

## Forget Mythology, It's Musicology As Witty Opera Fare

By Richard S. Ginell, June 17, 2014



Ojai, Calif. – When pianist-writer-wit [Jeremy Denk](#) first appeared at the [Ojai Music Festival](#) in 2009, he was virtually unknown. But he proved to be a terrific fit for this quirky, brainy, adventuresome little festival, and he was recruited as Ojai's music director for 2014 on the spot.

As things turned out, Ojai proved to be a significant springboard for Denk's career, which took off shortly after his appearances here. He returned over the past weekend as a rising star, with a good portion of the music world waiting with bated breath on Friday to see if he and composer [Steven Stucky](#) could turn a musicological book called [The Classical Style](#) into an opera. Well, why not? If [Stephen Sondheim](#) could make a Broadway musical out of a painting ([Sunday in the Park with George](#)) or [Philip Glass](#) could fashion symphonies out of [David Bowie](#) albums (the [Low](#) and [Heroes](#) Symphonies), no idea is too outlandish these days. Thus *The Classical Style: An Opera (Sort Of)*, a 75-minute romp of a comic opera with serious undertones by a couple of guys who love music and are not afraid to have fun with it.

Writing his first opera libretto, Denk seems to be hugely enjoying himself, firing off one contemporary reference and in-joke after another. He opens this fantasy in Heaven, where Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven – the Holy Trinity of classical-period geniuses – are playing Scrabble in German, fretting about the declining fortunes of classical music back on earth as reported in the *New York Times*. Haydn feels neglected; Mozart wants royalties from [Amadeus](#); Beethoven is grumpy, pompous. They think that [Charles Rosen](#), the late pianist-author of the book *The Classical Style*, understands them, and they want his reassurance that their music is still valuable and needed.

Rosen himself is a character, quoting sagely from his text as some of his concepts spring to life. The harmonic building blocks of classical-period music – Tonic, Dominant and Sub-Dominant – become real characters who behave in character; the needy Dominant pines after the one-track narcissist Tonic (his aria about “Me! Me! Me!” rivals [Nixon In China's](#) “News! News! News!”), who desires the sexy femme fatale Sub-Dominant. A nerdy musicology student named Snibblesworth intrudes upon the scene, getting involved in an off-and-on re-enactment of *Don Giovanni* – complete with a funny parody of Leporello's Catalog Aria – until he is unceremoniously dragged off to Hell. There are a few times when the musicological jargon gets to be too heavy going even for those in the loop. But you could rationalize that away if you consider that most operas are in foreign languages anyway.

Meanwhile Stucky – putting what he half-jokingly calls “those decades of teaching sophomore theory” at [Cornell](#) to good use – goes off on a spree, spraying mischievous quotes and parodies at us in a torrent

of bemused erudition. There is a music theory class in which Stucky follows Denk/Rosen's oration on sonata form in a virtual play-by-play commentary. Musical games abound: *Don Giovanni* morphs hilariously into Richard Strauss' *Don Juan* as the Don loses his desire; a character called Tristan Chord (Rosen with an eyepatch) does a wickedly grim parody of Wotan's monologue from *Die Walküre* with Sub-Dominant kneeling at his feet *à la* Brünnhilde. The opera ends not with a buffo finale, but with a scene of serious contemplation as Rosen and a kindly Robert Schumann wonder why styles go out of fashion as Stucky reverts to the dreamy clusters depicting Heaven with which he began Scene 1. Unlike, say, [Peter Schickele's P.D.Q. Bach](#) tomfooleries, which hit the audience on all levels of sophistication simultaneously, it seems to me that *The Classical Style* is mostly aimed very high. It was clearly a hit with Ojai's dotting audience and with at least one music critic who laughed his head off at many of the musical in-jokes while wondering whether anyone outside the town limits would get them. Given the reality of fading awareness of classical music in our culture – and Denk strikes a nerve when he brings it up in his libretto, even in jest – will this kind of an entertainment be less and less viable as the years pass, sort of like the classical style itself in the 19th century? Wouldn't that be ironic?

[Robert Spano](#), the Ojai Festival's music director in 2006, returned to lead New York's chamber orchestra collective [The Knights](#) with brio and a keen ear toward the score's plethora of jokes. [Mary Birnbaum](#) directed, placing The Knights at the rear of the stage, with a minimum of props up front like a bookcase ultimately doubling as a piano. A cast of eight talented singing actors doubled or tripled up on the many roles (the exception was tenor [Keith Jameson](#), whose Snibblesworth was his only part). A particularly versatile member of the cast was the dark-timbred mezzo-soprano [Peabody Southwell](#), who tripled in the roles of Sub-Dominant, a participant in the music theory class, and Schumann. The cast's diction was pretty clear a good deal of the time, but in order to get the most from Denk's clever libretto, you had to consult the supertitles on video monitors flanking the stage. Unfortunately, the layout in Ojai's tree-shaded [Libbey Bowl](#) is such that the supertitles were blocked from view for many in the lower section. That shouldn't be a problem in the venues where this opera is headed – Hertz Hall at UC Berkeley [June 19 and 20](#), Zankel Hall in New York's Carnegie Hall on [Dec. 4](#), and the Aspen Festival in 2015. Prior to intermission, four members of The Knights who double as the string quartet [Brooklyn Rider](#) raced through Haydn's String Quartet Op. 74, No. 3, as a kind of control sample of the classical style before it would be dissected. Of course, the Haydn quartet happens to bear the nickname, "The Rider."

*Richard S. Ginell writes regularly about music for the Los Angeles Times and is the Los Angeles correspondent for American Record Guide.*

# Los Angeles Times

Review

## 'Classical Style' at Ojai Music Festival draws on wit, wisdom

By [Mark Swed](#) June 17, 2014

OJAI — Charles Rosen's "The Classical Style" is an illuminating, academic, occasionally combative, close study of the musical style of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven by a brilliant pianist and scholar who died in 2012. Though a technical tome, it takes on big, universal issues and proved a surprise hit of 1971, winning a National Book Award and reaching a remarkably wide audience.

Rosen's 43-year-old book, never out of print, pulled a bigger surprise Friday as the subject for the first opera commissioned in the 68-year history of the Ojai Music Festival. The rules of musical form attempted a spectacularly absurd leap off the library shelf onto the lyric stage in the form of Steven Stucky's "The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)."

If this sounds like a somewhat ridiculous centerpiece for festival programming that revolved around issues of reinterpreting the Classical era (and will be reviewed further Tuesday), that of course was the point. The whole thing is so side-splitting that one rehearsal reportedly broke down when conductor Robert Spano had an uncontrollable laughing fit and had to be carried off the stage to recover.

He was entitled. "The Classical Style" is a mash-up of Glenn Gould at his most satirical, PDQ Bach at his sauciest and a distractedly erudite Rosen cooking up a French sauce while pontificating on harmonic structure in his kitchen. But underlying the jokes (good ones and the groaners) and tomfoolery, Stucky's resourceful score and Denk's droll text produce an ingeniously eloquent musing on the meaning of life.

On the surface, "The Classical Style" is a supercilious opera of sorts about death. It opens in heaven, with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven playing Scrabble and squabbling like sitcom characters. They are dismayed by newspaper reports of the death of classical music and their own apparent irrelevance. They get wind of Rosen's book and go looking for him for advice.

The composers turn up at a bar, where they encounter Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant, personifications of musical chords, carrying on. Tonic, the home key, is a grand narcissist. Dominant, harmonically the closest key, is the needy one in the relationship, always dependent upon resolving on the tonic. Sultry Subdominant is the sexy harmonic diversion. Mozart makes a beeline to her.

We get witty harmony lessons. Sonata form, the most important organizing principle of 18th century music, is sung about at a musicology conference.

A sniveling PhD candidate in the music department at UC Berkeley, Henry Snibblesworth, stumbles into the opening scene of "Don Giovanni." His theorizing deflates the Don, who then loses his desire for Donna Anna and thus has no need to kill her father, the Commendatore. He, then, is stuck needing to figure out what to do with his life. Snibblesworth offers him a job at Cal, but the benefits aren't so attractive these days.

The "Tristan" chord, the unresolvable chord Wagner invented, walks into the bar, a sinister stranger dressed as a cockeyed Wotan. Music of the future, he warns, will require an uncertainty principle.

Rosen can't help. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven return to heaven unfulfilled. Musical styles, we must accept, can mean something to us only if they function like living processes. But to live, styles must also die.

The opera ends with a visit by Robert Schumann to Rosen. A controversial thesis of Rosen's book is that Beethoven's visionary late music was not ahead of its time but rather the fulfillment of the Classical style, taking its implications to their ultimate conclusion. Schumann represented a new departure.

This is Stucky's first opera. In his two-decade association with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he proved himself a consummate composer of instrumental music. He has a gift for lyricism, exquisite coloration and supple forms. He sometimes reflects on composers of the past.

All of that is characteristic of Stucky's score to "The Classical Style," but a good deal of the Stucky style here is necessarily a pastiche. He subtly interweaves quotes of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven with made-up classical riffs and elements of Stucky's own music, adeptly moving us not only back and forth through history but also through reality and fantasy. There are musical jokes aplenty, some intended for a general audience, wonkier ones setting traps for Spano.

In the end Spano led a finely nuanced performance that featured the Knights, the orchestra from New York that is this year's resident band for the festival, and an excellent eight-member cast assuming 18 roles. Among them were Dominic Armstrong (Haydn and the bartender), Jennifer Zetlan (Mozart and Donna Anna), Ashraf Sewailam (Beethoven and the Commendatore), Aubrey Allicock (Tonic and Don Giovanni), Kim Josephson (Rosen and the Tristan Chord), Peabody Southwell (Subdominant and Schumann) and Keith Jameson (Snibblesworth). Making Mozart and Schumann pants roles sung by mezzo-sopranos proved a touching touch.

Unfortunately Mary Birnbaum's production at the Libbey Bowl, while engaging, made silliness an enduring priority. Melissa Trn's costumes had a Halloween flavor. Postmodernism was not invited to the party.

That allowed for little room to follow Denk and Stucky into the deeper regions that the opera unexpectedly reaches at the end. If Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven are inane in death, that is because they are dead. The profundity of "The Classical Style," on page and stage, is that we can, with historical hindsight, understand them in death,

But where does a new style come from?

Birth, not death, is music's — and hence life's — greater mystery. Schumann makes the final entrance, transforming Beethoven, a new life with Beethoven's DNA.

Like all births, there is something new in the room that wasn't there before. For Stucky and Denk, this is a fleeting instant of transcendence, namely a miracle.

# Los Angeles Times

## Review

### At the Ojai Music Festival, Classical style takes a turn

By [Mark Swed](#) June 16, 2014

(Ojai) -- The town of Ojai, a place of wonder, is changing, as places of wonder do. It's become a little fancier, worldlier, but only a little. It's still unsullied Ojai, where the Pink Moment transforms dusk into a transient psychedelic experience.

The Ojai Music Festival is changing too. It's grown, become a bit fancier and worldlier, as festivals of wonder seem to do.

This year's festival, the 68th, ran Thursday through Sunday. Pianist Jeremy Denk, one of the field's most deserving fast-rising stars, served as music director. He hosted the classics, more of them than typical for an idiosyncratic festival known for venturing far from the standard repertory.

