

Los Angeles Times

Ojai Music Festival celebrates icon Pierre Boulez's 90th birthday

By Mark Swed



June 11, 2015

Tributes this year to Pierre Boulez's 90th birthday have been plentiful in Europe and will continue to be at summer festivals. In America, where the revolutionary French composer has always been more admired as a conductor than for his music, not so much.

In fact, America's best-known contributions to late 20th century and 21st century music — Minimalism, neo-Romanticism, improvisation, the New York School avant-garde, the infusion of pop culture into classical music — have been either a direct reaction against Boulezian complexity and dogma or American obliviousness to foreign influence.

The Ojai Music Festival is a different story. Although Boulez has had a major presence in the U.S., notably as music director of the New York Philharmonic in the 1970s, Ojai served as his most consistent American musical and spiritual haven. He was music director seven times between 1967 and 2003.

Wednesday night, the festival paid tribute to Boulez with "A Pierre Dream," a multimedia tribute to Boulez with a remarkable stage design by Frank Gehry.

More remarkable still, the following four days and nights of this year's expanded festival, with percussionist and conductor Steven Schick as music director, presents a vast collection of work by nearly 50 composers, most contemporary and American, meant to put Boulez in a broad and not necessarily copacetic context.

"A Pierre Dream" sets a beguiling scene for the festival. Gehry designed a dozen rectangular screens. Six are held on poles and carried by actors, who move in intricate patterns around the stage while imagery is projected on them with astonishing accuracy, creating a magical visual counterpoint to the structural fluidity of Boulez's music.

The projections include archival footage of Boulez speaking and conducting. We see him with Stravinsky. We see him last year at home, frail but feisty. We see the usually formal Boulez in swinging '60s London wearing a polka-dot shirt straight out of Carnaby Street.

Created by British composer and writer Gerard McBurney for the Chicago Symphony, the most Boulez-friendly orchestra this season, the 90-minute portrait of Boulez felt at Ojai as though he might be a curiously progressive American in the Thoreau, John Cage and Gehry tradition. If you don't move you stay paralyzed, Boulez observes. You cannot make new music out of old material, he explains, just like 20th century architecture needed new materials like glass and steel.

Near the end of the production, Boulez says that art should not be thought of as operating on a trajectory but is more like a tree. We go from moment to moment, a branch at a time. The moment is what matters. A marvelously tangled tree grows before our eyes. We think we understand its structure, but we can never fully grasp its meaning.

This, however, simplifies Boulez's biases. Great art, he says, provokes you to discover yourself. But he is also a composer who has always thought about his place in history, not only as a conductor tirelessly revisiting his influences but adamantly proscribing the future of music.

Most important, his own work, which "A Pierre Dream" does a very good of presenting, consists of constant reworking of basic musical ideas from his early pieces.

For him, one thing always leads to another, and that is a labyrinthine process he can never stop.

Wednesday night, ICE and red fish blue fish, this year's resident ensembles in Ojai, offered dazzlingly virtuosic performances of excerpts of Boulez's work early and late. Pianist Jacob Greenberg played "Incises," a small piano solo written for a competition, as though it were explosive jazz.

Flutist Claire Chase uncovered a raw theatricality from Boulez's early, adamantly serial "Sonatine." Schick conducted excerpts from the 45-minute "Dérive 2," which will end the festival Sunday, with breathtaking rhythmic emphasis but less attuned to the kind of expressive elegance that Boulez's own performances emphasize.

Occasionally the presentation could be overly literal. Boulez compared the motion in a small piano piece to the quick and quiet activity of gold fish, and there, on the screens, were gold fish. He compared "Dérive 1" to the motion of an airplane, and one flew by on the screen.

This was effective in making Boulez accessible without seriously watering down the complexity of the music or the ideas, but there were occasional lapses. For all Boulez's talk about living in the moment, he was also a composer who expected his audience to come well prepared for that moment.

His settings of Mallarmé, he once said, were meant for listeners who had already absorbed the poetry. Mellissa Hughes sang them with care. But readings of Mallarmé and of Boulez by actress Anna Bowen in a grandiloquent Broadway manner took the Americanization of Boulez too far even for Ojai, where this elegant Frenchman once good-naturedly dined at Carrows late one night when all the town's fine restaurants had closed.

That will be the festival's challenge. Ojai will not let Boulez's music stand still. It will be, as never before in this way, played in an environment of new American music that arouse out of much of what Boulez has opposed, especially pop music and Minimalism.

Even spiritual havens must move or they will be paralyzed.

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Schick Happens in Ojai

James Chute



June 12, 2015

OJAI — It there was any question whether this year’s Ojai Festival belongs to Steven Schick, all you had to do was see the new festival T-shirt, emblazoned with the slogan, “Schick happens.”

Indeed he did.

The UC San Diego percussionist and conductor is music director for this year’s edition of the lively, highly acclaimed festival in Ventura County, just north of Los Angeles, and he wasted no time putting his mark on it.

Schick has long been a champion of composer John Luther Adams, so he used Adams’ “Sila: The Breath of the World” to open the festival Thursday afternoon.

For the hour-plus work co-commissioned in part by the Ojai Festival and the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus (which will present the San Diego premiere in September at the Japanese Friendship Garden in Balboa Park), Schick situated 80 musicians from the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), UC San Diego's red fish blue fish and CalArts around Libbey Park.

Grouped into similar combinations of instruments or voices and roughly configured as a circle, they played long sustained tones as hundreds of audience members walked around and through, seemingly entranced by the music.

Some of the materials for the piece are taken from the lower portion of the overtone series, so there were these big open fifths (think the opening motive in "2001: a Space Odyssey") tuned in particularly resonant combinations.

There we also the sounds of the park. The birds singing, children playing, cars passing, inevitably became part of the piece. Adams' final direction to the musicians on the single-page score is to listen.

But you didn't have to be a musician to have your perception shifted by the music. If there's a theme to this year's festival, it's the idea of listening, and that music is more than the sounds made by conventional, Western instruments.

Schick continued that theme in Thursday's main event, an evening concert at Libbey Bowl that included four major works by Varese, Chavez's Toccata for Percussion and Alberto Ginastera's remarkable "Cantana para America Magica."

Unfortunately, the scheduled soprano for Ginastera's monumental, rarely performed work was ill, and the New York soprano Melissa Hughes agreed to step in. But her light voice, apparently so fine in other circumstances, had little chance against the ensemble of 14 percussionists, even amplified. And understandably, she had not internalized neither the demanding music nor this elemental, even primitive text.

That was the impressive element of the Varese performances on the program's first half: the degree to which the musicians (including flutist Claire Chase in "Density 21.5) made Varese's music their own.

You could be a lifelong symphony subscriber and never hear a single piece by this influential, mid-20th century master (with less sympathetic performances, you might say madman). And while history gives Varese credit for adding some usual sounds and tone colors to the mix, Schick showed in persuasive interpretations of "Integrales" with ICE, and Ionisation with red fish blue fish, that in fact Varese can swing.

Such was the fluidity of these performances of what are generally considered difficult, inaccessible works, that it made you wonder if it's taken musicians decades, and perhaps the passing of a generation, to really internalize and master this music as a language that can be as convincingly communicated to an audience as it was Thursday night.

After the performance of “Ionisation,” Schick explained to the audience how this work was ground zero in the percussion repertoire, how important it was, and how in its use of seemingly incongruous instruments from different cultures, it even offered a vision of a better world.

And then, to the audience’s delight, he and red fish blue fish played it again.

Schick happens.

VENTURA COUNTY
STAR

Review: Ojai Music Festival shows off its percussion power

By Rita Moran



June 12, 2015

OJAI, Calif. - Bang the drums! Clang the cymbals! Beat, brush or caress just about every other possible surface.

