

THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

Zappa invades Ojai

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The city of Ojai, population 8,202, nestled in a idyllic valley 12 or so miles inland from Ventura, stays the same. Zoning and no growth laws keep it that way, year after year. There are no chain stores here, no malls. But there are lots of old oaks and citrus groves, mom and pop stores and fancy little boutiques. Visiting Ojai feels like stepping into California's past.

It is curious, then, that the town should host one of the most important contemporary music festivals on the planet. The Ojai Music Festival, a barrage of concerts over four days in June, is fresh and daring every year; you never know just quite what you'll get, and people seem to like it that way.

British composer George Benjamin, 50, is the music director this time around, and in addition to his own works, he has selected music important to him, including those of his teachers and students.



Among the concerts presented at this year's event, the 64th annual, were a Friday night program devoted to the music of Frank Zappa, performed by a German orchestra, and a Saturday morning recital of what is considered the largest scale work in the piano repertoire, Olivier Messiaen's "Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant-Jesus," more than two hours long. Both were performed in the open air in Libbey Bowl, a rustic old amphitheater with an aged but stylish band shell, scheduled to be rebuilt over the next 12 months.

The Zappa concert was wild. It featured a number of his instrumental works, many of them composed on and for the Synclavier but arranged by Ali N. Askin for the Ensemble Modern, a contemporary orchestra of strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion, guitars, keyboards and synthesizers. The music from Zappa's "The Yellow Shark" and "Greggery Peccary and Other Persuasions" wasn't meant for humans to perform. To hear this ensemble of 30 or so musicians blister their way through it was nothing less than jaw-dropping.

Zappa's style is virtually unclassifiable; the minute you think you've got a handle on it, he does something else, anyway. Elements of rock mix and fuse with progressive jazz and avant-garde contemporary music. The music of Edgard Varèse was among Zappa's passions, and you could hear its influence in these free-form, freewheeling pieces, but the kitchen sink was in there too.

Their exuberance was well nigh maniacal. A basic construction might be a driving, syncopated bass line, heavily punctuated and fueled by drums, over which a kind of group improvisation takes place – fierce, frenetic bebop-style. The Ensemble Modern's orchestrations were spidery and clanging. Led by conductor Brad Lubman, it played with abandon, virtuosity and a lot of dirt and steal in its sound.

A couple of Zappa's atonal works were also played (many are right on the edge). One of them, arranged for pianos, harp and mallet instruments mustered the evocative, meditative feel of Asian music. The composer's clowning was displayed in "Welcome to the United States," in which an actor dressed as Uncle Sam recited text and questions from the Nonimmigrant Visa Waiver Arrival and Departure Form, the orchestra (and audience) reacting and answering with all sorts of razzmatazz, shouting, foot-stomping, etc. When Uncle Sam asked about possible involvement in terrorist activities, the orchestra broke out in "Louie, Louie."

An encore, "Peaches En Regalia," revealed Zappa's bright and merry side, his relentless inventiveness anchored to pure joy.

Two pieces by Varèse were also heard -- the sultry and shrieking "Density 21.5" (1936), for solo flute, and the hard-edged "Octandre" (1924), for woodwinds, brass and double bass, music carved out of rock.

Eric Huebner, a contemporary music specialist, played Messiaen's mammoth masterpiece on a perfect Saturday morning -- blue skies, cool air and birds singings in the trees. His was a feat of endurance, managed with equal parts grace, precision and eloquence. Messiaen's "Vingt Regards" ("20 Gazes on the Infant Jesus") is in 20 movements, couched in the composer's symbolic architectonic language, predicated on Catholic mysticism.

There is a Theme of God (one of the most beautiful things you'll ever hear); a Theme of Mystical Love; a Theme of the Star and Cross, etc. He constructs cathedrals of sound out of them, the building blocks repeated like heartfelt prayers. Dissonance is used to create shards of brilliant light and gentle, celestial sparkles, never anxiety or fear. A listener is put into a kind of trance, but the audience came out of it to roar at the end.

And we were just getting started, with music by Stravinsky, Ligeti, Boulez and Benjamin to come, and Purcell paired with Indian ragas.

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