

2012 Festival Reviews & Blogs

The New York Times

At a Concert, Even the Birds Chime In

Posted June 8, 2012 | By Anthony Tommasini

OJAI, Calif. — The superb Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes was a natural choice to be music director of this summer's Ojai Music Festival, which opened on Thursday evening here in California's beautiful Ojai Valley. Mr. Andsnes has long felt strongly about the culture and environment of his homeland. For years he was a co-director of the Risør Chamber Music Festival in a small coastal town in southeastern Norway, where distinguished musicians young and old gather each summer for six busy days of concerts and camaraderie, and the music-making takes inspiration from the place itself: a charming, rustic fishing village.

Since its inception in 1947, the Ojai Music Festival has also been identified with its setting, a cozy town surrounded by rugged mountains and plush hills. Concerts take place in the sheltered atmosphere of the 1,000-seat outdoor Libbey Bowl. For decades musicians have been emboldened by Ojai to think creatively and take chances with new music. The festival is short and intense. This summer the schedule, planned by Mr. Andsnes and the artistic director, Thomas W. Morris, is fuller than ever, with concerts, lectures, discussions and even films over four days.

It began late Thursday afternoon with a special public event, a performance in Libbey Park, adjacent to the bowl, of John Luther Adams's "Inuksuit" that was its West Coast premiere. Mr. Adams, born in 1953 and one of the more original American composers of his generation, has found ways to combine his passions for music and for nature. And "Inuksuit," flexibly scored for anywhere from 9 to 99 percussion players widely dispersed in an outdoor area, is the ultimate environmental piece.

Mr. Adams describes it as a "site-determined" work; whatever space it is performed in becomes the hall. Actually, the first New York performance was indoors, at the cavernous Park Avenue Armory, in February 2011. To bring some element of the outdoors into the setting, street sounds from the surrounding blocks were piped in.

Inuksuit is the word for stone markers that guide the Inuit people on journeys across the Arctic tundra. It also means "to act in the capacity of the human." The 45 percussionists and 3 piccolo players who took part in this performance, directed by Steven Schick, wore black T-shirts with an image of the stone markers and the Inuit word.

There was quite a crowd in the park for this 65-minute performance. The musicians, mostly recruited from universities and ensembles in Southern California, were placed all around the park, though the piccolo players sat on low-hanging tree limbs. The percussionists wandered as they played, shaking rattles, twirling whirling rubber tubes and blowing into single-pitch plastic horns, which are technically not percussionist instruments but were certainly in the spirit.

You had to be careful where you walked. I almost backed into a percussionist swinging a bullroarer, a small piece of carved wood with holes that makes a low humming sound when twirled on a cord.

Surprisingly the piece began with delicate figures from chimes, glockenspiels and rattles. Gradually the intensity level grew, with fitful drum riffs, gongs and wailing sirens. The park was filled with curious and talkative people. And the bustle of conversation, along with dog barks and shouts from children in the playground, became an intended part of the piece. But many people listened intently, including Mr. Andsnes, who wandered slowly around in sandals and seemed captivated. Some sat on the ground, eyes closed, looking meditative.

When the music settled down again, with fleeting melodic bits, like bird songs, it seemed clear that the piece was ending. People in the park became more still and quiet until everyone broke into applause and cheers.

Mr. Adams, who lives in Alaska, could not attend. He is undergoing treatment for a serious eye condition and was advised by doctors not to travel.

The evening concert was held in the Libbey Bowl, which was renovated extensively before last summer's festival. The new bowl is spiffy and inviting, with a cloth canopy covering most of the seats. Performances in this space require amplification, which is not ideal, though the electronic boosting is not excessive.

The program began with another inventive work by Mr. Adams, "Red Arc/Blue Veil" for piano, percussion and processed sounds, performed by the brilliant pianist Marc-André Hamelin and Mr. Schick. This 12-minute piece unfolds in one long arc of soft rumbling piano figures and spiraling vibraphone bursts that start low and inch higher, while growing steadily in volume and intensity. Then at its climax the process reverses. After this, Mr. Andsnes accompanied Christianne Stotijn, a dynamic young mezzo-soprano with a deep, rich voice, in a vivid performance of a bleakly beautiful 1973 work by Shostakovich, "Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva."

Following the intermission Mr. Hamelin brought formidable technique, insightful musicianship and unusual elegance to Ives's "Concord" Sonata. You could say that he tamed this daunting work, in both good and curious ways. I have seldom heard Ives's pathbreaking sonata played with such nuanced touch, varied shadings and effortless virtuosity. But other pianists bring out the lurching, wild and shocking qualities of the music, including Jeremy Denk, who was in the audience (and will be the music director of the festival in 2014).

Still, Mr. Hamelin's refined approach, if not the way I think of the piece, was fascinating. And toward the end of the final movement, "Thoreau," Tom Ottar Andreassen played the distant flute melody that lends an ethereal touch to this dreamy passage. This being Ojai, he played from behind a nearby tree. And many birds joined in.

The Ojai Music Festival runs through Sunday in Ojai, Calif.; (805) 646-2053, ojaifestival.org.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/arts/music/john-luther-adamss-inuksuit-at-ojai-music-festival.html?_r=1

Sequenza 21/

The Contemporary Classical Music Community

Posted June 8, 2012 | posted by Paul Muller

The 66th annual Ojai Festival was kicked off with the West Coast premiere of *Inuksuit*, the 2009 composition by John Luther Adams. Staged outdoors and directed by Steven Schick, some 46 percussionists and 3 piccolo players performed the 60 minute piece amid a large crowd in Libbey Park. The audience was encouraged to walk among the many scattered percussion sets, making the experience more like visiting a sound installation than attending a concert. *Inuksuit* is named after the distinctive stone markers of the Arctic Inuit peoples and the printed score has the outline of one such sculpture.

The piece begins quietly, the players imitating the sound of a soft breeze using cardboard megaphones, others rubbing rocks together and some with rattles – all moving outward from a central point through the crowd. At first the audience was not sure what to make of this – cell phones were answered and conversations continued – but eventually everyone quieted down as wind tubes were swung overhead simulating the eerie whistling of the wind through rocks or cliffs.

Distant horn calls from around the perimeter of the crowd followed, sounding a bit like moose calls. Drum beats, like the random thudding of rain drops, began to sound all through the assembly increasing in frequency and tempo much like an approaching storm. Cymbals followed and by now the crowd was fully engaged and circulating among the players. The drumming increased in intensity, along with loud cymbal crashes and rolls, as if standing on the banks of a roaring river.

The entire first half of the piece was essentially one long crescendo that could be reasonably heard as a convincing percussion sketch of a walk in the Alaskan wilderness. But just at the halfway point and at the peak of intensity, Adams introduces a series of sirens and bells into the mix – a distinctly urban sound. This departure from a strictly pastoral viewpoint is a masterstroke – it connects the urban listener with the environment most familiar to them. The sirens gradually abated and the second half of the piece declined in volume and intensity as the loud drumming slowly subsided.