The 69th Ojai Music Festival, which runs through Sunday under the inspired leadership of percussionist/composer/educator Steven Schick, is making a widespread and deep impression exploring the musical potential of sounds that expand exponentially in the hands of Schick and the remarkable players he has gathered to celebrate what the ear can hear when single-minded concentration is in play.

After the grace note of Wednesday evening's multimedia presentation about Pierre Boulez, who turned 90 this year and has been music director of the festival a record seven times, the festival's live programs began Thursday night at Libbey Bowl with nods to the creativity of Boulez, Béla Bartók, Edgard Varèse, Carlos Chávez and Alberto Ginastera.

Schick was joined for the evening by three top-line ensembles: ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble), for which he is currently artist-in-residence; red fish blue fish, a percussion ensemble he founded; and the Calder Quartet. ICE brought the music of Boulez to life with a deft presentation of his "Dérive 1," with the Calder Quartet following with Bartók's String Quartets No. 1 and 2.

"Dérive 1," which Boulez debuted in 1988 but mused over for decades, is a small but infinitely measured work in which he strives for technical purity, given his passion for perfection. Understanding its intricate structure may enhance listeners' enjoyment, but even a neophyte can relish the compelling miniature. Those looking for more will be able to sate their thirst with the performance of "Dérive 2" at Sunday's concluding festival concert.

The Calder Quartet tackled Bartók's first two string quartets with zest and nuanced skill that showcased both the Hungarian composer's origins, in the first, and his growing comfort with and pursuance of the adventurous structural discipline pervasive in the experimental musical world that was growing around him.

After the newly traditional hour long pause before the evening's second concert, an array of instruments filled nearly every inch of the stage gearing up for works by Varèse, in the first half, followed by Mexican composer Carlos Chávez's Toccata for Percussion and Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera's Cantata para América Mágica. Kettle drums were many, as were various bold, and some very subtle, percussion instruments.

Schick led ICE in Varèse's "Intégrales," with billowing wind instruments jauntily juxtaposed by bold percussion patterns. The dramatic "Ionization" was tackled with gusto by red fish blue fish members as the rhythms swirled toward transformation until the finale when piano, glockenspiel and tubular bells dramatized the conceptual change in nature.

Solo flutist Claire Chase combined vivacity and breadth of skills in Varèse's brief "Density 21.5," which flowed directly into the all-hands aboard drama of his "Déserts," in which ICE joined vivid percussion, wind instruments and piano in an expanding theatrical mix ultimately jarred by thundering recorded sounds of the world outside, making the Libbey Bowl seem a cocoon for the fascinated audience.

Chávez's Toccata for Percussion gave red fish blue fish another opportunity to demonstrate their peerless skills and Ginastera's Cantata brought together free-spirited soprano Melissa Hughes, pianists Gloria Cheng and Vicki Ray, red fish blue fish, percussionists Nathan Davis Ross Karre, Joseph Pereira and Jacob Nissly and celesta player Jacob Greenberg, who had been featured as pianist earlier in the evening.

VENTURA COUNTY
STAR

Review: Ojai Music Festival marches to a bold new beat

By Rita Moran



June 13, 2015

OJAI, Calif. - Steven Schick is a world of music wrapped in a compelling presence. The music director of this year's Ojai Music Festival, Schick has not only gathered forces around him who open up the vast potential of percussion to naive ears and minds, but he personally demonstrated Friday night that a 90-minute-plus program of percussion in its many expressions can be irresistible.

In a fast-paced world where people increasingly shut out daily sounds while embracing their own personal-messaging mechanics, Schick, the musicians he's gathered around him in Ojai to perform the works of nearly 50 composers, and the festival's powerful tradition of fearlessness are combining to deliver a fascinating series of concerts and events. Friday night was a prime example.

Early in the evening, the festival — which wraps up Sunday — continued its pursuit of juxtaposing the works of Pierre Boulez, who at 90 is still an icon of the contemporary music scene, and Béla Bartók, a kindred soul whose passionate Hungarian sensibility surfaces through the stringent modernism that characterize his central work. Played with affinity and grace by the Calder Quartet, Bartók's string quartets No. 3 and No. 5 showed the composer at the height of his career, with the fifth concerto including a nod to the folk music that surrounded him in Hungary as he developed his own distinctive modern voice.

Clarinetist Joshua Rubin captured the eerie essence of Boulez's complex "Dialogue de l'ombre double" in which the soloist wanders around the stage from station to station while the haunting shadow of an unseen clarinet joins him intermittently, a technical wonder of compatibility as they move through transitions.

Later, when Schick took the stage for a tour de force of solo percussion, the buzz in the audience was impossible to miss. The stage for the first half of the concert was set up with pockets of percussion instruments that were grouped to match the demands of each piece, starting with Iannis Xenakis' "Rebonds" basically requiring a range of snare drums, with a few piquant side strokes, then moving on to Karlheinz Stockhausen's "Zyklus," in which cymbals came to the fore.

Kaija Saariaho's "Six Japanese Gardens" proved a winningly contemplative piece, delicately layered with chants and other electronically provided textures. Schick played all flawlessly, calling to mind a controlled grace that, as has been said of others, "floats like a butterfly, stings like a bee," each at just the right moments.

As those in the crowd returned after intermission, they were each handed a pair of sea stones so they could join Schick in Lei Lang's "Trans," the second piece in the segment. After a ringing David Lang work, "The Anvil Chorus," the percussionist explained that the rocks would allow the audience to join him in "Trans," giving the fascinated gathering a brief lesson in how to hit rocks together to make a group percussive sound. It brought chuckles to the assemblage and even a comment from one of Schick's new fans that we were about to have "a rock concert." Schick did get an earnest try at the clicking sounds he programmed, and the audience got to have fun in the bargain.

Next, for the most extraordinary moment of the evening, or of many another, Schick returned to the stage, having shed his working clothes of T-shirt and jeans for black workout pants, and sat yoga-like on a large, raised black box, where he proceeded to produce percussion sounds by beating on his body, tweaking it into different poses and adding gasps of human air, picked up by the array of receptive microphones surrounding him.

The piece was French composer Vinko Globokar's "Corporel," which along with the battering of the body includes one human sentence, "I recently read the following remark: Human history is a long sequence of synonyms for the same word. It is our duty to disprove this." His piece exemplifies his turf-shaking perspective. Schick's rendition culminated in lying flat on his back, a snoozing sound emanating from his head, then jerking back into action.

For his final work of the evening, Schick returned to the stage to render Xenakis' "Psappha" ("Sappho"), written for six instrumental groups through which the soloist wanders while demonstrating the confluence and dissonance among drums and metal instruments.

Schick said he had originally planned an encore, but "there are still eight concerts to go." Instead, he provided more food for thought by reciting Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." Its lines leave many provocative, and humorous thoughts, among them: "Every day do something that won't compute," "Ask the questions that have no answers" and "Practice resurrection."

It's worth looking up to relish the entire "Manifesto," which Schick certainly seems to embrace.

The San Diego
Union-Tribune

All Music, All the Time in Ojai

Is every piece appropriate for performance outside?

By James Chute



June 13, 2015

OJAI — Somebody should do a study on what this much music does to the central nervous system. Friday's lineup at the Ojai Music Festival included four concerts comprising 20 pieces, while Saturday promised six concerts and 27 pieces. Not that I'm complaining. But it's a lot to take in. You might be someone else by the time you are finished with this festival curated by conductor and percussionist Steven Schick.

Here's what Friday's programs did to my nervous system:

I never really thought about it before, but I'm now convinced some pieces should never be played outdoors. By its very nature, being outdoors, especially in a scenic setting like Ojai, has a certain uplifting quality. Roland Auzet's staged version of Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate," "La Cathedrale de misere," expertly performed by Schick, belongs in a cold, soulless black box theater with an audience of people either gazing at their navel or contemplating the futility of their shallow existence.