Commonly played pieces by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann were given pride of place. But the playing wasn't common. Nor was the context, which essentially served to add its own Pink Moment colorization of classical traditions.

As already reported, the event of the festival was the Friday night premiere of Steven Stucky's marvelous comic opera, "The Classical Style," with a libretto by Denk that was improbably inspired by pianist Charles Rosen's classic analytical study. The opera pokes delightful fun at Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, but it also cunningly ponders why millions of us music lovers are drawn to live modern lives in the thrall of centuries-old music.

During a closing trio of the opera, the three composers sing: "We imagine ourselves able to revive the past through its art. For this illusion of reliving history, the style must be prevented from becoming truly alive once again."

So where do we go from there? What is old, and what is new? What is liberation and what, despoilment? The rest of this Denkfest was a quirky consideration of those implied questions.

The Ojai Festival itself has expanded to the point that Ojai becomes no longer an environment to be absorbed but a place to be on the go. Saturday, the busiest day, offered concerts at sunrise, midday, early evening, evening, late night and past midnight. An afternoon screening of Peter Bergman's "The Magic Flute" was also provided for those with little patience for a moment in glorious natural surroundings or a ramble through Bart's Books. And nearly all the concerts are streamed live and then archived on the festival website.

The range of music was considerable, with the earliest work by Josquin des Prez from 1515. There were recent pieces by young composers Timo Andres and Andrew Norman. Jazz pianist Uri Caine reworked

Mahler, Gershwin and Bach with his ensemble. The superb vocal quartet Hudson Shad was on hand. The scrappy house orchestra was the Knights from Brooklyn, along with its affiliated string quartet, Brooklyn Rider.

So where do we go from there? What is old, and what is new? What is liberation and what, despoilment?

Morton Feldman's unearthly "Rothko Chapel," conducted by Robert Spano in a near midnight chill under a full moon, was a highlight despite a wan solo viola. At the other extreme was one of Mozart's smutty scatological canons lustily sung by Hudson Shad the next morning. Storm Large was soloist in Kurt Weill's "Seven Deadly Sins," giving the gleeful impression of being better attuned to the subject matter than well tuned.

Although it was Denk's festival, he remained above much of the messy fray he had set into motion along with the festival's artistic director, Thomas W. Morris.

The pianist opened the festival Thursday night by meeting the sylvan setting surrounding Libbey Bowl with what he called a mix tape of slight Schubert dances with numbers from Leos Janáček's piano cycle, "On the Overgrown Path."

In the circumstance of moving back and forth between polite early 18th century Viennese court dances and startling evocations of the Czech countryside a century later, Schubert started to gain an edge and Janáček lose a little of his. The middle ground was unsettling, a new landscape.

Denk helped close the festival Sunday evening by playing the first two books of Hungarian avant-gardist György Ligeti's late 20th century etudes, with their startling metallic sound effects and fabulously difficult rhythms. Denk's virtuosity is a thrill, killing and enlivening tradition at the same instant.

Denk is devoted to Charles Ives, and he devoted Saturday morning to Ives' four violin sonatas, which he played with violinist Jennifer Frautschi. In these early 20th century scores, Ives transforms old hymn tunes into excitedly original elicitations of messy modern life. The male quartet Hudson Shad sang the hymns for context. Denk and Frautschi provided noble classical grandeur.

But transformations of the classical style weren't always on such high grounds. Caine, who had once created revelations of Mahlerian jazz excess, has gotten stale, and his band is no longer a sensation. The Knights, once a rough ensemble, remains rough. In performances led by the group's co-founder, Eric Jacobsen, there was little atmosphere in Ives' "Three Pieces in New England" on Saturday night, and a performance of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony on Sunday morning verged on the amateurish.

Storm Large and the band seemed to hit it off in Weill's "Seven Deadly Sins," but when Andres played his "re-composition" of Mozart's "Coronation" Concerto, adding a left-hand part to the piano solo in a lively non-Mozartean style, the Knights often veered the wrong way.

The festival ended with Beethoven's Choral Fantasy featuring Denk, the Ojai Festival Singers and the Knights. It opens with a long piano solo, which Beethoven had originally improvised and which Denk

made sound spontaneous, not reliving history but partaking of it. He did not look pleased when the Knights entered flabbily.

But it was a lesson in context. What the Knights and Brooklyn Rider (which played Haydn's "Rider" Quartet as a curtain-raiser for the opera Friday) do offer is a contemporary sound and approach. The players emphasize the beat, four-bar phrasing and instant gratification climaxes in the manner of much 21st century popular music. Every moment is a Pink Moment.

The Knights advertises itself with a *Los Angeles Times* quote, stating that these musicians "are at the forefront of 'the future of classical music in America.' "

What I wrote in 2010, in a decidedly mixed CD review, is that "if we are going to talk about the future of classical music in America, sooner or later the Knights will come up."

Denk's opera libretto makes clear, no one owns the Classical style any longer. But in 2014, not only Classical style but all else is clearly in the eye — and ear — of the beholder.

Copyright © 2014, [Los Angeles Times](#)

**REVIEWS**

## ***Denk Soup* Opens at Ojai**

June 20, 2014 | By Rick Schultz, *MusicalAmerica.com*



OJAI, CA--Steven Stucky and Jeremy Denk's frenetic *The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)* received its premiere on June 13 in a semi-staging at the Ojai Music Festival. Billed as the first opera commissioned in the 68-year-history of the festival, it is not truly an opera, though it does parody the genre. It is something less grand, more accurately an operetta or *singspiel*.

Denk, a remarkable pianist and writer who was the festival's music director this year [and *Musical America's* Instrumentalist of the Year], based his libretto on the late pianist-scholar Charles Rosen's 1971 book *The Classical Style*, an award-winning study of the music and musical structures of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. This is Denk's first stint as a librettist, though *Romeo and Juilliard: a tragedy in 5 acts* appeared in 2007 on his blog, *Think Denk*. It's also composer Stucky's first opera (of sorts).

At 75 minutes, *The Classical Style* is not much longer than the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*. Call it *Denk Soup*, rife with in-jokes for music and film connoisseurs, anachronistic references, and skits satirizing the field of musicology, with eight singers playing multiple roles.

In a symposium before the premiere, Denk and Stucky acknowledged that they were flying their nerd flags proudly. Denk called his effort, "Music Theory 101 made into an opera." Yet he makes a brave attempt to keep things comprehensible to casual listeners.

It's a worthy goal, trying to sustain an anti-academic satire that's not anti-intellectual. But *The Classical Style* is never quite as light and fleet as it should be. It's overlong and overstuffed, and though witty and clever in spots, its largely cerebral humor is never laugh-out-loud funny.

The plot, such as it is, begins in heaven with Haydn complaining he's never had a movie made about him, Mozart whining about not having the rights to *Amadeus*, and Beethoven pondering a game of Scrabble. Bored, this titanic triumvirate fear classical music is dying and with it their legacies. So they go in search of Rosen, a man who understands their achievements.



Some of the comedy comes out of their battle of egos, with Beethoven announcing to Haydn and Mozart that neither remotely equaled "the profundity I achieved in Für Elise." First seen in an apron preparing dinner, the erudite Rosen, brilliantly embodied by baritone Kim Josephson, sings of tonality and "a new emphatic polarity between tonic and dominant."

The proceedings get even wackier: Tonic, Dominant and Sub-Dominant--opera buffa characters here--walk into a bar. Denk cleverly imagines them as a co-dependent love triangle. Among director Mary Birnbaum's contributions is making Tonic a slick narcissist, who arrives onstage to the tempo marking "Allegro pomposo." Don Giovanni makes a few appearances, and there's a satisfying moment when he drags Snibblesworth, a fatuous U.C. Berkeley musicology student of Richard Taruskin's, down to hell.

But these are sitcom moments, good for about a half hour of amusement. Rosen is the only real character in the story, and Denk honors him perhaps too well when he has him lecture, "Mozart is the first composer consistently to use the subdominant with a full sense of its relaxation of long-range harmonic tension."

Lines like that, and there are many, are the stuff seminars are made of, and they hamper the work's ability to build dramatically. By the time we get to the lengthy fifth scene, in which Mozart asks, "Do we at last understand sonata form?," it's hard to care. We can only sit back and enjoy the pleasantly nostalgic backdrop offered by Stucky's well-crafted and wide-ranging score, which employs faux 18th-century music up to Strauss and Stucky himself. Throughout, conductor Robert Spano showed the Knights, the festival's "resident" orchestra, at their transparent best.

Though Denk amusingly turns the Tristan Chord (Josephson again, with a Wotan-like eye patch) into a moody, self-pitying character ("Oh, I am the saddest of all chords!") in the penultimate scene, it doesn't sufficiently prepare for the opera's faux poignant ending, as Schumann, representing the coming of Romanticism, appears before Rosen, lamenting the necessary death of the Classical style. In an abrupt shift from broad comedy to the seriously personal, Schumann points out the obvious -- "For we cannot repeat the same forms for centuries."

A jarring moment occurs in this final scene: after dealing with the whining Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, Rosen tells Schumann: "I hate to say it, but you're much more emotionally well adjusted." It's an obvious joke, since Schumann was famously unstable, but it's out of character for Rosen, who generally serves as the straight man, anchoring all the exhausting madcap inventions surrounding him.

A full staging of the opera may improve the audience's experience, but the libretto and score would benefit from a good edit. Someone suggested that *The Classical Style* might eventually prove an effective teaching tool for college audiences. For now, however, it's not quite a night at the opera.

(*The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)* plays at Hertz Hall at UC Berkeley June 20, then to Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall on Dec. 4. Its first fully staged performance is scheduled at the Aspen Festival in 2015.)

A serious theme, the wartime depopulation of France, is belied by the score's music-hall frivolities and the nonsensical action. The message, as stated by the Theatre Manager (a solid Anthony Clark Evans) at the beginning and the full ensemble of ten singers at the end, is for the audience to go home and make children. But since our heroine, Thérèse, wants to make war, not babies, her exasperated husband (Will Liverman, impeccable in his comic timing) is forced to make them all by himself. Such is his skill that he produces 40,049 in a single day.

The price to be paid for dispensing with sets, costumes, props and most of the detailed stage movements indicated in the text was that the non-Francophone audience had trouble figuring out the surreal plot as it breezed past. Fortunately the singers sang and acted so engagingly that the charming essence of the piece came through. Hlengiwe Mkwanazi brought a bright, billowing soprano to the title role. Richard Ollarsaba stood out as the randy Policeman, and there were enjoyable performances from Jesse Donner, Jonathan Johnson, Bradley Smoak, J'nai Bridges and Julie Anne Miller. JOHN VON RHEIN

## Los Angeles

The LOS ANGELES PHILHARMONIC presented a semi-staged version of *Così fan tutte* as the finale of its three-year Mozart-Da Ponte survey (May 23). In collaboration with the architect Zaha Hadid, Christopher Alden made the work's drama clear and even occasionally visceral—no small feat—and he was helped immensely by the costumes of Hussein Chalayan. Each of the outfits worn by the two couples shifted or transformed at different points, showing the different layers of the characters, all while making the pairs of young lovers look stylish and attractive.

