

Al Fresco Meeting of the Modernists

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OJAI, California -- The Ojai Music Festival doesn't quite add up. This tiny town of about 8,000, located in a valley of orange groves, vineyards and modest mountains, has just one main street where cars religiously stop for pedestrians. The Libbey Bowl, the festival's soon-to-be-rebuilt venue, has a rustic 1957 band shell surrounded by trees and fronted by wooden benches and a lawn where people spread out with elaborate picnics. A good place for Tchaikovsky and fireworks, you might assume.

But every June, top-notch musicians congregate under this tangle of sycamores for a few days of modern, offbeat fare drawn from the European and American avant-garde. Devoted audiences arrive for their annual fix of Boulez, Knussen and Ligeti one night and Zappa and Varèse the next.

Throughout much of its 64-year history, Ojai has appointed a different music director every year, with such prominent figures as Stravinsky, Copland, Messiaen, Boulez and Adams as previous holders of the post. This year it was British composer and conductor George Benjamin, who brought along a contingent of avant-gardists including Germany's Ensemble Modern in its West Coast debut.

Benjamin isn't well known to American audiences, even though he has a sizable reputation abroad, with premieres by numerous European orchestras, a teaching post at Kings College, London, and a residency at this summer's [Aldeburgh Festival](#). Like Ojai itself, he's somewhat of a paradox. Born in 1960, he's of the generation exposed to rock music. But unlike many of his peers who soaked up minimalism, neo-romanticism and various noisy hybrids, his chief interests lie in the ascetic modernism of an older, post-Schoenberg generation.

The opening night concert threw down the modernist gauntlet rather gently, with works by two of Benjamin's students. Saed Haddad's "Le Contredesir," a trio for cello, horn and clarinet, mixed jagged, dissonant gestures with sinuous, vaguely Arabic clarinet lines, meticulously synchronized by members of Ensemble Modern. No less intriguing was "Paradigms," a theatrical song cycle by American Steve Potter that had Welsh mezzo-soprano Hilary Summers swooning, cooing, braying and ranting like a crazed bag lady on the subway. The rest of the evening traveled a backward path from Elliott Carter's sharp-edged but whimsical Oboe Quartet to Schoenberg's "Five Pieces for Orchestra" and that composer's arrangement of Johann Strauss Jr.'s "Emperor Waltz."

The blockbuster event was Friday night, when Ensemble Modern took on the classical works of Frank Zappa (d. 1993). It was a performance a long time coming: the group visited Zappa's hometown of Los Angeles in 1991 to record his suite "The Yellow Shark," and again two years later to make an (as yet unreleased) all-Varèse album under Zappa's supervision. Varèse was Zappa's idol but since he was seriously ill with prostate cancer by this point, he left the conducting to composer/conductor Peter Eotvos.

Because many of Zappa's later works were composed on and for the Synclavier, they were thought to be too difficult for mere mortals on acoustic instruments. Yet conductor Brad Lubman guided the group through performances of staggering virtuosity and sweep, covering a huge range, from the progressive rock of "G-Spot Tornado" to the Boulez-like intricacy of "The Girl in the Magnesium

Dress" to the icy four-hand piano piece "Ruth Is Sleeping." Later, pianist Hermann Kretzschmar reappeared on stage for "Welcome to the United States," wearing an Uncle Sam outfit and reciting a series of queries put to immigrants on visa forms while the orchestra stomped its feet, played assorted noises and strains of "Louie Louie." When Uncle Sam asked about possible involvement in espionage, the orchestra held up their instruments as spyglasses.

The evening, which also included Varèse's "Octandre" and "Density 21.5," ended with three Zappa encores, to the delight of the many graying hippies and Zappa fanatics who turned out in droves.

The next morning brought another remarkable concert: Eric Heubner tackling Messiaen's complex, visionary piano suite "Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus." Neither flamboyant or showy, the young New Yorker played this immense two-hour masterpiece with didactic enthusiasm and attention to detail. Coming on a brilliant Saturday morning, Messiaen's evocations of blackbirds, nightingale and thrush drew responses from the real thing perched on branches above.

Benjamin's chamber opera "Into the Little Hill" lasts a mere 35 minutes, but feels a good deal longer. An updated retelling of "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" for two singers (the eloquent soprano Anu Komsu and contralto Hilary Summers), the piece aims to mine fresh social commentary from the timeless story, but succeeds only in showing Benjamin's skill as an orchestrator. Ravishing textures alone can't create compelling drama; in the end, the work seemed curiously aloof. The evening's first half fared better, with a crisp and detailed rendering of Stravinsky's "L'histoire du Soldat" by Ensemble Modern.

One of the joys of Ojai comes in finding the connections between styles and musical eras, however subtle (or coincidental). Sunday began with a morning concert by the cheery Bay Area early music group Wildcat Viols, which deftly navigated 12 of Henry Purcell's Fantasias for Viols. Later that evening, Ensemble Modern violists Megumi Kasakawa and Patrick Juedt Benjamin presented Benjamin's 1997 work "Viola, Viola." While the Purcell mixed clashing harmonies with finely wrought counterpoint, Benjamin's piece made its effect through tightly interwoven parts, and almost antagonistic degrees of musical dialogue.

Benjamin is also an admirer of Indian ragas, here represented in a program led by the sarod player Aashish Khan during the second half of Sunday morning's concert. While a highly improvisatory medium, many American audiences are unaware of how highly structured, even mathematical, North Indian ragas are (thus offering a small connection to Purcell). For the first part of the second raga, Khan emphasized controlled, linear slides on the strings of his large, lute-like sarod. Then, midway through, he switched to a nimble cycle of single-note scales played at blinding speed and at an emotional fever pitch that heavy-metal guitarists would envy. Eventually, he and tabla player Javad Ali Butah would alternate improvisations and the raga's 16-cycle structure.

On paper, the closing night concert by Ensemble Modern had something to scare about everyone. But "Memories and Memorials," as it was called, wove a thread that spanned Boulez's "Memoriale," written for the late flutist Lawrence Beaugard in 1985, Knussen's "Songs for Sue," a 12-minute requiem for his late wife and Benjamin's "At First Light," a contemplation of dawn in glaring and refined colors (celebrating the birth of day rather than the end of life).

Next year's 64th Ojai Festival promises soprano Dawn Upshaw as music director, with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, the Maria Schneider Orchestra, and director Peter Sellars. Sounds like a good plan.

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