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Wildcat Viols Libbey Bowl, Ojai (CA)  
19 June 2010

**Eric Huebner's** rendition of Messiaen's gargantuan *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* opened the third day's musical activities. Delivered in a straight two-hour session to a chorus of rustling leaves and (it seemed) appreciative birds, this performance pushed all the right buttons as far as the electrified mysticism goes, but was most distinctive in the portrayal of an ecstatic sense of exhaustion—something that can only be achieved by a pianist who is anything but tired.

The evening brought us firmly back in the grip of Benjamin's vision. It's not every day that you see a crowd break into spontaneous applause during a description of a piece for two violas, but Benjamin's account of his piece *Viola, Viola* caused such unfettered delight. This talent for evocation carries right into Benjamin's work as conductor and especially as composer. The show-stopper was, no doubt, the concert performance of his opera *Into the Little Hill*, based on the legend of the Pied Piper. Benjamin has the story of the Piped Piper narrated, not staged by two girls (the superb **Anu Komsi** and **Hilary Summers**).



Released from the strictures of representation, the imagery takes on a sinister surrealism: a man with a feature-less face, a baby rat trampled on by the blind stream of death-driven rats, children burrowing themselves into the titular little hill despite their mother's desperate call. Benjamin animates this with a chamber orchestra that scurries, murmurs and rattles. The archaic sound of open fifths and fourths haunts a score that manages fullness of sound while wilfully withholding the comfort of human warmth.

Waking up to viol consort and Hindustani music was a strange start to the next day: as equal temperament went out of the window, so did one's sense of time and space as Purcell's viol Fantazias (thoughtfully conveyed by **The Wildcat Viols**) resonated across the intermission with of the 16th-century morning ragas played by great sarode virtuoso **Aashish Khan's** three piece ensemble.



In the late afternoon the Ensemble Modern and Benjamin appeared one last time. The Ensemble was at its most flexible, contracting to two violas for Benjamin's *Viola, Viola* and then expanding to full size for the glowing intricacies of his *At First Light* and Ligeti's Chamber Concerto. After that, it was Knussen's tribute to his late wife, *Songs for Sue*, whose arching vocal lines mark the composer's rare gift for song. The closing performance of Messiaen's *Oiseaux Exotiques* provided the customary fireworks, after which the enthused audience gradually scattered back to their urban engagements.

'Isn't it pretty to think so?' Hemingway's bittersweet last line lingered in my head as I made my way back to the city. Isn't it indeed pretty to imagine that the art music of the 20th century—this irksome genre that sends most people reaching for their earplugs—could regain its ability to speak to the

world at large if planted among trees and the birds, cradled in the soft hills of California's southern up-country?

It is pretty. A little too pretty, perhaps. But to dismiss the idyll would be to ignore the fundamental role of the festival (and of festivals generally): to provide, if only a few days, a glimpse of an alternative world.

By **Delia Casadei**

Photo: George Benjamin (Credits: Luke Sommer); Aashish Khan (Credits: Ojai Music Festival)