

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Serious, contemporary-ish music takes a holiday

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Several years ago, ripples of excitable anticipation could be sensed among the contemporary music fans in SoCal with news of a first-time visit by Germany's stunningly fine Ensemble Modern — considered a pinnacle of its class, something akin to the Radiohead of new music. That tour was canceled, unfortunately, and excitement yielded to disappointment.

At long last, the ensemble made its way to the West Coast in time for its 30th anniversary as a group at the top of its game, and their trip out west was in grander, more full-service style, as the featured group of the 64th Ojai Music Festival. Over the course of four days last weekend, this remarkably precise and sharply focused group surveyed a broad range of music from the last 100 years, from Stravinsky's "L'Histoire du soldat" to Friday night's blissfully wild evening devoted to the too rarely heard "serious music" of great American iconoclast Frank Zappa (see review in yesterday's paper). EM has a relationship with Zappa's "longhair" music, having recorded 1992's "The Yellow Shark," Zappa's last project before his death in 1993, and 2004's "Greggery Peccary and Other Persuasions," both must-have Zappa discs.

In short, EM's adventure in Ojai made for one of the strikingly fine, bold and challenging editions in years, probably the most gripping overall Ojai festival program since Pierre Boulez last was in charge here, in 2003. Still the most internationally significant event in the tri-counties, the wondrous Ojai Music Festival hit a new and special high in 2010.

In tandem with the ensemble's residency, noted British composer-conductor George Benjamin had much to offer, in terms of a characteristically eclectic handful from his compositional output and as conductor, through to a genuinely grand and cerebral transfixing finale on Sunday evening, of Gyorgy Ligeti's Chamber Concerto and Olivier Messiaen's "Oiseaux exotiques." Not coincidentally, Mr. Benjamin has been strongly influenced by both Ligeti and Messiaen, with whom he studied.

Most substantially, Mr. Benjamin's Saturday night special was the semi-theatrical concert work "Into the Little Hill," a fiendishly clever and vaguely haunting reworking of the "Pied Piper of

Hamelin" tale with contemporary social relevance. It was beautifully sung by soprano Anu Komsu and contralto Hilary Summers, taking on multiple roles, from a slimy minister to beleaguered rats, with instrumental writing of high invention and illustrative powers.

Mr. Benjamin's varied compositional voice continued on Sunday night's program, following a ripe opener, Mr. Boulez' cool and bracing "Memoriale." Mr. Benjamin's work swerved from impressive, economical yet full "Viola, Viola" — giving equal time to an instrument deserving greater spotlight time — to the evocative, tough-love impressionism of his ensemble tour de force "At First Light," inspired by a Turner painting.

In Ojai, the Sunday morning concert often veers slightly away from the presiding theme of the weekend, and this year's morning show took an intriguing twofold detour, from 17th-century Baroque England to the timeless allure of Northern Indian Hindustani classical music. Somehow, they made for compatible performances.

Seventeenth-century Baroque master Henry Purcell's music, for the vintage string instrument, the viol, was given a beguiling reading by the San Francisco-based Wildcat Viols. The expert period instrument group produces a focused ensemble sound, compared to, say, the diversely ranged sound of a string quartet, and delivered the music in all its intricately designed, soothing glory.

Next up, sarod master Aashish Khan, son of Ali Akbar Khan and a teacher at Cal Arts, performed alternately meditative and invigorated morning ragas, with the virtuosic young tabla sensation Javad Ali Butah. Khan was a special guest this year, who also performed late-evening raga on Thursday night and afternoon raga in downtown Ojai on Saturday.

Musical history has such a rich legacy in the Ojai Music Festival that memories and milestones of festival's past tend to keep bubbling up, as they did this year. Saturday night's concert opened with the leaner, meaner instrumental suite version of "L'Histoire" (aka "The Soldier's Tale"), minus the folksy Faustian narrative and dramatic angle, which does get old. This piece, in its final version, had its world premiere in Ojai in 1948 (and Stravinsky himself was in Ojai twice, in the mid-'50s), and was last heard on this stage in a hip, rap-lined version, post-Rodney King, courtesy of Peter Sellars' direction (Sellars, incidentally, is involved in directing next year's Ojai fest).

Another blast from the past arrived in the ultimate work of the weekend. Messiaen's gripping and spectrally exhilarating quasi-Piano Concerto "Oiseaux exotiques" was his first to use direct

transcriptions from birdsong.

He stole from nature, in the most profound way. When the late, great French composer was a guest in Ojai, in 1985, the in-house birdsong aspect seemed unusually resonant with what happened onstage. That same sensation arose on Sunday, as amateur avian chirpers lent their songs to the solo piano parts (adeptly played by Ueli Wiget). In those moments, the universe, and Ojai's natural-cum-cultural order, seemed blissfully in sync for a fleeting period of time.

In other, extra-musical Ojai festival news, this was the last year in Ojai's Libby Bowl, in its current state, before a major renovation and overhaul begins. Included in the project are a complete rebuild and reorientation of the Bowl's stage, expansion of its dressing rooms, and removal of several beloved trees in the seating area, including the sycamore we have sat next to for many years now. Before leaving the bowl, we kissed "our" tree adieu.

Subtle changes do occur over time in Ojai, which otherwise stays a fairly steady course of continuity, year after year. But the future — a notion the festival has always embraced — continues to look and sound bright.

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