Of course, the fact that the costumes were draped on six excellent singers didn't hurt either. Rod Gilfry was deliciously evil as Don Alfonso, and Rosemary Joshua left you wanting Despina's role to be larger thanks to her penetrating performance. Alek Shrader and Philippe Sly were strong vocally as Ferrando and Guglielmo, the only quibble being that they occasionally seemed hard to differentiate dramatically. This was the real success of Miah Persson's Fiordiligi and Roxana Constantinescu's Dorabella. Both radiated sexuality and sweetness, but their singing (even more than their acting) brought out the different shades of their characters.

Gustavo Dudamel's conducting in this final opera of the cycle was far more accomplished than it had been in the previous two (and he even sang a line in Act 2). The tempos were still unpredictable throughout (sluggish overture but rousing military chorus?), but while the young maestro still doesn't bring much illumination to these operas, with *Così* he brought greater detail to several of the numbers, and the music as a whole felt more of a piece than it had in *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*.

Shortly before this, two productions new to LOS ANGELES OPERA showed Massenet's *Thaïs* and Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire* in a new light. Nicola Raab's production of *Thaïs* (from Gothenburg Opera; see June 2013, p. 752) sets the story of a repressed monk and a religiously inclined courtesan in an eroticized world of theatre: *Thaïs* is now a showgirl, Alexandria is a cabaret. The sets and costumes by Johan Engels are just opulent enough to flatter the eye and just ugly enough to reveal the decadence of it all. The most striking costume is the bird gown for *Thaïs*'s entrance, and Nino Machaidze filled out both the feathers and vocal demands of the role in fine fashion. She wielded her oversized soprano seemingly without care, nailing big notes and making grand gestures. It worked,

but it was unsubtle. Sadly, Athanaël is a role in which Plácido Domingo's particular baritenor vocal stylings don't quite work; the combination of French diction and lighter melodies proved problematic. Dramatically, though, the tortured monk's angst was right up Domingo's street, and there was real chemistry between him and Machaidze. The third principal, Paul Groves, was a flamboyant Nicias, and on the first night (May 17) everyone performed with energy under the conductor Patrick Fournillier.

In full productions or traditional concert performances, André Previn's 1998 adaptation of Tennessee Williams can feel both inert and unnecessary. But Brad Dalton's semi-staging (first seen at London's Barbican Centre in 2003) gave the opera a focused, chamber feel, which helped connect the less-than-grand music to the action (May 18). Renée Fleming, 16 years after the work's premiere in San Francisco, brings even more pathos and insight to the role of Blanche. Ryan McKinny smouldered as Stanley, Stacey Tappan was a convincing and well-sung Stella, and Anthony Dean Griffey as Mitch (a role he created) sang beautifully. Evan Rogister kept Previn's music moving fast, always emphasizing action over beauty. The result: instead of dreading another performance of *Streetcar*, I'm curious to hear how a soprano other than Fleming (the only singer thus far to perform Previn's Blanche) might interpret this role.

JAMES C. TAYLOR

## Ojai

The pianist, occasional *New Yorker* contributor and, now, librettist Jeremy Denk has subtitled *The Classical Style*, which he has written with the composer Steven Stucky, 'An Opera (of Sorts)'. He also jokes that it is the first opera about musicology. He's wrong on both counts. Not only is it genuine opera, but there is a tradition, particularly in the American avant garde, of making performance pieces about musical process and

about music history, such as Robert Ashley's *Yes, But is it Edible?* Even so, *The Classical Style*, which was premiered at the OJAI MUSIC FESTIVAL on June 14, comes from an unlikely source—Charles Rosen's scholarly study of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, published in 1971. And what Stucky and Denk have come up with is a wildly inventive and side-splitting 70-minute farce that ultimately delves into the reasons why classical music has retained its hold over the centuries. It is also a moving, if sassy, tribute to Rosen, who gave his blessing to the project shortly before his death at the end of 2012.

■ Jennifer Zetlan (*Mozart*), Ashraf Sewailam (*Beethoven*) and Dominic Armstrong (*Haydn*) in the Ojai premiere of Steven Stucky's *The Classical Style*



The opera begins with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven in heaven playing scrabble and getting on each other's nerves. They learn from a celestially delivered copy of the *New York Times* that classical music is in trouble and fret over their legacies. Perhaps Rosen, who seems to have understood them better than anyone else over the centuries, could help. They return to earth to find him. The composers land in a bar, where the regulars are personifications of chords—the egotistical Tonic, the needy Dominant and the sultry Subdominant. Having always had a thing for subdominant harmonies, Mozart cosies up to her, certain that they could make beautiful music together. A mysterious wanderer, the Tristan Chord, enters and ruins the mood, foretelling the end of the world as these tonal chords know it.

The composers stumble into a symposium at U.C. Berkeley where sonata form is being examined and where they encounter a maladroit musicologist, Henry Snibblesworth. In one of the opera's most absurd moments, Snibblesworth blunders into the opening scene of *Don Giovanni*. The musicologist deflates Giovanni's libido by informing him about the key structure of the melodic line he is about to sing to Donna Anna. That prevents her rape and consequently the killing of the Commendatore, but it leaves Donna Anna with nothing to do other than go to bed and the Commendatore with having to figure out what to do with the rest of his life.

No one, other than the annoying Snibblesworth, accepts that the dead composers are anything but oddballs in bad Hallowe'en costumes. They burst into Rosen's apartment as he is having dinner with a student and carrying on as elatedly about the extraordinary development of the Classical style as if it were a living organism or a great meal. He dispatches them back to heaven disappointed. The end of the opera turns suddenly wistful.

A revelation in Rosen's book was that Beethoven's late music did not so much herald a visionary path for future music as realize the ultimate fulfilment of the Classical style. Like all things, styles must die. The more profound mystery, Rosen posits, is the miracle of birth. Where do new styles come from? Robert Schumann is Rosen's last visitor. He sits down at the piano and transforms a song from Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* into his own Fantasy in C. It is a beautiful, haunting moment: the miraculous dawn of a new age.

This is Stucky's first opera; the 64-year-old, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer is best known for his exquisitely coloured orchestral scores. But he takes to the lyric stage with ease. His vocal writing is graceful. His score contains much playful pastiche, with loving and/or ironic references to pieces by composers from Haydn to Strauss. Like Mozart, he has a thing for the subdominant, which gives the score a warm glow. The challenges can be considerable, such as when he has to explicate academic discussions of sonata form with traditional, yet still engaging, musical examples. He also goes between tonal harmonies and a more modern style recognizably his own, to indicate the shifts between our world and that of the 18th and 19th centuries.

This was the first time this annual four-day festival had commissioned an opera in its 68-year history. But Ojai, hidden away in the glorious hills a 90-minute drive north of Los Angeles, has a long history of hospitality to new music. Stravinsky held forth here in the 1960s. Boulez was once a regular. This year Denk was the festival music director, and he based his programming around the Classical style and its reinvention. Unfortunately, though, the outdoor LIBBEY BOWL has terrible sightlines. In this case, the less that could be seen the better, what with Mary Birbaum's slapstick staging and Melissa Trn's ridiculous costumes. But the performance was superb. Eight singers took on 17 roles, often having to shift between characters with split-second comedic timing. Jennifer Zetlan (soprano) was a plucky Mozart, Keith Jameson (tenor) a hilarious Snibblesworth and Kim Josephson (baritone) a sympathetic Rosen. Haydn was the tenor Dominic Armstrong, and the bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam sang the humourless Beethoven. Peabody Southwell (mezzo) was the sexy Subdominant, Aubrey Allicock (bass-baritone) the over-the-top Tonic, and Rachel Calloway (mezzo) the whiny Dominant. Robert Spano conducted The Knights, a New York chamber orchestra, enthusiastically.

MARK SWED

## St Louis

As a first-time visitor to the OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS, I came away from three performances impressed with its high musical standards and the sheer pleasure and comfort of attending opera in the wrap-around theatre of the LORETTO-HILTON CENTER, on Webster University's lush campus.

Ricky Ian Gordon's *A Coffin in Texas* at Opera Philadelphia the previous week had left me indifferent, but I enjoyed encountering the far more pleasant 90 minutes of his 27 (June 17). Gordon seems fatally hooked on post-Coplandesque nostalgic wash, yet the opera (to Royce Vavrek's libretto, signally more inventive and more Gertrude Steinian than its musical complement) succeeds as a tribute in fantasia form to one of American culture's most notable same-sex unions, that of Stein and Alice B. Toklas. The artists with whom Stein and Toklas associate (including Matisse, Picasso, Man Ray, Hemingway and Fitzgerald) are enjoyable caricatures. All the minor figures, plus Stein's brother Leo and (intriguingly) the canvases on the couple's walls at 27, rue de Fleurus, are assigned to three male singers. Robinson's clever production lent the



**Royal Academy of Music**  
specialist and intensive two-year postgraduate opera course

'...once again I wish that the Academy's operatic efforts could be preserved on film'  
The Spectator, May 2013

Puccini *Suor Angelica* / Gianni Schicchi  
November 2014  
Peter Robinson conductor / Will Kerley director

Stravinsky *The Rake's Progress*  
Spring 2015  
Jene Glover conductor / John Ramster director

Marylebone Road, London NW1 5HT  
www.ram.ac.uk/opera





Okulitch and Rishoi in Cincinnati's *Carmen*

provided delightful choreography for the tavern scene and before the bullfight in the final act, a bright moment leading up to the stark conclusion. It is a luxury to have the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in the pit. They were a tremendously exciting presence in the opening of Act II; unfortunately, their delicate playing of the atmospheric entr'acte opening Act III was compromised by a talkative audience.

The production, originated by Florida Grand Opera and borrowed from Atlanta, was rather plain, with those enormous walls angled at each side of the stage. For each act, that basic unit was accessorized with beams, platforms and stairs to suggest each location. The result often left a relatively small performing area, which usually appeared crowded. It was most effective for Act IV, during which the final tragedy unfolded in an open space. Gauthier's generally unobtrusive direction occasionally raised some questions — e.g., why was a nun playing the guitar in Lillas Pastia's tavern? JOE LAW

### OJAI, CA

An opera in which musicologist Charles Rosen is the hero and his celebrated magnum opus, *The Classical Style*, is the main object of attention sounded like a rather improbable undertaking. This much was clear from the talks and inter-

views preceding the world premiere of Steven Stucky and Jeremy Denk's work *The Classical Style: An Opera (of sorts)* at this year's Ojai Festival (seen June 13). Stucky evidently had his doubts, but Denk's witty libretto swayed him.

*The Classical Style* is a free-ranging, often bizarre fantasy in which Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, ensconced in boredom in Heaven, become panicked by reports of a decline of interest in classical music on Earth and a perception that human audiences find their music stale. After reading Rosen's *Classical Style*, they descend to Earth and only manage to make contact with the author after enduring an excruciating musicological symposium at UC Berkeley. Once they meet with Rosen, he persuades them that it is inevitable that their music, indisputably great as it is, *must* grow out of fashion. The "Big Three" return to Heaven, and the opera ends with Rosen quietly meditating, in the company of Robert Schumann, on the inevitability of change in music. The plot is enlivened by multiple farcical episodes, including some bar scenes (in both senses of the word) in which the characters Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant try to resolve their rather squalid emotional dependency on each other.

