

OJAI MUSIC FESTIVAL

Eclectic Affinities: The Ojai Festival

It began with a place, a setting of idyllic seclusion, once sacred ground for the Chumash Indians, later a home to farmers and ranchers, then artists, writers, actors, and eccentrics, the wealthy in search of rusticity, the spiritual in search of enlightenment, retirees in search of peace. But Ojai is no self-contained Shangri-La, no valley community gated by its natural walls. For that its spirit is too open, its residents too eager to share the magic of their home, and above all too inquisitive to cut their ties to the outside world. In Ojai the horizon draws one's gaze beyond oneself, upward, over and past the hills that surround it.

John Bauer, a well-traveled and experienced arts administrator with a flair for fund-raising, discovered Ojai in 1936 and founded the Ojai Festival in 1947. His original plan was grand: eight week-long festivals featuring all the arts, a festival playhouse, an outdoor amphitheater, international stars. Bauer had a kind of pocket-sized Salzburg in mind, but few of his initial dreams were ever realized. Ojai struggled, a summer-long plan collapsed into three weeks, three weeks into two, and by 1949 it had become a single long week-end. But what had happened in the meantime was pure magic; a festival had found its soul.

That soul is music, sometimes bold, sometimes whimsical, but seldom conventional and always an eclectic mix of new and often very old performed by musicians eager to break out of the concert routine and connect with colleagues for whom *Art* means discovery. From the start the Ojai Music Festival had an ad hoc feel that has remained its birthright. Generous donors, an overworked staff, an army of volunteers, hospitable home-owners, all working together for a few days of giddy exhilaration in which artists and audiences are thrown together in an intimate and informal setting unlike any in the world.

In the early years most concerts were held in Nordhoff (now Matilija) auditorium, but as of 1952 they began the move to Libbey Park, where a stage was constructed in 1954. By 1960 seats, benches, a shell, and night-time lighting were added (although it would be another two decades before artists got dressing rooms and plumbing). In 1952 Lawrence Morton, then still a music critic, was not impressed "by the waving of branches in the breeze, the movement of clouds, the flickering of sunlight on the lawn, or the spiders crawling up a neighbor's sleeve." "I love nature as much as the next fellow," he growled, "but I take it straight; and I like my music straight." Too late now. Ojai is famous for its Cagean intrusions - trains (when they still ran) and traffic, barking dogs, rhapsodic birds and power tools. Not ideal, perhaps, but who would change it? Brush by scruffy bark, squirm on intractable benches, curse that you forgot your hat, but here the tangible reminders of physical inconvenience melt away in a place where a breeze and a musical phrase become one.

During his tenure as Managing Director John Bauer contented himself with administrative and fund-raising duties, entrusting the programming to conductor Thor Johnson. Although Johnson flew in from Cincinnati most of the Festival's players and soloists were drawn from nearby Los Angeles, with notable outside guests, including Martial Singher, the Juilliard String Quartet, Lili Kraus, and Vera Zorina. The ties with Los Angeles grew even stronger in 1954 when Bauer was succeeded by Lawrence Morton. Morton, who was also the director of the Monday Evening Concerts at the Los Angeles Country Museum, changed his job description to Artistic Director and for the next thirty-some years, whether in that position or behind the scenes, he guided the Ojai Music Festival to become the major showcase for contemporary music that it is today. His secret was selecting a strong music director for each season, usually a composer, but often an adventurous conductor. During his tenure, Ojai became a second home for Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, Ingolf Dahl, and Pierre Boulez, and a launching pad for the conducting careers of Robert Craft, Michael

Tilson Thomas, Calvin Simmons, and Kent Nagano. Other composers who have been music directors or guests "in residence" have included John Adams, Milton Babbitt, Luciano Berio, Elliott Carter, Peter Maxwell Davies, John Harbison, Mauricio Kagel, Magnus Lindberg, Olivier Messiaen, Stephen "Lucky" Mosko, Gunther Schuller, and Mark Anthony Turnage.

Over six decades there have been experiments, pendulum swings (including an ill-fated year of pops entertainment, after which music director Lukas Foss oversaw three of the wildest years in Ojai history), competing visions and agendas, tensions with donors and patrons, and budget battles that have resulted in "lean years" of reduced resources. There was jazz, third stream, and electronic music in the sixties and seventies, world music in the seventies and eighties, echoes of political discontent during the War in Vietnam, forays into classical and modern dance, and an on-going flirtation with semi-staged music theater, including Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale*.

In 1970 the Los Angeles Philharmonic made the first of many Festival appearances and since then, budget permitting, other orchestras have followed, including the Lyon Opera Orchestra, New World Symphony, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Other distinguished guests have included the Kronos and Emerson String Quartets, the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, the Gregg Smith Singers, and world class soloists too numerous to name.

Since Lawrence Morton's death in 1987 the Festival's spiritual continuity was assured under the leadership of Jeanette O'Conner (1988-1991), Ara Guzelimian (1992-1998), and Ernest Fleischmann (1999-2003). They have reinvigorated Morton's formula, with highlights including appearances by Pierre Boulez, Sir Simon Rattle, and Esa-Pekka Salonen, and an emphasis on high modernism. In more recent years Thomas W. Morris had placed a renewed focus on the Festival's eclectic roots, adding early music and expanding the relationships with ever more new artists.

Ojai would not be what it is without its sounding board - its audience. It is a loyal, sophisticated, and sometimes hyper-critical crowd whose interlocking memories form a chain of generational experiences that are shared in casual encounters throughout the weekend. Ojai is a place where even performers linger on, melt into the crowd, or gather around the old timers - often past Festival participants - who inevitably grumble about the programming (too tame!). Pre-concert talks, in which composers and performers often take part, lectures and free-wheeling symposia encourage spirited dialogue in which all participate, not to mention a year-round commitment to education - from its family concerts to *BRAVO!*, an award-winning K-12 music education program in the Ojai Valley region.

Sixty years on, it is unlikely John Bauer would be disappointed with how the Ojai Music Festival has evolved. While still somewhat ad hoc, un-slick and rustic, it still inspires wonder that there is such glorious music in this enchanted place.

-- Christopher Hailey