

The New York Times

At Ojai, Peter Sellars Has a Personal Yet Global Playlist



By ZACHARY WOOLFE
June 16, 2016

OJAI, CALIF. — Peter Sellars hugs everyone: friends, strangers, people he’s seen just a few hours before, people he hasn’t seen in years.

Embrace is his ethos. As an artist — a stage director and multifaceted cultural curator — he seems to hug his collaborators and hug his audiences. The results can sometimes veer toward the sentimental, even the saccharine, but they always have wide-ranging warmth and inimitable gusto. To hear him talk, everything he touches is the best piece he’s ever heard, the most important project he’s ever worked on.

As the music director of this year’s Ojai Music Festival, which ended Sunday, June 12, he included both Carnatic singing from southern India and French Spectralism, voices from Cairo and from Mexico, a toy piano and a block party. While Mr. Sellars, 58, has been an impresario many times over — one devotee here this weekend wore a T-shirt from the raucous Los Angeles Festival he led in 1990 — the directorship at Ojai gave him perhaps the purest and most concentrated possible vessel for his dizzying range of enthusiasms.

In part because this 70-year-old festival’s musical leadership changes each year, its audience — loyal and attentive, with a bourgeois-bohemian vibe that aptly reflects the sheltered, fragrant Ojai — is unusually open to variation and exploration. And just four days long, the event is compact enough to give the sense that its offerings are the product of a single mind rather than a committee. This was Mr. Sellars’s personal playlist, leave it or — more often — take it.

Most striking about the program he created was that almost all of the music was by women. When I noted this in a review of opening events on Thursday, June 9, the composer, vocalist and pianist Leila Adu added on Twitter that women of color were especially prominent.

For Mr. Sellars, this was clearly not a matter of meeting quotas or checking demographic boxes. He has been promoting the full diversity of world music for decades, freely juxtaposing traditions in a way that can sometimes seem designed to flatter liberal pieties about multiculturalism, but more often simply feels vibrant. His Ojai wasn't set up to prove the influence of, say, classical Indian singing on contemporary American a cappella vocalism; the weekend's performances and styles seemed to inform one another without imposing themselves on one another.

Rare even in the most progressive new-music circles, Ojai's robust helping of female composers seems not to have been the outcome of a particular goal, and it went mostly unmentioned over the weekend, unsurprising for a festival modest about its self-presentation and inclined to let audience members reach their own conclusions.

As the people filed into the outdoor Libbey Bowl on Friday afternoon, June 10, Mr. Sellars stressed this point: "No one has to say, 'Good evening and welcome to a concert written by men.' No one needs to say that about women, either." Thomas W. Morris, who as Ojai's artistic director is a constant as music directors come and go, added, "We never had a meeting where we decided not to emphasize" the festival's gender breakdown.

The Finnish master Kaija Saariaho, whose "L'Amour de Loin" arrives at the Metropolitan Opera this fall, was a focus this year and has long been resistant to being classified as a "woman composer"; Mr. Sellars said her feelings were taken into account, too, in underplaying talk of gender. Two concerts devoted to decades of her shimmering chamber music were highlights of the weekend.

"Terrestre," an intimate kind of flute concerto for five players, begins with quivering in the solo instrument, here played by Claire Chase, the fearless founder of this year's house band, the International Contemporary Ensemble. "Kesapaiva" ("A Summer Day"), five songs for a cappella voices — members of another resident ensemble, Roomful of Teeth — combined plainchant simplicity with tumbling, overlapping commotion.

Aruna Sairam, right, and her Indian ensemble. Credit David Bazemore/Ojai Music Festival "Adjo" finds keening, percussive synchronicity between voice (Martha Cluver), flute (Ms. Chase) and guitar (Dan Lippel). The iridescent, aqueous "Nymphéa" surrounds a string quartet (here the Calder Quartet) with a barely detectable electronic humidity, setting in motion cycles of sounds evaporating and condensing. In the surging "Solar," the birds audible around the bowl flickered in and out of the instrumental textures, as did the quaking flute line (Ms. Chase, yet again, and peerlessly vivid).

A stream of harp (Bridget Kibbey) lent a mystical vibe to "Sombre," settings of Ezra Pound cantos. Camilla Hoytenga played the bass flute with unnatural lightness one moment, caramel liquid weight the next; Davóne Tines's baritone floated through the text like a dense fog.

The festival's planned centerpiece, Ms. Saariaho's "Only the Sound Remains," a pair of Noh-inspired operas that had an acclaimed premiere in Amsterdam in March, was canceled here because of a lack of sufficient rehearsal time. With it out of the lineup, the main events were three loosely, even abstractly biographical oratorios: Ms. Saariaho's ruminative "La Passion de Simone," about Simone Weil; Julia Bullock and Tyshawn Sorey's "Josephine Baker: A Portrait"; and Claude Vivier's "Kopernikus."

With the premiere of "A Portrait," the festival produced something with the heart — if not quite yet the proportions — of a masterpiece. Mr. Sorey, a brilliant avant-jazz composer and musician, has arranged a set of songs once performed by Baker, the celebrated singer, dancer, French Resistance operative and civil

rights activist, as if he's channeling the composer Morton Feldman. It's a landscape of glacial melancholy, shot through with glinting fragments from an ensemble of six players, solemn resonances in the piano and shudders of drums.

This is a ritual of mourning, not a gay-Paree nostalgia trip, and it is one of the most important works of art yet to emerge from the era of Black Lives Matter. "Si J'Étais Blanche" ("If I Were White"), a suavely swinging two and a half minutes as Baker recorded it, is here a haunting quarter-hour dirge, as harrowing as "Strange Fruit."

Her soprano mellow and flexible, somber yet with a crucial undercurrent of youthful hopefulness, Ms. Bullock was a magnetically still presence — until a sensational climactic break into sinuous Baker-esque choreography (by Michael Schumacher). The pitiless words of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "Terre Sèche" were caressed, yet starkly clear.

One problem, however, is the interstitial spoken text, newly written by the poet Claudia Rankine ("Citizen") and recited by Ms. Bullock. Dully underlining points about Baker's relationship with race, it's more obvious and stolid than the ambiguous music. And it keeps pulling us out of Mr. Sorey's hypnotic textures and tempos, making the piece — at 90 minutes already too long, with a particularly unwieldy, cloying late instrumental interlude — feel even longer.

It might be advisable, in what I hope will be many future performances, to flesh out the visual element. Perhaps fractured or slowed footage of Baker dancing could convey her artistry without sacrificing Mr. Sorey and Ms. Bullock's elegantly spare stylization. But "A Portrait" is already, in this early form, a work that demands to be heard and wrestled with, a space of pain and contemplation.

Mr. Sorey, who alternated between piano and drums, was far from the only dual composer-performer over the weekend. Caroline Shaw, a member of Roomful of Teeth, sang the music of others as well as her own Pulitzer Prize-winning "Partita for Eight Voices," as blissed-out as ever but also with an exhilarating recklessness in her performance on June 10. Her new "This might also be a form of dreaming," set to enigmatic texts by Ms. Rankine about connection, requires many of the same techniques as in "Partita": grand, plush harmonies; droning on tangy, bendable pitches; sighing, exhaling babble.

Carla Kihlstedt, a violinist-vocalist, led a group from Roomful of Teeth and the International Contemporary Ensemble in a series of pensive numbers with texts drawn from dreams. Ms. Adu, who sings and plays the piano, offered a late-night set of her earnest, intimate songs, her voice trembling with childlike vulnerability.