At about 50 minutes into the piece, players holding triangles appeared around the edges and began moving inward through the crowd to the center. Their airy sounds created an ethereal quality, like the sprinkling of a light rain shower after a storm. The crowd followed, converging on three oak trees where piccolo players had been placed, standing above everyone on the lower branches. What followed was impressive: the piccolos issued a series of soft, bird-like calls that were answered by a few rapid bars of xylophone from several of the percussion stations. There was a sort of magical quality to this after all the drama of the heavy drumming. As the time between the piccolo calls and answers gradually lengthened, the sounds of children playing and cars making their way along the Ojai Avenue gradually became an integral part of the piece. In its final minutes *Inuksuit* manages to blur the distinction between performance and ambient life, achieving a sort of Cagean ideal by intersecting the musical arts with the outside environment– an impressive accomplishment.

The evening program was staged at the Libbey Bowl, an outdoor performance shell that was significantly upgraded in 2011 with improved lighting, stage area and seating. Thankfully the upgrades included a decent sound system that proved its worth in *Red Arc/Blue Veil*, a 2001 composition by John Luther Adams scored for piano, percussion and processed sounds. This was ably performed by pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin and the aforementioned Steven Schick on percussion. *Red Arc/Blue Veil* features processed sounds that rumble and swell in and out of the foreground while the piano and percussion counter with rapid arpeggios. All of this creates an engaging texture and pleasant harmonic structure that reaches toward a sort of mystical quality, often succeeding. Credit here to the sound engineer who kept the balance between the recordings and the players to an agreeable level – the acoustic instruments could have been easily swallowed up. The outdoor ambiance of the Libbey Bowl did intrude, however, at the very end of the piece as it gradually dies away – some street noise broke the spell prematurely. Still, a credible outdoor performance for a piece better heard in the concert hall.

Following *Red Arc/Blue Veil* was the formidable *Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva* (Op. 143a) by Dimitri Shostakovich. This was written in 1973, well after the trials and tribulations that Shostakovich had suffered under Stalin, but it reflects the anger and frustration of a life lived in difficult political circumstances. The work was performed by mezzo Christianne Stotijn and pianist Leif Ove Andsnes. The *Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva* are, by turns, solemn, melancholy, defiant, sad or resigned and these emotions were powerfully expressed by Ms. Stotijn who sang marvelously. Credit again to the sound system for bringing each nuance out to the lawn seating.

The concert closed with *Piano Sonata No. 2, "Concord"* by Charles Ives. This was performed with a fine touch and expressive feeling by Marc-Andre Hamelin. The 'Concord Sonata' is written in four sections, dedicated to Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcott family and Thoreau, New Englanders who together shaped Ives' thinking. This piece was written 100 years ago, and admittedly Ives revised it all during his lifetime, but it seems completely contemporary to our time and place. It is elegant, playful and nostalgic music, but it is right at home in the 21st century. The appreciative audience gave Hamelin a standing ovation for his carefully controlled, yet intense reading of this challenging work.

<http://www.sequenza21.com/2012/06/ojai-festival-2012/>

Review: Ojai Music Festival opening night

Posted Friday, June 8, 2012 | By Rita Moran

First, a long, slow breath, then gentle rustles and murmurs. The 66th Ojai Music Festival was stirring to life with the intimate throb of John Luther Adams' "Inuksuit," a work born to be performed in open spaces. Gradually, beginning at a mellow 5 p.m. in Libbey Park, 45 percussionists added bolder sounds until sirens blared and drums thundered. After an hour of intrigue while an eclectic audience strolled in the shade of the park's graceful trees, stopping to soak in the incremental weaving of whispers and roars, piccolos chirped from tree perches in what could have been Ojai's own version of tweeting, when real birds inevitably join the festival's sound stream.

Listeners also exuded an Ojai essence familiar at the festival, a mix of wise-looking elders and members of a with-it younger generation who had either grown up around the special attractions of the erudite festival or been drawn to its enduring spirit of pushing the musical envelope. Joining them to savor the experience freely in an open environment were others rarely seen in the festival's audiences: infants in strollers, toddlers clinging to their moms, Buddhist monks and an assortment of dogs that ranged from a sporty greyhound to hand-held bundles of fur. At the park's colorful playground, it was fun as usual for children climbing, sliding and running as the sounds of the musical moment drifted around them.

Adams' unique calling card, directed by percussionist Steven Schick, is designed to be site-determined in that it offers to, and receives from, the character of its natural setting and avid listeners. As the composer has put it, "How does where we are define what we do and who we are?"

Schick and Adams' skills were joined again in Thursday night's opening concert in Libbey Bowl, where other composers who carved original paths were honored by sterling performances. The percussionist joined pianist Marc-André Hamelin in Adams' "Red Arc/Blue Veil," a duo virtuoso piece for both instruments with its nonstop swelling and receding of massed, multi-textured sound. Hamelin was the powerful pianist and Schick the nimble percussionist for the dense, electronics-enhanced score.

In a much quieter moment, this year's Ojai festival music director, the Norwegian Leif Ove Andsnes, was the sensitive piano accompanist for mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotjin as she wrapped her rich voice around Shostakovich's "Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva," one of Russia's major 20th-century poets. The songs were from various periods in Tsvetaeva's beleaguered life and reveal a piquant soul who ruminates cleverly in "Dialogue of Hamlet with His Conscience" and praises the excellence and activism of fellow poet Anna Akhmatova. Shostakovich, a rebel in his own right, found a compatible soul in the troubled poet whose short, perceptive poems he enhanced with music.

The concert's second half was given over to Charles Ives' mammoth Piano Sonata No. 2, "Concord," a celebration of American Transcendentalism as expressed in the lives of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Alcotts and Henry David Thoreau. Hamelin returned to the keyboard to deliver a brilliant performance of the work in which the deeply individualist Ives rejoices in kindred souls.

In the first movement, "Emerson," he imagines bursts of discovery with little concern for regimented order. Summoning the spirit of Hawthorne as Ives defined it, the second movement crosses childlike fantasy with threatening clouds. The Alcotts, especially father Bronson and daughter Louisa May, are thoughtfully evoked in the third movement as visionaries who found peace in a divine presence. It also is the movement in which the familiar "knocking at the door" motif from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony becomes insistent.

And finally, Ives illuminates Thoreau, complete with allusions to the nature writer's own flute playing and his beloved Walden Pond. As the movement coursed toward its conclusion, an offstage flute eerily joined the piano in the final moments of the sonata. Concerts today and Sunday are designed in true Ojai Music Festival tradition to continue leading listeners along the "road not taken," with Andsnes and his fellow composers and musicians as the pathfinders.

<http://www.vcstar.com/news/2012/jun/08/review-ojai-music-festival-opening-night/>

Los Angeles Times

Ojai Music Festival opens with magic made and missed

John Luther Adams' experiential 'Inuksuit' enchants strollers in the park, but the main opening program grasps at threads.