Auzet has taken Schwitters' harmless sound poem (whose meaning is found in the delight he takes in the sounds themselves) and turned it into a nihilist nightmare. The disturbing performance at the Libbey Bowl ended at 11:55 p.m. Sweet dreams. (That late program also contained Michael Harrison's entertaining if perplexing "Just Ancient Loops" performed by cellist Maya Beiser, and Osvaldo Golijov's expressive "Mariel," played by Beiser and Schick.)

I'm also convinced some pieces may be enhanced by being outdoors. I've heard UC San Diego composer Lei Liang's "Trans" twice before in concert halls, but hearing it outside was a revelation. The work, performed by Schick in a Friday mid-evening concert devoted to solo percussion, requires the audience to tap small stones together at certain points in the piece, and in the Libbey Bowl, the effect was magical. (Schick premiered Liang's piece last year at the Miller Theatre in New York in a pair of solo percussion concerts; much of the repertoire on those concerts was also on this concert: Xenakis, Stockhausen, Kaija Saariaho, David Lang, and Globokar.)

Some music that you might expect to be compromised by the outdoors is not.

Consider UC San Diego composer Rand Steiger's "Concatenation," for bassoon and electronics. Given the sophisticated digital signal processing involved and balance issues, it might seem you need as controlled an environment as possible. But in a Friday afternoon concert by members of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) at the Libbey Park Gazebo, Steiger's work was unstoppable. Fire engines could have gone by and it wouldn't have mattered.

Of course it helped that bassoonist Rebekah Heller played it like a rock star, and then some. Imagine that moment in a heavy metal concert where the lead guitarist turns toward her amp, purposefully induces some feedback, and starts wailing. It was kind of like that. Well, not exactly like that, but with the same level of intensity and an infinitely higher level of sophistication. (Also on that concert were works by Steve Reich, John Zorn, Suzanne Farrin, Du Yun, Mario Diaz de Leon and Pauline Oliveros.)

For most music, it just doesn't matter if you are outside. During the festival, the Calder Quartet is performing the complete Bartok string quartet cycle (also on those programs: works by Boulez). During Thursday's early evening concert ushers had to remove someone in a wheel chair during the first movement of the String Quartet No. 1. There were fewer distractions Friday (for the String Quartets Nos. 3 and 5), but inevitably there were the occasional sounds of distant traffic and children playing. The Calder stayed focused, offering unusually communicative performances. This is a quartet that knows how to speak Bartok. And what Bartok is telling us, like nature, like music, like the Ojai Festival, is that life is full of endless wonder.

The San Diego
Union-Tribune

Morning Glories at Ojai Music Festival

ICE's performance of "In the Light of Air" a
revelation

By James Chute



June 14, 2015

One of the delights of an event like the Ojai Music Festival, with its myriad performances of 20th and 21st century music, is encountering surprises, especially early in the morning.

Music director Steven Schick programmed two "Ojai Sunrise" concerts for the festival: On Sunday (the festival's final day), with flutist Claire Chase and pianist Sarah Rothenberg, he performed Morton Feldman's monumental, four-and-hour 1984 work, "For Philip Guston." You pretty much know what to expect with this delicate, tactile piece; the only surprise, and

admittedly it's a big one, is how your mind and body interact with the music over that extended period of time.

But Saturday's "Ojai Sunrise" brought with it something unexpected: Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir's revelatory "In the Light of Air," which ICE commissioned last year from the UC San Diego graduate as part of its ICElab program.

As you listen to this nearly hour-long work, performed with an extreme degree of sensitivity and commitment by five members of the International Contemporary Ensemble, you find yourself sinking deeper and deeper into the music, until you are fully absorbed in Thorvaldsdottir's slightly unsettling, oddly disorienting space.

Enhanced by the use of dozens of lighted glass globes suspended overhead, which subtly reacted to the musicians' gestures, and by a darkened room, which was the black-box theater on the campus of Ojai's Besant Hill School, Thorvaldsdottir's piece has a strong architectural element. She carefully creates her own highly individual sonic universe.

But it's what she does there that's so remarkable. Written for viola, cello, harp, piano, percussion, and employing subtle electronics, it's divided into four sections (Luminance, Serenity, Existence, and Remembrance), framed by a prologue and epilogue, and connected by transitions. Violist Kyle Armbrust, cellist Michael Nicolas, harpist Nuiko Wadden, pianist Cory Smythe and percussionist Nathan Davis, who worked with Thorvaldsdottir in developing the piece and premiered it just over a year ago in Reykjavik. Iceland, behaved like actors as much as musicians, sometimes taking the lead, sometimes stepping back, at times disappearing out of audible range and always supporting each other.

You might hear a brief snippet of melody from the pianist, then the harpist would answer with a cascade of sound, the violist would draw his bow across the strings in a percussive manner, the percussionist would strike a cymbal and the cellist would pluck a string or two. It was nothing too outrageous, nothing too out of the ordinary except for Thorvaldsdottir's use of each instrument's total spectrum of tone colors and her skill at delicately layering and weaving them together.

As the piece developed, those snippets of melody started to sound like some long forgotten memories momentary coming to the surface. By the end, the aged, out-of-tune sounding piano that seemed to come from out of the distance as the doors at the rear of the stage opened revealing the Ojai morning was one of the most poignant sounds you'll ever hear.

There were other surprises, but mostly affirmations throughout Saturday's multiple performances. It's easy enough to think of Ravel as living in one era and Boulez in another (didn't Boulez say modern composers should start with a tabula rasa?), but Schick's telling juxtaposition of Ravel's "Trois poemes de Stephane Mallarme" and Boulez's "Improvisations sur Mallarme" in a concert with ICE and red fish blue fish at Libbey Bowl was a reminder that Boulez owed an enormous amount to Ravel (and to Messiaen, whose "Visions de l'amen," convincingly performed by pianists Gloria Cheng and Vicki Ray, opened the late morning program).

In a later concert, Julia Wolfe's "Four Marys," conducted by Schick and performed by the San Diego-based string ensemble Renga, affirmed that there's still plenty of excellent tonal music to be written, while UC San Diego composer Rand Steiger's exhilarating "Template for Improvising Trumpeter and Ensemble" (with ICE's Peter Evans) showed that there's nothing implicitly inaccessible about experimental, atonal music.

And on a still later concert, Schick's sympathetic performance of John Luther Adams' "Become River" with ICE and Renga, and his pristine yet lyrical interpretation of Copland's "Appalachian Spring" with ICE and violinist Kate Hatmaker, showed these two American masters have a considerable amount in common.

That's no surprise.

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Percussionist Steven Schick makes Ojai Music Festival his own

By Timothy Mangan



June 15, 2015

It is always good to wind in along the two-lane road that leads to this little town after an invariably horrible drive from Los Angeles, to once again find Ojai here, dusty, pretty and unchanged, and the Ojai Music Festival in full swing as if it had never stopped.

Percussionist and conductor Steven Schick is this year's music director. The festival had been underway since Wednesday, but Friday night (shortly after our arrival) he turned in what will certainly be one of the 69th annual event's defining concerts, a solo percussion recital as the sun went down and the cool night air rolled into Libbey Bowl.

It was the percussionist who was solo; the number of instruments he banged on, one-man-band-like, were in the several dozens, a different set for each piece. The repertoire for solo percussion is of recent vintage, the founding fathers of it being the European avant-gardists Iannis Xenakis and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Schick's recital could be listened to in several ways, but one of them was definitely as a display of virtuosity. The performance of this music is an athletic event and fiercely intricate. Schick toweled off between numbers.