A relaxed, sunny presence, Dina El Wedidi and her Cairo-based band explained little about their music or their Arabic texts, making their entertaining show on June 10 — ostensibly an evocation of the revolutionary sounds of Tahrir Square — feel oddly glib. The next night, Aruna Sairam was a more informative, therefore more rewarding, guide to the fundamentals of Indian song, her improvisations witty and joyful.

On June 12, in the wake of the shooting in Orlando, Fla., Mr. Sellars's longstanding vision of art as social justice, and a way to think and feel slowly and carefully in a time of superficial rushes to judgment, was deeply consoling. A morning concert on a hilltop high above the Ojai Valley featured International Contemporary Ensemble members playing from Pauline Oliveros's "Sonic Meditations," the musicians moving around the audience, leaving passing fragments of sound as they passed.

An even more poignant meditation came back in town, when Phyllis Chen performed an enchanting recital of music for toy piano in the courtyard of the Ojai Art Center, the audience full of children. Young musicians from the Los Angeles Philharmonic's youth orchestra program, modeled on Venezuela's El

Sistema, performed later at the bowl. That concert also showcased the orchestra's talented teenage composer fellows.

Vivier's "Kopernikus," a cult classic from the 1970s getting a belated American premiere, charts a transition from life to something after in a surreal mixture of astronomical facts and invented languages — too politely staged by Mr. Sellars, with the performers all in eerie, cultish white. Death-embracing, the work also felt life-affirming in its proud strangeness.

Mr. Sellars's most characteristic move of all was to close the weekend with a street party in Santa Paula, a gorgeous half-hour drive through the mountains. It was the first time organizers could remember the festival venturing beyond its hometown, and a large crowd gathered in the mild evening, singing and dancing, for a taste of the year's artists.

As the sun went down, Mr. Tines dedicated a roaring spiritual to the victims in Orlando. Mr. Sellars watched from the side of the stage, his eyes wet, then pressed Mr. Tines back onstage for another selection, and another.

The Los Angeles band Cambalache, which has deep ties to Veracruz, Mexico, later ripped into a tight set of sweet, danceable songs. Its lead singer, César Castro, thanked the crowd for coming and "enjoying my culture," then corrected himself: "Enjoying *our* culture. Let's make it ours."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/arts/music/at-ojai-peter-sellars-has-a-personal-yet-global-playlist.html? r=0>

Los Angeles Times

Worlds meet and worlds beyond at Ojai Music Festival



By MARK SWED
June 14, 2016

As the great Southern California music retreat, the Ojai Music Festival offers venturesome refuge from normal life for locals and visitors to this blissed-out valley. But on the final day of the festival that had begun Thursday, we awoke to the same horrific news from Orlando as the rest of the country.

This year's Ojai music director, Peter Sellars, led a moment of silence in Libbey Bowl at 3 p.m., the hour Florida Gov. Rick Scott had asked the nation to remember the 49 killed in the mass shooting in a gay nightclub. The silence here initiated the U.S. premiere of Claude Vivier's ritual opera, "Kopernikus." As staged by Sellars, this wondrously mystical masterpiece became a profound and uncanny guide for the dying as they leave this world and prepare for the transcendent next.

That "Kopernikus" happened to be written by a dazzlingly original young Canadian composer murdered by a gay prostitute in Paris in 1983 might have made the premiere of this too-little-known 1979 opera seem all the more uncanny. But for Sellars, the prime function of art is to serve as a spiritual early warning system.

The opera itself isn't exactly obscure. Netherlands Opera produced it a dozen years ago, as did Opera Factory Freiburg more recently, and there are recordings of both. But the European approach has been to treat the 70-minute experimental opera as a Stockhausen-infused Postmodern circus.

Vivier's libretto reads like a phantasmagoric dreamscape. A dying figure, Agni, is surrounded by the countenances of mythic beings, including Mozart, Lewis Carroll, a witch, the Queen of the Night, Copernicus, Tristan and Isolde. Seven singers become their voices on occasion, but mostly they sing Dadaesque nonsense syllables.

Oboe, three clarinets, trombone, violin and a trumpet (as a voice calling from the beyond) make up the instrumental ensemble, which is enhanced by electronics. There are recognizable musical formulas, and there is unrecognizable musical chaos, just as there are recognizable words and unrecognizable ones, recognizable singing styles and all kinds of weird vocal sounds.

For Sellars this is simply the Balinese ceremony for the dead, so for his ritualistic staging, instrumentalists and singers dressed in white were placed on a high stage over the body of dancer Michael Schumacher. He remained immobile for an hour (devastatingly so during the moment of silence), then rose to the call of the trumpet from behind the audience and began his journey. Allusions in word and music to this world, past and present and future, appeared to enter into his being. The effect was utterly transfixing.

The performers, conducted by Eric Dudley, were the respective instrumental and vocal New York ensembles [ICE](#) (International Contemporary Ensemble) and Roomful of Teeth. They softened the Modernist edge to Vivier's score but replaced that with spiritual purpose. "Kopernikus" is an opera we need, and the encouraging news from Ojai is that Sellars plans to develop this production for international consumption.

The other Sellars-staged pieces were concerned with social responsibility, and both were solo vehicles for Julia Bullock, who had appeared in the 2011 festival as a student performer and is now on the verge of what promises to be an astounding career. In a new chamber version of Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's 2006 "La Passion de Simone" on Thursday night, Bullock transformed a somber meditation on the disturbing French philosopher and activist Simone Weil's suicidal self-sacrifice into a ritual of a young African American woman finding her place in a protest movement.

In the long, late-night "Josephine Baker: A Portrait," Bullock sang the famous African American's Parisian show tunes as dark meditations and protest songs. Avant-garde percussionist and pianist Tyshawn Sorey recomposed everything for members of ICE. Poet Claudia Rankine added introductory texts that were rarely useful, but Bullock's singing, dancing and sheer stage presence proved hauntingly effective.

The baritone, Davóne Tines, is the new name to remember from this festival. Discovered by Sellars as a phenomenal singer of spirituals, Tines was invited by Sellars to be in his production of Saariaho's new opera, "Only the Sound Remains," which was to have had its U.S. premiere at Ojai but had to be canceled because of its technical demands. Two brilliant afternoon chamber concerts of Saariaho's chamber music did, however, remain. They concluded with her recent piece "Sombre," a setting of three late Ezra Pound cantos — the poet conversing, like Vivier if in a more terrestrial way, with paradise.

"I have tried to write Paradise," Pound writes. Tines doesn't need to try. He is a singer of immense power and fervor. Everyone in Ojai was talking about him. Saariaho also had the benefit of performers — ICE, flutist Claire Chase, bass flute Camilla Hoitenga, the Calder Quartet and conductor Joana Carneiro — uncovering under her shimmering surfaces strong dramatic musical material.

Much more of this festival was, Sellars style, all over the place — and the globe. Sellars imported the blowsy Egyptian singer Dina El Wedidi and her fusion band, as he did the alluring Carnatic Indian singer

Aruna Sairam with her inspired traditional Indian musicians. These are paths that didn't show any need to cross.

There were daily doses of Roomful of Teeth, which has become popular for its cute use of extended vocal techniques and because the alto Caroline Shaw is an appealing young star composer. The ensemble needs stretching, which "Kopernikus" is clearly doing.