At times the performance veered close to the sophomoric humor of an end-of-year fraternity or sorority review, but it

never arrived there. The opera is hugely entertaining, not least because Steven Stucky is a parodist of genius whose knowledge of the language of classical music over the past 250 years is astoundingly detailed and seemingly infinite. The majority of the score is based on the music of the Big Three, and Stucky was clearly most at ease and enjoying himself as he parodied Mozart. A revenge aria, in which Mozart inveighs against Hollywood producers for not paying him royalties for *Amadeus*, and a hilarious satire of contemporary musicology, based on the catalogue aria, are masterpieces of parody. The score refers most frequently to *Don Giovanni* but is shot through with allusions to *Così*, *Fidelio* and a whole range of classical orchestral works. We were persistently reminded, in the orchestra and vocal lines, of works that dissolved classicism, above all those by Wagner and Richard Strauss. The key scene came when a shabby old man with a patch over his eye shuffled onstage and, in a dark parody of Wotan's monologue from *Die Walküre* to the accompaniment of *Tristan* chords, foretold the trackless chaos that music faces once classical tonality has been dissolved. This was not just parody but powerfully symbolic dramatic action. It heralded in a tone of seriousness, modulating toward the sublime, in which the Big Three, kindly admonished by Rosen, accept that all things change, and nothing can



*The Classical Style* in Ojai, with Zetlan, Josephson, Sewailam and Armstrong



be relevant forever. It was an ending that touched tragedy.

*The Classical Style* received a wonderfully lively and energetic first performance from a cast of eight who played eighteen roles. Kim Josephson, as Charles Rosen (and Wotan), was the still, dignified center of the riotous action; Dominic Armstrong, Jennifer Zetlan and Ashraf Sewailam played Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, respectively, initially in comic-book fashion, later in performances touched with pathos; Aubrey Allcock, Rachel Calloway and Peabody Southwell were gloriously self-indulgent as Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant, providing a most enlightening lesson in the nature of tonality and the mutual dependency of chords. Keith Jameson played the musicologist, Snibblesworth, the butt of everybody's humor, with infuriating versatility. Robert Spano conducted that wonderful New York ensemble the Knights with a thoroughness and gusto that elicited the rich allusiveness of Stucky's score.

As the orchestra had to be accommodated onstage, director Mary Birnbaum had only the front ten feet or so of the Libby Bowl stage on which to block the production, which led to a highlighting of the more farcical and parodic aspects of the action. Perhaps future productions, of which there should be many, may take place with the orchestra in its pit and a greater degree of scenic illusion onstage. When that happens, the moving, consequential aspects of this highly effective piece of theater may come more to the fore.

SIMON WILLIAMS

## SAN FRANCISCO

The high point of San Francisco's summer opera season wasn't at the War Memorial Opera House but just across the street at Davies Symphony Hall, where Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony capped their season-ending Britten Centennial Celebration with the composer's *Peter Grimes*. On June 26, the first of three performances, Tilson Thomas led his fine-tuned orchestra, a superb chorus of more than 100 voices and a red-blooded cast of singing actors in a thrilling semi-

staged realization of Britten's 1945 masterpiece. Stage director James Darrah, who also designed the effective nineteenth-century-style costumes, employed an elegant, flowing movement scheme, bringing singers on and off from the wings, through the audience, and down from upper tiers. Every detail of the show was thoughtfully conceived. Cameron Jaye Mock's scenic and lighting designs included a black thrust platform extending beyond the lip of the stage, giving the singers ample playing space in front of the podium; Adam Larsen's images of the fog-swept Suffolk village and the pitiless sea were projected on large curved screens wrapped around the stage behind the orchestra.

Stuart Skelton's magnetic performance captured Grimes's blunt, looming physicality and wounded fragility in



Van den Heever and Skelton in *Peter Grimes* for San Francisco Symphony

equal measure. Skelton's tenor is astonishingly virile — stunning in its power at forte, softly sensitive in “Now the Great Bear and Pleiades” and honeyed in the lyrical passages describing his dream of love for Ellen Orford. His early scenes projected a blunt, defiant misanthrope given to quicksilver flashes of rage, and his final scene — a wrenching descent into madness — was shattering. Soprano Elza van den Heever was a brilliant Ellen, deploying her focused, penetrating instrument with urgency upon discovering the Boy's bruises in Act II, and

singing with ineffable beauty and poignancy in the embroidery aria.

The supporting cast was uniformly strong in its suggestion of the town's mix of “hot desires” and censorious blame. Alan Opie's large, sturdy baritone was an asset for the role of the retired sea captain Balstrode. Baritone Eugene Brancoveanu made a fine showing as an articulate, insinuating Ned Keene, and bass-baritone John Relyea was a nimble, resonant Mr. Swallow. Ann Murray's Auntie, with Nikki Einfeld and Abigail Nims as the First and Second Nieces, blended beautifully with van den Heever in the women's quartet, and Nancy Maultsby lent Mrs. Sedley an apt mix of acid and pathos. Richard Cox (Bob Boles), Kim Begley (Horace Adams) and Kevin Langan (Hobson) sang with distinction. Rafael Karpa-Wilson was a tender Boy.

Ragnar Bohlin's chorus sang with admirable unity and raw, hair-raising power.

At the center of it all was Tilson Thomas, whose forays into semi-staged performances in recent years — *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Fidelio* among them — have affirmed his credentials in opera. Even so, this performance was extraordinary. The conductor strove for, and achieved, remarkable clarity from his players, illuminating the nuance and unrelenting invention in Britten's majestic score and supporting the singers throughout. The ebb and flow of the interludes came across with stark specificity, and the ensemble numbers roared. At the end of the performance, the conductor and his forces assembled onstage, and the audience roared back its approval. Tilson Thomas turned to the audience, looking slightly dazed. He'd just been through a once-in-a-lifetime experience. So had the audience. It was an unforgettable night.

GEORGIA ROWE

□ Much of the intermission buzz at San Francisco Opera's June 15 performance of *Madama Butterfly* had to do with the colorful, eye-catching production



## Adventurous night at the Ojai Music Festival

***Music director Jeremy Denk lets the pieces just fly by.***

**BY TIMOTHY MANGAN** / CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

*Published: June 13, 2014*



The opening concert of the 68th annual Ojai Music Festival, held in cool conditions on a moonlit Thursday night in Libbey Bowl, was typical of this atypically adventurous event in many ways. As a listener sat through it, his mind was at work, trying to make sense of what he was hearing and not quite succeeding. The program notes for the concert said it was about something to do with the difference between “memory” and “remembering,” and he didn’t understand that, either.

But one learns to go with the flow at the Ojai festival pretty quickly or get lost. Or maybe getting lost is the point. At any rate, this listener finally decided, after longer than you’d think, that the best way to digest the information that was overloading his ears was just to sit back and let it come, turn off (at least part of) the brain and enjoy.

The pianist, writer, Avery Fisher Prize-winning and newly minted MacArthur Foundation “genius” Jeremy Denk is this year’s music director, and he began the concert with a half-recital of music by Schubert and Janáček. In brief opening remarks, he called the collection of pieces he was about to play a kind of “iPod shuffle of Eastern European anxieties.” He then performed them without pause, juxtaposing short works by Schubert – several Ländler (a country dance in 3/4 time), two of the “Moment Musicaux,” a couple of others – with selections from Janáček’s “On an Overgrown Path.”

In the continuous 30-minute stream of music, it was sometimes difficult to tell who was who and what was what until, of course, Janáček interposed with a decidedly early 20th century harmony. But expressively, there was but a hair’s breadth difference between the two composers (at least in the music performed here) and Denk made the connection closer, by slamming pieces together that shared a particular harmonic sequence, or melodic shape, or rhythmic profile.

It was a lovely, wistful and nostalgic sequence, and yet Denk kept a firm hand on the wheel, never dawdling over the material and dispatching it with a kind of Bachian sense of counterpoint and line.

After intermission came Uri Caine, a jazz pianist who, among other things, spends part of his time reimagining the music of classical composers. He’s no Claude Bolling. Here, with an ensemble that

included drums and bass, violin, trumpet and clarinet, as well as a record-spinning DJ, he reimagined the music of none other than Gustav Mahler, specifically excerpts from the symphonies and songs. It wasn't as bad as you'd think. In fact, it wasn't bad at all.

The music unfurled in a continuous hour, cacophonous, wild, tender, comical and grandiose. The effect, at times, was of avant-garde collage, the elements of Mahler roiling in a teeming soup of improvisation and free-swinging virtuosity. At others, the musicians came together (how was hard to figure) and the music became almost a straight transliteration of the Mahler original. At others still, Mahler hovered without anchor, turning in space.

Throughout it all, Caine pounded away relentlessly at the keyboard and drummer Jim Black drove it on with jagged glee. Trumpeter Ralph Alessi, with a heavy load, showed plenty of stamina and tinged Mahler with a bluesy style. DJ Olive calmly selected records to spin and added delicate sound effects, the voice of an emotional Ingrid Bergman in the Adagietto of Mahler's Fifth Symphony somehow being the perfect touch.

You can hear it yourself at [ojaifestival.org](http://ojaifestival.org). The festival is providing live video streaming of this year's concerts and archiving them for subsequent viewing. I'll probably go back later myself to figure out what I heard Thursday.

**Contact the writer:** 714-796-6811 or [tmangan@ocregister.com](mailto:tmangan@ocregister.com)

## There's 'Classical Style' and substance in opera premiere in Ojai

[BY TIMOTHY MANGAN](#) / CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

*Published: June 15, 2014*



The Ojai Music Festival put on an opera Friday night, and a delight it was against the odds. This year's festival music director, pianist Jeremy Denk, fashioned the libretto, and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Steven Stucky, the music, a promising team perhaps, though Denk had never written a libretto or Stucky an opera. Still, they chose as their text a book without characters or plot, a celebrated musicological treatise in fact, Charles Rosen's "The Classical Style," not exactly the stuff that operas are made of.

But the result of their work, "The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)," in seven scenes and 75 minutes, definitely flies, and its first audience in Libbey Bowl certainly enjoyed it. It's a comedy, of course, of the inside baseball variety, tongue firmly in cheek; the more you knew about its subject matter the funnier it was, but the farcical proceedings are lively enough that even the uninitiated are allowed in.

It's been a while since I picked up Rosen's book, but it doesn't start with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven playing Scrabble in heaven and getting on each other's nerves. Denk has rather ingeniously dramatized the book (a brilliant exploration of the workings of the musical style of the three composers).

He personifies musical constructs such as the tonic, dominant and subdominant harmonies (they walk into a bar, the boisterous tonic singing "Me, me, me"); throws in a couple of musicologists (Rosen and Snibblesworth, a fictional student of Richard Taruskin at Berkeley); includes a scene set at a symposium on sonata form; allows another opera, "Don Giovanni," to interrupt his; and generally creates a fantastical Never Land where characters and non-characters, dead and alive, can logically walk in and out with impunity.