He performed two pieces by Xenakis, "Rebonds" and "Psappha," both of which were surprising in their compelling immediacy, a kind of narrative laid out through rhythmic patterns (standing in for melody), contrasts and instrumental interplay. Consonance and dissonance were easily established through the regularity and irregularity of rhythm. Stockhausen's "Zyklus" proved fascinating as well, a kind of mobile of aural color, catching the light in different ways as it, and Schick, turned this way and that.

Kaija Saariaho's "Six Japanese Gardens" added recorded thrums, chants and reverberations to the mix, creating a science fiction ritual. In Lei Liang's "Trans," the audience became part of the performance, clicking small rocks to create an enchanting sound of rain in the darkness of the amphitheater. With its metal pipes and other clanging things, David Lang's "The Anvil Chorus" was an exercise in industrial minimalism.

The piece de resistance, though, was Vinko Globokar's "Corporel," part percussion piece, part absurdist theater. The work is "played" on the bare torso and head of the performer in a noninjurious and amplified form of self-flagellation. Vocalizations and various bodily contortions come into it as well. Schick lay flat and snored at one point.

As an encore, he recited the poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" by Wendell Berry. This proved a preview of things to come later in the evening, when on an Ojai Late Night program in Libbey Bowl Schick took us to the midnight hour with a recitation of the Dadaist nonsense poem "Ursonate" by Kurt Schwitters.

By staging it, complete with chaotic lighting, electronic enhancement and rolling mirrors as sets, Roland Auzet turned it into a bit of performance art he called "La Cathédrale de misère," but nothing could hide that Schick had memorized some 45 minutes of gibberish and spit it out with the dexterity of an auctioneer.

The charge of pretentiousness is sometimes lobbed at the festival, perhaps not surprisingly so, especially when the offerings are as out there as the Globokar and the Schwitters. To each his own. This listener enjoys the spirit of experimentation that presides in Ojai and the opportunity to hear music off the beaten path.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Ojai Music Festival Marches to a New Beat

Classic Modernist works shared the bill with rarities and the odd piece of core repertory at this festival.

By David Mermelstein



June 15, 2015

Ojai, Calif.

A host of luminaries have held the annually rotating music-director post during the Ojai Festival's 69 years, including the composers Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland and Pierre Boulez and, more recently, the soprano Dawn Upshaw and the choreographer Mark Morris. But not since 1990, and the tenure of the composer Stephen Mosko, has the largely outdoor festival,

which this year ran from June 10 through 14, selected someone as little known to the wider world as the percussionist Steven Schick.

Yet the 61-year-old Mr. Schick is something of a hero in his field, credited with having commissioned or given the premieres of some 150 works for percussion. Since 1991, he has taught at the University of California, San Diego, where he founded, and continues to lead, the crack percussion band Red Fish Blue Fish. In 2012, he became the first artist-in-residence of the New York-based International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE). Separately and combined, those groups served as house musicians at this year's festival, eagerly responding to Mr. Schick's clear beat and elegant manner when leading them.

Naturally, percussion-heavy scores dominated the roster, which Mr. Schick developed in collaboration with Thomas W. Morris (Ojai's artistic director since 2004 and himself a trained percussionist) and which Cal Performances presents in a condensed form at U.C. Berkeley from June 18 through 20. But plenty of other music—some with no percussion whatever—also left strong impressions. As ever at Ojai, classic modernist works shared the bill with rarities and the odd piece of core repertory. But whether by design or coincidence, a recent drift toward predictability was slowed this year thanks to the addition of music by several composers new to Ojai. Some—like Julia Wolfe, who won a Pulitzer Prize in April, and her husband, Michael Gordon, both longtime collaborators with Mr. Schick—seemed logical additions to the fold. Others—like the electronic-music maverick Pauline Oliveros and the Argentine master Alberto Ginastera—were long overdue for inclusion.

Bending and melding genres is an Ojai tradition, but rarely have they been stretched so far. On Friday night, for example, Mr. Schick emerged on the rusticated Libbey Bowl stage, the festival's primary venue, for Vinko Globokar's "Corporel" clad only in yoga pants. He then proceeded to "play" his own body, sitting cross-legged on a spotlighted dais, where he gnashed his teeth, slapped his chest and belly, made clicking sounds with his tongue, mock-snoored and engaged in a bit of spoken word that called to mind Samuel Beckett's more elliptical stage works. He went even further as midnight approached, acting as the protagonist in Roland Auzet's "La Cathédrale de Misère," a staged version of the German artist Kurt Schwitters's Dadaist sound poem "Ursonate."

There were more conventional performances, too, including, on Thursday evening, incisive accounts by Mr. Schick and company of four seminal works by Edgard Varèse: "Intégrales," "Ionisation," "Density 21.5" (Claire Chase was the solo flutist) and "Déserts." And Mr. Schick's solo realization of Kaija Saariaho's "Six Japanese Gardens" earlier on Friday proved transporting. But his interpretation of Copland's "Appalachian Spring" in its original instrumentation for 13 players, which closed the late-night concert on Saturday, was disturbingly, if intentionally, uninflected—every note in place but not a shred of feeling.

As always at Ojai, different musical streams ran concurrently. The most gratifying found the rising Calder Quartet—formed in Los Angeles in the 1990s but now earning accolades internationally—traversing Bartók's six string quartets over three programs (Thursday through Saturday) that juxtaposed their labors against chamber works by Mr. Boulez performed by

others. The Calders, in a sensational Ojai debut, could not have brought greater cohesion and character to these complicated, at times sprawling, masterworks. The programs were also a welcome reminder that Mr. Boulez, who turned 90 in March, served as Ojai's music director a record seven times between 1967 and 2003. He was honored in other ways as well, most obviously on Wednesday night with an engrossing full-length multimedia tribute first produced in Chicago.

John Luther Adams, another composer who provokes intense and divergent reactions, also loomed large at the festival. Mr. Adams (not to be confused with John Adams of "Nixon in China" fame) won a Pulitzer Prize in 2014, and his "Become River" shared Saturday's late-night program with "Appalachian Spring." But it was his "Sila: The Breath of the World"—an immersive, hour-plus work that used 80 musicians, performed on Thursday afternoon—that emerged as a festival favorite. It unfolded with clusters of musicians grouped by type (brasses, strings, woodwinds, percussion, and singers droning into megaphones made of construction paper) spread throughout Libbey Park, each choir performing, stopping and then starting again in various formations. Listeners were encouraged to move about, repeatedly altering sonic vantage points as they absorbed not just the music being played, but also the "music" of the environment traversed. Gimmicky though the effort sounds, the effect was transcendent.

The other great surprise here proved to be the festival debut of the Chinese-born pipa player Wu Man, who appeared at the conclusion of the big concert on Saturday night and then again, with even greater impact, on Sunday's late-morning program. Ms. Wu's virtuosity on her pear-shaped instrument, which sounds like a mandolin, was impossible to resist in such cross-cultural works as Lou Harrison's Concerto for Pipa with String Orchestra, Bright Sheng's Three Songs for Violoncello and Pipa, Gabriela Lena Frank's "¡Chayraq!" and Evan Ziporyn's "Sulvasutra." But her appeal was furthered by her unforced charm and modest manner—a mode in sharp contrast to that of another soloist, the showy Israeli-American cellist Maya Beiser, with whom she collaborated on Sunday.

Los Angeles Times

Feeling the sonic rush at the Ojai Music Festival

By Mark Swed



June 16, 2015

The first major work in Western music for percussion ensemble, Edgar Varèse's 1931 "Ionization" instigated the percussion revolution in modern music. But Thursday night at the Ojai Music Festival, this year's music director, percussionist and conductor Steven Schick, noted something possibly even more revolutionary about this 20th century classic.

