

## Ojai Music Fest 2012: Generosity, clownishness and a table-groaning feast

**The four-day program overseen by Leif Ove Andsnes travels a wide and dizzying range that prominently features, but is by no means limited to, Scandinavia.**

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The 66th Ojai Music Festival ended in high spirits Sunday. Leif Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin put on clown's noses and played a hilarious — and spectacular — two-piano transcription of Stravinsky's "Circus Polka."

Andsnes, who is Norwegian, was this year's primarily serious and understated music director. But whatever it is in the Ojai atmosphere that causes the mountains to turn pink at sunset may also incite strange neurochemical uninhibitors in the brains of introspective Nordic music directors. Eleven years ago, Esa-Pekka Salonen astonished a Sunday morning audience by hopping around in a bunny suit.

Andsnes' festival had a Scandinavian heart. The resident ensemble was the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. Contemporary composers from Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland were represented (although none was on hand). So perhaps it was only natural that the programming resembled a smorgasbord, or what the Norwegians call a *koldtbord*.

Andsnes gave an overriding impression of gracious generosity. It would be hard to count the portions of this four-day, nonstop feast. Dozens of works were played in morning, afternoon, evening and late-night concerts, and many works were broken up into little pieces and mixed around. The Scandinavian music was, in fact, but a small part of these far-flung, even farfetched, offerings.

Andsnes' generosity was not only of quantity and variety, but also in spirit. The artists he invited were little like him. Hamelin's transcendental technical virtuosity can make any pianist, even Andsnes, seem a slightly lesser master of the keyboard. The flamboyant Swedish clarinetist Martin Fröst, another amazing technical wizard, shamelessly did his best to steal any show in which he appeared. The over-employed Dutch mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotijn conveyed an old-fashioned Romanticism. The under-employed Dutch conductor and composer Reinbert de Leeuw is an agelessly hip, tough anti-Romantic.

Strangest of all was the versatile Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. How could you not like these eager musicians with such a fetching fashion sense? Every time they appeared, they had different outfits that ranged from sophisticated black to the adorable casual look of an orchestra out for a midsummer picnic. Playing Grieg's "Holberg" Suite Sunday morning, a bass player stepped forward and danced a silly rigaudon with his instrument.

Overall, Ojai's programming was conservative this year, and it was also a bit of a mess. There was an obsession with finding new bottles of every size, shape and material to give new context to old music. By the law of averages, some things had to work, given the collection of talent and the huge amount of material. And sure enough, every now and then over the weekend, something refreshingly unexpected happened, as with the string orchestra arrangements of Janáček's two striking string quartets.

The Second Quartet ("Intimate Letters") began the Friday night program. The arrangement by Terje Tonneson, a showy violinist who is the leader of the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, softened Janáček's hard edges. The playing was bloated and bland.

The next night, Tonneson's string arrangement of Janáček's First Quartet was the focus of a 10:30 p.m. program. The night had turned chilly, which, I doubt, was a problem for the Norwegians, but their intonation began to falter. The ensemble was

sloppy. The players obviously were tired. But none of that mattered. In fact, it helped what proved an inspired theatrical presentation.

Janáček's quartet is a musical depiction of Tolstoy's novella "The Kreutzer Sonata," which takes its title from a Beethoven violin sonata. A Norwegian actor, Teodor Janson, whose English is excellent, read engrossing excerpts from the novella, between (and sometimes during) movements of the quartet.

First, though, he interrupted an interpolated performance of Beethoven's sonata by Andsnes and a violinist in the orchestra, proclaiming that music is disgusting. This is a typical Tolstoy tale of betrayal, self-centeredness, abuse and murder, and Janson and the orchestra made it deliciously nasty.

The other big dramatic piece was De Leeuw's "Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai," an hour-long refashioning of Schubert and Schumann songs for the German actress Barbara Sukowa. But a family illness forced her to cancel. Lucy Shelton made a noble last-minute, Marlene Dietrich-style stab at this wrenching and arresting work Friday night, and De Leeuw conducted from the piano. But the players lacked the fire felt on his riveting Dutch recording of the piece.

On Sunday, though, the Norwegians came to life for De Leeuw, who led a ravishing performance of John Adams' early "Shaker Loops" — the best I've ever heard. Meanwhile the most effective performance by Stotijn was of Berg's neglected Four Songs, Opus 2.

The Scandinavian composers Andsnes selected all go in for sizzling sonic swooshes often used to transform other music. In a string orchestra piece, "Langsam und Schmachtend," Eivind Buene added a spectral Norwegian eeriness to Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde." Swedish composer Bent Sorensen's Piano Concerto No. 2 ("La Mattina"), written last year for Andsnes and given its U.S. premiere at Ojai, was inspired by Bach and got the swooshing treatment from the orchestra. The piano sonorities were gorgeous, if the concept unsurprising.

What to make of Fröst, who is a dancing clarinetist? In a shortened version of Anders Hillborg's clarinet concerto "Peacock Tales," the soloist was a masked satyr cavorting with licorice stick. Fröst moves extremely well and plays brilliantly, but his clichéd choreography ruins everything. So does his showoff-y rubato. He played and conducted Copland's Clarinet Concerto with moments of sublime sensitivity and, as Tolstoy would say, of disgusting insensitivity. The real surprise was his knack for conducting.

After wending its way through the smorgasbord that also had dishes of Kurtág, Schnittke, Mahler, Wagner, Berg, Beethoven, John Luther Adams, Haflidi Hallgrímsson (the Icelandic composer), Mozart, Bolcom, Liszt, Bartók and Debussy, the overstuffed festival made room for a two-piano transcription of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring." Hamelin played the first piano part fancifully. Andsnes made the second piano the rhythmic glue. It was a knockout. Then, with the smiles of a summer night, the clowns brought dessert.

An innovation this year was live video streaming of all the concerts. Most are supposed to appear, any minute now, in archived form on the Ojai Festival website. Next year Mark Morris will be music director and the music of John Cage and Lou Harrison will be featured.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-ojai-festival-review-20120612,0,5614256.story>