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The famous **Ojai Music Festival**, held yearly in the homonymous town of Southern California, boasts a 63-year-long tradition and a list of musical directors of the greatest available prestige and lasts four full days (10-13 June this year). In keeping with artistic director **Thomas Morris'** vision, every year brings a new musical director to the festival, and with them a different vision, performers and featured composers.

This year's king for a day was British composer **George Benjamin**, who brought with him his composing, conducting and programming talents as well as his beloved **Ensemble Modern** (easily one



of Europe's top new music ensembles), on their first visit to the West Coast. Featured composers were Messiaen (Benjamin's teacher and life-long mentor), Ligeti, Schoenberg, Knussen, Carter (a cameo appearance), Stravinsky, Benjamin himself and Frank Zappa. (If you've just done a double-take on that last name, you are not alone: more on this below).

The first day was the least momentous, its evening concert providing an understated beginning to the Festival. As if to underline the preparatory nature of the evening, Benjamin held back a

full display of the Ensemble Modern by programming chamber pieces (by Elliot Carter and two of Benjamin's current students) and the rare, eleven-instrument reduction of Schoenberg's Op. 16 Orchestral Pieces.

It takes courage to open a world-renowned festival with the unapologetically sharp idiom of emerging talent such as **Saed Haddad** and **Steve Potter**. But the taking of the risk paid off handsomely in both cases. Indeed, the high point of the concert was the wicked wit of Potter's *Paradigms*, a song cycle for piano and mezzo, which the composer chose to present via a quick anthology of five songs (some of them mere snippets). Aside from the shortest pieces (some vocal hissing and the dampened lower octaves of the piano entitled 'three part Sinfonia', a cabaret-style ten-second snippet entitled 'l'ennui') the fulcrum of the mini cycle was Potter's setting of Ferlinghetti 'what could she say to the fantastic foolybear'.

We got a taste of the breadth of Potter's palette in his setting of Ferlinghetti's wryly ironic poem about the psychedelic bewilderment of a young woman following sexual initiation. Mezzo soprano **Hilary Summers'** part is full of grunts, gags and gasps shadowed by a piano that balances nervous quicksilver with a tongue-in-cheek call to order in the guise of an aggressive falling sixth in the lower register. This is music with an undeniable punch, whose razor edge was unmatched by the somewhat labored instrumental writing of Carter's oboe quartet. Despite the quality of both performance and score, Schoenberg's reduction of his op. 16 lost much of its eerie halo (and its resonant bass) to the dodecahonic quest for musical hygiene of which the instrumentation was surely a symptom.

Friday brought with it a sea change: hundreds of Zappa fans descended on Ojai for a morning symposium and an evening concert. The shift was remarkable, the new audience a far cry from the seasoned contemporary-music consumers that make up the typical Ojai audience. The clash between popular and elite culture highlighted both the sinew of Zappa's artistic personality and the vagaries of his legacy: caught between art-composer ambitions and success as a rock star, leaving few scores but many unnotated compositions recorded on his medium of choice (the synclavier, a type of ante-litteram synthesizer).

Contemporary music aficionados feel obliged to sit through interminable quarter hours without so much as batting an eyelid; by contrast, the enthusiasm of the Zappa audience was immediately striking. Then again, the two Varèse pieces at the centre of the programme were greeted with obvious indifference. Granted, the rock amplification that buttressed the Ensemble Modern as they launched into Zappa had the inevitable effect of making the lone flute of Varèse's *Density 21.5* like plain old vanilla. Something of an apologetic hurry interfered with **Dietmar Wiesner's** expressivity during Varèse's masterly monody (in the circumstances, I'd have rushed too), and the end of *Octandre*, which blended straight into the ensuing Zappa number, was greeted with obvious relief.

What of Zappa's music? Is it the obvious cipher of its composer's musical ambiguity? Much of it has been transcribed from its original synclavier form, and betrays its original medium: A tendency to stack sounds veers dangerously between garishness and awesome physical presence. With much of it—the audience's beloved *G-spot Tornado* comes to mind—the rhythm section entrances, but the lack of purposeful harmonic movement can tire those who have been trained to listen for such complexity. Many numbers are pervaded with a sharply satirical humor that makes one think of an amped-up and updated Kurt Weill.

By **Delia Casadei**

Photos: Ojai Festival's Libbey Bowl (Credits: Axel Koester); Ensemble Modern (Credits: Manu Theobald)