The heavy stretching, though, was with YOLA at HOLA Symphonic Winds, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's student group. For the free family Sunday afternoon concert that preceded "Kopernikus," Tania León wrote and conducted "Pa'lante" for the kids and four ICE wind soloists who have been coaching them. They rocked Libbey Bowl. L.A. Phil teenage composer fellows Benjamin Champion, Robby Good, Luca Mendoza and Ethan Treiman provided solo pieces for the ICE winds; L.A. Phil senior composer fellows Sharon Hurvitz and Andrew Moses wrote wind quartets. All revealed spunky curiosity for cleverly unusual sounds and arresting theatricality.

Sellars' most radical move was to end the festival with a free street party in downtown Santa Paula, a flamboyant celebration of life after Vivier's flamboyant dance of death. The Latino band Los Jornaleros del Norte, YOLA, El Wedidi, Sairam and Tines took turns performing on two stages. By evening's end the crowd thinned to a couple hundred festivalgoers and Santa Paula natives dancing to another Latino band, Cambalache, here two worlds meeting not in a refuge but on Main Street.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ojai-festival-notebook-20160606-snap-story.html>

The New York Times

Women Rule at Ojai Festival, Unannounced



By ZACHARY WOOLFE
June 10, 2016

OJAI, Calif. — Always a bit low key about its high ambitions, the [Ojai Music Festival](#) barely made reference at its opening events on Thursday to the most striking element of this year’s four-day program: Nearly all of the work is by women.

Other organizations would have screamed that from the rooftops. (The Lucerne Festival, coming up in August in Switzerland, has branded itself “Women on the Podium.”) But Ojai, its vibe as luxuriantly relaxed as its sunny, secluded hometown, talks quietly. At 70, as dependable a source of new, intriguing music as any annual event in America, Ojai never seems to sell itself too hard.

Its reliability is something of a paradox, since each year the festival changes music directors. Over the past few years, the post has gone from a choreographer (Mark Morris) to a pianist (Jeremy Denk) to a percussionist (Steven Schick); this year, the leader is the stage director Peter Sellars. (A constant, for over a decade, has been the artistic director, Thomas W. Morris, who shares the planning.)

Mr. Sellars first made his name in the 1980s with vividly updated productions of Mozart operas, including “The Marriage of Figaro” set, yes, in Trump Tower. But he has pared down his aesthetic in recent years to more timeless stylizations, like [the spare Bach “St. Matthew Passion”](#) that the Berlin Philharmonic brought to New York in 2014. He has long been John Adams’s key partner on both librettos and stagings, and has also been a frequent collaborator with Kaija Saariaho, whose “L’Amour de Loin” arrives at the Metropolitan Opera this fall.

Ms. Saariaho, born in Finland in 1952, is the star of this year's Ojai. The American premiere of a chamber version of her [2006 oratorio](#) "La Passion de Simone" was the main offering on Thursday, while the festival's biggest loss was the cancellation, reportedly because of lack of sufficient rehearsal time, of what was to be the weekend's centerpiece: Mr. Sellars's production of Ms. Saariaho's new, Noh-inspired "Only the Sound Remains."

Sober yet seething, "La Passion de Simone" is a more or less static reflection on the life and work of the writer and activist Simone Weil, the great secular saint of self-abasement who in 1943, at just 34, starved herself to death in a radical act of solidarity with those suffering under German occupation. She was given to cheerful sayings like: "Nothing that exists is absolutely worthy of love, so we must love what does not exist."

Susan Sontag once wrote of Weil: "No one who loves life would wish to imitate her dedication to martyrdom nor would wish it for his children nor for anyone else whom he loves." Mr. Sellars put it slightly differently in a talk on Thursday afternoon: "She's the friend you can't stand but you need in your life. Someone has to say those things."

Ms. Saariaho and her librettist, Amin Maalouf, fashioned a Christ-like structure for a Christ-like subject. Patiently gaining power, if not much depth, over the course of its 75 minutes, "La Passion de Simone" is organized into 15 "stations" — as in "stations of the cross" — that offer oblique commentary on Weil. Our guide is a nameless woman, here the noble young soprano Julia Bullock, who both embodies (and quotes) Weil and stands apart from her, an awe-struck, agonized sister who addresses her, or perhaps her memory, in the second person ("you have always been incapable of loving yourself").

Her vocal lines are surprisingly even-keeled, as if the expressions of a person trying desperately to keep mighty emotions under control. Extremity emerges more often from the instrumental ensemble, which Ms. Saariaho reduced from a full orchestra to a complement of fewer than 20 here, conducted by Joana Carneiro. This leaner group still made an impact (if also, in the amplification of the endearing outdoor Libbey Bowl, a rather muddled, fractured one). "You had such a thirst for sacrifice," Ms. Bullock sang at one point, and the orchestra answered with loud whoops, then a sudden drop to a sad, lonely whistle. A massive scraping sound traveled through the ensemble in the 12th station; the final one began with savage fanfares.

But among the most memorable moments were the subtlest, as when Ms. Bullock trilled over the barest hint of high strings, bells and softly tolling drum. A full chorus in the original version was reduced to a vocal quartet that chimed in with floating, crystalline harmonies.

Mr. Sellars's staging was simpler than his 2006 original: It placed Ms. Bullock on a platform above the other performers, where she shared the stage with just a box of shifting colored light — both a shrine and a coffin. Tender even in full cry, she was a presence simultaneously youthful and mature: a compelling vehicle for Ms. Saariaho and Mr. Maalouf's restrained work.

Late Saturday night, Ms. Bullock will interpret songs of Josephine Baker in a new production that features music by Tyshawn Sorey and will interweave texts by the poet Claudia Rankine. Ms. Rankine's work is also the source for Caroline Shaw's new "This might also be a form of dreaming," which has its premiere planned for Saturday afternoon. Works by Leila Adu, Du Yun, Tania León, Christine Southworth, Carla Kihlstedt, Pauline Oliveros and others fill the rest of the weekend, in addition to two programs of Ms. Saariaho's intricate, glinting chamber music.

Given this year's immersion in female composers, it is particularly conspicuous that Ojai's artistic directors over the past 70 years have been almost entirely male; Dawn Upshaw, in 2011, has been the only woman to hold the post on her own. While the festival has clearly taken note of this disparity — three of the next five years will be led by women — it has, characteristically, not spoken too loudly about it.

That's not shame; it's modesty. But with women still struggling to gain an equal footing in roles of artistic leadership in roles in the music industry, the festival's commitment in this regard deserves to be publicized, as does Mr. Sellars and Mr. Morris's inspiring program this year. If Ojai won't make a big deal about it, I will.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/11/arts/music/women-rule-at-ojai-festival-unannounced.html? r=0>

Women Composers Reign At Subdued 70th Ojai Festival



By RODNEY PUNT
JUNE 17, 2016

OJAI, Calif. — With a woman about to be nominated for president, the 70th annual Ojai Music Festival (June 9-12) could hardly have been better timed. Announcing that all but two works were by women, music director Peter Sellars noted wryly, “I’d rather not have to mention that, but there’s something wildly exciting about hearing from the other half of the planet.”

It was Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho’s first visit to the valley of evergreen oaks and orange groves. With three full programs, the now Paris-based Saariaho was clearly the featured star. The festival included four American composers: Pauline Oliveros, with two concerts, and a younger set, Caroline Shaw, Christine Southworth, and Carla Kihlstedt, with scattered entries.

The worldwide reach was extended with Cuban-American Tania León and New Zealander Leila Adu. Adding performance flair to the fare were rising soprano Julia Bullock (a former vocal student of Ojai alum Dawn Upshaw) and two world-music singers, the Egyptian Dina El Wedidi and South Indian Aruna Sairam. Yet the spirit of the weekend skewed closer to lamentation than celebration. Three stage works —

by Saariaho, Claude Vivier, and Tyshawn Sorey — dealt with themes of suicide, bitter regret, and what comes in the afterlife.

