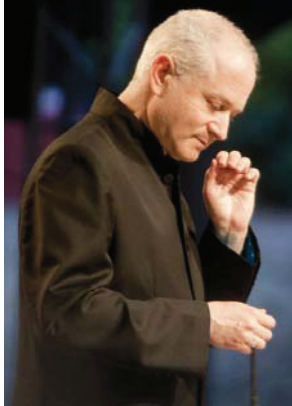


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Music review: Ojai Music Festival when it's 64

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-- Mark Swed



Ojai, remarkably, remains Ojai. The 64th [Ojai Music Festival](#) was held over the weekend. The beloved, unstable Libbey Bowl was no less ratty, its uneven wood benches no more comfortable than before. The valley's light looked illuminated, as is its wont, from heaven. Local ice cream, tangerines and olive oil lived up to their reputations.

The music challenged just like it always has, none of it to everyone's taste. The Ojai faithful – an audience prized for its open minds and congeniality – proved ever faithful.

Nonetheless, nothing lasts forever, and Ojai, long a haven of Eastern spirituality, surely must understand the embrace of impermanence. The 53-year-old Bowl, no longer structurally tenable, will be razed the first day of summer and a new one designed by Ojai architect David Bury with modern facilities will open next June.

This year's festival did not break new ground so much as rearrange the old ground. British composer George Benjamin visited the valley for the first time as music director, but he is as if born to the Ojai tradition. [Ensemble Modern](#) from Frankfurt, Germany, was the resident band. As one of Europe's most admired new music groups, it too fit right in, despite the surprising fact that the 30-year-old ensemble was making its West Coast debut.

Benjamin proved a gentle and gentlemanly presence, a refined, generous musician of many sides. He began the festival with recent pieces by two of his students (Saed Haddad and Steve Potter) at Kings College in London; their odd, unsettling works showed little of his own influence. A devotee of Indian thought and music, Benjamin brought in the consummate sarode player, Aashish Kahn, for morning, noon and late night ragas. A film buff and superb pianist, the composer improvised an accompaniment to a DVD screening in the Ojai Theatre of the 1932 classic "Vampyr," by Danish director Carl T. Dreyer.

A student of Messiaen, Benjamin included a Saturday morning performance by Eric Huebner of the French composer's 130-minute cycle, "Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant-Jésus," and Benjamin conducted Messiaen's "Oiseaux Exotiques" Sunday afternoon. He indulged his love for the viola and Purcell with the latter's Fantasias for viols (performed by Wildcat Viols) and by his own "Viola, Viola" for two players. He acknowledged Stravinsky's history with the festival, as well as Boulez's. He threw in Schoenberg, Carter and Ligeti for good measure, Frank Zappa for some other kind of measure. Oliver Knussen's "Requiem – Songs for Sue," was a radiant, apt tribute to Sue Knussen, a former education director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

But the festival will be mainly remembered for the West Coast premiere of Benjamin's first and so far only opera, "Into the Little Hill," which was given in a concert performance Saturday night. A condensed, modernized version of the Pied Piper story, the chamber opera is modest in scope. It lasts less than 40

minutes and was written for soprano and mezzo-soprano, who must be narrators, crowd, children, the Minister and his wife. The rats, scurrying and perhaps a bit too vividly imagined for a park performance, are left to 15 musicians.

With an elusive and singable libretto by British playwright Martin Crimp, “Into the Little Hill” deals with the way hidden fears can be desires and the other way around. Exterminate the rats (kill them: they bite, they steal, they foul our property and take our jobs) and you destroy our environment, our future. Written for soprano Anu Komsí, mezzo Hilary Summers and Ensemble Modern, each singer and player is soloist and part of something larger. Komsí and Summers changed character with animated suddenness. Benjamin’s score gets under the skin. Shadowy instruments – bass flute, contrabass clarinet, two bass horns, mandolin, banjo, double bass – were made to sound weirdly light and insubstantial. In diamond-like mysterious instrumental phrases, the sinister turned ethereal then mystical. A small masterpiece, the opera benefits from no staging, its meanings too many for a single point of view. Benjamin’s accompaniment of “Vampyr,” while equally dark and mysterious, was his other side. He turned the film soundtrack off and let the Liszt flow, creating creepy mood, much color, engrossing big climaxes and, I would imagine, big smiles in the dark room.

The festival’s other highlight was Kahn’s three raga hours. The first, on Thursday, led up to the midnight hour in the Bowl. The air was cold; the night sky dark; the raga -- accompanied by a young, flashy,



spectacular tabla player, Javad Ali Butah – a somber meditation. Saturday afternoon, Kahn and Butah played on a lawn behind the town arcade for happy families basking in the sun and passersby. Sunday morning, a mellow and magisterial raga followed the moody, understated Purcell fantasias (dull to me but special to some).

This year’s new voices were Haddad and Potter. The former’s “Le Contredésir” intriguingly mixes Middle Eastern melody with Western Modernism. Potter’s “Paradigms” confused me, being a vaguely insulting parody (at least I hope it was a parody) of a past avant-garde.

Ensemble Modern is an amazing collection of soloists, but a very German one. Carter’s Oboe Quartet, for instance, was playful but not, in an American sense, robust. Benjamin led dazzling accounts of Ligeti’s Chamber Concerto. Boulez’s “Mémoriale” (with Dietmar Wiesner as the cool flute soloist) and of Messiaen’s “Oiseaux Exotiques”) with Ueli Wiget as piano soloist). It took, however, Huebner’s lighter touch and sense of color in his Saturday morning Messiaen to actually get a response from Ojai’s aviary community.

But each is a new year, and the next one will be a new dawn. The remade Libbey Bowl will be ushered in by soprano [Dawn Upshaw](#) as music director, with participation by Peter Sellars, the Australian Chamber Orchestra and jazz composer [Maria Schneider](#).