Posted June 9, 2012 | By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Music Critic

Nearly four dozen percussionists were scattered about Libbey Park late Thursday afternoon. They were joined by a couple of piccolo players tooting in the trees.

The sun was bright and warming. The grounds were crowded with strollers, vendors, artists, frolicking children and dogs, to say nothing of a gaggle of concertgoers preparing for the start of the 66th Ojai Music Festival.

The magnificent occasion was a performance of "Inuksuit" by Alaskan composer John Luther Adams. The title is an Inuit term meaning "to act in the capacity of the human." In spiritually illumined Ojai, that, you might figure, goes without saying. But it didn't go without saying.

"Inuksuit," which was written in 2009 for from nine to 99 percussionists and the odd piccolo, has already enjoyed performances in spectacular settings around the world. In Ojai, though, it had the addition of an ad hoc chorus. Wandering spectators kept exclaiming, in happy congratulatory amazement, "Isn't this so Ojai?"

So Ojai, such a ritual hour of enthralling rumble and shimmer, it surely was.

A product of early-'70s experimental CalArts and overdue for festival exposure, Adams (not to be confused with the popular Bay Area-based John Adams) is an obviously kindred Ojai spirit. The whirring and whooshing thingamajigs that opened "Inuksuit" on this glorious afternoon felt like a summoning of the great spirits of Ojai past, such as the saintly spiritual leader Krishnamurti and the provocative potter Beatrice Wood. The event, of course, fit right in with the decades' worth of unconventional musical adventures for which this festival is beloved.

But the irony is that "Inuksuit" may prove the exception for a festival that does not, this year, seem uniquely Ojai overall. The music director is the admired Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes, who has imported the kind of programming and virtuoso players typical of a fishing village chamber music festival he ran that turned Risør, Norway, into an international destination.

In fact, a surprising amount of this four-day event, packed with more pieces and concerts than ever before, is familiar, although the contexts are less so. The main attraction appears to be the promise of high-quality performances.

Whether or not Thursday night's opening concert is an exemplar of this year's festival remains to be seen. The music was sophisticated. The performances were brilliant. But the evening made little sense and seemed an occasion of missed opportunities.

At least the program began where it should, with another Adams work, "Red Arc/Blue Veil" for percussion and piano. Steven Schick — who put together the sensitive and winning performance of "Inuksuit" and is among Adams' most persuasive champions — played vibraphone and crotales. The extraordinary Canadian virtuoso Marc-André Hamelin, one of this year's featured artists, was the pianist.

The piece is a 13-minute binge of tinkling sonorities, enhanced by prerecorded electronic sound processing. The amplification was on the crude side, not quite sending enough overtones into the atmosphere. But there was enough magically magnified sonic glitter to have rustled the trees in the Libbey Bowl, had they not been cut down last year when the festival installed a controversial new shell.

One improvement this year is the removal of the kitschy fake rocks. That's a good thing too, given that Adams' Alaskan music celebrates real rocks, as well as being in our moment of time. Adams fits a kind of overall Nordic theme, Andsnes being Norwegian and all. But what followed was a very different idea of the north — Shostakovich's "Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva," six intensely bitter late songs. Andsnes was joined by Dutch mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotijn, who brought a seething, explosive force to the raging hopeless anger of Tsvetaeva's texts.

The piano part is startling in the opposite way. You think each gloomy note will be the last, yet Shostakovich finds another and another. Andsnes made every note stand out and matter, like yet another tear falling on yet another grave of yet another martyr.

Then, as if to erase Shostakovich's upstart nihilism, came Charles Ives' quixotic, massively utopian and just plain massive "Concord" Sonata played by Hamelin. It was an extraordinary performance, overcoming the score's transcendental technical challenges. But this sonata that celebrates Emerson and Thoreau and Hawthorne and the Alcotts, was not Transcendentalist.

What beauty Hamelin reveals in Ives' writing! What a fantastic unraveling of the typical Ivesian tangle of musics! What Romanticism, what polish. And what a lost opportunity.

Ives' sonata demands a rough spirit, pounding, craziness, mysticism. It was played at Ojai as recently as five years ago by Pierre Laurent Aimard, also an extraordinary pianist, but in his case overly analytical for Ives. The missed opportunity was for Hamelin to have played something remarkable and neglected, for which he is known. Perhaps the connection with "Inuksuit" was the offstage flutist at the end. He wasn't in a tree, just not very well hidden behind one and too soloistic. But I suppose that's also in the capacity to act like a human.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-ojai-festival-review-20120609,0,5941942.story>

Festive Late Nights, Festive Mornings

Posted June 10, 2012 | By Anthony Tommasini

OJAI, Calif. — As much as you love a masterpiece, as much as you think you know it well, you can still be perplexed by its hold on you. Composers experience this with particular intensity. Most spend lots of time analyzing great works of the past to uncover their inner secrets.

But sometimes the only way a composer can come to terms with an old piece is to turn it into something new, as Liszt did in his piano transcriptions of excerpts from Verdi and Wagner operas.

The pianist [Leif Ove Andsnes](#) has keen interest in such pieces. As the music director of 66th annual [Ojai Music Festival](#), which opened on Thursday here in the resplendent Ojai Valley, north of Los Angeles, he has programmed several unusual works in which living composers transform pieces by their predecessors.

A concert on Saturday morning at the Libbey Bowl, the outdoor pavilion where most performances take place, opened with a 2003 work by the Norwegian composer [Eivind Buene](#), “Langsam und Schmachend” (“Slowly and Languishing”), performed by the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra conducted by the violinist Terje Tonnesen. This 12-minute piece is at once a sensitive homage to Wagner and a bold commentary on his “Tristan und Isolde.” The music, scored for strings, unfolds in dense, astringent harmonies and twisting contrapuntal lines. Yet through the hazy textures themes from the Wagner [opera](#) emerge in veiled guises.

For an exploration of old music by a living composer, the most ambitious work of the festival was performed on the second half of Friday night’s program: [Reinbert de Leeuw](#)’s “Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai” (“In the Beautiful Month of May”). The title of this 75-minute piece, scored for a singer and chamber ensemble including harp and piano, is taken from the opening song of Schumann’s “Dichterliebe” (“A Poet’s Love”). Songs from this cycle and from Schubert’s “Winterreise” (“Winter Journey”) as well as 10 other well-known Schubert lieder are melded into an elaborate, theatrical contemporary cycle of 21 songs, grouped into three parts.

In this fascinating work, performed with the composer conducting from the piano, Mr. de Leeuw intrepidly fractures and alters the originals. He lingers on notes and harmonies, speeds up or slows down phrases, jiggles rhythms, lifts bits from different songs and clashes them together. The soprano Lucy Shelton, in a courageous and emotionally raw performance, sang some phases and delivered others in breathy Sprechstimme.

