

Music styles harmonize at Ojai Music Festival's first day

By Rita Moran
Saturday, June 12, 2010

Ah, Ojai, where musical works by boundary-breaking composer Arnold Schoenberg can sound almost retro when juxtaposed with fresh works featuring the sinuous exoticism of Saed Haddad, 38, and the mind-expanding fragmentation of Steve Potter, 30.

All three composers were featured Thursday during the 64th Ojai Music Festival's opening-night concert at Libbey Bowl. The annual event will continue through Sunday.

The new kids on the block at Thursday night's concert have both studied with this year's music director, British composer-conductor George Benjamin, a prodigy who burst onto the international composing scene while still a teen. At 50, he is now the pied piper for those who believe music is a "living, breathing organism," in the words of commentator Christopher Hailey, who spoke about the program during a pre-concert analysis. Benjamin is a composer "very much involved with the joy of listening," Hailey said.

Tonight, Benjamin will lead festival-goers through a concert version of his own short opera, "Into the Little Hill," a somewhat macabre retelling of the legendary Pied Piper's tale, along with Igor Stravinsky's "Histoire du Soldat" suite. At Sunday's final concert, he'll conduct more of his own music along with that of Pierre Boulez and Olivier Messiaen, two of his distinguished mentors.

Haddad's native Jordan, as well as time spent in Israel, England, France and Germany, contributed a virtual roundtable of musical insights to the composer's "Le Contredésir," elegantly played by cello, horn and clarinet representatives from Ensemble Modern, the contemporary music group based in Germany that provides the instrumental backbone for the festival.

A more daunting challenge was met by Welsh mezzo-soprano Hilary Summers and pianist Hermann Kretzschmar in excerpts from Potter's "Paradigms." The composer has suggested that the audience shouldn't try to "see the elephant" from the fragments offered. With each segment dramatically different from the others, it would be difficult to imagine the "whole" of the work, but as delivered by Summers and Kretzschmar, the pieces were provocative, and through a wittily skewed lens, endearingly amusing.

Summers was called on to "mime" with measured pacing and arm gestures, blare minimalist words in Japanese for an excerpt called "Haiku," and deliver scattered words in "Poem" and a Lawrence Ferlinghetti stanza in "Story." She was especially impressive during the "Music Only" portion, in which she was required to repeat a series of sound fragments, sometimes bringing to mind Victor Borge and his vocal punctuation trick. She accomplished all with formidable aplomb. Fortunately, she will return to the stage tonight to put her voice to operatic use.

By far the oldest living composer represented at the concert was 102-year-old Elliott Carter, whose Oboe Quartet was written when he was 91, just a youngster, and highlights a series of duets by paired instruments, played with precision and equanimity by Ensemble Modern members.

With the first half of the program devoted to works written in the 21st century, Benjamin then turned to Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra, written a century ago but just as stirring then as contemporary insights are today. For the audience,

however, Schoenberg's orchestra piece had the soothing resonance of the European era from which it sprang, followed by his arrangement of Johann Strauss Jr.'s "Emperor Waltz." Briskly yet liltingly played with jaunty character by the dedicated Ensemble members, "Emperor" left at least some audience members humming as they departed

Libbey Bowl, an uncommon feat at the festival.

Other than a new clanging crush of sound that summons the audience to its seats, some things never change. The searing siren of an emergency vehicle that raced across the aural passages shortly before the concert began, the occasional twittering of birds mixed with ardent intermission discussions among festival fans, and the perfectly temperate weather reminded all comers of the festival's unique setting. Ah, Ojai.

