

Ojai Music Festival, California

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With a span of only four days, the [Ojai Music Festival](#) might look like a blip on the festival circuit, an event notable as much for the natural beauty of its Ojai Valley setting, north of Los Angeles, as for its breadth of offerings. But appearances can be deceptive, and those who came for the duration of the festival were enriched in a way that selective dips into festivals of greater scope would have difficulty matching.

Ojai's success stems from its modus operandi. Each year it subjects the musical persona of a contemporary musician to intense scrutiny in events overseen by that musician, who serves as music director. "It's a great system," says the British composer George Benjamin, music director of the 2010 festival. "A dictator comes in and then gets thrown out." But the festival doesn't rebuild its administration every year. It has an artistic director, Thomas W. Morris, whose seventh festival was held last weekend, as well as a 64-year history documenting how things are done. Pierre Boulez has been music director seven times.

The choice of Benjamin was astute. Much admired at home and in Europe, he is less well known in America, but his participation ensured the high proportion of new music on which Ojai thrives. "We see new music as an appropriate vantage point for looking at music of the past," says Morris, although this year there was relatively little music of the past.

More often, the music director will be a performer, not a composer – though Benjamin, an accomplished conductor, is both. But strong new-music credentials are a job requirement. The festival capitalises on the area's beauty and obliging climate by holding performances in the Libbey Bowl, an outdoor venue shaded by sycamore and oak trees.

The concerts had an appealing overall shape this year, starting with a programme of works that, one guessed, represented general influences on Benjamin – Elliott Carter's Oboe Quartet, Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op 16* (in the chamber version) – and concluding with composers closer to him both personally and stylistically, including his teacher Messiaen (*Oiseaux exotiques*). Benjamin, who is 50, conducted these framing concerts scrupulously. In between came his 40-minute opera *Into the Little Hill* and repertoire segments for which he has special fondness: Indian ragas, Henry Purcell's fantasias for viols, and music by the rock musician Frank Zappa. Doing yeoman work for four of the festival's eight concerts was the outstanding Frankfurt-based Ensemble Modern.

Into the Little Hill is an absorbing retelling of the Pied Piper story. Aware of the pitfalls of traditional narrative opera, Benjamin employs just two singers (soprano and mezzo) but they interact tellingly by assuming multiple roles in the story-telling, with Martin Crimp's libretto giving the story a contemporary edge. Benjamin says he imagined people sitting around a campfire, so the outdoor setting of this concert performance proved most apt.

With arresting turns by Anu Komsı, whose stratospheric vocal leaps were stunning, and the vividly communicative Hilary Summers, the opera built to a engrossing climax as a mother communicated with her lost daughter, irrevocably consigned, like the town's other children, to a subterranean home. Benjamin's work is biting modernistic, lacking elements of post-Romanticism or minimalism or smatterings of tonality common in new American music. Sonorities tend to be complex, yet the music has an emotional restraint, refusing to acquire tunefulness even for the lure of the piper's music.

Benjamin's link to Zappa came via the Ensemble Modern, which, according to Zappa himself, performed his music with unparalleled precision. A cult figure, Zappa, who died in 1993, infused rock with musical invention, sometimes transcending the idiom entirely. Excerpts from *The Yellow Shark* and *Greggery Peccary & Other Persuasions* framed two brief works by Edgard Varèse, a Zappa favourite, in a bracing concert led by Brad Lubman. Some listeners, though, might have found the rock-music context tiresome over the long haul.

Programmes of Indian ragas signalled another departure from the European mainstream. Aashish Khan played them with concentrated intensity on the multi-stringed sarode, with Javad Ali Butah in virtuosic form on the tabla. More than a little of this improvisatory genre rubbed off on Benjamin, who displayed his own talent by accompanying Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent film *Vampyr* late one night.

Purcell's fantasias – some 12 of them – came as a balm. Their expertly wrought counterpoint, spiked by dissonant “cross-relations”, proved endlessly absorbing. I wrote “wild harmonies” in my notes before observing that the performing ensemble was called Wildcat Viols, an expert quartet.

The final concert mixed works by Benjamin and kindred composers. Oliver Knussen's *Requiem – Songs for Sue*, a setting of diverse poems about loss sung by soprano Komsı, proved to be a lyrically ingratiating elegy to Knussen's late wife. Benjamin's *Viola, Viola* extracted riches from a seemingly paltry source: two violas. And his four-movement *At First Light* displayed the kind of low-pitched growlings – also heard in Ligeti's Chamber Concerto – that made *Into the Little Hill* sound menacing. In sum, you went away with a feeling for what makes this composer tick.

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