The musical transformations are sometimes shocking. Schumann’s “Ich Grolle Nicht,” in which the poet bitterly insists that he bears no grudge for a broken heart, becomes a vehement tour de force. Imagine a German Édith Piaf. The whirling figures that evoke the spinning wheel in Schubert’s “Gretchen am Spinnrade” are pumped up by the orchestra and delivered in fitful phrases until the music reaches a hysterical pitch.

Mr. de Leeuw is respectful toward the originals, sometimes too much so. The piece is strongest when the songs come across like modern echoes of their sources. But what continually pulls you in is his intense involvement with the music. Here is a composer grappling with the heritage of German song, embracing Schumann and Schubert as contemporaries and bringing a modern slant to timeless themes of longing, delusion and suicidal despair.

On Saturday morning Mr. Buene’s riff on Wagner’s “Tristan” proved an ideal way to begin a concert called in the program notes “After Wagner (and Before).” Wagner’s Wesendonck Lieder, two of which were warm-up works for “Tristan,” were also performed, along with Berg’s Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano, written in 1913, music steeped in a Wagnerian ethos. Here is the young Berg audaciously transforming late-Romantic chromatic harmony into a pathbreaking musical language almost untethered from tonality.

The mezzo-soprano [Christianne Stotijn](#) sang the Wagner songs with glowing voice and deep sensitivity, supported by the excellent Norwegian Chamber Orchestra and Mr. Tonnesen. The dynamic clarinetist [Martin Frost](#) was joined by Mr. Andsnes for a suspenseful account of Berg's rhapsodic work. To make the connections between Wagner and Berg more palpable the five Wesendonck Songs and the four Berg pieces were performed in alternation. After intermission Ms. Stotijn and the brilliant pianist Marc-André Hamelin gave a nuanced, urgent account of Berg's Four Songs (Op. 2). The program ended with an uncommonly refined and Apollonian performance of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata by Mr. Andsnes.

From his long association with the Risør Chamber Music Festival in Norway, where there are 20 hours of sunlight each day during June, Mr. Andsnes has grown fond of late-night concerts. Here on Friday at 10:30 he presented a rewarding program lasting just over an hour.

Mr. Andsnes played three short piano works written by the Danish composer and his good friend Bent Sorensen. The first, "Lullabies," consists of two sweet, harmonically diffuse pieces that Mr. Sorensen wrote for his young daughters. "Sigrid's Lullaby" was a gift for Mr. Andsnes's first child, born two years ago. And "Sigrid's Cantata" was inspired by an Andsnes family home video of the infant Sigrid listening with seeming rapture to a Bach cantata.

Each piano piece led without break to a longer work: Busoni's exotic "Berceuse Élégiacque" (arranged by Schoenberg); Mahler's Rückert Lieder, performed by Ms. Stotijn and Mr. Andsnes; and, to conclude, Schnittke's ruminative, stylistically eclectic Piano Quintet, with Mr. Andsnes and string players from the orchestra.

Hearing Mahler's "Um Mitternacht" outdoors, as midnight approached, with birds and crickets joining in, is truly an Ojai Festival experience.

The Ojai Music Festival takes several programs to Hertz Hall, University of California, Berkeley, for Ojai North!, from Monday through Thursday; (510) 642-9988, calperformances.org.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/arts/music/leif-ove-andsnes-ojai-festival-riffs-on-tristan.html?_r=1

Ojai Music Festival performers succeed with well-traveled themes

Posted Sunday, June 10, 2012 | By Rita Moran

Leif Ove Andsnes excels at nurturing the communal nature of composition, a penchant that leads the Norwegian-born music director of the 2012 Ojai Music Festival into fascinating territory. Works performed Saturday at Libbey Bowl united composers who found common ground in their themes or modes of expression intentionally, or simply from attraction to the same ideas.

Cases in point were Hafliði Hallgrímsson's "Poemi," Bent Sorensen's "La Mattina" Piano Concerto and Anders Hillborg's "Peacock Tales." All three composers were born between 1941 and 1958, exposing them to many of the same influences. For good measure Andsnes tossed in Mozart's 1786 Trio in E-Flat ("Kegelstatt") which in turn affected Robert Schumann, whose "Fairy Tales" served to inspire György Kurtág's 1990 "Hommage a Robert Schumann."

The hints and outright quotations from predecessors provided a game for the avid festival audience, which always seems happiest when challenged and ecstatic when it turns out, as in this year's festival, that the skill is not only in the planning but equally in the playing.

On that score, the festival was a winner even before its completion, with the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra returning to the stage Saturday night with its rigorous commitment to even the gnarliest of works and with special joy when the task is buoyed by music that was rewarding, or at least fun, to play. One of those moments unquestionably came with the American premiere of Sorensen's concerto, as the ensemble engaged with Andsnes himself as pianist in a work that celebrates morning, with delicate shadings evoking illumination and movement.

Then there was Swedish clarinetist Martin Fröst, who with his brilliant renditions and mischievous personality was the ideal proponent for such works as Hillborg's "Peacock Tales," in which Fröst not only set his clarinet swirling but joined it with puckish charm as dancer. Lights, a mask and taped sound were enhancements, but Fröst himself made the piece memorable.

That was followed by another perfect match: a joyous run of Mozart's Trio with Andsnes at the piano, Fröst on clarinet and Antoine Tamestit on viola. The same three musicians soared once more, with Kurtág's "Hommage."

The exuberance continued to flow at Sunday morning's concert, featuring Fröst yet again, with pianist Marc-André Hamelin and violinist yvind Bjork in Béla Bartók's smooth-flowing "Contrasts."

The biggest burst of laughter, and then applause, occurred when the Chamber Orchestra strode briskly onto the stage for Grief's "From Holberg's Times; Suite in Olden Style," dressed in sneakers and multicolored clothing instead of staid black, some of the men in European-style "knickers," the women in floaty summer dresses. One of the younger voices in the audience was heard to exclaim, "They're dressed like Ojai!"

They played as well as they looked, with the bass player leading the others hoedown-style to the strains of a rustic rigaudon. Another popular performer brought the audience to its feet in the second half of the morning concert, when mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotijn delivered a group of "Cabaret Songs" set in rousing period mode by William Bolcom, with lyrics by the late Arnold Weinstein.

Back onstage for Aaron Copland's Concerto for Clarinet, Strings, Harp and Piano, Fröst and his impeccable clarinet brought the audience to its feet once again. He rewarded the crowd with an encore of two brilliantly played examples of klezmer music.