Instruments from cultures unable to get along then or now were asked to sit side by side. Finding compatibility between European military snare drums, Latin American bongos, Asian gongs and African drums, Schick observed, could become "a model for an environment of cohabitation ... that we could all aspire to live up to."

Schick did not go so far as to propose compatibility and cohabitation as a festival theme. But by packing the 69th Ojai festival into marathon days of concerts from dawn (and before!) until midnight, he, in fact, turned the five-day festival into a de-facto Davos of musical diplomacy. No model society emerged, but there were helpful hints of how we might proceed.

In theory, the festival was meant to be Pierre Boulez-centric and thus a celebration of cerebral music. In honor of Boulez's 90th birthday and in recognition of the French composer and conductor having seven times been Ojai's music director, the festival began Wednesday in Libbey Bowl with a special multimedia Boulez tribute and ended Sunday with a performance of Boulez's 48-minute "Dérive 2" from 2009 and one of his most recent works. There were further daily doses of Boulez, added to a heady diet of contemporary music.

Over five days at Ojai, Schick conducted dozens of works, ranging from Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" to the world premiere of Julia Wolfe's string orchestra arrangement of "Four Marys." ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble) was the impressive main instrumental group in residence, and Schick, who is based at UC San Diego, also led the San Diego ensembles red fish blue fish and Renga.

Indefatigable, Schick worked around the clock. On Friday night, he offered a flabbergasting recital of European, American, Finnish and Chinese avant-garde solo percussion pieces, including Vinko Globokar's agonizingly outlandish "Corporel," in which a bare-chested Schick sat cross-legged and played his body. He followed that with a late-night appearance in Roland Auzet's "La Cathédral de Misère" — a vulgar staging, with electronics and psychedelic lighting, of Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate," a 35-minute Dada poem that Schick delivered with beyond-flabbergasting vocal virtuosity.

Saturday night found Schick conducting demanding 8 and 10:30 p.m. concerts in Libbey Bowl. On Sunday morning at 5 at the nearby Ojai Arts Center, he joined ICE flutist Claire Chase and pianist Sarah Rothenberg for Morton Feldman's "For Philip Guston." A score of repetitive, ethereal unworldliness, it lasted 4 hours and 38 minutes.

Some listeners brought sleeping bags to the arts center and were strewn on the floor as though stranded at an airport. The haunting bells, the call-to-prayer flute lines and solemn piano chords were given the added buzz of snoring.

Neither Schick, nor Ojai, can do it all. Late Feldman ("For Philip Guston" was written in 1984, three years before Feldman died) and late Boulez have little in common. The composers were born less than a year apart, and each accused the other of lacking elegance. This year, each might have been proved correct but not for their reasons. Feldman's music goes back to essentials and cleans the air, leaving logic out of the equation. Boulez's music is a fascinatingly complex world of expressive logic.

"For Philip Guston" was given a magisterial performance in a messy setting. "Dérive 2" had the opposite problem of seeming too well scrubbed. While ICE played brilliantly, Schick's conducting, which lacks the nuance of his solo playing, allowed no room for essential messiness, the expressivity of the intricate little details that give Boulez's music its life.

Nor was mixing small earlier Boulez pieces with Bartók string quartets in early evening concerts illuminating. Although a great Bartók conductor, Boulez always considered the Hungarian the least important to him of the great 20th century composers. But the refined yet visceral Bartók performances by the Calder Quartet were commanding.

Still, Schick was terrific at providing an atmosphere in which musical reactions might occur. The West Coast premiere Thursday afternoon of John Luther Adams' recent "Sila" for dozens of musicians stationed around Libbey Park gave the impression of the trees taking audible breaths, the ground groaning, the wind in happy duet with the flowers and the stones dancing. I have never seen such contented-looking musicians and listeners.

At the other extreme, Schick conducted a strong performance of Varèse's lonely, pessimistic "Déserts" later that night, and the environment now felt in danger. But a couple of nights later, Adams came to the rescue with his fluid, life-affirming "Become River" for chamber ensemble.

The Israeli cellist Maya Beiser proved particularly effective in tapping into Ojai's spiritual essence with Michael Harrison's droning, electronic "Just Ancient Loops" (accompanied by a Bill Morrison film) and her chanting in Mohammed Fairouz's haunting arrangement of the Kol Nidrei.

Wu Man was the soloist in Lou Harrison's Concerto for Pipa With String Orchestra, but here there could be no cultural detente with an eloquent Chinese soloist and Renga's poorly tuned and timid strings.

Olivier Messiaen's two-piano "Visions de l'Amen" added mystical Catholicism to the mix, and a glorious Ojai moment was the Saturday morning performance by Gloria Cheng and Vicki Ray. Messiaen had been Boulez's teacher, but the connection was curiously stronger with Feldman, whose "For Philip Guston" has a mystical Jewish character.

There were vast amounts more, too much to absorb, reminding us that marathon diplomacy is show business and that real understanding takes time. Nonetheless, Schick demonstrated that there is no place better for real peace talks than Ojai, something musicians this year knew well and something that governments would do well to check out next year, when Peter Sellars will be the music director.

Santa Barbara **Independent** **INDEPENDENT.COM**

Ojai Music Festival 2015

Schick happens in Ojai

By Charles Donelan



June 17, 2015

The Ojai Music Festival has always been friendly to influences from outside the Western tradition, but this year's edition took things a step further by ushering in so much of the so-called "outside" as to render the distinction temporarily invalid. As in his own extraordinary solo performance on Friday evening, 2015 Music Director Steven Schick created a sonic world out of the vast array of instruments laid out for him by the various ensembles and musicians on hand. From the rigorous classical discipline of the strings in the Calder Quartet to the elaborate batteries of percussion deployed by red fish blue fish, and from the single-instrument virtuosity of pipa player Wu Man and cellist Maya Beiser to the democratic sounds of audience members

clicking away on small stones, the 2015 Ojai Music Festival wove together a tapestry of sound that seemed ready to start anywhere and end everywhere.

Celebrating the 90th birthday of the great French innovator Pierre Boulez was one strand of the festival, while investigating the overlap between music and physical theater was another. Electronics, prerecorded loops, and digital-delay devices were employed freely, but so were such pre-digital sound technologies as tearing paper and rattling rocks. For example, Friday evening's main concert was divided into two parts, a Bartók-Boulez pairing and a feature for Schick as a solo percussionist.

Bartók's string quartets are quintessential Ojai Festival material — dense and astringent, they offer a high return on the considerable investment of the listener's attention they demand. The Calder Quartet was born to parse the intricacies of such music, and on Friday, they played numbers 3 and 5 with equal fidelity and brio. Placed between these two imposing examples of 20th-century string-quartet composition, the *Dialogue de l'ombre double* of Pierre Boulez went off like a firecracker. With electronic samples cascading through the audience from multiple speakers placed around the Libbey Bowl, clarinetist Joshua Rubin performed a score that had him interacting with a digital shadow of his instrument in what Boulez refers to as “spatial theater.”

Schick's solo set gave new life to the tired notion of a tour de force performance. Surrounded by thousands of instruments, Schick powered through seven dense compositions without the aid of a score. In the process, he educated his audience in the eclectic sounds of the contemporary repertoire for solo percussion. Two works by Iannis Xenakis, *Rebonds* and *Psappa*, anchored the program at either end, indicating the seminal status of Xenakis in this arena.

Schick's penultimate solo piece, Vinko Globokar's *Corporel*, was the most talked about, as it required the performer to shed not only his arsenal of sticks and mallets but also his shirt. Sitting and eventually lying on a resonant platform amplified with microphones, Schick rubbed, slapped, tapped, and knocked on his head and chest while emitting a wide range of nonverbal noises. At one point, while laying flat on his back, he even threw in some snores. He also spoke the piece's only words: “I recently read the following remark: ‘Human history is a long sequence of synonyms for the same word. It is our duty to disprove this.’” In searching for an example of this ongoing quest for the non-synonymous, one could hardly do better than the Ojai Music Festival.