Stucky's score is pastiche, quoting directly from our trio of composers (and many others), but also providing his own music in their styles, and a smallish amount of his own music in his. The musical references in the libretto are reflected sometimes directly and sometimes slyly in the music (the symposium on sonata form is in, that's right, sonata form). Stucky, or someone, had the good sense not to set all the words to music – spoken dialogue quickly takes care of some of the more prosaic issues of plot and musicological exegesis. The music's all very nimble and knowing. It winks at the listener as it keeps him on his toes.

The jokes are good, and not all of them are erudite. It turns out that the opera is a send-up, not of opera itself, but of musical analysis and the way we talk about music generally. It is clever enough to have it



both ways, since in the process of listening to it we learn quite a bit about the capital “C” Classical style (the style specific to Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven), looking and listening under the hood as it were. The end even manages to touch, as Rosen and Robert Schumann contemplate the miracle of the style and the mysteries of its birth, life and death.

Director Mary Birnbaum made it all work with a minimum of props and costumes. Onstage, Robert Spano conducted The Knights ensemble, a New York-based orchestral collective, who together stayed on their toes. The cast – Aubrey Allicock, Dominic Armstrong, Rachel Calloway, Keith Jameson, Kim Josephson, Ashraf Sewailam, Peabody Southwell and Jennifer Zetlan, most in multiple roles – was uniformly excellent and, not incidentally, sensitively amplified.

“The Classical Style” now moves on to Berkeley, Carnegie Hall and Aspen, but surely that won’t be the end of it. As prelude to the opera Friday, Brooklyn Rider nimbly performed Haydn’s String Quartet, Op. 74, No. 3, a fine and playful example of Classicism and a nice salad before the meal.

**Contact the writer:** 714-796-6811 or [tmangan@ocregister.com](mailto:tmangan@ocregister.com)



## You'll find pleasures and laughs at Ojai Music Festival

***This year's festival, headed by pianist Jeremy Denk, provided a fare dose of comedy and play.***

**[BY TIMOTHY MANGAN](#)** / CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

*Published: June 19, 2014*

The Ojai Music Festival, which wrapped up its 68th annual event last week, is always a pleasure for your reviewer to attend. He tries to avoid getting too poetic about the magic of the place, and this time around attempted to discover the formula of its success, the elements that when put together define the place.

There is the little town, of course, in a beautiful valley in from the Ventura coast – a couple of stoplights, 8,000 people, orange groves, oaks and sycamores, mom and pops and little boutiques. Ojai is quaint by design and zoning laws and a little dusty around the edges. It's old California.

There is the venue, Libbey Bowl, in a little park in the center of town, near the mission-style post office. You descend into its concave and nestle within, surrounded by greenery and the sound of chirping (sometimes cackling) birds. The weather plays a part here. During the festival, concerts are held morning, noon, afternoon, night and late night. In the course of a day, a listener may go from sunscreen, T-shirt and shorts to jacket, scarf and hat.

There is the schedule – every time you turn around another concert, talk or film. You have to be a little nuts to attend everything, but some attempt to. The days are full of music and you realize that both 11 a.m. and 11 p.m. are good times to listen and that it's a different experience from listening at 8 p.m. and rather refreshing to do so.

None of the above is a trifling contribution to the whole, but the definitive factor in Ojai, the thing that sets it apart from ordinary concert life, is the programming. Take that away and you just have pretty concerts in a park. There is always a heavy dose of and focus on new music here (three living composers attended this year, to hear and perform their works), on music of the 20th century (both early and late), and on American music (usually). Some pieces from the 18th and 19th century may be thrown in here and there but, like the newer music, they are usually of the neglected variety; sometimes you are unaware of their very existence until they are performed here. For the listening gourmet, Ojai is the place to taste new things, in abundance, and take a break from Tchaikovsky and Brahms meat and potatoes.

## **'Classical Style'**

This year's festival was curated by pianist and writer Jeremy Denk, serving as music director. He put together a schedule of music that had a clever conceit (Denk called it "nerdy"): Music about music, self-referential music, self-perpetuating music. We heard a lot of Ives. We heard jazz pianist Uri Caine and his ensemble transform Mahler, Gershwin and Bach into pulsating and cacophonous collage. We heard Morton Feldman, György Ligeti, Karlheinz Stockhausen. And we heard the world premiere of a new opera, "The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)," an elaborate and zany in-joke with a libretto by Denk and music by Steven Stucky.

The opera is based on Charles Rosen's celebrated book "The Classical Style," an examination of how the music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven worked, from the inside. There is nothing even remotely operatic about the book, but Denk literally fleshed it out, having the three composers and Rosen among his characters, turning the tonic, subdominant and dominant harmonies as well as the "Tristan" chord into walking, talking and singing personages and generally making a whoop-de-do out of the whole thing.

Stucky's pastiche score romped wittily and referentially. One scene, set at an academic symposium on sonata form, was composed in sonata form. A nerdy musicologist dreaming himself a hero is accompanied by music from Richard Strauss' "Don Juan." The tonic chord, full of himself, sings "Me, me, me!" fortissimo – on the tonic chord, of course. The opera was smart and clever screwball comedy, and the talk of the festival.

Comedy made itself felt elsewhere this year as well. At the Sunday morning concert, Denk put together a program he called a "canonade," a pun, and consisting entirely of canons. (An imitative style of writing in which the initial theme harmonizes and interacts with itself: Think "Row, row, row your boat" and you're halfway there.) Many of these canons were send-ups of the form, such as two of Mozart's scatological canons, P.D.Q. Bach's "Hot Dog" from "The Art of the Ground Round" and Beethoven's "Da ist das Werk. Sorgt um das Geld," in which he demands his fee from a publisher. (These were sung by the Hudson Shad quartet). Several were strangely beautiful, including two of Schumann's "Etudes in the Form of a Canon" and Kurtág's "Fog Canon" (played by Denk and pianist/composer Timo Andres).

## **Quite a range**

Here are some other highlights, and low points (not everything succeeded), of this year's festival. Ligeti's Etudes (stunningly dispatched by Denk) required a mind-boggling virtuosity of the performer and listener alike. (I'll need to "practice" them with my ears to figure out what's going on.) Ives' four Violin Sonatas (played by Denk and violinist Jennifer Frautschi) are three too many for one concert, even with Hudson Shad singing the hymns they are based on.

Ives' "Three Places in New England" remains one of his best and most satisfying works. It was part of a Saturday evening program, performed by the chamber orchestra The Knights and conductor Eric Jacobsen, that also included Boccherini's charming "La Musica Notturna delle Strade di Madrid," Feldman's hypnotizing "Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety," Stockhausen's zippy "Tierkris – Leo" and Kurt Weill's sultry and cynical "The Seven Deadly Sins," sung memorably by Storm Large. Quite a range, and why don't more orchestras program like this?

Though a plum of an idea, Timo Andres' "re-composition" of Mozart's "Coronation" Concerto, in which he filled in his own dissonant harmonies and ideas in the spaces the composer left blank, was interesting for about three minutes. The lighting for the concert late Saturday night added to the listening pleasure of for Frautschi's austere solo turn in Bach's Sonata No. 3; and conductor Robert Spano, the Ojai Festival Singers, violist Max Mandel and others' serene account of Feldman's "Rothko Chapel."

There was more but we're out of time. It's always like that at Ojai. It's an exhausting four days, but I'm always sad to leave. The real world seems just a little unimaginative in comparison.

**Contact the writer:** 714-796-6811 or [tmangan@ocregister.com](mailto:tmangan@ocregister.com)

Review: Ojai Music Festival 2014

## The Classical Style Served All Ways

By Charles Donelan, Wednesday, June 18, 2014

This year's ebullient edition of the Ojai Music Festival reflected the eclectic taste, prodigious scholarship, and zany sense of humor of its music director, pianist Jeremy Denk. The centerpiece was the premiere on Friday night of a new satirical opera by Denk and composer Steven Stucky called *The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)*, which was packed, both score and libretto, with inventive wit. But even on Sunday morning, when the Knights got things started with a reverent reading of Mozart's *Symphony No. 41, "Jupiter,"* the tone swung back to irreverence when the vocal ensemble Hudson Shad sang a pair of Mozart's most scandalous "Scatological Canons." In between the gutter and the stars of this, the area's most consistently thrilling annual event, there was plenty of incredible music to swoon over, obsess about, or just ponder, albeit in new ways.

On Thursday, Denk introduced his opening-night performance with typically self-deprecating humor, declaring that he felt like an "opening act" for the Uri Caine Ensemble. His program paired two sets of miniatures, one by Franz Schubert and the other by Leoš Janáček. In itself, this was not a particularly bold statement, as recitalists commonly juxtapose romantic and modern music, but what distinguished Denk's performance as belonging to the Ojai tradition of unsettling approaches was the sequencing. Rather than playing one of the series straight through and then starting the other, he caromed back and forth, sometimes playing two or three Schubert compositions before alternating with the Janáček, and other times simply going back and forth. In the process, the tone of the Janáček series, which is called *On an Overgrown Path*, and which was written at a time of deep distress for the composer, becomes intertwined with that of the more conventional seeming nostalgia of Schubert. The combination made an eloquent brief for the festival's theme, which was the beautiful tension between the consolations of harmony and the ecstasies of dissonance.

Uri Caine's set on Thursday night reworked the music of Gustav Mahler for a jazz group consisting of Caine on piano, Chris Speed on clarinet, Ralph Alessi on trumpet, Josefina Vergara on violin, John Hébert on bass, Jim Black on drums, and DJOlive on turntables. Cantor Don Gurney joined in for the final number, "The Farewell" from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. Although teasing out the Jewish musical roots of Mahler's lyricism and steeping the result in jazz and blues inflections may not be quite as shocking today as it was in 1997 when Caine got started with the project, time has allowed his ensemble's mutual understanding to mature and flourish.

For Friday night's big premiere, I took advantage of the Ojai Music Festival's decision to live stream the opera and watched it from a very comfortable seat on my own sofa. It opened with Beethoven (bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam), Haydn (tenor Dominic Armstrong), and Mozart (soprano Jennifer Zetlan)

hanging out together in heaven and dealing with the depressing news that their musical movement, “the classical style,” has run out of steam. Turning aside from the game of Scrabble they have been enjoying, the big three decide to seek out the musicologist and pianist Charles Rosen, the author of a famous 1971 book called *The Classical Style*. From there, Stucky and Denk were off and running with one musicological in-joke after another. Three chords, the tonic (bass-baritone Aubrey Allicock), the dominant (mezzo-soprano Rachel Calloway), and the subdominant (mezzo-soprano Peabody Southwell), walk into a bar, where they demonstrate Rosen’s pet subject, sonata form. Despite its obvious cleverness, *The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)* proved unexpectedly moving in the final scene, when Schumann (Peabody Southwell) appeared to Rosen, seeking the scholar’s insight into his own role in the grand scheme of musical things.

Saturday saw yet another deconstruction/reconstruction of the classical style, this time by young composer/pianist Timo Andres. His “Re-Composition” of Mozart’s “Coronation” Concerto took advantage of blanks in Mozart’s original score to import musical ideas from very far afield. At once more conventionally classical in its language and more noticeably divergent in its effects than Caine’s jazz version of Mahler on Thursday night, Andres’s music left the sophisticated Ojai audience both wowed and a little bit stunned. We will be hearing a lot more about this musician soon.