<http://www.vcstar.com/news/2012/jun/10/ojai-music-festival-performers-succeed-with-well/>

Leif Ove Andsnes Brings Wit and Power to Libbey Bowl

Posted Monday, June 11, 2012 | By Charles Donelan

When Leif Ove Andsnes, the immensely gifted pianist who served as music director of the 66th annual Ojai Music Festival, stood to acknowledge the applause at the end of the Festival's final day, he hesitated before issuing his first thanks, which went to the audience. "This is truly the world's best audience," he said, and a ripple of happy laughter passed through the larger wave of applause that followed his remark. The audience for the Ojai Music Festival is indeed among the most intense, the most passionate, and the most discerning to be encountered anywhere, and not the least of its charms is an undercurrent of self-aware humor. Moments later, when Andsnes and his partner for the two-piano transcription of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Marc-André Hamelin, reappeared onstage for their encore, Stravinsky's "Circus Polka," they donned matching green clown noses, joining in the general spirit of light-hearted silliness.

This is not to say that the Ojai Fest is superficial or frivolous — in fact, it's far from it. The Norwegian Chamber Orchestra may have put on some kooky colorful outfits for Sunday's matinee performance, and they may have done a collective kick step when they left the stage for the last time on Sunday evening, but otherwise they were all steely precision and professionalism. Highlights of their multiple appearances included Friday night's arrangement for string orchestra of Leos Janáček's string quartet "Intimate Letters" and Sunday evening's exquisite rendering of Debussy's *Danses sacrée et profane*, a delicate and evocative piece that provided an excellent opportunity for harpist Ida Aubert Bang to shine.

Of the three major concerts that I attended, the 11 a.m. performance on Saturday, June 9 was the most memorable. The program, which put Alban Berg's music into dialogue with some extraordinary songs by Richard Wagner, was perfectly balanced. In the first half, the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra set the tone with a dark and dissonant piece by Eivind Buene, paving the way for mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotjin, who alternated with clarinetist Martin Frost in a set that paired five of Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder* with Berg's *Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 5*. Frost is one of the world's most acclaimed reed players, and he was mesmerizing, but the real excitement came from Stotjin, who absolutely claimed these delicious, long-lined, and complex lieder as her own.

The Friday night concert, which featured the aforementioned Janáček's [tk C w/ V over it], was mostly given over to "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," an arrangement by Dutch conductor and pianist Reinbert de Leeuw of 21 songs by Robert Schumann and Franz Schubert. The sound for this was not perfect, as the notes from de Leeuw's open-topped grand piano seemed at times to float off into the night before reaching the seats, but there was much to admire both in the music, which was ingenious, and in Lucy Shelton's performance of this highly demanding material. It's possible that the original performer scheduled for this piece, the German actress Barbara Sukowa, might have done more to deliver the necessary theatrical touches, but it's my guess that these arrangements would fare better in an indoor setting. Ultimately, the great value of this extraordinary festival was upheld throughout the weekend, as passionate listeners met with challenging works through the medium of some truly inspiring performances.

<http://www.independent.com/news/2012/jun/11/ojai-music-festival-reviewed/>

Los Angeles Times

Ojai Music Fest 2012: Generosity, clownishness and a table-groaning feast

The four-day program overseen by Leif Ove Andsnes travels a wide and dizzying range that prominently features, but is by no means limited to, Scandinavia.

Posted June 12, 2012 | By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Music Critic

The 66th Ojai Music Festival ended in high spirits Sunday. Leif Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin put on clown's noses and played a hilarious — and spectacular — two-piano transcription of Stravinsky's "Circus Polka."

Andsnes, who is Norwegian, was this year's primarily serious and understated music director. But whatever it is in the Ojai atmosphere that causes the mountains to turn pink at sunset may also incite strange neurochemical uninhibitors in the brains of introspective Nordic music directors. Eleven years ago, Esa-Pekka Salonen astonished a Sunday morning audience by hopping around in a bunny suit.

Andsnes' festival had a Scandinavian heart. The resident ensemble was the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. Contemporary composers from Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland were represented (although none was on hand). So perhaps it was only natural that the programming resembled a smorgasbord, or what the Norwegians call a *koldtbord*.

Andsnes gave an overriding impression of gracious generosity. It would be hard to count the portions of this four-day, nonstop feast. Dozens of works were played in morning, afternoon, evening and late-night concerts, and many works were broken up into little pieces and mixed around. The Scandinavian music was, in fact, but a small part of these far-flung, even farfetched, offerings.

Andsnes' generosity was not only of quantity and variety, but also in spirit. The artists he invited were little like him. Hamelin's transcendental technical virtuosity can make any pianist, even Andsnes, seem a slightly lesser master of the keyboard. The flamboyant Swedish clarinetist Martin Fröst, another amazing technical wizard, shamelessly did his best to steal any show in which he appeared. The over-employed Dutch mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotijn conveyed an old-fashioned Romanticism. The under-employed Dutch conductor and composer Reinbert de Leeuw is an agelessly hip, tough anti-Romantic.

Strangest of all was the versatile Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. How could you not like these eager musicians with such a fetching fashion sense? Every time they appeared, they had different outfits that ranged from sophisticated black to the adorable casual look of an orchestra out for a midsummer picnic. Playing Grieg's "Holberg" Suite Sunday morning, a bass player stepped forward and danced a silly rigaudon with his instrument.

Overall, Ojai's programming was conservative this year, and it was also a bit of a mess. There was an obsession with finding new bottles of every size, shape and material to give new context to old music. By the law of averages, some things had to work, given the collection of talent and the huge amount of material. And sure enough, every now and then over the weekend, something refreshingly unexpected happened, as with the string orchestra arrangements of Janáček's two striking string quartets.

The Second Quartet ("Intimate Letters") began the Friday night program. The arrangement by Terje Tonneson, a showy violinist who is the leader of the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, softened Janáček's hard edges. The playing was bloated and bland.

The next night, Tonneson's string arrangement of Janáček's First Quartet was the focus of a 10:30 p.m. program. The night had turned chilly, which, I doubt, was a problem for the Norwegians, but their intonation began to falter. The ensemble was

sloppy. The players obviously were tired. But none of that mattered. In fact, it helped what proved an inspired theatrical presentation.

Janáček's quartet is a musical depiction of Tolstoy's novella "The Kreutzer Sonata," which takes its title from a Beethoven violin sonata. A Norwegian actor, Teodor Janson, whose English is excellent, read engrossing excerpts from the novella, between (and sometimes during) movements of the quartet.

First, though, he interrupted an interpolated performance of Beethoven's sonata by Andsnes and a violinist in the orchestra, proclaiming that music is disgusting. This is a typical Tolstoy tale of betrayal, self-centeredness, abuse and murder, and Janson and the orchestra made it deliciously nasty.

The other big dramatic piece was De Leeuw's "Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai," an hour-long refashioning of Schubert and Schumann songs for the German actress Barbara Sukowa. But a family illness forced her to cancel. Lucy Shelton made a noble last-minute, Marlene Dietrich-style stab at this wrenching and arresting work Friday night, and De Leeuw conducted from the piano. But the players lacked the fire felt on his riveting Dutch recording of the piece.

On Sunday, though, the Norwegians came to life for De Leeuw, who led a ravishing performance of John Adams' early "Shaker Loops" — the best I've ever heard. Meanwhile the most effective performance by Stotijn was of Berg's neglected Four Songs, Opus 2.