REVIEWS

Ojai Festival, Not for the Faint of Heart

June 19, 2015 | By Rick Schultz

LOS ANGELES--The Ojai Music Festival, which this year ran from June 10 through 14, isn't for sissies. Artistic Director Thomas W. Morris sets a high bar for audiences, and they're usually up to the challenge: People arrived before dawn on Sunday to hear Morton Feldman's *For Philip Guston*, a nearly five-hour trio for flute, piano, and percussion that began at 5 a.m. Some brought their sleeping bags to the venue, the Ojai Art Center, near the Festival's famed pastoral amphitheater, the Libbey Bowl. Morris called this year's five-day festival an "immersive experience," but new- music boot camp might be more accurate. Of the 49 composers represented, 28 were new to Ojai, including Arab-American composer Mohammed Fairouz and Julia Wolfe, who in April won the Pulitzer Prize for her oratorio, *Anthracite Fields*. That's a lot of ground to cover. Perhaps too much, but the extraordinary Steven Schick, the first percussionist music director in the festival's 69-year history, made all the requisite rushing from one event to the next worthwhile.

Schick, 61, teaches at the University of California, San Diego, where he founded the expert percussion ensemble "red fish blue fish." That group, along with the New York-based International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), performed together and separately at the festival, with Schick on the podium. In *The Percussionist's Art*, Schick's remarkable memoir, history, and analysis of the solo percussion repertoire, he demonstrated a Bernstein-level ability to articulate even complex musical ideas. That was particularly evident on Thursday night, when he presented a tribute to Edgard Varèse in the program's first half. Performed by "red fish blue fish," *Ionisation* (1931) for assorted percussion—91 measures of organized noise—sounded fresh and riveting. At the conclusion, the sound of chimes and bass drum faded eloquently into the night air.

Schick explained how *Ionisation*'s use of instruments from all over the planet paralleled the festival's de facto theme of cultural diversity, saying the score represents an inspiring model for human coexistence. The ensemble then performed it a second time. Three other seminal works by Varèse—*Integrales*, *Density 21.5* (Claire Chase was the solo flutist), and *Déserts*—received authoritative readings from ICE, conducted by Schick.

But the heart of the festival came on the Libbey Bowl stage Friday night with Schick's brave one-man percussion show. Opening and closing with two major solo works by Iannis Xenakis, *Rebonds* (1988) and *Psappha* (1975), Schick maintained a firm musical line through sheer physicality and gesture as he pummeled and caressed an array of woods, skins, and metal instruments. He stripped to the waist for Vinko Globokar's *Corporel*, a small, but fully realized performance-art piece where even Schick's teeth became part of the arsenal.

Sitting cross-legged center stage on a platform, he turned his own body into a percussion instrument, with elements of mood lighting and amplified sound adding to the theatrical spectacle. During intermission, audience members grabbed stones from buckets so they could participate later in Lei Lang's *Trans*, a charming, imaginative piece for which Schick gave a tutorial from the stage. After a quick run-through

with his impromptu collaborators, Schick quipped, "You may not want to quit your day jobs yet." Occasionally, Schick turned to conduct the audience, and toward the end, he cued our tapping noises to diminuendo. Accompanied by Schick's light touch on cymbals, the effect conjured a magical moment of the sound of rain tapering off.

Later that night, Schick gave the American premiere of Roland Auzet's *La Cathédrale de misère*, a staged version of Dadaist collage artist Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*. In a tour de force performance, Schick delivered a madman's nonsensical but rhythmical ranting for over a half hour, expressing puzzlement, deep sadness, protest, and sheer sound and fury. Complemented by large mirrors on rollers, abstract lighting, and creepy sound design, the work had a striking impact.

Pierre Boulez turned 90 in March and was Ojai's music director seven times between 1967 and 2003. The festival honored him with a multimedia tribute on Wednesday night and performances of the busy *Sonatine for Flute and Piano, Op. 1* (1946), on Saturday (with Chase, flute; Jacob Greenberg, piano). On Sunday's closing program, Schick conducted ICE in the 2009 revision of the 48-minute *Dérive 2* (1988-2006), a somewhat less chilly work than the *Sonatine* that indulges in complexity for its own sake, but a charming (for Boulez) deconstruction of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* can be heard in the rhythmically restless final pages.

All six of Bartók's string quartets were performed over three programs, a first in the festival's history. The superb Calder Quartet, in a memorable Ojai debut, captured the composer's developing "night music" style in the Fourth, the Bulgarian folk-rhythms in the Fifth's scherzo and trio, and the slight bitterness in the melancholy Sixth's "Marcia" and "Burletta."

Inevitably there were several misconceived, self-indulgent scores. On the Sunday morning program, for example, Gabriela Lena Frank's *The Giant's Drum*, which featured Wu Man on pipa and Maya Beiser on cello, began well, then proved in need of ideas and editing. The same has to be said of Tan Dun's *Elegy: Snow in June*, which became music, to paraphrase Stravinsky, that was over before it finished. In the concert's first half, however, Bright Sheng's *Three Songs for Violoncello and Pipa*, once again with cellist Beiser, proved a joyful vehicle for Wu Man's stunning virtuosity. And Fairouz's *Kol Nidrei*, composed for Beiser, brought out her best in a performance featuring her singing the ancient Aramaic prayer.

The five-day festival ended appropriately Sunday evening with the last few sounds of Bartók's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* tapped out by Schick on a snare drum. The composer's late masterpiece featured him and LA Philharmonic principal percussionist Joseph Pereira, with pianists Gloria Cheng and Vicki Ray.

As all the "Schick Happens" t-shirts for sale gave way to buttons promoting next year's 70th-anniversary event, it occurred to me that in its entire history, the Ojai Music Festival has appointed only one woman as solo music director: Dawn Upshaw, in 2011. Mitsuko Uchida shared the post with David Zinman in 1998; Diane Wittry co-directed with Nicholas McGegan and Peter Maxwell Davies in

And with the previously announced next three music directors—Peter Sellars, Vijay Iyer, and Esa-Pekka Salonen—that brings the total to three women in 72 years.

Maybe Morris will rethink this situation by 2019, the next open date for a festival music director.

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



The director also drums

Percussionist-conductor Steven Schick leads one of the smarter Ojai Music Festival programs in years



*By Josef Woodard, News-Press
Correspondent*

June 19, 2015 12:00 AM

Steven Schick was working overtime in Ojai over the past weekend, and in more than just the figurative sense. He presided over and dove into the world-renowned and contemporary-minded five-day, 69th annual Ojai Music Festival, which he painstakingly and brilliantly designed, as conductor and percussionist, including an entire solo percussion concert on Friday. He finished conducting Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" around the stroke of midnight on Saturday in Libbey Bowl, and was on call for a 5 a.m. performance of Morton Feldman's mesmerizing, four-and-a-half-hour piece "For Philip Guston," in the Ojai Arts Center the next morning. The term "Energizer bunny" was going around Ojai to describe the Schick phenom.

But what might seem on paper to be a self-imposed gymnastic feat - festivaling as extreme sports event - and egotistic spotlighting was, in fact, primarily about something much more rewarding and "other" oriented. In this, his grand moment as musical director of this auspicious and historic festival, a role previously filled by Copland, Igor Stravinsky, Pierre Boulez, John Adams and countless others, Mr. Schick wanted to pack a lot in and make a sweeping yet multi-tiered statement, while also bringing along musicians and composers formerly not in the Ojai orbit.

