

A Wild Musical Party

An Inside Peek at the
2009 Ojai Music Festival

by *Tim Munro*



eighth blackbird. Back row, left to right: Nicholas Photinos, cello; Tim Munro, flutes; Matthew Duvall, percussion; Michael J. Maccaferri, clarinets. Front row, left to right: Matt Albert, violin & viola; Lisa Kaplan, piano
PHOTO BY LUKE RATRAY.
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EIGHTH BLACKBIRD WAS NAMED MUSIC DIRECTOR OF THE 2009 OJAI FESTIVAL WAY back in the summer of 2006. This was shockingly, overwhelmingly, nerve-rattlingly unexpected. Taking the reins of the Festival, we would be stepping into the shoes of some giants of 20th-century music, including Stravinsky, Copland, Boulez, and the Emerson Quartet. The weight of tradition has remained on the back of our minds throughout the process, but so has the “kids-in-a-candy-store” feeling: “Those crazy Ojai folks are giving us a whole festival? Woo-hoo!”

Our first programming meeting with Ojai’s artistic director Thomas W. Morris in September 2006 was chaotic. Conversations collided, overlapped, intersected; megalomaniacal plans and utopian visions were hatched; hundreds of programs were planned. We all agreed the Festival should reflect the character of eighth blackbird, and two overarching ideas were settled upon: present unique, unexpected, groundbreaking chamber music experiences; and, make the Festival a wild, no-holds-barred musical party.

“Groundbreaking chamber music”? The Festival would expand the traditional definition of chamber music to include all of the bizarre things that we do as a 21st-century new music band: chamber-sized music theater (the world premiere of Rinde Eckert/Steve Mackey’s *Slide*); the collision of dance and small ensemble (Mark deChiazza’s radical new *Pierrot Lunaire*); unconducted “super-ensembles” (Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians*; David Gordon’s everything-but-the-kitchen-sink *Quasi-Sinfonia*; Andriessen’s raucous, pedal-to-the-metal *Worker’s Union*).

“A wild musical party”? By cramming a diverse group of the country’s best musicians in close proximity, we would encourage cross-pollination, turning Ojai 2009 into a weekend-long jam session, concluding with a “marathon” concert that will be a rollicking good time for all!

There are good reasons that the designation “Music Director” is typically used in

its singular form. Artistic decisions made by committee can be stilted, bureaucratic, compromised. This is where Tom Morris, former Executive Director of the Cleveland Orchestra and one of America's most experienced orchestral "thinkers," was essential. We met with him every few months until early 2009, and during the meetings he played many roles with ease and gusto: supportive dad ("That's a great idea – nice work!"); experienced diplomat ("You both have interesting ideas, we just need to find the right place for them"); football coach ("OK guys, we've done solid work so far, but we still have a big job ahead of us"); the voice of reason ("I really think that is too much work for you"). He resolved inevitable disputes, massaged our egos, and focused our minds on the task at hand.

From the outset, we wanted *Slide* as the centerpiece of Ojai 2009. This project, eight years in the making, reunites prize-winning collaborators Rinde Eckert and Steve Mackey, who have created an ambitious night of "concert-theater" in which all eight performers speak, sing, play instruments, and take roles in this poignant drama. Eckert plays Renard, a psychologist whose 40-year-old experiment into perception and reality still haunts him.

Other highlights from Ojai 2009? The world premiere of a new production of Schoenberg's tragicomic masterpiece *Pierrot Lunaire*, in which director Mark DeChiazza uses dance and gesture to connect to the human core of this bizarre, fascinating work. We will also perform Steve Reich's new Pulitzer Prize-winner: the Double Sextet.

We have invited more than 20 of our favorite friends and collaborators to join us at the Festival, including the brilliant pianist Jeremy Denk, genre-bending ensemble Tin Hat, legendary soprano Lucy Shelton, surprising recorder quartet QNG, superstar guitarist/ composer Steve Mackey, rising Aussie star flutist Alexis Kenny, and a battery of amazing percussionists.

After three years of dreaming and scheming, the craziness of Ojai 2009 is almost upon us. I do hope you'll join us for our wild musical thrill-ride!

Flutist Tim Munro is a member of eighth blackbird.

MUSIC SHELF

A Fitting Tribute

HOLST: Ballet music from *The Perfect Fool*; *The Golden Goose*; *The Lure*; *The Morning of the Year*. Joyful Company of Singers, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Richard Hickox. Chandos 5069.

by Jim Svejda

None of his friends or musical associates can quite believe that Richard Hickox is dead. At the time of his sudden passing in November of last year, this busiest and most recorded conductor of his generation had launched yet two more ambitious series for Chandos: projected surveys of the complete orchestral music of the English composers Sir Eugene Goossens and Gustav Holst. Tragically, both series now end with their first volumes.

In many ways, this recording of Gustav Holst's ballet music is a wonderfully appropriate swan song. Apart from the ballet music from *The Perfect Fool*, none of these works are very well known, and throughout his recording career, Hickox

had an absolute passion for championing unknown British music that he thought deserved a hearing.

Like his Alwyn, Rubbra, Howells, and Percy Grainger series, this Holst anthology is a revelation. At the very least, *The Golden Goose* and *The Morning of the Year* are charming, tuneful, constantly surprising works; in Hickox's hands, they seem a good deal more.

Among recordings of the much-recorded *Perfect Fool* ballet, this is the first one to seriously challenge Sir Andre Previn's EMI version of a generation ago. In spite of the fact that Previn had the London Symphony at the top of its form, this new version actually outpoints it in both the actual playing and (obviously) the recorded sound.

Not only does the BBC National Orchestra of Wales offer some of their best work for a conductor they clearly adored, but so also does the aptly named Joyful Company of Singers. But what the album captures most movingly is a huge, indefatigable – though, alas, not indestructible – talent, doing what he most loved to do.