The Scandinavian composers Andsnes selected all go in for sizzling sonic swooshes often used to transform other music. In a string orchestra piece, "Langsam und Schmachend," Eivind Buene added a spectral Norwegian eeriness to Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde." Swedish composer Bent Sorensen's Piano Concerto No. 2 ("La Mattina"), written last year for Andsnes and given its U.S. premiere at Ojai, was inspired by Bach and got the swooshing treatment from the orchestra. The piano sonorities were gorgeous, if the concept unsurprising.

What to make of Fröst, who is a dancing clarinetist? In a shortened version of Anders Hillborg's clarinet concerto "Peacock Tales," the soloist was a masked satyr cavorting with licorice stick. Fröst moves extremely well and plays brilliantly, but his clichéd choreography ruins everything. So does his showoff-y rubato. He played and conducted Copland's Clarinet Concerto with moments of sublime sensitivity and, as Tolstoy would say, of disgusting insensitivity. The real surprise was his knack for conducting.

After wending its way through the smorgasbord that also had dishes of Kurtág, Schnittke, Mahler, Wagner, Berg, Beethoven, John Luther Adams, Haflidi Hallgrímsson (the Icelandic composer), Mozart, Bolcom, Liszt, Bartók and Debussy, the overstuffed festival made room for a two-piano transcription of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring." Hamelin played the first piano part fancifully. Andsnes made the second piano the rhythmic glue. It was a knockout. Then, with the smiles of a summer night, the clowns brought dessert.

An innovation this year was live video streaming of all the concerts. Most are supposed to appear, any minute now, in archived form on the Ojai Festival website. Next year Mark Morris will be music director and the music of John Cage and Lou Harrison will be featured.

http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-ojai-festival-review-20120612,0_5614256.story

With a Touch Of the North

Posted June 12, 2012 | By David Mermelstein

Ojai, Calif. - Reflection and refraction were the bywords of the 66th annual Ojai Music Festival, which unfolded last week from Thursday through Sunday in this quiet valley some 80 miles northwest of Los Angeles. Ojai has always valued juxtaposed programming, but that approach was in especially sharp relief this year.

With the estimable Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes serving as music director (an annually rotating position), a Scandinavian slant marked the festival—which, as usual, offered its programs *al fresco*, at the 1,000-seat Libbey Bowl in the center of town. The Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, with whom the pianist has enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship, acted as the festival band in all but name. And the Swedish clarinetist Martin Fröst was among the featured soloists. Even the repertory had an unmistakable Northern accent, with several pieces by the Danish composer Bent Sørensen and one each by the Norwegian Eivind Buene, the Icelander Hafliði Hallgrímsson and the Swede Anders Hillborg.

Yet, as ever, Ojai was not reducible to a simple formula. A strong American current also ran through the programs, with works by Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, William Bolcom, John Adams and John Luther Adams occupying prominent berths. And there was even some mainstream fare for intended contrast, not all of it—Edvard Grieg's "Holberg" Suite, Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata—artfully placed.

Reinbert de Leeuw's "Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai" (2003) proved particularly well suited to Ojai's aesthetic. The piece, given its West Coast premiere on Friday with the composer at the piano leading members of the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, is essentially a mash-up of two pillars of the song-cycle repertory, Schumann's "Dichterliebe" (from which this work borrows its title) and Schubert's "Winterreise." Scored for vocalist and small ensemble and written for the celebrated German actress Barbara Sukowa, its emphasis is squarely on the poetical texts. But a family emergency forced Ms. Sukowa to cancel her return to Ojai—she appeared previously in 2008—and the soprano Lucy Shelton gamely substituted.

Ms. Shelton was last seen at Ojai in 2009, performing Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire," which—like Mr. de Leeuw's piece—is composed in three parts of seven songs each. Both works require a vocalist skilled in *Sprechstimme*, that unsettling hybrid of speech and song. Though the soprano overdid it occasionally—especially in the ironic "Ich grolle nicht" ("I Bear No Grudge"), which she practically barked—the overall impact was like that of a vintage recording, at once familiar and strange, yet somehow touching and endearing.

Mr. Sørensen's Piano Concerto No. 2 "La Mattina" (2009), written for Mr. Andsnes and receiving its American premiere on Saturday with him accompanied by the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra conducted by Per Kristian Skälstad (who led the same ensemble for the work's debut), made a similar impression using very different means. The piece opened movingly, with whispers of the Bach-Busoni chorale that inspired it played with a velvet touch by the pianist. From there, the work became more lively and took unexpected turns—the string players tapping wooden blocks and even humming briefly—before returning to a more somber state and a delicate, heartbreaking conclusion.

It was followed by the weekend's strangest offering, a drastic reduction of Mr. Hillborg's "Peacock Tales" (2000). Performed by Mr. Fröst, its dedicatee, against taped accompaniment instead of a live orchestra, the work proved a showcase for this extraordinary clarinetist, whose technical assurance is complemented (or undermined, depending on your view) by a penchant for dancelike gestures. In this case, Mr. Fröst donned a satyr mask to match his flashy attire, as the Libbey Bowl stage seemed temporarily hijacked by an errant *Cirque du Soleil* player.

Mr. Fröst was far more restrained later that night in two trios, one by Mozart and the other György Kurtág's "Homage á Robert Schumann." And his performances the following morning of Béla Bartók's "Contrasts" (composed for Benny Goodman) and Copland's haunting Clarinet Concerto were organic and sublime.

In addition to Mr. Fröst, the festival's two other featured soloists were the Dutch mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotijn and the French-Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin. Ms. Stotijn fared poorly during the festival's opening concert, in which she dryly sang Dmitri Shostakovich's "Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva," a dreary late work. And she was little better the next day in an ill-advised late-night performance of Gustav Mahler's "Rückert Lieder." But she perked up on Saturday morning for Richard Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder," offering full tone and compelling phrasing despite having to stop between each song to accommodate interpolated movements from Alban Berg's Four Pieces, Op. 5, for clarinet and piano (deployed with exquisite craft by Messrs. Andsnes and Fröst). And her lusty account, on Sunday morning, of five cabaret songs in English by Mr. Bolcom was a festival highlight.

Mr. Hamelin served as accompanist for the Bolcom, but he was featured more prominently elsewhere. His Thursday-night performance of Ives's "Concord" Sonata combined virtuosity and structural rigor with a welcome, and difficult to achieve, emotional component. Still, most festival-goers will likely remember him for the last work of this year's final concert: Stravinsky's stunning two-piano version of his "Rite of Spring"—in which Mr. Hamelin partnered with Mr. Andsnes. One can throw around superlatives praising the technical aspects of the performance, but both artists would surely take greater pride knowing this reduction revealed interesting textures and details not always obvious in the full orchestral version. After all, such illuminations are what Mr. Andsnes intended from the start.

