

Ojai Savors a Scandinavian Import: Long Musical Nights

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OJAI, Calif. — Bucolic settings have long been a major selling point of summer music festivals. There is something magical about hearing an orchestra in the outdoors, chamber music in a pavilion, or even an open-air opera. This is part of the appeal of the [Ojai Music Festival](#), which ran from Thursday through Sunday in the lovely Ojai Valley, north of Los Angeles. Most concerts are performed in the 1,000-seat open-air Libbey Bowl, adjacent to this charming town's park.

Of course the summer festivals that really matter offer more than natural settings. The fact that [Marlboro Music's](#) festival of chamber music takes place on the woodsy campus of a small college in rural Vermont, for example, has been central to its purpose — to bring master musicians together with emerging artists and even students. A teenage violinist and a cellist from a conservatory might find themselves working on a trio with the pianist Richard Goode. (In the old days, it would have been Rudolf Serkin, who came to personify the festival.) The Marlboro spirit stems from the performers' living together, eating together and spending summer weeks in the country far from the protocols of typical concert life.

The Ojai Music Festival, founded in 1947, has long made contemporary music central to its purpose. In early decades the music directors included Robert Craft, Stravinsky, Copland, Michael Tilson Thomas and Pierre Boulez. Older music is also performed at Ojai, but usually in the context of exploring new and recent works.

This purpose is enhanced not just by its natural setting but also by the brevity of the festival: four jam-packed days. Ojai offers curious music lovers a chance to immerse themselves in adventurous programs. All the concerts I went to were well attended, as were the preconcert talks and special panels.

The emphasis on new, recent and little-known music was maintained by the Norwegian pianist [Leif Ove Andsnes](#), this summer's music director. Mr. Andsnes used the opportunity to introduce Ojai audiences to many living Scandinavian composers and artists, including the excellent [Norwegian Chamber Orchestra](#). And why not?

The first of two programs on Saturday night showed his vision at its best. It began with a 1983 work by the Icelandic composer Haflidi Hallgrímsson, "Poemi," a 15-minute violin concerto in three connected movements, performed by the brilliant violinist Terje Tonnesen and the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Per Kristian Skjalstad. This shifting, mercurial work, alive with gurgling rhythmic figures and skittish violin bursts, was inspired by three Chagall paintings of Old Testament subjects.

Then Mr. Andsnes was the soloist with the orchestra in the American premiere of the Danish composer Bent Sorensen's Piano Concerto No. 2 ("La Mattina"), a 2009 work written for Mr. Andsnes. Structured in five continuous movements, the concerto begins with a hushed, almost lugubrious yet intense choralelike theme in the low register of the piano. The music unfolds with strange, angelic tinkling figures in the high strings and upper octaves of the piano, broken up with volleys of rhythmic energy. Piercing sustained chords alternate with curious passages of Bachlike counterpoint. Mr. Andsnes brought out the intricate textures and mystical allure of this wondrously soft-spoken piano concerto.

From his long association with the Risør Chamber Music Festival in Norway, Mr. Andsnes has come to think that no single performer or ensemble should dominate any program at a summer festival. So after intermission on Saturday, the program took a decisive turn.

First the dazzling, virtuosic Swedish clarinetist [Martin Frost](#) gave a tour-de-force performance of a work that has become his calling card: "Peacock Tales," by the Swedish composer Anders Hillborg. Written for clarinet and tape, this is a piece of performance art, an impish tale of vanity and pride in which Mr. Frost dispatched the stylistically eclectic music while prancing and dancing about the stage in costume and, at times, a peacock mask. Slender, agile and an impressive dancer, Mr. Frost gave a riveting performance.

Then Mr. Frost, Mr. Andsnes and the violist Antoine Tamestit played an elegant and articulate performance of Mozart's "Kegelstatt" Trio in E flat (K. 498). A Mozart trio? It somehow made sense. The same three players shifted directly from the Mozart to Gyorgy Kurtag's elusive, restless and epigrammatic "Hommage à Robert Schumann," composed in 1990, to end the program.

But this was not all. At 10:30 on Saturday night, the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra returned to play an arrangement by Mr. Tonnesen of Janacek's String Quartet No. 1 ("Kreutzer Sonata"). The piece is Janacek's musical evocation of Tolstoy's novella "The Kreutzer Sonata," a tale of a marriage in crisis and the impulsive murder of a wife by a jealous husband, who catches her with a seductive violinist. A compelling actor, Teodor Janson, read excerpts from the Tolstoy work between and sometimes during the movements of the Janacek. The complete performance lasted almost an hour and drew a large, enthusiastic audience.

Concerts at the Libbey Bowl require subtle amplification, which takes adjusting to. Still, I was struck again and again by the intensity of the audience's involvement. A [Saturday morning program](#) ended with Mr. Andsnes in a fleet, refined performance of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata, and during the slow movement he played whole stretches with extremely soft and controlled dynamics, as if determined to pull listeners in and turn the amplification into an advantage. It worked.

Along with the natural setting at Ojai come the creatures of nature. Sometimes, during the daytime concerts, chirping birds would land right onstage. During a talk on Thursday night, the percussionist Steven Schick, who had directed the exhilarating performance of [John Luther Adams's "Inuksuit,"](#) an environmental work played in Libbey Park by 45 wandering percussionists and three piccolo players, was asked whether the birds, the laughter of children at play and the chatting crowds in the park were a distraction to the performers.

Not at all, he said. In a way, he added, "we, the musicians, are the interlopers."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/13/arts/music/under-leif-ove-andsnes-ojai-festival-enjoys-long-scandinavian-nights.html>