

Los Angeles Times

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

By Mark Swed June 17, 2014

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A sniveling PhD candidate in the music department at UC Berkeley, Henry Snibblesworth, stumbles into the opening scene of "Don Giovanni." His theorizing deflates the Don, who then loses his desire for Donna Anna and thus has no need to kill her father, the Commendatore. He, then, is stuck

needing to figure out what to do with his life. Snibblesworth offers him a job at Cal, but the benefits aren't so attractive these days.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But where does a new style come from?

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

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



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

BY TIMOTHY MANGAN / CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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The Ojai Music Festival put on an opera Friday night, and a delight it was against the odds. This year's festival music director, pianist Jeremy Denk, fashioned the libretto, and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Steven Stucky, the music, a promising team perhaps, though Denk had never written a libretto or Stucky an opera. Still, they chose as their text a book without characters or plot, a celebrated musicological treatise in fact, Charles Rosen's "The

Classical Style," not exactly the stuff that operas are made of.

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

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

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

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

issues of plot and musicological exegesis. The music's all very nimble and knowing. It winks at the listener as it keeps him on his toes.

The jokes are good, and not all of them are erudite. It turns out that the opera is a send-up, not of opera itself, but of musical analysis and the way we talk about music generally. It is clever enough to have it both ways, since in the process of listening to it we learn quite a bit about the capital "C" Classical style (the style specific to Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven), looking and listening under the hood as it were. The end even manages to touch, as Rosen and Robert Schumann contemplate the miracle of the style and the mysteries of its birth, life and death.

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

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

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San Jose Mercury News

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

By Richard Scheinin

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

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

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

awash with allusions to (and quotations from) the charms of Haydn, the shadowy breezes of Mozart, the storms of Beethoven.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Proof is right here in this winning little opera.



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

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

June 21, 2014

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

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

What does it have to do with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, the three subjects of Rosen book, and along with Rosen himself, the main characters of this opera? "The Classical Style" finds a joyful energy in the same trick of using music to explain music, of being humorously meta. Where the pattern of the one note samba is simple, the Classical Style goes over much more sophisticated material, including indeed the same tonic-dominant-subdominant relationship as in the samba, explained to you by characters in a bar named Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant. Ambivalent Dominant is literally attracted to a narcissist Tonic around which everything revolves, until the

sexy, sultry Subdominant comes in and by being the tonic of the tonic, throws everything off. The Sonata Form is explained in Sonata Form, with a first theme on the tonic, a second theme on the dominant, a development, a recapitulation on the tonic, and an optional coda, setting the exact words of Rosen's book to the music. The Tristan chord comes in to instill doubt in between Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant, indeed casting a shadow on the whole Classical Style they impersonate, forecasting a "terrifying future" for them.

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

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

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

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

Forget Mythology, It's Musicology As Witty Opera Fare

By Richard S. Ginell June 17, 2014



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Okulitch and Rishoi in Cincinnati's *Carmen*

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

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

OJAI, CA

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

SIMON WILLIAMS

SAN FRANCISCO

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

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

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



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

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

singing with ineffable beauty and poignancy in the embroidery aria.

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

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

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

GEORGIA ROWE

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

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

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

Los Angeles

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

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

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

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

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

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

JAMES C. TAYLOR

Ojai

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

MARK SWED

St Louis

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

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



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