(The same artists, minus Mr. Fröst, perform much of this repertory in Berkeley, Calif., through Thursday in a satellite version of the festival at Cal Performances.)

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303768104577462293719796410.html?mod=googlenews_wsj

Ojai Savors a Scandinavian Import: Long Musical Nights

Posted June 12, 2012 | By Anthony Tommasini

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Out West Arts

posted by Brian Holt

Piano Men

June 12, 2012

One of the hallmarks of Leif Ove Andsnes tenure as music director of this year's [Ojai Music Festival](#) that wrapped up this past Sunday before heading north for a week full of shows in Berkeley as part of Cal Performances [Ojai North](#), was how willing he was to share the spotlight. And by this I mean almost eschewing being center stage all together. This wasn't an act of artistic modesty. Instead, it showed a keen eye to integrated and collaborative programming that Andsnes picked up in his many years leading Norway's Risør Chamber Music Festival. In fact, Andsnes enlisted the services of another world renowned pianist, Marc-André Hamelin, to perform alongside him for much of the festival's six main stage programs. Hamelin is well known for his explorations of the more unusual corners of the solo piano repertory. He's just released the third volume of his excellent examination of the [Haydn Piano Sonatas on Hyperion](#). But he also took a more often than not supportive role in the festival's many concerts. Hamelin and Andsnes each performed only one or two solo or starring performances over the weekend, Hamelin took on Ives' "Concord" sonata [on Thursday](#) and Andsnes played Beethoven's "Waldstein" sonata on Saturday morning with the solo part in [Sørensen's Piano Concerto No. 2](#) that same evening. Pianists can be some of the most notable lone wolves of the classical music world, but in Ojai either Andsnes or Hamelin were onstage nearly the whole festival typically in supporting roles of one of the many song cycles performed by Christianne Stotijn or as a as members of some trio or quintet.

Yet in the two concluding concerts of this year's festival, the two came together in some of the most best moments of the whole weekend. Perhaps the highlight of the whole festival for me outside of John Luther Adams' *Inuksuit* on Thursday, was a small chamber concert performed for a group of donor's on Sunday afternoon. The program included 14 of Gyorgy Kurtág's musical miniatures from various collections interspersed with three short pieces from Kurtág's countryman Franz Liszt. Andsnes' piano solos were set in contrast to other miniatures for viola played with a beautiful tone and touch by the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra's Antoine Tamestit. Intermittently, Hamelin and other players from the orchestra would join in for an unbroken hour that was by turns brooding, playful, or jarring. It was the kind of program that felt like it had the whole world of human emotion tied up in it with the performance bookended with Kurtág's *Ligatura- Message to Frances-Marie (The Answered Unanswered Question)*. In each of these segments a pair of cellos is answered by offstage violins in yet another of the weekend's invocations of Ives.

The two pianists were the central focus of the weekend's final concert that craftily pulled the festival's many loose ends back together. After Debussy's *Danse sacrée et danse profane* the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra gave a moment to the other John Adams, (not to be confused with composer John Luther Adams) whose *Shaker Loops* was their parting gift to the festival. The work's embrace of minimalism made my memory of the recent world premiere of his oratorio *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* seem like an even more radical invention by contrast. But the final word would belong to Andsnes and Hamelin who returned to John Luther Adams' music which had also opened the festival. *Dark Waves* for two pianos and electronics paralleled the slowly arcing movement of [both *Inuksuit* and *Red Arc/Blue Veil* from Thursday](#). It also provided a contrast to the showstopping festival closer, the duo's adaptation of Stravinsky's two-piano version of *Le sacre du printemps*. This adaptation is world's away in some aspects from the familiar full orchestral version. It is by necessity more mechanical sounding with the two pianists acting as one against an external force as opposed to engaging each other in musical sparring. Like Adams' *Dark Waves* the energy flowed outward together grabbing the audience and pulling them in. It missed some of the mournfully quiet touches of the bigger version but it brought the two artists out into the spotlight still collaborating but now in a combined starring role.

In the end, Andsnes version of the Ojai Festival was one of the stronger in recent years. True, it was not always packed with the latest and greatest of new music. But it did re-examine important relationships between 19th and 20th Century music and it did provide one of the most integrated and collaborative groups of artists the festival has seen in a while. None of the programs felt isolated or unconnected to the rest, and the logic of the overall festival program could be clearly seen from show to show. There are many reasons to love Ojai, but experiencing the musical festival when it is this well executed rivals most of the place's other charms. Nearly all of the programs I've written about will arrive in Berkeley this week and are worth seeing. And, of course, it's never too early to start thinking about next year when choreographer Mark Morris will take over leadership of the Ojai Festival with evenings that do promise something a bit different.

For Out West Arts complete posts visit: <http://outwestarts.blogspot.com/>

June 13, 2012 | Josef Woodard

A summery afternoon melted into evening and the 66th Ojai Music Festival melted into history, on Sunday night, and all seemed right with the world for a fleeting moment. Ojai's Libby Bowl filled with the pre-modernist, modernist and post-modernist comfort food sounds of Debussy, minimalist era John Adams, atmosphericist John Luther Adams and the two-piano version of Igor Stravinsky's 1913 masterpiece "The Rite of Spring."

We were again warmed by the knowledge that Stravinsky and Adams are on the stellar roster of past directors and performers at this festival, along with Aaron Copland, Pierre Boulez and countless other luminaries.

Still and all, the wrap-up concert of this year's happily dense, four-day festival had a certain old school quality, by the high, historically-charged standards of the Ojai Music Festival — still the highwater mark of internationally-important classical music events in this general area. We often hear Adams and Stravinsky on the final concert, and Debussy also makes his appearance in this slot. The two-piano "Rite of Spring" was played here by the Buggalo-Williams duo in 2005, which seems recent to those among us who are longtime, lifer Ojai Festival goers.

For this year's festival, whatever the usual suspects in the programming, the most memorable and fresh turf came from Scandinavia, as it should be for a festival with the great Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes as music director, and the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra as visiting ensemble. Also on the roster of visiting artists were Belgian mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotjin, soprano Lucy Shelton, violist Antoine Tamestit, and Swedish clarinet phenom Martin Frøst, whose many impressive turns included his agreeably gimmicky but virtuosic showpiece of music, mime and dance on Saturday night's "Peacock Tales," by Swedish composer Anders Hilborg.

To these ears, the festival's real highlight came with Saturday night's program, opening with Icelandic composer Hafdi Hallgrímsson's tersely lyrical string orchestra invention "Poemi, Opus 7," followed by the American premiere of the commanding Danish composer Bent Sørensen's Piano Concerto No. 2, "La Mattina," the real show-stealer of the weekend. Inspired by the playing of Mr. Andsnes, who offered up a performance which felt perfectly enchanting (an operative word for this archetypically dreamy work).

