

Smart and provocative, Ojai delivers a compelling modernist weekend

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It says something about the natural splendor of the Ojai Valley, north of Los Angeles, that it served for a view of Shangri-La in Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon*, although the 1938 film couldn't capture the olfactory allure of the valley's orange blossoms.

Those who attend the short but intense Ojai Music Festival last weekend didn't have a lot of free time to enjoy natural wonders yet one is built into the experience: concerts take place in the Libbey Bowl, an outdoor venue shaded by sycamore and oak trees. Concerts are never rained out.

What makes the festival artistically special is that it has a new music director every year. "It's a great system," said the British composer George Benjamin, the music director of the 2010 festival. "A dictator comes in and then gets thrown out." The situation is actually not as volatile as it might seem, since the festival also has an artistic director, Tom Morris, now in his seventh season. And it has history going for it too, having endured for 64 years.

The idea is to pick a captivating musician and let him or her run with it. The music director is as often as not a performer (Benjamin is also an accomplished conductor). But an unwritten requirement is an involvement with the music of today. Ojai is not technically a contemporary music festival, but it seems like one, especially this year with Benjamin—a potent force in new music not well known in America—as the self-described dictator whose musical persona set the rules.

Represented in the programming were a mentor (Messiaen), great influential figures (Schoenberg, Stravinsky) and students (Saed Haddad and Steve Potter, both promising), as well as repertoire segments that count among his special favorites: Indian ragas, Henry Purcell's fantasias for viols, and music by the rock icon Frank Zappa. It all supplied brilliant context for Benjamin's own work, which was amply represented. And doing yeoman work for half of the festival's eight concerts was the estimable Frankfurt-based Ensemble Modern, in their West Coast debut.

Fittingly, pride of place went to the brief but potent *Into the Little Hill*, the first operatic effort by the 50-year-old Benjamin. It is less than 40 minutes long (shorter even than *Trial by Jury*) but makes for an absorbing retelling of the Pied Piper story. Obviously aware of the pitfalls of writing a traditional narrative opera, Benjamin divided the vocal duties between two singers (soprano and mezzo) giving them multiple roles in the story-telling. Cleverly, he chose a subject the audience would already be conversant with, and Martin Crimp's libretto gave it arresting twists. Among these are having the daughter of the politician (known as the Stranger), who engages the piper to exterminate the rats, be sympathetic to their plight. With arresting performances by Anu Komsu, who is capable of ascending to stratospheric heights, and the vividly communicative Hilary Summers, the opera built to an engrossing climax, as the mother of the politician, who reneged on his deal, holds a dialogue with their lost daughter, now, like the town's other children, irrevocably consigned to a subterranean dwelling place.

Benjamin's music in *Into the Little Hill* and elsewhere is bitingly modernistic, lacking elements of Post-Romanticism, Minimalism or other stylistic traits thought to heighten "accessibility." You could sense where he came from by the music he programmed, like Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op 16 (in the chamber version) or Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques*, which he conducted with scrupulous clarity, as he did for his opera, programmed on the same concert with Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat*. The latter was offered in its suite form, thereby happily ridding the music of the unhappily grim tale that inspired it.

Benjamin's link to Frank Zappa came via the Ensemble Modern, which performed Zappa's music in a Frankfurt concert shortly before his premature death in 1993. Now very much a cult figure, Zappa had a creative drive that infused the rock idiom with stylistic refinements, even sometimes dispensing with it entirely, all exemplified by an ebullient concert led by Brad Lubman. Zappa also showed a capacity for humor in his *Welcome to the United States*, a remarkably prescient piece about the bureaucratic hassles attendant to this country's visitors, which found the Ensemble Modern's excellent pianist Hermann Kretzschmar in an unusual speaking role. Excerpts from *The Yellow Shark* and *Greggery Peccary & Other Persuasions* framed two brief works by Varèse, including *Density 21.5* played expertly by flutist Dietmar Wiesner. Ultimately, one's ability to appreciate the essential Zappa will rest on one's ability to appreciate its rock-music trappings; my point of satiety was reached prior to the end of the concert.

An even greater departure from the European mainstream was signaled by half of a morning concert that paired Indian ragas with Purcell viol fantasias. The improvisatory ragas were played with concentrated intensity by Aashish Khan on the multi-stringed sarode and Javad Ali Butah, in virtuosic form on the tabla, a type of drums. Amidst so much music foreign to the Classical music listener's normal fare, Purcell's fantasias—some 12 of them—came as something of a balm, not that they are encountered on an everyday basis. The expertly wrought counterpoint, spiked by the composer's celebrated dissonant "cross-relations" proved endlessly absorbing and was articulated fluently and with impeccable intonation by Wildcat Viols, a quartet of four women.

By the final concert, which included works by Ligeti, Boulez, Knussen and Messiaen, again, under Benjamin's leadership, you really had a feeling for what makes this notable composer tick. His *Viola, Viola* proved to be a tour de force in extracting sonoric riches from two violas, which otherwise might seem to be a rather forlorn pair. And his four-movement *At First Light* displayed the kind growlings from low-pitched instruments—also heard in Ligeti's *Chamber Concerto*—that contributed to the menacing tone of *Into the Little Hill*. It's all part of the mind-expanding experience that keeps drawing people to Ojai.