the pop/classical divide. In recognition of his eclectic and exacting criticism, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers has honored him twice, and his book, The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the...
The performers spend their days engaged in playing or singing, rehearsing, preparing concerts, perfecting their techniques, developing their interpretations, making recordings, teaching their students, living the active lives of professional music-makers. Their habitats are practice rooms, studios, and concert halls...[T]hey rarely have time to pursue historical or critical issues behind the works. Their job is to bring music to life in performance and to interpret it well. They are deeply engaged in the practical tasks of preparing performances down to the last detail.

The scholars spend their days thinking, reading, listening, writing essays or books, teaching classes or seminars, preparing lectures, studying in libraries or in their private studies, living the contemplative lives of historians or critics. A few scholars work regularly with performers and many are themselves skilled amateur performers who understand the art and craft of music-making. In fact many members of the two groups know more about each other and their domains than might generally be supposed, though their paths rarely cross in public.

Still, if the history of this invisible city is indeed inscribed upon it, that history can be discovered in its concert halls, its schools of music, its practice rooms, its university and high-school classrooms, its music libraries, and its lecture halls. It is imprinted on the memories, imaginations, hearts, voices, and hands of all as denizens of one city.

This book attempts to link musical scholarship and performance.
Anthologizing Yourself
Mary Jo Salter keeps her own (and others’) poetry alive.

After squeezing nearly 1,000 years of creativity into the Norton Anthology of Poetry, Mary Jo Salter ’76 began the smaller but still consuming task of anthologizing her own verse. The result, A Phone Call to the Future, revives selected poems from her previous books and introduces a handful of new ones. Her editing for W.W. Norton, where she sometimes had to whittle entire careers down to no more than a poem or two, helped her take a long view. “Anytime I was beginning to feel sorry for myself,” she remembers, “I thought, ‘You know, if you’re lucky and you do get into posterity, you won’t have nearly this many poems in front of readers.’”

A Phone Call to the Future begins with her newest poems. Two appeared in The Best American Poetry series: the title work and “Costanza Bonarelli,” an unnerving but expertly crafted meditation on a sculpture by Gianlorenzo Bernini. (After chiseling a bust of his mistress, Bernini sent a razor-wielding servant to do much the same to her face; rumor had it she was sleeping with the artist’s brother, too.) Salter then guides her readers from her first book, Henry Purcell in Japan (1985), to her most recent, Open Shutters (2003). Along the way she visits a Kyoto hospital, rides in a hot-air balloon that she likens to a fire-breathing dragon, and winds up accidentally seated across the aisle from her former psychiatrist at a family restaurant. “Inevitably, with poetry, older books go