## 2014 Ojai Music Festival – The Classical Style

Posted by Paul Muller June 15, 2014

The [2014 Ojai Music Festival](#) opened on Thursday June 12 to begin 4 days packed with informative talks, movie screenings, parties and concerts. The Festival's Music Director this year is [Jeremy Denk](#) and the resident musical groups included [The Knights](#) orchestral collective and the [Brooklyn Rider](#) string quartet. Friday night's concert was built around an examination of the Classical period and featured a Haydn string quartet as well as the world premiere of a new opera – "The Classical Style" – by Jeremy Denk and [Steven Stucky](#) that was commissioned by the festival for the occasion.

The concert began with Haydn's *String Quartet in G minor, Op. 74, No.3* (1793), performed by Brooklyn Rider. Right from the opening passages of the 1st movement the light, bouncy rhythms combine with the classical harmonies and familiar Haydn wit to produce a lively and optimistic feel. As the instruments took turns developing the theme there was a sense of increasing fussiness that added to the fun. The playing was light and precise, setting just the right mood for the evening.

The second movement was more stately and slower – almost hymn-like – but easy and flowing. This turned a bit darker towards the middle, but soon returned to the lighter feel of the opening, giving a sense of resolution. The ensemble playing was impressive here and the ornamentation in the upper parts nicely done.

The third movement, in the traditional triple meter, was faster and featured close harmony. The balance and dynamic control were outstanding and the bright feel reinforced the sense that this was music that does not take itself too seriously. The final movement was faster still and had a dramatic feel that turned brighter with a series of bouncing rhythms that suggested a sort of gallop, hence the nickname of this Haydn string quartet as the "Rider". This work is typical Haydn – bright, optimistic and not too serious. The precise and agile playing by Brooklyn Rider caught the essence of this piece exactly and it was an ideal prelude to the opera that followed.

Not being able to make it to Ojai, I listened to the concert as it was streamed on the Internet. The quality, both audio and visual, was excellent and there were no drop-outs or interruptions of consequence. The seeing and hearing are much like being in one of the back rows of the Libbey Bowl and was actually an improvement over my usual seating out on the lawn.

The streaming provided another benefit – a televised interview of Steven Stucky during intermission by Fred Child of American Public Media. The subject of the interview was the music for *The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)*. This is a comedy based loosely on *The Classical Style* by the late Charles Rosen, a textbook first published in the early 1970s and widely influential in the field of musicology. The libretto,

by Jeremy Denk, was taken in part from the Rosen book but the opera also includes the personalities of Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, Robert Schuman, Charles Rosen, and characters like the Tonic Chord, Dominant Chord, Sub Dominant Chord and the Tristan Chord as well as a host of supporting characters. The plot revolves around Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven returning to earth to reclaim their musical relevance and to rescue the classical style from academic over-analysis by appealing to musicologist Rosen. There are also scenes involving the several musical chords in a bar, and other assorted comic vignettes and sketches derived from musical theory and history.

Apart from the varied collection of characters, one of the challenges Mr. Stucky pointed out was the need to write music in the classical style, using the sonata form where appropriate, or in the romantic style during the Tristan Chord scenes. Another challenge was that much of the comedy was based on knowing something about music theory, and this needed to be put across in a way that all audiences could enjoy. The character of Charles Rosen, a close personal friend of Jeremy Denk, was portrayed as something of a hero, bringing order to the comedic chaos around him, and this necessitated a more serious musical sensibility when he was on stage. Steven Stucky, while confident and articulate, nevertheless betrayed the look of a man who had spent the last two years of his life on a large-scale work to be premiered on Friday the 13th. He needn't have worried.

For *The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)* the orchestra was situated on the stage and was comprised of the Knights with the addition of the Brooklyn Rider string quartet. The singers and scenery were mostly in the foreground but there was some creative staging required to work within the friendly confines of the Libbey Bowl. The singers wore microphones and the normally reliable sound system worked as expected so that the music and the libretto were clearly heard. Unfortunately there was no listing I could find for the cast of singers who were all excellent. Mary Birnbaum directed and Robert Spano was the conductor.

The opening scene is in heaven where we find Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven in various stages of boredom and dissatisfaction. Mozart (sung by a soprano but with just the right amount of breeziness) busies himself with writing a letter to the Hollywood producers of *Amedeus*, inquiring about possible royalty payments and future scoring possibilities – this sent a loud giggle through the audience. Beethoven is mostly lost in thought but delights in running up huge scores in their scrabble games with enormous German words. The music is elegantly classical but turns profound when Beethoven (a bass) is singing. Haydn (a baritone) seems frustrated, and lacking any work to do, worries about his musical legacy. All are alarmed when Haydn reads from a New York Times article stating that 'classical music is dead,' and the music here suddenly turns from smoothly classical to faintly dissonant, as if a foreshadowing of the future. They sing together in harmony – "It is shocking how time has made us into caricatures of ourselves." But then they pick up a nearby book – it is *The Classical Style* by Charles Rosen – and the music swells to an heroic theme as Haydn exclaims "It's all about how great we are!" The three composers depart, seeking out Rosen on earth to persuade him to restore their legacy and relevance.

The scene changes to the Rosen home. Charles Rosen is engrossed in cooking but is actually supposed to be going to an academic symposium. Here Rosen sings of the elegance of the sonata form and the music



swells to a pleasing grandiosity. Meanwhile in a nearby bar the Dominant Chord is having a drink and an existential crisis; she doesn't feel 'resolved'. The Tonic Chord swaggers in and begins singing about 'Me, Me, Me,' and this provoked a knowing laugh from students of tonality. Dominant is attracted to Tonic who replies that he "isn't sure he wants to be in a relationship." A sultry Sub Dominant Chord walks in and Tonic is immediately attracted to her, but she seems cool and aloof. This scene with the three chords is entertaining as well as educational – and way to dramatize their harmonic functions. At length Rosen appears, and explains the circle of fifths.

More such scenes follow. The composers appear in the bar and Mozart is attracted to Sub Dominant. Rosen explains Mozart's music and a scene from *Don Giovanni* breaks out played by Sub Dominant and Tonic. Henry Snigglesworth, a musicology student from UC Berkeley appears with questions and an endless supply of statistics about Beethoven's music. There are several inside jokes about music and Beethoven announces that he wants to go to the Sonata Symposium to meet Rosen.

The Sonata Symposium scene opens with heavily dramatic Beethovenesque music, but there is no sign of Charles Rosen. The attendees all sing an explanation of the sonata form, in sonata form. This is convincingly classical music and Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn enter to endure a pedantic academic explanation of the sonata form ending with a big finish by all the singers. Just as this is concluding a blast of Wagnerian music is heard and the Tristan Chord, the 'saddest of all chords' enters dressed in a wanderer's coat and hat, complete with a Wotan eye patch. The Tristan Chord embarks on an extended solo – in wonderfully expressive Wagnerian style – about the dark future in store for the chords that is coming in the romantic era. As Tristan departs, Dominant, Sub Dominant and Tonic chords, alarmed by what they have heard, reconcile in a short aria.

Back at home Charles Rosen is finishing a late dinner. Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn enter, entreating his help after the discouraging events of the symposium. But Rosen refuses and states that their music is what must make their legacy and keep them relevant. In the final scene Robert Schuman appears to a lonely Rosen and explains how styles must always change. In a final statement Schuman sums up by declaring that the sonata form was " ...a miracle, Charles, that can never be repeated."

*The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)* has a lot of singers and a lot of moving parts to the plot. The music, even with the many styles and requirements, was well matched to what must have been a tricky libretto. The singers, musicians and of course Steven Stucky did a fine job to bring it all together. If the goal was to produce a piece that will see wider performance, Denk and Stucky may have already succeeded but perhaps a little streamlining would make for a less sprawling and more cohesive production. But, all in all, it was an enjoyable experience and well suited to the festival atmosphere..

Although this piece was intended primarily as a comedy – and succeeded as such – it is remarkable how seeing Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn, even as broadly drawn characters acted on stage, can provoke such an empathetic response. We know these composers from their music but to see them concerned about the relevance of their work in the 21st century was surprisingly touching. *The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)* manages to make light of the current uncertain state of classical music, but also reminds us – through the words of Charles Rosen – of its ultimate value.

## **Music director plays with audacity**

### **Opening night of Ojai festival provides delight**

By Rita Moran, Arts writer June 14, 2014 online

Pianist Jeremy Denk, the 2014 music director of the Ojai Music Festival, is just what you'd expect of a winner of the MacArthur Fellowship, the Avery Fisher Prize and Musical America's 2014 instrumentalist of the year honor, and then some.

He's a genius at disturbing audiences' expectations with his wide-ranging grasp of musical relationships, and equally at home with the irreverent and the reverent. Both figured in Thursday afternoon's opening discussion about the festival he has designed and nurtured. That night's concert demonstrated more of Denk's delightful audacity as he sat down at the keyboard, modestly allowing that "My role is sort of as the warm-up band" for the evening, which also featured Uri Caine's "Mahler Re-Imagined" in the second half of the program.

Introducing a mesh of composers, for starters Leos Janacek and Franz Schubert, Denk found much to mix and match between the Czech composer who died in 1928 at age 74 and the Austrian who passed on to immortality at 31 in 1828.

Beginning with Janacek's "On an Overgrown Path," Set 2, No. 1, a gentle organic andante that simultaneously tempts musical taste buds and stirs quiet emotions, Denk continued with a program of alternating works by the Czech and the Austrian, sometimes in parallel styles and moods, sometimes with piquant contrasts, but all with recognizably similar impulses when woven together by the magically alert musicianship of Denk.

"Landler," "Moments Musicaux" and finally a "Galopp" by Schubert alternated with gracefully intervening segments of Janacek's "Overgrown Path," stirring primal memories and simple pleasures. Denk rendered all with an assured touch and deft imagination that lured the audience into a mellow mode buoyed by the pianist's insight into what he introduced as "inward and intimate music."

The dynamics changed after the intermission when the Uri Caine Ensemble took to the stage for a dramatic jazz-based "Mahler Re-Imagined" in what has become a specialty of jazz pianist Caine and his group of solo-quality instrumentalists: trumpeter Ralph Alessi, clarinetist Chris Speed, bass player John Hebert, drummer Jim Black, violinist Josefina Vergara and DJ Gregor Asch, aka DJ Olive.

It was never entirely clear what DJ Olive was setting in motion, as the audience could watch him leaf

through records, slide them from their envelopes and place them on the turntable, sometimes manipulating the speed or stop-motions, all with elegant movement. But only a few sounds could be heard by the audience in rows closest to that stage that were clearly from his site: fragments spoken by women and occasional surges of sound.

The primary focus, of course, was on the individual musicians and their interplay. Percussion was nonstop, beginning with Caine's high-powered attack on the piano, with fists and slaps that only a strong keyboard could withstand. The thunder continued as the crew revisited the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 5, then segued into other Mahler works of varying moods but never without a strong contemporary cast. Symphonies 1 ("Titan's" third movement) and No. 5's adagietto were vigorously coordinated through Caine's reworkings alongside Mahler's shorter works "They Have Merely Gone Out," "Shining Trumpets," "I Went Out Over the Countryside," "The Drummer Boy," "Primal Light" and finally "The Farewell." Joining the ensemble for the final re-imagining was cantor Don Gurney, whose smooth and solemn intonations provided a relatively peaceful sense to the long, dynamic work.

