

Innovation resounds as Ojai Music Fest ends

By Rita Moran
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“Relationships” was the telling word that popped up in comments by Christopher Hailey minutes before the final concert of the 64th annual Ojai Music Festival on Sunday in Libbey Park. Just hearing that word suggested the approach of this year’s music director, George Benjamin, a Brit who is a bright light of contemporary composing and conducting.

There are all kinds of relationships, of course, and in the four-day festival’s context many were explored: instrumental, stylistic, historical, philosophical and personal. Sunday’s final program showcased works by previous festival music directors and highlighted composers, an impressive list that summons to mind the impact of Pierre Boulez, Oliver Knussen, Gyorgy Ligeti and Olivier Messiaen over the latter part of the 20th century. Joining them in forward thinking of the 21st is Benjamin himself, whose “Viola, Viola” and “At First Light” put his mark on the event. Benjamin has studied or conferred with them all. He is equally at home with the culture of Indian ragas, compellingly led by Aashish Khan at Sunday morning’s concert and subtly reflected in some of the music directors works.

The newest and youngest composers involved in the festival were Saed Haddad and Steve Potter, both of whom have studied with Benjamin. And the oldest composer represented, 102-year-old Elliott Carter, has been an innovative and enduring presence on the American classical scene.

The final concert of the festival’s 2010 season opened with Boulez’s “Mémoriale,” a delicate and demanding work featuring flutist Dietmar Wiesner, one of four Ensemble Modern soloists for the evening. Violists Megumi Kasakawa and Patrick Jüedt charmed with the byplay of their violas in the ambitious challenges set before them. Their relationship with the morning concert’s Wildcat Viols balanced Benjamin’s cleverly expanded challenges for the instruments with Henry Purcell’s 17th-century “Fantasias for Viols.”

Knussen’s “Requiem — Songs for Sue” reflects on the death of his wife, through verse settings by Emily Dickinson, Antonio Machado and Rainer Maria Rilke. Brought back from the previous night’s performance of Benjamin’s stark “Into the Little Hill” opera was Finnish soprano Anu Komsu, pairing the purity of her voice with potent musical and emotional effect. Benjamin’s “At First Light,” inspired by William Turner’s painting “Norham Castle, Sunrise,” provided an extended opportunity to appreciate his deft hand with complex textures. Ligeti’s Chamber Concerto offered the late composer’s own reflections on natural phenomena with a multi-tasking touch evoking immediate pleasure with an intensely faceted subtext.

Messiaen’s “Oiseaux Exotiques” (“Exotic Birds”) brought the festival to a fitting close, with Ensemble Modern’s intrepid pianist Ueli Wiget at the keyboard surrounded by his fellow master musicians. A day before, relationships also had come into play when the composer’s two-hour-plus work “Vingt Regards sur L’Enfant Jésus” was played by the formidable Eric Huebner. The piece was written for Messiaen’s pianist wife, Yvonne Loriod, a major artist in her own right who died less than a month ago.

Longtime Ojai Festival fans will remember Loriod and Messiaen for their roles in the 1985 festival. The composer, who was fascinated with the sound of birds, was in his element at the Libbey Bowl, where birdlike music often draws responses from the real thing perched in the leafy trees above. But everyone who frequented this year's festival surely had to chuckle when they recognized — as “Oiseaux” rolled to its close — the familiar clang of notes that had been used to call the audience to its seats before each concert.

As always, there were vocal demurrers who found elements of the festival too astringent for their ears. One suspects that despite their unease they will return again, because at its core the Ojai Festival has always promised challenge along with its delights. After all, if a relationship can't withstand turbulence along with smooth sailing, what good is it?

Another relationship will be renewed at the 65th Ojai Music Festival, which is slated to take place June 9-12 in an entirely rebuilt Libbey Bowl. Singer Dawn Upshaw, who won many hearts with her appearances at the 2007 festival, will return as music director, bringing with her the Australian Chamber Orchestra, the Maria Schneider Orchestra and creative pot-stirrer Peter Sellars. Upshaw and Sellars could be seen in Saturday night's audience, doubtless already cooking up something special for the occasion. For more about the Ojai Music Festival, call 646-2094 or visit <http://www.ojaifestival>.