It was a tall, wide, sleep- and dinner-challenged order of a task, but Mr. Schick and company worked wonders here, in what was one of the smartest, edgiest and funnest Ojai Music Festival programs in the past decade. Crowds may have been more pandered to in recent years, as in the Mark Morris-directed year in 2013 or last year's Jeremy Denk-led program, but Mr. Schick's Ojai Year shone with a special light of intelligence and insight, with a bounty of drums in the mix.

For my money, two of the most striking features of the festival "only in Ojai" variety, except that they were also Ojai firsts: maybe that dichotomy makes sense by new sensation-seeking Ojai standards. Thursday night's main concert, with amazing ensemble-in-residence ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble) was built around a first half of music by experimental music pillar Edgard Varèse, including the percussion landmark "Ionisation," and the epic brain-twister "Deserts," including vintage tape sounds - and including a perfectly timed siren in the Ojai night, one of the expected ambient sonic "guests" in the outdoor festival.

For the first half of Saturday night's concert, the going was uncompromisingly edgy, including a first-time from the remarkable trumpeter Peter Evans, who moves easily from new music to jazz (he's part of the wily and woolly avant-prankster jazz band Mostly Other People Do the Killing), deftly improvising his way over Rand Steiger's "Template for Improvising." That piece was

followed by a deliciously compacted, atonal and detailed - and frankly Boulez-esque - piece, "The Will to Adorn," by another jazz/serious music bridge-crosser, George Lewis.

Mark this the year that Ojai opened its arms to Bang on a Can, that old-guard entity in the new music universe. BOAC had a strong presence this year, beginning with Mr. Schick's own link as a founding member of the Bang on a Can All Stars ensemble, and including music by its founding composers/conspirators Julia Wolfe (her surreally, darkly sensuous string piece "Four Marys"), David Lang (his clangorous and hip solo percussion work "Anvil Chorus") and Michael Gordon ("Timber," the most hypnotic hour-long piece written for five percussionists, from the red fish blue fish group, on 2 x 4 boards).

Ojai circa 2015 was an extra-dense affair, with extra early afternoon concerts, panel discussions and 6 p.m. concerts allowing Mr. Schick to accommodate the logical blend of two 20th-century B's: Bartok and Boulez. As part of the program's focus on Mr. Boulez in this, his 90th year, included an extra day, the Wednesday night multi-media tribute The Calder String Quartet (a first-time Ojai visitor deserving repeat visits) was the beautifully surveyed six Bartok quartets over three early evenings, framing the Boulez pieces "Derive 1" - whose later offspring "Derive 2" was a closing concert highlight - "Sonatine" for flute (the wonderful Claire Chase) and piano, and "Dialogue de l'ombre double" (powerfully realized by ICE clarinetist Joshua Rubin).

Mr. Schick's work as percussionist was spotlighted on the enthralling solo percussion concert on Friday night on the instrument-packed Libbey Bowl stage, a concert including works by Iannis Xenakis, Karlheinz Stockhausen, a passage of lyrical relief from Kaija Saariaho (who will be a featured visitor in

next year's Peter Sellars-directed Ojai festival) and the body/breath as instrument tour de force of Vinko Globokar's "Corporel."

Early Sunday morning's Morton Feldman epic "For Philip Guston," written in 1984 and a prime example of the later Feldman era involving profound expansions of space and time, and simple materials rendered profound, was a kind of surrogate spiritual/church experience in a concert space. So, in its way was the moving performance, by LA pianists Gloria Cheng and Vickie Ray, of "Visions de l'Amen," by the late, great Catholic-modernist-nature lover Olivier Messiaen (who, incidentally, was another important artist feted in Ojai).

If there was one specific artist in Ojai this year embodying the flexibility and open-ear quality of the new music scene, it had to be cellist Maya Beiser, also connected with the BAOC mothership. On Saturday afternoon, in brainy-brawny rock 'n' roller mode, she packed the auditorium of the Ojai Valley School for a riveting set of power rock trio tunes from her popular recent album "Uncovered." Joined by Gyan (son of Terry) Riley on bass and the uniquely flexible drummer Glenn Kotche - of Wilco fame, but with a "secret" life as composer/conceptualist in artier circles - the all-black-clad Ms. Beiser, with her flailing bushel of dark hair and mile-high heels, easily channeled the rocker within.

Classic rock classics, including Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" and "Kashmir," Janis Joplin's take on "Summertime," Nirvana's "Lithium" took on new dimensions through her distorted electric cello, suggesting the cathartic wail of both rock guitar fervor and rock lead singer howling.

On Sunday morning, the cellist returned in purer, paper music mode, performing less-is-plenty solo works and the cello/percussion bedazzlement of Tan Dun's "Elegy: Snow in June." The cellist also embarked on infectious pairings with the Chinese migr marvel Wu Man on pipa, as on Bright Sheng's "Khse Buon" and Gabriella Lena Frank's "!Chayraq!"

Sunday evening's near-perfect finale concert combined Mr. Boulez's 2009 version of "Derive 2," first written in 1988 for Elliott Carter's 80th birthday and performed the last time Mr. Boulez was musical director in Ojai, in 2003. This newest version, a veritable modern masterpiece, runs 45 minutes and basks in the Boulez glory of precision and uncompromising post-serialist investigation, played with astonishing acuity by ICE. The festival all came to an exciting close with that thinking person's feel-good powerhouse favorite, Bela Bartok's "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion," with Mr. Schick in drum mode along with Joseph Pereira and the Cheng and Ray team, ending with an actual, pretty and, yes, irony-kissed, happy ending. Happiness comes in many forms in Ojai, and the memorable Schick Year added a few new definitions to the list.

THE NEW YORKER

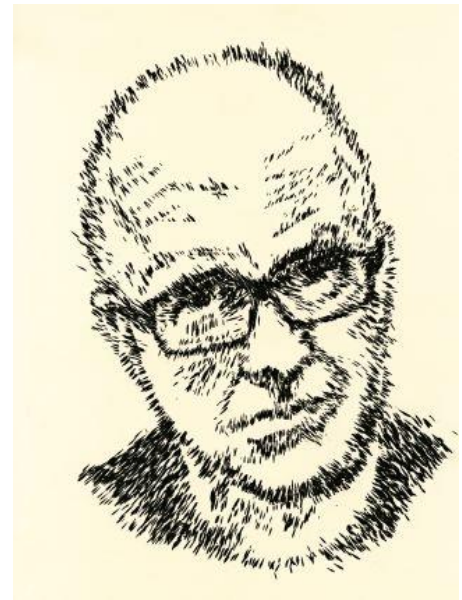
Outsiders

The Ojai Music Festival.

JULY 6, 2015 ISSUE

BY [ALEX ROSS](#)

At first glance, it is a mystery how the prosperously rustic town of Ojai, California, came to host one of the world's great festivals of modern music. Tucked away in a lush valley at the edge of Los Padres National Forest, sixty-five miles northwest of Los Angeles, Ojai is not the sort of place where one would expect to find an aesthetic of musical experiment. Its crisp air, sycamore groves, and mountain views have long attracted millionaires, spiritual seekers, and bohemians. In the nineteen-twenties, the Indian guru Jiddu Krishnamurti and various personalities connected with the Theosophical movement took up residence in Ojai. More recently, the town has attracted a smattering of Hollywood celebrities, who seem to pass through its streets unmolested.