Saariaho's earlier announced *Only the Sound Remains* had proved too much to take on at Ojai. In its place, as season opener, her *La Passion de Simone* received the U.S. premiere of its pared-down chamber version. Described as "a musical journey in fifteen stations," *La Passion* is a wake inspired by the suicide starvation of French Marxist and mystic philosopher Simone Weil. She died at age 34 in an English hospital in 1943, proclaiming solidarity with the victims of Nazism.

The scenario has Weil's hero-worshipping younger sister (Bullock, as the fictitious character created by librettist Amin Maalouf) recounting to her deceased sister the life story of Simone's concern for mankind, her struggles against tyranny, and the neglect of her family. Saariaho's treatment of each station (as of the cross) illuminates incidents in Simone's life, with the composer's trademark ability to conjure pictorial states, as with the sixth station's metallic stabs invoking the mechanization of work. (Two later chamber concerts gave further evidence of Saariaho's uncanny skill at time-stopping depictions.)

Director Sellars had a raised platform on the Libbey stage with a light box of opaque fluorescence standing vertically and changing colors at each station, suggesting stained glass windows or perhaps a coffin. (Born secular Jewish, Weil converted to Catholicism.) Maalouf's libretto, with its several false endings and lines like "Such a thirst for sacrifice," flirted with making a martyr's fetish of Simone's story. But Bullock's performance resisted any such impulse. Her focus was sure and her rich vibrato flung colors into the Ojai night vibrant enough to match the showy hues on stage. Leading the well-paced performance was Joana Carneiro, whose International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) served as the orchestra.

Bullock turned in another fine performance two nights later in the world premiere of Sorey's *Josephine Baker: A Portrait*. But the work itself was a miscalculation. Attempting to portray the great singer's struggles with prejudice, it unwittingly projects a steady stream of self-pity onto one of the 20th century's most exuberant entertainers. The real Baker's resilience overcame the discrimination she encountered in her native St. Louis. Rather than give up, she moved to France and thrived during the Roaring Twenties as an adored star of the Paris stage.

During the war years, Baker bravely spied for the Allies. Back in the U.S. in the 1960s, she was a civil-rights icon. She had her low points, but they did not define her or reduce her life force. Sorey's bleak jazz score, while technically fine, stripped away the classic tunes of 13 Baker lyrics and recast all but one as dirges. Sorey, playing drums, contributed a phenomenal solo in the otherwise lugubrious score.

Claudia Rankine's libretto was an assemblage of every worst day the singer ever had. The versatile Bullock, to her credit, invested the hapless role with credibility, even simulating a set of Baker's more famous dance moves. It was not enough to redeem the production. Announced as a one-hour show from 10:30 p.m., it droned on for an additional 40 minutes until after midnight. By then, many attendees had departed.

Kopernikus, by the French Canadian composer-librettist Claude Vivier, is a "ritual opera" on death and resurrection in the manner of a funeral cantata. Sellars directed its U.S. premiere in a spare but effective production that proved it to be an endearing, if eccentric, *tour de force* with a sad back-story. A male prostitute murdered Vivier shortly after the work's completion, an act the gay composer had eerily anticipated. In retrospect, the oddly upbeat work seems both autobiography and antidote. Full of tenderness and whimsy, *Kopernikus* is more "beam me up" than funeral procession. A childlike dream, its sweetness suggests a modern day *Magic Flute*. On his way to heaven, the sojourner Agni (the composer's

alter ego) meets heroes like Merlin, Mozart, and Lewis Carroll. He encounters all he valued in life: the laws of nature and of science, and the great astronomers and philosophers.

Notable in the performance was the solo and ensemble singing of the festival's choral component, Roomful of Teeth. ICE provided the instrumentals. Particularly effective were the trombone wails of mortality and, at the back of the amphitheater, the trumpet fanfares at heaven's entry. Conductor Eric Dudley's control of the far-flung musical forces was steady and nuanced.

In other concerts, two pieces by Shaw were well received. Her captivating Partita for 8 Voices was a close-harmony vocal exploration by Roomful of Teeth (in which Shaw is a vocalist) of four antique dances that sway and stretch in surprising and captivating contemporary ways. The work won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for composition. Baritone Davóne Tines and the Calder Quartet's later performance of Shaw's *By and By* (freely set bluegrass and gospel texts) galvanized all present. In the fine acoustics of the Besant Hill School's Zalk Theater, the rendering by Tines induced tears from many — the composer and Sellars himself among them.

Shaw's third work, *This might also be a form of dreaming*, was commissioned by the festival and given its world premiere here by Roomful of Teeth and ICE. The seven-movement setting of Claudia Rankine's bleak poetry employs a series of contemporary musical styles, but was not animated much by its source material.

Two concerts by veteran composer Oliveros ushered in mornings at a bucolic hilltop retreat called Meditation Mount. Oliveros, known for her electronic music, employed acoustic instruments in "random" ways in her Sonic Meditations I and II that seem as fresh today as when they were composed four decades ago.

After seven decades, Ojai's music festival seemed far distant from the sonic worlds of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Boulez. It could have taken a nostalgic glance back, but it was too busy exploring today's hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows to do so. After all, Peter Sellars was at the helm. The Ojai Music Festival continues through June 18 at Cal Performances in Berkeley.

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

2016 Ojai Music Festival: Works by Shaw, Adu, and Yun

By ZOË MADONNA
June 15, 2016

On the first day of the 2016 Ojai Music Festival, artistic director Peter Sellars hoped that the audience would respond “as personally as possible” to the weekend’s musical offerings. The hour-long late afternoon concert on Saturday was programmed with three pieces written as sincerely personal responses: to grief, to a mother’s love and resilience, and to a work of literature that is a personal response in itself. All were works by young female composers, on very different topics, and an ineffable feeling of love persisted from beginning to end.

The most anticipated piece (or so I gathered from the murmurings of the crowd) was the first, which probably should have been last. Caroline Shaw, the youngest winner of the Pulitzer Prize for music, premiered *This might also be a form of dreaming*, on text and ideas from Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. The source material, a collection of essays and prose poems, was written in 2004. It is a product of the beginning of an anxious, hazy time in America’s history: post 9/11, pre-Facebook and Twitter.

During Friday’s concert featuring Roomful of Teeth performing the Pulitzer-winning *Partita for Eight Voices*, I ended up sitting next to singer/songwriter Storm Large, who jumped to her feet cheering as soon as the first applause sounded. “It’s like the sound of thoughts bouncing around your brain,” she described it having just heard it for the first time. *Partita* is the sound of those thoughts in the abstract, and *This might also...* is the sound of thoughts reacting to things simultaneously specific and general; the loneliness of a hyper-connected world, the deluge of information offered us every time we turn on the news, the dada pastiche of the Internet.

Through her membership in Roomful of Teeth, Shaw has an unmatched understanding of the ensemble’s strengths and idiosyncrasies. As in *Partita*, those are audible in the piece’s fabric. The musicians were arranged in an arc, the singers in the middle and instrumentalists on each end. The three melodic instruments were those most akin to the human voice—cello, viola, and a bass clarinet which wailed like a saxophone. Ross Karre’s percussion set stood behind. “Here, I am here,” they sang in unadorned lockstep harmony, vast and intimate, before the second movement erupted into a chaotic maelstrom of spoken excerpts from philosophical texts and pharmaceutical ads. The third movement expressed the snap of sudden acuity crystallizing out of mental murk. “Sometimes you read something,” Roomful of Teeth sang again and again together, the words liquefying into a vowel flow from which emerged the conclusion. The musical pinnacle of the piece could have been a lost movement of *Partita*, gliding slowly through open chords towards a full-on yawp in unison from the women. “I am here, you are here,” the final movement reminded us, but we understood already.

