

LA  
*Opus*



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## Ojai Music Festival 2010

### *George Benjamin and friends say good-bye to historic Libbey Bowl*



Ensemble Moder/Photo by Robert Millard

### *Review by Rodney Punt*

When you drive to the bucolic town of Ojai, up the coast and inland from Los Angeles, you think of its enchanted valley as a destination, like the end-of-the-rainbow Shangri-La it depicted in the classic film, *Lost Horizon*.

If, however, you take the “back” route up highways 5 and 126, over the hill and into its west bound valley, Ojai can seem a momentary crossroads to other destinations along the coast.

The renowned Ojai Music Festival can be viewed in much the same way – as a “destination” for music lovers to gather, and as a “crossroads” for musicians to explore new directions in works of contemporary composers, or the forgotten contributions of earlier ones.

Heading the festival’s front office for several seasons now, Artistic Director Thomas Morris and Executive Director Jeff Haydon have established a good track record in their global search for talent and trends. Last year they brought us eighth blackbird and Jeremy Denk. In 2011 it will be Dawn Upshaw and friends.

This year’s 64th Ojai Music Festival was the last to be held in the historic but outmoded Libbey Bowl. It featured as Music Director (impresario) the 50-year-old English composer and conductor George

Benjamin. The Thursday through Sunday event celebrated the composer's works and those in his circle - his teachers, mentors, colleagues, students, and most admired composers.

Benjamin's works, and those he selected for the festival, seek to break down barriers between musical styles - popular and serious, tonal and atonal, Eastern and Western. He is, however, not an eclectic in the pasted-together, anything-goes way that trivializes the moniker. His works, in the modernist tradition, are precisely integrated, objective in style, and full of sensual and dazzling instrumental colors. Though his musical subjects are often stimulated by visual images, natural phenomena, or program narratives, he is essentially an abstract composer.

In appearance and style, Benjamin is meticulous, articulate, and energetic, also modest in the pleasing manner of a well-educated Englishman. It should be no surprise, meeting him and hearing his music, that he was a favorite pupil of French composer Olivier Messiaen. Less noted than Messiaen's influence, but also important to his development were studies with Alexander Goehr at King's College, Cambridge, where he was exposed to Schoenberg's 12-tone system. Benjamin has become a noted teacher in his own right as the Henry Purcell Professor of Composition at King's College, London.

A frequent collaborator with the composer, the Ensemble Modern of Frankfurt, Germany, served as Benjamin's central reservoir of performers for the weekend, augmented by singers, raga artists, a group of early music viols, and guest pianists. As *modus operandi*, the Ensemble Modern reconfigures its members in flexible instrumental groups for each work, seldom appearing in the same guise twice. Benjamin conducted the larger of such impromptu ensembles.

The overall program was an interesting contrast from some previous years at Ojai; not a note of minimalism pulsed anywhere within earshot, nor was there anything from the neo-romantic Atlanta School (less likely heard here anyway). This festival's fare was representative of progressive lines stemming from 20th Century French colorists and German formalists.

Three of Benjamin's works were performed. His chamber opera, *Into the Little Hill*, of 2006, received its West Coast premiere in its concert version on Saturday evening. It was agreeably paired with the orchestral suite from Igor Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*. Both are morality tales involving pacts with the devil and share a common musical aesthetic of objective astringency.

*Little Hill* is a retelling of the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Remarkable in its depictions are passages that capture, in the words of Chris Haley's program notes, "the slashing whiplash of the bloodthirsty crowd, the smooth platitudes of the unctuous minister, the scurrying rats, and the mysterious, unsettling stranger." Story-telling in the third person reinforces the inherent objectivity of Benjamin's works. Vocal lines for its two soloists, Anu Komsu, soprano, and Hilary Summers, contralto, are no less impressive, and Komsu's performance of her stratospherically high flying role was riveting.