Amid the self-discovery talks, spa treatments, and rounds of golf, the Ojai Music Festival has been raising a finely calibrated ruckus each spring since 1947. Stravinsky and Copland have presided over performances of their own works, and Pierre Boulez has served as music director on seven occasions. The jazz great Eric Dolphy once played Varèse's "Density 21.5"; Mauricio Kagel led his "Anagrama," for speaking, spluttering chorus. In 1999, when I first visited, a gang of Finns banged on discarded auto parts that were dangling from Ojai's ancient trees. (Most events in the festival take place at the Libbey Bowl, in the town park.) At the most recent edition, under the aegis of the percussionist and conductor Steven Schick, there were shrieks of flute and clatterings of gong; two works involving stones that were knocked together; austere chamber programs of Bartók and Boulez; a concussive hour of Varèse; a recitation of Kurt Schwitters's Dada poem "Ursonate"; and a rendition of Morton Feldman's five-hour trio, "For Philip Guston," which began at 5 A.M. on a Sunday.

On second thought, no one should be surprised that such an institution took root in Southern California. The esoteric sects that proliferated in the state at the turn of the last century had myriad connections to modernism in the arts. The lineage of experimental composers who grew up on the West Coast or were based there for part of their careers—Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, John Cage, Lou Harrison, La Monte Young, James Tenney, and Pauline Oliveros, among others—is central to contemporary music history. And the mighty exodus of composers from Nazi-occupied Europe to Los Angeles, led by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, prepared the conditions in which the festival flowered.

To attend Ojai is to enter a happily topsy-turvy world where longtime patrons are as avid for new music as they are for classic repertory. Works are sometimes criticized for being *too* accessible; such was a not uncommon reaction to a piece performed at this year's festival, Michael Harrison's "Just Ancient Loops," in which the cellist Maya Beiser spun out soothingly euphonious lines. Conversely, after the clarinetist Joshua Rubin sailed through Boulez's coolly spastic "Dialogue de l'Ombre Double," a woman behind me exclaimed, "Now, *that's* real music!" She employed the tone of relief that one hears at Lincoln Center when Boulez gives way to Brahms. What is different about Ojai? It has to do, I think, simply with the power of consistency: the festival stuck to its mission, year after year, decade after decade, until, at some point, its ideal audience became the real one.

Ojai appoints a different music director each year. Dawn Upshaw, Leif Ove Andsnes, Mark Morris, and Jeremy Denk have participated in recent seasons, and Peter Sellars will unleash his enthusiasms in 2016. Schick, who teaches at the University of California, San Diego, and also leads the La Jolla Symphony and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, is not as well known as the others, but in the contiguous worlds of percussion and new music he possesses quasi-legendary status. That he is committed to modern fare is a given; as he likes to say, he is older than his repertory, having been born in 1954, five years before Stockhausen wrote "Zyklus," which is considered the first major work for solo percussion. Schick finds force and feeling in the allegedly cerebral world of the European avant-garde; at the same time, he brings rigor and focus to the American experimental and minimalist traditions. He is one of the supreme living virtuosos, not only of percussion but of any instrument.

At the heart of the 2015 festival, which unfolded from June 10th to June 14th, was a solo program by Schick, and its centerpiece was "Zyklus"—a magisterially ambiguous creation that combines precisely notated sections with more open-ended passages that leave considerable choice to the performer. Schick's interpretation, which he has been honing for forty years, is a sinuous audiovisual ballet in which hard-hitting, rat-a-tat drum solos intermingle with subtle, whispery sounds, as of a tapped gong or a brushed gourd. Although Schick meticulously plans each performance, he gives the impression of engaging in intuitive action, as if no score existed and the music were all muscle memory. The distinction between idea and gesture was similarly blurry in his accounts of Xenakis's percussion pieces "Rebonds" and "Psappha," and it disappeared altogether in Vinko Globokar's "?Corporel," which calls for a semi-naked percussionist to make sounds with his or her amplified body, slapping hands against skin.

Members of the International Contemporary Ensemble, which has lately emerged as America's foremost new-music group, joined Schick for the majority of the concerts, and they were willing collaborators in his quest for uninhibited instrumental theatre. The flutist Claire Chase, the co-founder of I.C.E., gave a free, impassioned rendition of "Density 21.5"—one that might have compared favorably with Dolphy's, had it been recorded. She also tore into Mario Diaz de León's "Luciform," which has a trace of heavy metal in its helter-skelter, electronically enhanced cadenzas. The cellist Katinka Kleijn donned a mask to perform Du Yun's "San," an opulent fantasy on the ancient Chinese piece "Guangling San." In Rand Steiger's "Template for Improvising Trumpeter and Ensemble," Peter Evans, in jagged lightning streaks of notes, seemed to revive the fusion of modern jazz and composition prophesied by the great Gunther Schuller, who died on June 21st.

In all, there were eighteen concerts (I saw thirteen), featuring forty-seven composers, most of them living. "Sonic gluttony," Chase called it, and some Ojai veterans came away feeling overstuffed. As Saturday gave way to Sunday, the schedule became a bit mad: at midnight, at the Libbey Bowl, Schick finished conducting Copland's "Appalachian Spring," and just five hours later, in the Ojai Art Center, he stood before a vibraphone and played, alongside Chase and the pianist Sarah Rothenberg, the opening notes of "For Philip Guston." A groggy group of sixty people were there at the beginning, and more than a hundred were present at the end. To listen to Feldman's vast, hushed creation as the world outside moved from night to day was a singular experience, yet I felt a little bedraggled by the end of it: such music requires more mental space for contemplation. The superhuman Schick went on performing for the remainder of the day.

By conventional standards, Ojai is hardly an ideal concert environment. The amplification system at the Libbey Bowl is less than state-of-the-art; I had the impression, as the Calder Quartet played Bartók, that the group was delivering tonally refined and rhythmically vigorous accounts, yet the music kept wafting past my ears. Furthermore, distractions are constant, as airplanes, cars, birds, dogs, and children make themselves heard. Often, though, the ambient noise adds accidental beauties. Cawing crows provided an apt prelude to Bartók's savage Third Quartet. The snoring sounds that Globokar notated in his "?Corporel" score were echoed by slumbering patrons at "Guston." Songbirds softened the severities of Boulez's "Improvisations sur Mallarmé," as if Messiaen, Boulez's bird-loving teacher, were providing commentary. (Schick placed Boulez's two Mallarmé settings amid Ravel's "Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé," making the two composers seem like avatars of a single secretive spirit. Mellissa Hughes proved a staggeringly flexible vocal soloist.)

In several of the festival's most memorable moments, intrusions from the outside were deliberately staged. At a morning concert at the Besant Hill School—an institution whose founders include Krishnamurti and Aldous Huxley—I.C.E. presented Anna Thorvaldsdottir's "In the Light of Air," for viola, cello, piano, harp, percussion, and electronics. The piece began in low light, with filament bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The instruments offered up a subdued, eerie fabric of timbres: ghostly glissandos on the viola and cello, fingertips and Super Balls brushing the strings of the harp and piano. In the course of four movements, this evanescent material acquired mass: droplets of melody and harmony precipitated from the air. Just before the end, darksome bitonal chords began crashing on the harp and piano, like the bell of a

phantom cathedral. Suddenly, the wall at the back of the auditorium was rolled aside, ushering in the bright-gray light and chilly breeze of a cloudy Ojai morning. Nothing I witnessed in opera houses this past season was as dramatic.

Just as transcendent was the ending of John Luther Adams's "Sila: The Breath of the World," an hour-long work designed for the outdoors, in which strings, wind, brass, voices, and percussion generate incrementally shifting clouds of tones based on the natural harmonic series emanating from a low B-flat. The event took place in the park outside the Libbey Bowl. Listeners walked among the ensemble, their sonic perspective constantly changing. Amid the brass, the blendings of harmonics were grand and dire; amid the strings, they were ethereal, insubstantial. In the score's final minutes, the musicians are asked to breathe aloud, and then to listen to sounds emanating from the space. From somewhere, I heard an intermittent high-pitched squeak and looked around for its source. In the distance, a child was swaying on a rusty swing. ♦