Those not already intimately familiar with Mahler, not too many of whom you'd expect to find at the Ojai Music Festival, might have missed most of the remolding of his work by the imaginative Caine, but the expertise of the players would at least have stirred jazz aficionados. Through the spurt of applause could be heard approving cries of appreciation. As one fan called out, "Mahler Re-Imagined" was "good stuff!"

## **Ives dominates night at Ojai Music Festival**

By Rita Moran Sunday, June 15, 2014

It was Ives in the morning, Ives in the evening and Ives at supper time at the Ojai Music Festival on Saturday.

The quirky American composer fascinates the festival Music Director Jeremy Denk, a man who recognizes originality and savors emerging talent as much as he treasures Ives.

Ives' four violin sonatas were featured at Saturday morning's concert, from No. 4 to No. 1, in that order, with Denk at the piano and Jennifer Frautschi wielding her violin as if it were an extension of her own connection with Ives's innovative spirit. Barefoot and almost dancing with the music, she joined Denk in celebrating Ives in performances whose vibrance could be experienced even by those watching and listening to the online streaming version.

Sonata No. 4 introduced the form, with its real-world title of "Children's Day at the Camp Meeting" signaling the bumptious spirit of it all. The composer came by his singular focus on music under the watchful eye of his father, George, a small-town Connecticut bandmaster. The real sounds of crowds and bands and celebration were never far from the composer's musical palette.

Hymns and anthems also inspired Ives, so naturally Denk interwove a number of those throughout the program, heartily sung by Hudson Shad, a quartet comprised of tenor Mark Bleeke, baritone Eric Edlund, bass-baritone Peter Becker and bass Wilbur Pauley. The quartet intoned "I Need Thee Every Hour," linked to Sonata No. 3's Adagio, and other relevant hymns and songs of the era.

Even during the dinner break, much of the buzz was about Ives or Denk or both, though the names of two rising young talents quickly captured attention at the earlier session.

Composer Andrew Norman and composer-pianist Timo Andres could be termed classical music up-and-comers, except that at the ages of 35 and 29, respectively, they have already made impressive marks on the musical world.

Norman's "Light Screens" was inspired by t Frank Lloyd Wright's complex window designs juxtaposing unusual shapes and vivid colors with more austere forms. The piece was perceptively played by flutist Alex Sopp, violinist Colin Jacobsen, violist Miranda Sielaff and cellist Eric Jacobsen, members of The Knights, the festival's versatile ensemble, which provided the backbone of accompaniment throughout the weekend.

There were gasps in the audience when Norman, who looks as if he could still be a college student, ran up the stage steps to take his bow.

Andres was joined by The Knights full corps of players, directed by Eric Jacobsen. Tall, slender and bespectacled, Andres is as original as his concert attire — gray suit, bright red socks, brown shoes — and just as riveting.

His “Coronation” Concerto Re-Composition fills in the left-hand notes Mozart composed but didn’t bother to annotate on his score with much more attention-getting contributions. His busy left hand was wide-ranging, adding lots in the low ranges but just as ready to leap over the right hand to add notes there. The result was a dense and compelling reworking of the classic, masterfully played.

After the break, The Knights were back to present an arrangement of Luigi Boccherini’s Quintet in C Major, “Night Music of the Streets of Madrid.” The massed strings of the ensemble all were being plucked as if they were guitars, with beguiling effect.

Another Ives work, “Three Places in New England,” completed the first half of the program. Then three works followed were played “attacca,” without a break, in one of the many times throughout the festival that music followed that basic direction.

Morton Feldman’s brief composition honoring the memory of a beloved teacher, “Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety,” and Karlheinz Stockhausen’s “Leo” from a work focused on signs of the zodiac, smoothly led into the evening’s finale, Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s “The Seven Deadly Sins.”

Vocalist Storm Large brought the tale of a girl sent from Mississippi to help raise money for her family vividly to life, with the Hudson Shad singing the stern, self-satisfied warnings and reactions of her family at home.

It was Weill and Brecht at their most cynical, but it offered Storm Large and the Hudson Shad the opportunity to make powerful music together, bringing the evening to a compelling close.



## **Denk's deft hand makes Ojai Musical Festival into something special**

By Rita Moran, Monday, June 16, 2014

"Think Denk?" Sure, but "Thank Denk" is in order as well.

Jeremy Denk, pianist, writer and all-around creative thinker brought together a captivating series of concerts for the just completed Ojai Music Festival.

It was the 68th festival, and one of the most fun-loving. Denk's wide-ranging interests and abiding sense of whimsy informed the multifaceted festival and added an array of young and vital musicians and composers new to Ojai's tree-lined Libbey Bowl.

*Think Denk* is Denk's name for his casually conversant blog, just one aspect of the musings he delivers in person or in commentary and reviews in major publications. What the Ojai Music Festival leaders happily realized a few years ago when they selected him as this year's music director is that Denk is a very interesting fellow, simultaneously multitalented and musically astute. Package all that with an adventurous bent and you have Jeremy Denk, an ideal music director for the festival.

Sunday's final concerts brought together most of those strengths with a late-morning concert featuring "Canonade," riffs on musical canon style "and canon-esque miscellany," according to the program. Denk introduced the concert with his ready smile, allowing that a canon is "basically 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat,'" that is, music that states a theme and follows with overlapping reiterations miraculously blending with grace.

But first, there was Mozart as his best, with his Jupiter Symphony, written the year he died at age 32. The well-rounded and exuberant work brims with life, a spirit readily captured by The Knights, the New York-based orchestral collective that figured prominently in the festival in various configurations and ensemble sizes.

In the canonade collection there was a mixed but engrossing bag of goodies, with The Knights figuring in the brief Kyrie from Josquin des Prez's 16th Century Missa Pange Lingua. The Hudson Shad singers with guest vocalists Alex Sopp and Christina Courtin, both instrumentalists in The Knights, leavened the delivery of two scatological canons by Mozart. Denk had noted in his introductory remarks, "We haven't monkeyed with the texts, so it's not our fault" if there's a bit of raunch stirred into the canon stew.

Beethoven also was represented by roguish canons, including one that states, loosely translated, "here's my work, where's the money?", a musical jab at a patron who was slow to pay. Denk was back at the keyboard alongside the previous day's composer Timo Andres for the dark cloud of music in Gyorgy Kurtag's "Fog Canon," and two Schumann etudes in the form of a canon, arranged by Georges Bizet. Lisa Kaplan made her pianistic points with Alexey Stanchinsky's canon in four voices.

Hudson Shad took on a group of “catches,” a canon variation that can be earthy: P.D.Q. Bach’s “Hot Dog” and “Please, Kind Sir,” John Isham’s “When Celia Was Learning on the Spinet” and Henry Purcell’s “Tom the Tailor.” They turned to Haydn’s more serious “Tod un Schlaf,” with Courtin again joining them.

Culminating the Canonade playtime were Uri Caine and his group having their way with Bach’s Goldberg Canons, a rousing, driving riff empowered by Caine’s dashing piano prowess.

Sunday evening’s finale was in another world altogether, though nonetheless memorable. Denk was back at the piano playing 13 Etudes by Gyorgy Ligeti, whose concept he identified as “exploring the possibilities of chaos theory,” but which he played nonstop with a joyous fervor that was irresistible.

Charles Ives would have been delighted to hear that his Psalm 90, and the concluding Fantasy in C Minor for Piano and Chorus by Beethoven, were to feature the Ojai Festival Singers, a group with a solid sound that radiated the earnest zest of real people. They were joined for the latter by Denk at the keyboard, The Nights and conductor Eric Jacobsen.

From that felicitous combination came an effervescent joy in music that Denk emanates by simply being himself, a man of wit and wonder and a performer of infinite possibilities. Musicians and audience alike couldn’t stop smiling with obvious delight as they shared in his bit of musical heaven.

There were many more facets to the 68th festival, with Libbey Park more welcoming than ever, music of all sorts at all hours to suit nearly any schedule, balmy weather to match the emanating sounds. But Jeremy Denk was the essential link.



# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## Ojai Music Festival: Fresh but Familiar

*The pianist Jeremy Denk served as this year's music director.*

By David Mermelstein June 16, 2014

*Ojai, Calif.*

The annual Ojai Music Festival thrives on a mixture of tradition and innovation. And that applies to both the music and the music makers. This year, the festival's 68th, the pianist Jeremy Denk served as music director, a responsibility that shifts annually. Though the programs, which ran June 12 to 15, may have struck some longtime festivalgoers as too conservative, there was, in fact, enough change to make the experience fresh—even as recent touchstones, like the music of Charles Ives, kept things familiar. (Recast as Ojai North, several of the festival's programs move to University of California, Berkeley's Hertz Hall from June 19 to 21.)

Thursday's opening concert—performed at the outdoor Libbey Bowl, the festival's principal performance space—set the tone for the long weekend, with Mr. Denk alternating selections from Leoš Janáček's evocative piano suite "On an Overgrown Path" and short pieces by Franz Schubert. This merging of composers has become fashionable at Ojai, and such juxtapositions can provoke hitherto unperceived connections. But it also undermines the unity of discrete works and destroys something of their integrity in the process. Here, Mr. Denk offered soulful Janáček and disappointingly charmless Schubert. But the concert's second half was a revelation, with the American pianist and composer Uri Caine and his jazz sextet deconstructing aspects of Gustav Mahler's oeuvre, including the Adagietto of his Fifth Symphony and the conclusion of "Das Lied von der Erde" (for which a cantor was added). Teasing out the earthy building blocks of these complex and deeply felt masterpieces—that is, the folk songs, military marches and Jewish wedding tunes—Mr. Caine and company reimaged Mahler's Olympian creations in more human-scale terms. And rather than deflating the originals, their work only enhanced one's appreciation of Mahler's genre-busting imagination. (A late-night concert on Friday found Mr. Caine and his sextet treating George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" in similar fashion, but their rendition of several canons from Bach's "Goldberg" Variations on Sunday proved less illuminating.)

The young composer-pianist Timo Andres is also interested in holding a new prism to established forms, and his 2010 gloss on Mozart's least esteemed late piano concerto, the "Coronation" (K. 537), boldly recasts a partly unfinished work. On Saturday night, he performed it with the freelance ensemble the Knights conducted by Eric Jacobsen. Though the faster outer movements of this collaboration were not entirely persuasive, the captivating slow movement achieved an admirable balance between old and new.

But the main event came on Friday night—Ojai's first commissioned opera, "The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)," a tribute to the scholar Charles Rosen. A cheeky work with a libretto by Mr. Denk and



music by Steven Stucky, this pastiche (a vaudeville, really) attempts to weave a narrative around Rosen's defining treatise, "The Classical Style," which in the 1970s helped to solidify the primacy of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven among academics. (Music lovers needed no convincing.) The opera's thin plot opens in heaven, with the three great composers moping. They then pursue an elusive Rosen (Kim Josephson, a baritone) while personifications of music-theory concepts (tonic, dominant, subdominant) bemoan their fates in a bar. The result—conducted by Robert Spano, the festival's music director in 2006—was funnier than it sounds but ultimately limited in its nerdy appeal. Mr. Denk's jokes can induce groans as frequently as smiles. But Mr. Stucky's music is subtler, paying gentle, imitative tribute to composers whose work he naturally reveres.