Sound enhancement for this work and the Stravinsky was spot on in the amphitheater, absolute clarity reigning, as designed by the Ensemble Modern's Sound Director, Felix Dreher. (In general, sound amplification at the Ojai Music Festival is among the best in the outdoor business. Let's hope its success carries forward in the new amphitheater next year.)

Benjamin's *Viola, Viola* composed in 1997 and heard at Ojai ten years ago, is a study in textures and the potentialities of a string instrument too often overlooked. The viola, unfair butt of insider jokes in music circles, is Benjamin's favorite of the string family (as it was also Mozart's). Violas have the ability - fully exploited by Benjamin - to plunge extreme depths into cello territory, as well as reach, in the upper registers, the province of the violin. With double-stopping and wild interval leaps the two violas of Megumi Kasakawa and Patrick Juedt made this duet sound at times like a full string quartet, which was, in fact, Benjamin's objective.

*At First Light* is an early Benjamin work (1982) and remains an impressive achievement. It's inspiration derives from a J. M. W. Turner painting of sunrise at Northiam Castle. Impressionistic writing pushes the extremes of instrumental registers, mostly upper but notably lower in one section. Rarely used instruments like bass flute and bizarre sound effects such as a ripped newspaper and bouncing ping-pong

balls make its colors particularly vibrant. Benjamin's proclivity for objective description – apparent in the *Little Hill* score of four years ago - has some of its origins in this remarkable work by a twenty-two year-old.

As could be expected, works by two of Benjamin's revered masters, Olivier Messiaen and Arnold Schoenberg, were represented the festival offerings, in addition to those of a number of admired contemporary composers and one very old master.

Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 16, of 1909, was performed in the chamber version arranged by the composer in 1920. At a time when his fellow Austrians were wringing the last potential out of Wagnerian romanticism, Schoenberg was instinctively moving on to new forms and timbres, in this work "a continuous succession of colors, rhythms, and moods" as he described them. The luminous delicacy of the orchestral version could not be duplicated with the chamber forces on hand, but one could trace the work's influence on Benjamin's own delicate colorations in such movements as *Bygone* and *Colors*.

Saturday morning provided a perfect setting for pianist Eric Huebner's stunning performance of Messiaen's two-hour tour-de-force, *Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant-Jésus*. Though inspired by his Catholic faith (with a capital "C"), Messiaen's "catholic" tastes infuse and inform the music. Unresolved dissonances, jazz inflections, chord clusters, irregular rhythms, nature references, sensual colorations in the tradition of Ravel, even thematic nods to Stravinsky - all are present, and all influential on Benjamin's own work. The presence of chirping birds within the overhead English Sycamores seemed part of the intended effect.

Speaking of birds, Ueli Wiget's Sunday evening piano performance of Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques* further explored the composer's riotous colorations and tingling replications of bird calls, again with a few aerial contributions from Ojai's natural aviary.

A selection of Henry Purcell's *Fantasias for Viols* performed by the Wildcat Viols (hardly descriptive of their drone-like performance style) gave opportunity to hear an influence on Benjamin's approach to string writing. These works and their ancient stringed instruments were already old-fashioned in Purcell's Baroque era, and the *Fantasias* sound more like polyphonic madrigals than steady Thorough-bass. The four simultaneous lines of the viols' oddly intervalled melodies collided in piquant harmonies simply unique to the composer.

In the category of works by contemporary composers Benjamin admires were Pierre Boulez's tender, ethereal flute solo, *Mémoriale*; Oliver Knussen's moving *Requiem - Songs for Sue*, dedicated to his wife, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's esteemed former education director; and György Ligeti's *Chamber Concerto*, reflecting a view of life that is the dark-matter counterpart to Messiaen's heaven-infused earthly vision.