Leila Adu's *Alyssum* for string quartet and harp and Du Yun's *An Empty Garlic* engaged on an individual level. Plucking together, the individual instruments of *Alyssum* became five fingers on a giant guitarist's hand, though the choice of register was slightly tinny. Waves of lyricism and arpeggiated cells took over, and a percussive ostinato on a harp high A (for Alison, the composer's mother) popped up at points. The composer-performer Adu shifts between vernacular and concert idioms easily, and *Alyssum* embodied a bittersweet sensuality that fell somewhere between bossa nova and Björk.

An Empty Garlic was wild grief, written by Du Yun for Claire Chase in memoriam of a mutual friend. Chase silently appeared on stage, an ominously chilly electronic soundscape rising in the background. She launched herself at a tam-tam, rattling and grinding metal sticks along the surface at full fury, before picking up her bass flute. Throwing her whole body into the music, slowly breathing in and whisper-shouting into her instrument, she demonstrated why she is truly one of the most vibrant performers on the concert stage. The music was most compelling when Levy Lorenzo's electronics were in tandem with Chase, amplifying her instead of responding to her; pipe organ-esque outbursts fell on the wrong side of overwrought.

As the light on the tam-tam changed color from red to lavender to yellow, the piece moved through distinct stages of grief: anger in a gasping litany, detached depression, final acceptance in clear tones with no resolution. Though undoubtedly meaningful, this love was a disquieting kind of love to end on, and the persistent warmth of *This might also...* would have been a better way to send the audience into the unseasonably chilly sunset.

<https://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2016/06/2016-ojai-music-festival-works-shaw-adu-yun/>

Sellers Shows Women Rule at Ojai Fest

By RICK SCHULTZ
June 16, 2016

OJAI, CA--Beautiful, maddening, dreary, outrageous, wearying, exhilarating. The annual Ojai Music Festival is sometimes all of these things. This year marked the 70th anniversary of the eclectic event, running June 9 through 12 in Ojai and then traveling in abbreviated form to Berkeley's Cal Performances, June 16 through 18. Last year the mostly outdoor festival, whose primary venue is the pastoral amphitheater, Libbey Bowl, leaned toward the exhilarating, wearying side, so packed with music and events there was little time to socialize and reflect. But Peter Sellers, this year's music director, ensured audiences had plenty of time to process each program, with most concerts staying within a manageable 70 minutes, albeit with no intermission. Sellers's directorship proved surprisingly low key. A provocative stage director, he remained in a "less is more" mode. That was especially true in his spare staging of the festival's thought-provoking but problematic opener on June 9, the American premiere of the 2013 chamber version of Kaija Saariaho's oratorio, *La Passion de Simone*. (Sellers directed the world premiere of the original in Vienna in 2006 as part of the New Crowned Hope festival.)

Based on the life and writings of French philosopher, mystic, and activist Simone Weil, *Passion*, described as "a musical journey in 15 stations," compares its subject's sufferings with those of Christ. Weil died in 1943 in England at age 34, reportedly of starvation (she was also suffering from tuberculosis), in solidarity with her compatriots in war-torn France. A Jewish convert to Catholicism, she was never baptized, saying it would betray the unsaved masses.

Difficult and contradictory in life, Weil makes an unlikely subject for what largely emerges as a passion play in Amin Maalouf's (French) libretto, which relies on the voices of fictional younger and older sisters of Weil. Unfortunately, it eventually falls into a heavy tone, as if pleading to make the case for Weil as an unacknowledged saint.

That said, *Passion* finds sustaining nourishment and intimacy in Saariaho's exquisite chamber score, demonstrating her signature sensitivity to timbre and balance and offering affectingly dark-hued instrumental colorings. Under Portuguese conductor Joana Carneiro, the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) and four members of the vocal octet Roomful of Teeth created remarkable, often nuanced textures throughout. The piece also proved a stunning showcase for soprano Julia Bullock, who sang a courageous, deeply committed performance of a role originally conceived for Dawn Upshaw. Dressed in black, her feet bare, she alternately stood, writhed on the floor, and sang--all hallmarks of Sellers's taxing physical-emotional stage choreography. Except for a tall lighted box at the back of the stage platform, Bullock was a woman alone. At one point, she lay on the floor perpendicular to the box, suggesting an inverted cross.

Bullock successfully embodied the spirit of Weil while wrestling with Maalouf's unsubtle libretto ("You laid your cross on the ground...Branded, as slaves are branded") and Saariaho's atonal vocal line. She also quoted from Weil's work in commendably idiomatic-sounding French (supertitles offered translations). Though Saariaho removed the electronic component from this version, Ojai

offered its own sonic contribution. During a long instrumental passage, police sirens resounded outside Libbey Bowl, momentarily becoming part of the score.

In addition to Saariaho and Bullock, Claire Chase, ICE's leader and empress of the flute, also emerged as a considerable force. Early Friday afternoon, in another all-Saariaho program, she offered darting, breathy, fidgety accounts of *Terrestre Oiseau dansant* and *Terrestre: L'Oiseau, un satellite infime* for flute, violin, cello, percussion, and harp.

Later that day, Carla Kihlstedt's *At Night We Walk in Circles and Are Consumed by Fire*, offered a welcome contrast to Saariaho's more intense, cerebral style. Along with collaborators ICE and Roomful of Teeth, vocalist-violinist Kihlstedt's piece featured a star turn for ICE bassoonist Rebekah Heller, some fetching Appalachian folk rhythms, and even a nod toward Laurie Anderson's use of disarming visual imagery (is that someone sawing wood at stage right?). Sellars's interest in world music and social protest came to the fore on Friday night, with the appearance of an accomplished Egyptian ensemble, the Dina El Wedidi Band. Perhaps regarding it as music more suitable for the Hollywood Bowl, there were a few walkouts and raised eyebrows from the festival's new music diehards. But that didn't deter the rest of the large audience from remaining for vocalist-pianist Leila Adu's similarly accessible-late night solo concert, which included a song about the murder of Trayvon Martin.

On early Saturday afternoon, it was more Saariaho, with the Calder Quartet offering a riveting account of her *Nymphéa*. Acting as a kind of fifth member of the group, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, the composer's husband, injected subtle electronics, balancing them with acoustic sounds to create a sense of floating in space. In *Sombre*, bass-baritone Davóne Tines, bass flutist Camilla Hoitenga, and three members of ICE tried to hold together Saariaho's lugubrious settings of three late fragments from Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. Later that day, Shaw's *This might also be a form of dreaming*, an Ojai Festival commission, received its world premiere. Brad Wells conducted ICE and Roomful of Teeth, in which Shaw sings alto, in a lovely rendition of the 20-minute score. Those who heard Shaw's 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Partita for 8 Voices*, performed on Friday, probably identified many of the same playful vocal effects and elusive harmonies in *...dreaming*.

There was still more to come, including the American premiere of Claude Vivier's oratorio *Kopernikus* on Sunday, but it was time to head back to Los Angeles, dreaming of next year's festival with American jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer as music director.