If one musical spirit hovered over this year's festival, it was Ives, whose works Mr. Denk has consistently championed. (He performed Ives's First Piano Sonata here in 2009 and has subsequently recorded and written about this composer's music.) On Saturday morning, he and Jennifer Frautschi performed with exquisite concentration all four of Ives's Violin Sonatas, over the cawing of a multitude of crows. In typical Ojai fashion, the experience was enhanced by the presence of the vocal ensemble Hudson Shad (constituted as a quartet at Ojai), who in between the pieces—and in the case of the First Sonata, between the movements—sang the hymns and songs that Ives so cleverly fractured and embedded in these scores. Ives was heard again that evening, when Mr. Jacobsen led the Knights in "Three Places in New England," where their scrappiness best served the raucous middle movement, "Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut." (That concert also featured in the Knights in an expansion of a quintet by Luigi Boccherini, one of those pieces that initially seem completely misplaced at Ojai yet ultimately, in a winning performance, encapsulates this festival's quirky potency.)

Ives also helped close the festival, his setting of Psalm 90 performed with antiphonal tubular bells so that it seemed as if one church's choir was singing while another's congregation was called to prayer. But both before and after, Mr. Denk sat center stage. He opened the Sunday evening concert with music that has become a calling card, György Ligeti's Etudes, which he dispatched with distinctive character—by turns lyrical, hypnotic and even jaunty—as well as ample virtuosity, a capacity he wears lightly. And, borrowing a page from Vermont's Marlboro Music Festival, he concluded the concert with a performance of Beethoven's "Choral Fantasy," that irresistibly compact piano-concerto-cum-choral-symphony (something of a dry run for the composer's Ninth). It proved a fittingly joyous end, with Mr. Denk winningly unbound and Mr. Jacobsen leading reduced forces that made up in commitment what they lacked in numbers.

*Mr. Mermelstein writes for the Journal on classical music, film and television.*

## San Jose Mercury News

Review: 'Classical Style' big-time charmer at Ojai

[By Richard Scheinin](#)

POSTED: 06/20/2014 12:49:33 PM PDT

BERKELEY -- "The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)" is an opera for real. Friday at the Ojai North Music Festival, it also proved to be an unexpectedly witty, illuminating and all-around delightful 70 minutes of entertainment. Too bad it's not running for a week or two; everybody who loves classical music should see it, as should everybody who thinks classical music is a bore.

Who knew? Jeremy Denk, the pianist, essayist and MacArthur "genius" award winner, is the amiable polymath who came up with the concept, which on its face seems beyond obscure. The opera is inspired by a musicological book -- "The Classical Style," by the late Charles Rosen, also a polymath, a snarky one, famous as pianist and barbed essayist. His tome, which won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 1972, is a biography (of sorts) of "the classical style" created by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

This new opera -- a love letter to the wonders of those composers and to the miracle of art itself -- has a libretto by Denk and a score by Steven Stucky, the Pulitzer Prize winner. With a clever hand, Denk has used excerpts from Rosen's book as the kernels of a fantasy, with the above three composers as leading characters. With equal elegance and humor, Stucky has built a score that is awash with allusions to (and quotations from) the charms of Haydn, the shadowy breezes of Mozart, the storms of Beethoven.

Premiered last week at Southern California's Ojai Music Festival, the opera is the centerpiece of Ojai North, which runs through Saturday, presented by Cal Performances at UC Berkeley's Hertz Hall, with Denk as music director. The East Bay festival features wall-to-wall programs, imaginatively conceived by Denk with an impressive list of guests. Still, what a shame that "The Classical Style" is receiving only two performances.

Directed by Mary Birnbaum, with Robert Spano conducting the chamber orchestra known as The Knights -- and with an all-around terrific cast -- this charmer of a one-act opera begins with a game of Scrabble. Around a table in heaven, the three composers compete: Beethoven hits the jackpot ("183 points!") with a triple word score; Mozart keeps spelling out expletives. They've just read a New York Times article declaring the death of classical music, when Haydn pulls a random book off a shelf: "The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven" by one Charles Rosen.

Then begins the hunt, as the three geniuses descend to Earth, searching for Rosen at his Upper West Side Manhattan apartment and at a musicological symposium, hoping "the eminent pianist and thinker" (they've noticed the blurb on the book) can help them achieve renewed relevance. The plot also detours to a bar, where, just briefly, the music gets slippery with blue notes. This is where we meet the characters Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant. (Hilariously, Denk has personified the three fundamental chords of Western classical music.)

Baritone Kim Josephson, left, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Zetlan, tenor Dominic Armstrong and bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam in "The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)," at Ojai North Music Festival in Berkeley. (David Bazemore/Ojai Music Festival)

It's as if the Marx Brothers are teaching lessons on music theory and sonata-allegro form. There are plenty of in-jokes, but this shouldn't deter anyone from seeing the opera -- because anyone can hear what counts: the bliss and beauty of the music. One also hears the dark tensions that grow via Mozart and Beethoven -- and Wagner, whose Tristan Chord character walks in and explains himself, smelling of subversion and sex.

There's no room here to describe each of the eight singers, so let's just name them, alphabetically: bass-baritone Aubrey Allicock as Tonic ("Me! Me! Me!"); tenor Dominic Armstrong as Haydn ("Papa! Papa! Papa!"); mezzo-soprano Rachel Calloway as Dominant; tenor Keith Jameson as Snibblesworth (a Nutty Professor-ish Ph.D. student in musicology from UC Berkeley); baritone Kim Josephson as Rosen (and as Tristan Chord); bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam as Beethoven; mezzo-soprano Peabody Southwell as sultry Subdominant; soprano Jennifer Zetlan as coloratura Mozart.

Stucky's score alludes at times to passages some listeners will recognize, including the Scherzo from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and a Mozart number (from "The Abduction from the Seraglio") that catalogs the wonders of women. The latter gets spoofed, at least to my ears, emerging as a "Catalog Aria" for Snibblesworth about the nerdy wonders of musicological obsessions ("887 papers on tonal functions").

"The Classical Style" is gorgeous to hear, and filled with laughs. And the opera is deep. Because underneath it all, it's a meditation on the miracle of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. "The classical style was a synthesis of forces that lay all around but dormant," sings Josephson (as Rosen), quoting from the book. "They created a language out of chaos."

That language -- that "style" -- was laid to rest a long time ago, having given birth to another style, and then another. Yet the music of the three masters lives on: "You are loved. Loved to death!" Rosen sings to them, assuringly.

Proof is right here in this winning little opera.



## SFist Reviews: 'The Classical Style' at the Ojai North Festival

*The cast of The Classical Style, an opera of sorts, at Cal Performances in Berkeley*

June 21, 2014

To discuss "The Classical Style," the witty, charming, exhilarating new opera by [Steven Stucky](#) for the music and [Jeremy Denk](#) for the libretto, based upon the eponymous 1971 [musicology treatise](#) by [Charles Rosen](#) (eulogized [here](#) by Jeremy Denk in 2012), presented in the [Ojai North Festival](#) by [Cal Performances](#), let's take a detour through the musical piece it most resembles: Frank Sinatra's "[One Note Samba](#)." O'I Blue Eyes croons "this is a little samba built upon a single note, other notes are bound to follow but the root is still that note" while at the same time singing exactly one note, an F. He switches then to another repeated note, B flat: "Now this new note is the consequence of the one we've just been through," returns to F for "as I'm bound to be the unavoidable consequence of..." and back to B flat for "you!"

This is a self-referential tune which explains to you in the lyrics what's going on in the musical line. F is the root, the tonic, and establishes a tonality. Bb comes in, as the "consequence" of F. In musical terms, Bb is the subdominant of F, a tonality which attracts F, where F wants to resolve. Bb therefore creates an ambiguity: "oh, but I thought I was stable in F, and now F is drawn to Bb." It uproots F, demotes F from being the key center to hanging up there, waiting to fall in the arms of Bb, which it does on the final "you." The musical gestures mimics falling in love.

What does it have to do with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, the three subjects of Rosen book, and along with Rosen himself, the main characters of this opera? "The Classical Style" finds a joyful energy in the same trick of using music to explain music, of being humorously meta. Where the pattern of the one note samba is simple, the Classical Style goes over much more sophisticated material, including indeed the same tonic-dominant-subdominant relationship as in the samba, explained to you by characters in a bar named Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant. Ambivalent Dominant is literally attracted to a narcissist Tonic around which everything revolves, until the sexy, sultry Subdominant comes in and by being the tonic of the tonic, throws everything off. The Sonata Form is explained in Sonata Form, with a first theme on the tonic, a second theme on the dominant, a development, a recapitulation on the tonic, and an optional coda, setting the exact words of Rosen's book to the music. The Tristan chord comes in to instill doubt in between Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant, indeed casting a shadow on the whole Classical Style they impersonate, forecasting a "terrifying future" for them.

The tour de force of the opera is that Denk (who also curates this year's Ojai Festival and performs there as a pianist) succeeds in setting some of Rosen's dense and erudite words and concepts to music in a way that is never dry, always light and fun. There is plenty of jokes, both in the text and in the musical accompaniment and the score flows seamlessly despite tackling topics that could be rather uninspiring. The self-deprecating joke in the opera defines classical music as "music so beautiful it has to be explained," and a nerd musicologist character (a Berkeley student, no less!) provides Don Juan with the only loss of erection ever depicted in any opera. Mozart's famous Catalog Aria is hijacked to comment on the pointlessness of so much musical analysis: "In Berkeley, 3,000 essays on gender construct and Beethoven." To be fair, Jeremy Denk pokes fun at his alma mater, Juilliard, as well, where students "finally learned to spell Beethoven." There are thick layers of irony there, when the subject of the opera becomes a joke within the opera.

The music, by Steven Stucky, wonderfully supports the action, finding inspiration (and pastiche) in the elders it honors: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and a wonderfully Wagnerian Wagner (who may not seem like the kind of composer who would appreciate such lighthearted antics, just saying). Stucky borrows liberally, and mixes all up, and captures the spirit of the classical style. How refreshing for a modern opera to provide Mozartian trios and to step away from Sprechstimme to embrace melodies again.

Stucky ends with an homage to Strauss and the passage of time, and there is enough scholarly work in the score to generate a few more PhDs in musicologies. The cast is uniformly strong, with a special note to Charles Rosen (Kim Josephson) for finding an inner Wotan full of vocal strength in its avowed weakness, but also Jennifer Zetlan as a perky Mozart (a pants role for a mezzo), Ashraf Sewailam for a moody Beethoven, or Peabody Southwell for the sultry subdominant (we last saw her as the sexy vixen in [Peer Gynt](#), the poor thing is being typecast). Robert Spano deftly conducted the ensemble. The Knights opened the concert with a bubbly, nimble, amazingly exciting Haydn String Quartet to set us in the mood.

Dropping off the irony, the opera concludes on a meditation about how one musical style must die to make room for the next. The Classical Style was "a miracle, and it could not be repeated." The opera is its own miracle of invention and intelligence, and it will be repeated!