Elliott Carter was represented by his *Oboe Quartet*, of 2001, described by its 91-year-old composer as "built up from a series of six duets, which cover every possible combination of the four instruments. Each duet lasts just a minute or two and the other two instruments provide an accompaniment." The Ensemble Modern's oboist proved as precise as a finch in his perfect-pitch landings of the work's angular melodic intervals. While witty and finely etched, the work reminded me of the later works of Picasso, full of uniquely developed technique but without pushing any new boundaries. For the 91-year-old Carter, however, what he says may not be as important as saying it as well as he does.

Benjamin's pupils were represented in two works. Saed Haddad's *Le Contredésir*, in its west coast premiere, draws motivic inspiration from the Middle East within its Western musical format. The dialogue is between clarinet in two different registers and a French horn, with a cello grounding the two. The conversation seems first agreeable, then a bit of a tussle, and finally, with all three equally joining in, a taffy-like tug of war.

Steve Potter's *Paradigms* was excerpted in its U.S. Premiere. The composer calls it "a fragmented piece of many tiny sections at odds with one another." Selections aired varied between both accompanied singing and purely instrumental. Its tool box of tone clusters, Japanese-infused (and screamed) haikus,

percussive effects, peculiar colorations, and accompanied poems could serve as a calling-card for the composer. While sometimes gimmicky, there were spurts of impressive inventiveness.

One of Potter's excerpts, a speak-song rendition of a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti ("What could she say to the fantastic foolbear...") reminded me of the sophisticated nonsense in William Walton's *Façade*. Mezzo-soprano Hilary Summers proved an effective singing actress as the deep-toned communicator of its surreal state.

In a parallel performance program, three separate sessions of North Indian Classical Ragas, so admired by Benjamin, were presented as specified for morning, afternoon, and late-night settings, by Sarode performer Aashish Kahn and two other performers.

By way of novelty fare, Friday evening's program was devoted to Frank Zappa's experimental contemporary rock music *Greggery Peccary & Other Persuasions* and his *The Yellow Shark* medley, the latter developed with and for The Ensemble Modern in 1992. Performance editions of the Zappa were made possible by a device known as the Synclavier, which can perform any imaginable number of parts with absolute accuracy electronically, an accuracy apparently only possible in human performance, according to the late Zappa, by the Ensemble Modern itself.

One sequence from *Yellow Shark*, "Welcome to the United States" is a facetious setting of an INS application form that provided Ensemble Modern's Hermann Kretzschmar an opportunity to step away from his usual position at the piano and comically recite a surrealistic sequence of questions actually asked as application for US entry. He wore an "Uncle Sam" suit and top hat.

All day Friday, the music festival's hipster new music crowd encountered former hippy Zappaistas from a wildly experimental era in pop. Zappa's pretensions toward serious music were contrasted on the program by Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5* and his *Octandre*, with which the "mad scientist" composer inspired Zappa, the two far-out creators meeting halfway in the odd space of their respective musical journeys.

The most sought-after ticket for the whole weekend was a late Friday evening screening of the classic Danish film, *Vampyr*, with Benjamin improvising its piano accompaniment. Directed and co-written by filmmaker Carl T. Dreyer, it was introduced drolly by noted film critic, Peter Rainer.

At the piano as the film ran, Benjamin introduced a theme I recognized from Franz Liszt's *Faust Symphony*. The character portraying the vampire emerged in the film shortly after as an exact - if most likely unintentional - image of the aging Franz Liszt draped in religious orders. The musical motif employed has an augmented major chord repeated four times, each a half step down, its later variations referencing both Faust and Mephistopheles. Cleverly echoing the film's own narrative between vampire and victim, it produced, from a musical point of view, a perfect twelve-tone row. Benjamin confirmed after the show that I had "solved the riddle" of his improvisation.

It was a notable 64th Ojai Music Festival, the last nostalgic encounter we shall have of the termite-ridden, fragile and obsolete, but beloved Libbey Bowl. Next year a new performing shell and backstage complex will be in place. Donations are being solicited by the Ojai Music Festival Board for its construction. My wife and I donated. You might consider doing so as well.

To contact the Ojai Music Festival office, [click here](#).