Ojai Music Festival wraps with Vivier's 'Kopernikus — A Ritual Opera'



By RITA MORAN
June 13, 2016

Claude Vivier's "Kopernikus — A Ritual Opera" concluded the Ojai Music Festival's 70th season with an eerie sense of the temporal world we live in and what lies beyond.

A ruminating work by the Canadian-born composer (1948-83), "Do you believe in the immortality of the soul," lay on his desk the night he was stabbed to death in Paris. Vivier was considered one of the most important composers of his era, and on the rise, at the time.

That the shimmering piece was the festival's finale was a fitting conclusion to four days of wide-ranging works chosen by this year's music director, the iconic Peter Sellars, whose diverse interests also brought world music center stage. That the work by an openly gay composer was the musical highlight of a day in which nearly 50 people were killed in a Florida gay nightclub is poignantly ironic.

As Sunday's afternoon concert was about to begin, Sellars stepped forward from the wings and mentioned the stunning tragedy in Orlando, then asked the audience to join in a minute of silence for the deceased.

That somber moment made Vivier's piece all the more cogent as it beguiled the audience with its panorama of words and music, slipping from familiar languages to an imagined cosmic sound-talk.

Artfully poised for the task were members of the two multitalented forces that bolstered pieces throughout the festival, singers from Roomful of Teeth and instrumentalists and an electronic expert from ICE. Joining them in the all-in-white death scene that dominated the stage was dancer and choreographer Michael Schumacher, who began as the lifeless body at the heart of the narrative and in the transforming second segment became the risen soul, backing away from the deathbed, down steps to the Libbey Bowl floor, and stoically up an aisle.

It was a solemn and beautiful moment, one that will resonate among the fortunate music devotees who were present for the occasion. In the festival's series of musical moments allied more closely than ever with text, "Kopernikus" filled seven pages in the program with words both vivid and strange.

As always, festival events happened on hours of the day ranging from very early in the morning to very late at night, from moments of celebration to solemn intonations. Breaks were longer between concerts, providing opportunities for visitors to tour a bit of Ojai in the interim, though many instead sought out one of the convenient chairs scattered around the park,

With Sellars as guide, there was considerably more musical diversity along with the shortened time elements. At various hours the stage was filled not only by ICE and Roomful of Teeth, the amusingly tagged vocal group, but also by musicians from Cairo's Tahrir Square and India.

Coursing through the whole series was the work and presence of the distinguished Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho. She was surrounded at the festival by a nonstop flow of women composers and soloists, some already famous, others destined to be.

This festival is something of a moment in history for the 70-year tradition, revealing as it did the strength and beauty, and wonderful promise, of women composers and soloists.

2016 Ojai Music Festival

Ojai Fest Declares That “Music Is Change”

by CHARLES DONELAN

Tuesday, June 21, 2016

Every year for four days and nights in early June the Ojai Music Festival transforms the Libbey Bowl into a uniquely bold and eclectic concert venue. Summoning top musicians and composers from all over the world, the Ojai fest delivers programming that reflects an incomparable sophistication and depth of knowledge about the full range of contemporary music. This musical magic is partly the result of a substantial tradition—the festival has been exploring the outer limits of composition for 70 years—and partly a response to the landscape of the Ojai valley, which has provoked spiritual aspirations since the time of the Chumash. Bookended by two highly unusual and compelling oratorios, and containing an impressive majority percentage of works by women, artistic director Peter Sellars’ 2016 edition of the event was one of the most idiosyncratic in memory, yet it felt all of a piece.

Thursday evening’s presentation of Kaija Saariaho’s *La Passion de Simone* was a perfect example of what the Ojai Music Festival does best. Soprano Julia Bullock commanded the platform that she shared with a giant light box for well over an hour, reveling in Saariaho’s multifaceted text and in Sellars’ direction, which at times had her singing in full voice from flat on her back. Simone Weil, a French philosopher and religious mystic, died of complications from malnutrition in 1943 at the age of 34. Weil had reduced her intake of food to no more than that of those in the concentration camps as a gesture of solidarity, despite the fact that she was relatively safe in London at the time. Although this tragic self-sacrifice reflected her painstakingly articulated belief in an extreme form of Christian piety, the coherence of Weil’s actions from a philosophical or theological point of view did nothing to ease the suffering of those who loved and cared for her at the time. In the libretto by Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, a chorus voices the sentiments of these helpless bystanders as they witness Simone Weil’s passage through fifteen “stations” on her way to her final agony. Bullock gave a tremendous performance, full of heart and pain, but also shot through with glimpses of ultimate transcendence.

On Saturday afternoon, the Calder Quartet performed *Nymphea*, a piece written by Saariaho for string quartet with electronic modification. Saariaho and her husband, Jean-Baptiste Barriere, are both longtime associates of IRCAM, the famed French laboratory for electronic music located near the Pompidou Center in Paris. This work, which was followed by two more chamber pieces by the composer, “Solar” for a small orchestra, and “Sombre” for bass flute, baritone voice, harp, percussion, and bass, helped this listener to understand a little better what the compositional technique known as “spectralism” or “spectral music,” and with which Saariaho is associated, is all about. Spectral

composers are the post-serial physicists of contemporary music. Through computer analysis and imaging, they have revolutionized our understanding of timbre, the sonic envelope that delivers a note or tone. Electronic effects such as those used to transform the playing of the Calder Quartet are designed to enhance certain harmonics and add sustain to sonic details many of which exist at the threshold of audibility. In “Solar,” which featured the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) and the marvelously dynamic playing of flutist Claire Chase, conductor Joana Carneiro brought out every complex nuance of this spectral aspect of the score. As if for emphasis, “Sombre” continued this journey to the edges of extended flute technique by bringing on Camila Hoitenga and her bass flute for a key role. Baritone Davon Tines was almost growling at times in order to conjure up Saariaho’s panoply of timbre effects.

Although I was unable to stay for either the Carnatic singer Aruna Sairam and ensemble that evening or the intriguing late night concert on Saturday that featured Julia Bullock performing Tyshawn Sorey’s *Josephine Baker: A Portrait*, I was lucky enough to make it back to Libbey Bowl for Sunday afternoon’s United States premiere of *Kopernikus: A Ritual Opera* by Claude Vivier. Vivier, who was murdered in Paris by a male prostitute when he too was just 34, is one of the most fascinating and enigmatic figures in the history of modern composition. Extraordinarily gifted and recklessly idealistic, he wrote *Kopernikus* as an assertion of his belief in an afterlife. Having only recently learned of the massacre early Sunday morning in Orlando, Sellars came onstage before the musicians and asked the audience for a minute of silent reflection, saying that “*Kopernikus* is a ritual ceremony celebrating the movement from one state to another, and thus we dedicate this performance to the victims of the Orlando shooting.”

What followed was a seething, pulsating, at times droning sonic odyssey through one man’s highly idiosyncratic vision of heaven, or something like it. Seven singers, seven musicians, a dancer, a conductor, and an electronics controller collaborated to realize this work, which consists of two acts, each divided into three sections. Agni, a young girl who is associated with the Hindu god of fire, is welcomed by a sequence of figures, some historical, others mythological, as she ascends through the circles of an imagined afterlife. Vivier invented a private language in order to express his musical vision, and much of the score is written in this impenetrable, mostly monosyllabic personal code. What’s not included dialogues with Merlin, Lewis Carroll, Tristan and Isolde, and a host of scientists and philosophers ranging from the pre-Socratics to “*Kopernikus*” himself. If all this sounds like a recipe for confusion, that’s only partly the case. Despite his deliberately esoteric approach, there’s an emotional center to Vivier’s work that this performance managed to communicate very directly to the audience, and many were visibly moved by both the music and the occasion, proving once again that certain musical experiences could only happen in Ojai.

<http://www.independent.com/news/2016/jun/21/2016-ojai-music-festival/>

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A Lukewarm Celebration at the Ojai Music Festival, Led by Peter Sellars

The 70th anniversary of this usually stimulating, eclectic festival didn't live up to those of past years.



By DAVID MERMELSTEIN
June 13, 2016

Ojai, Calif.

The annual Ojai Music Festival has always thrived on focused eclecticism. But achieving such balance over a long weekend is an art. When it happens, disparate works, styles and musicians engage in something like a conversation. Naturally, some voices speak louder than others, but the juxtapositions provoke connections and discussions; audiences leave stimulated, even educated. Alas, the mix this time didn't prompt the warm feelings engendered by recent festivals. And that's a pity because this one—which ran June 9 through 12, and also travels in condensed form to Cal Performances in Berkeley, June 16 through 18—marked the festival's 70th anniversary.

Further raising expectations was this year's music director (a position filled annually), the provocative stage director Peter Sellars, only the second nonmusician (and the only nonperformer) to hold the job. Yet save for a series of preconcert discussions, Mr. Sellars's normally overwhelming imprint was surprisingly faint. The striking devices he generally employs indoors—exotic costumes, stylized movements, video elements and the melding of various, often indigenous, cultural traditions—were absent from this primarily outdoor festival, which, as always, was centered at the sylvan Libbey Bowl. To some degree, the fault lies in poor planning, for until April, Mr. Sellars was scheduled to direct the U.S. premiere of "Only the Sound Remains," a new opera in two parts by the celebrated Paris-based, Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, in all but name the unequivocal star of this year's festival.

Two afternoon concerts of Ms. Saariaho's lapidary chamber music, on Friday and Saturday, offered revelations. She combines timbres that ought not to work together yet somehow do—like string quartet, whispers and electronics in "Nymphéa" or bass flute and baritone in "Sombre." And though tension and anguish abound in her music, ugly sounds are anathema. She prizes tonal beauty no less than Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen did.

But filling the gaps caused by the absence of her new opera created challenges. Music composed and performed by Leila Adu, a New Zealander of Ghanaian descent, felt insubstantial, even banal. Still, Ms. Adu's chamber piece "Alyssum" was beautifully rendered by the superb Calder Quartet and Bridget Kibbey, a harpist for the Brooklyn-based International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), increasingly the festival's primary source for instrumentalists. Both the Calders (cherished members of the regional music scene) and ICE, a collective of gifted players dedicated to new music, found better material elsewhere at the festival—most obviously by Ms. Saariaho, but also in the inventive, ear-tickling scores of Carla Kihlstedt, a violinist and singer, and Caroline Shaw, an alto with the thrillingly agile Roomful of Teeth. The nine-person vocal group made its festival debut across five programs, including the finale, the U.S. premiere of Claude Vivier's "ritual opera" (read: oratorio) "Kopernikus" (1979), a work of occasional poise and frequent whimsy that ICE and Roomful of Teeth, under the baton of the latter's Eric Dudley, delivered with rigorous commitment—not the easiest thing given that the piece is largely sung in an invented language à la Lewis Carroll.

Vivier, who was murdered in 1983, a few weeks before his 35th birthday, was the only nonliving composer on the roster this year, an unprecedented occurrence at this festival. More significant was his status as the only male composer featured. To the festival's credit, this laudable initiative in favor of women wasn't flaunted, allowing the music to speak for itself.

"Kopernikus" seemed a logical bookend for what opened this year's festival, the U.S. premiere of Ms. Saariaho's chamber version of "La Passion de Simone," a haunting tribute to the philosopher Simone Weil, who, like Vivier, died at age 34. Here, too, ICE and Roomful of Teeth collaborated with commendable unity of purpose. Some credit for that cohesion goes to the gifted Portuguese conductor Joana Carneiro, who gave shape and impetus to a work that for all its glinting colors and beguiling motifs would be dolorous in less able hands. The role of the work's narrator (a fictitious sister for Weil created by the librettist, Amin Maalouf) was assumed by the rising soprano Julia Bullock, who lent the performance controlled vigor, tonal purity and fierce commitment. Though Mr. Sellars's disappointingly minimalist, arbitrary production failed to enhance Thursday night's performance, the occasion was still a triumph of demanding material transcending abundant obstacles.

Unfortunately, Ms. Bullock's other star turn, the premiere of "Josephine Baker: A Portrait" late Saturday night, was the festival's biggest disappointment. Claudia Rankine's static and pretentious (to say nothing of long-winded) narration made dull one of the 20th century's most vital figures, completely misreading the St. Louis-born French entertainer's place in history and the arts. Ms. Bullock sang well, but Tyshawn Sorey's arrangements of Baker's signature songs and his interstitial music were painfully monochromatic and enervated—everything Baker wasn't. What a misstep in a year when Ojai did so much else right to recognize the contributions of women in music.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-lukewarm-celebration-at-the-ojai-music-festival-led-by-peter-sellars-1465854829>



Ojai Music Festival highlights women composers, performers

By RITA MORAN

June 12, 2016

Women's voices continued to sound trumpet-clear blasts of artistic achievement at Saturday's Ojai Music Festival, the 70th in the small but distinctive Ventura County town that continues to offer forward-looking and mind-bending music to adventurous concert-goers.

This year's festival, under the aegis of music director Peter Sellars, not only highlights women as composers and performers but also stretches to embrace music of many nations. Each day's events, spread from early morning to late at night and are thought-provoking. Most of the major events are at the familiar Libbey Bowl during daytime or early evening hours. But it's not uncommon for delights to take place in smaller locations or at unusual times.

Saturday's major Bowl events began at 1 p.m. with a focus on the featured composer, Kaija Saariaho, continued midafternoon with a brief but intense look at the work of Carolyn Shaw and Du Yu, then segued into a chat led by Sellars, a central night concert featuring Aruna Sairam and ensemble exploring South Indian Vocal Music, and finally for those with determination, endurance and large quaffs of coffee, the fascinating world premiere of the Josephine Baker Project, a tribute to one of the world's most striking talents. Baker, born in St. Louis, Mo., became an international star and French citizen, an activist for equal rights and one of the last century's most controversial and admired women. Among her friends along the way were many of the writers and artists active during Europe's far-flung cultural influence during the 20th century.

It had already become clear in the earlier concerts and presentations that Saariaho is not only a striking artist but also an important standard-bearer in the progressive influence of 21st century women composers. Her work leads as well into the inevitable melding of long-familiar musical instruments and the intricacies offered by contemporary electronic possibilities. So much so that the program often includes not just the composer's name but the electronics whizzes involved.

So it's not surprising that in addition to the composer herself, whose Chamber Music II offerings were played early Saturday afternoon, Jean-Baptist Barriere was listed for electronics along with the Calder Quartet's Benjamin Jacobson, Andrew Bulbrook, Jonathan Moerschel and Eric Byers as "Nymphéa" was performed. The instrumentalists themselves double-tasked as voice-whisperers in a piece that focused on a water lily as it floats on a pond.

"Solar," performed by ICE instrumentalists including pianist Jacob Greenberg whose fingers multi-tasked by touching both a grand piano and a side electronic keyboard he swiveled to when appropriate, was another arresting work. Joana Carneiro conducted with persuasive precision, with the sound textured by the work of Barriere and Levy Lorenzo.

The program concluded with the compelling "Sombre," teaming baritone Davone Tines, bass flutist Camilla Hoitenga and ICE members Bridget Kibbey at the harp, percussionist Ross Karre and bass player Randy Zigler. The dramatic vocalizing by Tines was particularly mesmerizing.

Picking up the musical strands at the 3 p.m. concert were composers Caroline Shaw, Leila Adu and Du Yun. Shaw's world premiere Festival-commissioned "This might also be a form of dreaming" brought together an octet of Roomful of Teeth vocalists, including alto Shaw herself, with ICE musicians Joshua Rubin, Kyle Armbrust, Kivie Cahn-Lipman and Ross Karre, conducted by Brad Wells. With text from Claudia Rankine, "Dreaming" mulls the idea of how the mind wanders and what brings it to points of discovery, with all hands involved showcasing a sinuous charm.

Leila Adu, a New Zealand composer of Ghanaian descent, was represented by her "Alyssum," ably played by the Calder Quartet and harpist Kibbey, with lots of apt plucking of strings and a bassa nova throb. A native of Brooklyn, Adu is currently a Princeton doctoral fellow and teaches music to Sing Sing prisoners. Chinese-born Du Yun's "An Empty Garlic" featured a whimsical combination of bass flute and tam tam work by Claire Chase, with electronics by Lorenzo.

The charming Aruna Sairam and her South Indian Vocal Music ensemble provided a zesty finish to the program with a range of her fascinating songs supported by her multitalented ensemble.

Late-late in the night, soprano Julia Bullock, with composer, pianist and drummer Tyshawn Sorey and members of ICE offered "Josephine Baker: A Portrait" in which the famous singer, activist and international celebrity expresses her feelings about what she was born into, what she has achieved and her ongoing battle against racial prejudice. The latter is what drove her from the U.S. and underscored her long career. Even after achieving success as the highest-paid celebrity in Europe, she was still turned away from a table at a ritzy U.S. nightclub. Ultimately she rarely ventured from Europe, except notably to appear with Martin Luther King at his momentous "I have a dream speech" in Washington, D.C.

Composer Kaija Saariaho's work continues to keep Ojai listeners rapt

By RITA MORAN
June 11, 2016



Ojai Music Festival audiences who experienced the compelling "La Passion de Simone" in Thursday night's opening concert found themselves savoring another mode of composer Kaija Saariaho's creative focus Friday afternoon in her Chamber Music I.

"Kesapaiva: A Summer Day, Five Musical Hours" brought to life Saariaho's multi-textured and wide-roaming skill for becoming at one with words, here in a text by Aleksis Barriere, and feelings that course through her agile mind. Joined again by the supple skills of ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble) as instrumentalists and Roomful of Teeth as vocalists ready to celebrate sounds of many shadings, she led the rapt audience through many passages.

An amusing and intriguing accent in the Oiseau dansant (dancing bird) element was the work of Claire Chase, who managed with aplomb the challenging task of adding spoken words and sounds as she

simultaneously was playing the intricate flute. But the entire piece as it passed through Daybreak, Work, The Hour of Longing, The Mystic Hour and 5th Hour: Evening Twilight, was an attentive and sometimes dryly amusing passage through the hours, with The Bees and The Humans making their ways through multiple moods. Finally, there was the "Adjo" (Farewell) employing the vivid words of Solveig Von Schoultz.

Later in the afternoon, the Libbey Bowl stage again came alive with Caroline Shaw's Partita for 8 Voices and Carla Kihlstedt's "At Night We Walk in Circles and Are Consumed by Fire."

Dancing through the modes of Allemande, Sarabande, Courante and Passacaglia, the vocalists from Roomful of Teeth, including alto Shaw herself, wove a beguiling, ever-changing web of sound that was fresh and full of beauty.

Kihlstedt was the lead violin and vocalist for her work delving into "the dissonance between our waking and sleeping lives," multitasking as she mastered the violin and vocals, strongly backed by members of Roomful of Teeth and ICE as they made their way through segments including Factual Boy, One-Story Motel, Rocks and Concrete, Against Dreaming and Addressing a Dream.

Later in the evening's Twilight Concert, Dina el Wedidi & Band brought The Sounds of Tahrir Square, Cairo, with Wedidi as composer and vocalist joined by master percussionists, accordion and other instruments. The songs were colorful and expressive in the throbbing style of Cairo's bustling streets. As expressed by the singer-composer in the festival's program notes, "My ears were drawn to the beats made by nature and the environment around me."

There's more to come from a festival designed to draw Ojai audiences into a trek onto musical roads less taken.



Ojai Music Festival impressive on opening night



By RITA MORAN
June 10, 2016

Ojai Music Festival audiences gather each June with an unspoken expectation: Impress me.

The festival, now in its 70th year, never fails to respond to that anticipation, as it demonstrated once again Thursday night at the opening concert of a weekend of fascinating music planned by this year's music director Peter Sellars.

In an afternoon, on-stage discussion with the evening's featured composer, Finland's Kaija Saariaho, Sellars emphasized that in a "culture of permanent distraction" it was bracing to open the festival with "something that is so tremendously serious."

It is not only Saariaho's work that is gripping, but the entire array of composers on "the front edge" of the next generation that Sellars celebrates. As it happens, most of those brought together for the festival are women, a disparate group with distinctive ideas for the future of music. They, and many of the

performers, also represent many countries and multiple continents, brought together to illuminate musical possibilities for the 21st century.

Saariaho's "La Passion de Simone," based on the short life of Simone Weil, an activist Sellars described as the "modern equivalent of Jeremiah," revolves through a "Musical Journey in Fifteen Stations" and is the U.S. premier of the chamber version of Saariaho's densely haunting music.

The libretto by Amin Maalouf allowed soprano soloist Julia Bullock to draw the audience into Weil's riveting world of protest and despair culminating in her death in 1943 as she refused to eat while others were being starved. She was 34.

The forces gathered to deliver "La Passion" along with Bullock, and Sellars as director, were formidable: ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble), returning to Ojai with its strong and diverse talents; four voices from Roomful of Teeth; and conductor Joana Carneiro, music director of the Berkeley Symphony since 2009, succeeding Kent Nagano, music director at the festival in previous years.

Saariaho's music has an elemental quality of rising organically from its textured base while able to respond to the searing text as Simone's tortured path is passionately portrayed by Bullock as a "sister" of Simone trying to follow, and fathom, her chiaroscuro path. Supporting and accentuating the struggle was an array of lighting effects keyed to the emotional moments. But it was Bullock's exceptional voice and vivid portrayal of the forces Simone battled, in the world and within herself, that held the audience's fascination.

ICE's ensemble, slightly compressed toward one side of the stage but performing with stellar commitment to the emerging waves of sound, and the quartet of Roomful of Teeth singers merged impressively with Bullock's remarkable performance.

Lucky for the rest of the festival audiences, Bullock, ICE and Roomful of Teeth will be seen and heard again, along with more works by Saariaho and others including Caroline Shaw, Carla Kihlstedt, Dina el Wedidi, Leila Adu, Christine Southworth, Du Yun, Aruna Sairam, Tyshawn Sorey and Claude Vivier, among others.

If most of those names sound like women to you, and of diverse origins, you'll understand the musical world that Sellars plans to introduce to audiences during the rest of the concerts and events. This is the Ojai Musical Festival: Fasten your seat belts.

<http://search.vcstar.com/jmg.aspx?k=ojai+music+festival>