Sørensen's masterful concerto defies easy description or categorization, like most great music, but it has a light, strange and soothing character, and something of the internal logic of a dream. Suddenly, the chamber orchestra members are meting out loose rhythms with claves or humming, between their alternately firm and ambiguous string parts, and it all comes together with impressionistic pageantry and secret meanings to be decoded later.

More generally speaking, Mr. Andsnes' smartly-designed program fell in line with the recent trend at this traditionally untraditional, contemporary music-minded festival — especially in the current regime of artistic director Thomas Morris, here since 2004 — for blending contemporary music with music of old, of finding continuities and affinities between music separated by centuries and cultural differences. But where other recent years have handled the juggling act more clumsily, the Andsnes year handled the task more artfully and thought provocatively.

Thus, we heard the American premiere of Dutch composer /conductor Reinbert de Leeuw's "Im wunderschen Monat Mai," a time and mind-twisting song cycle in which the composer rewrites history, in the form of refiltered and post-modernized Schumann and Schubert songs (beautifully rendered by Ms. Shelton). Late on Saturday night, we heard Jan-cek first string quartet interspersed with readings, by Norwegian actor Teodor Janson, of the Tolstoy story "The Kreutzer Sonata," an inspiration for Jan-cek. The idea sounds better on paper than in the real time forum, where one source struggled to get along with the other.

Living Hungarian legend Gyorgy Kurtag (who, incidentally, visited the Ojai Festival many years back) is no stranger to new/old pacts in his music, but with integrity intact, and here, we heard his elliptical "Hommage a Robert Schumann," to close the Saturday night concert, and in a special "donors" recital at the Ojai Art Center on Sunday afternoon, Mr. Kurtag's beguiling miniatures were mixed with short, romantic pieces by another famous Hungarian of an early time, Franz Liszt.

In the Ojai Festival, certain realities are built into the nature — and the nature — of the operation, including stowaway bird songs, a lovely addition, and the inherent sacrifice of pristine sound quality. But it's an accepted and worthwhile payoff, given the idyllic setting of Libby Bowl, now in its second year in its new, refurbished (but tree-deprived) condition.

Other less welcome sonic intruders naturally appear. Each year, we get some of the unplanned "Ives-ian" effect, related to Charles Ives' famed love of colliding, ambient sound sources, and this year, it came literally in the middle of an encore song by Ives himself. While pianist Marc-André Hamelin and mezzo Christine Stotjin, following up a juicy take on William Bolcom's "Cabaret Songs," performed an Ives song, during which we could hear Chamber Orchestra violinists warming up backstage and a car alarm going off in the distance, in polyrhythm. We had to wonder: was it planned?

Regarding the great outdoorsy setting of Libby Park vis a vis the musical activities here, the festival proper had as its uncommon introduction the west coast premiere of John Luther Adams' "Inuksuit," with 48 percussionist and piccolo players roaming through and sonically energizing the park outside the Libby Bowl, proper. I wasn't able to get there in time to catch that happening, but the Luther Adams subplot continued in the evening concert, with the entrancing "Red Arc/Blue Veil," played by Hamelin and percussionist Steven Schick.

After Shostakovich's "Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva," with Andsnes and Stotjin in high, poetic form, Mr. Hamelin gave a stirring and lucid reading of Ives' great "Concord Sonata," a still-iconoclastic and transcendental piece which feels just right in Ojai.

On Saturday morning, the historical cross-hatching scheme was a moving one, with a strong Wagner connection. The program dubbed "After Wagner (and Before)" kicked off with Norwegian composer Eivind Buene's fascinating 1973 piece "Langsam und Schmachend" ("slow and languishing"), the very score direction on Wagner's immortal prelude to his opera "Tristan und Isolde." Buene's music slyly makes reference to "Tristan" but is a ruggedly modern entity, from the period before minimalism when dissonance had its expressive sway. The program then intriguingly interwove early songs of Wagner with music of serialist Alban Berg and Wagner hero Beethoven's "Waldstein" Piano Sonata, played with magnificence and subtlety by Mr. Andsnes.

If Saturday morning's Wagner-gear program leaned toward a darker end of the musical spectrum, Sunday morning brought goodness and light, and levity. Call it the sensual pleasure principle or the crowd-pleaser event. That's not a bad thing, especially when matters of greater substance and challenge are represented over the weekend, which was the case here.

Framing the program were two works famed for their linkage between clarinetist Benny Goodman and noted classical composers, Bartok's "Contrasts," a trio for clarinet, violin and piano, and Aaron Copland's Clarinet Concerto. In both cases, clarinetist Frøst delivered seamlessly and showcased more dimensions of his ample talent. For this concert, the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra came out in light, casual garb, and stood up (cellos excepted) to play Edvard Grieg's "Holberg Suite," the breezy, crowd pleasing favorite by Norway's best-known composer. For added Sunday morning feelgood sauce, a chamber orchestra bassist came forward and "danced" with his instrument to cap off the piece.

Come Sunday night, Norwegian harpist Ida Bang skillfully and alluringly drew us into the lilting folds of Debussy's "Danses sacrée et profane," before the orchestra deftly worked up the sonorously looping lather of Adams' "Shaker Loops." After festival piano stars Mr. Andsnes and Mr. Hamelin summoned up the surging and compounded sonic wave action of Luther Adams' two-piano "Dark Waves" and then the challenging edifice of "Rite of Spring" — with the pianists in bracingly telepathic accord — some levity was in order. Mr. Andsnes paid respects to the festival and the audience, and then the pianistic pair launched into Stravinsky's "Circus Polka," but now with green clown noses attached. Ah, that Norwegian humor. Not to mention deep, probing musicality.



Ojai Music Festival 2012: Northern Lights & Dark Shadows

Wed June 27, 2012 | Rodney Punt

Tucked in its idyllic pastoral valley north of Los Angeles, the annual Ojai Music Festival has earned its well-deserved reputation for adventurous music in a laid-back setting, a yin-yang suspension between stimulus and serenity. For its 66th edition this month, music director Leif Ove Andsnes and ongoing artistic director Tom Morris packed four days with seven of the longest concerts in memory, not to mention an overflowing slate of lectures, talks, films and events. Call it a sincere, if severe, case of ambition creep that put at risk the festival's delicate balance.

Concerts were dense and diverse, sometimes oddly matched; their moods could swing from seraphic to somber or visa versa. Nordic evocations, Austro-German Weltschmerz, Slavic and Hungarian folk influences and American iconoclasm were just some of the joy rides taken at the occasionally unfocused musical theme park that was Ojai's Libbey Bowl this year.

Much admired as a pianist in these parts, Andsnes also founded and for two decades served as impresario of the Risør Festival of Chamber Music in his native Norway. He brought to his one-season Ojai visit an artistic cohort centered around the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra (NCO), which, Lego-like, reconfigured into smaller musical modules depending on need. Other NCO-associated artists included the NCO's leader/solo violinist Terje Tønneson, Canadian-American pianist Marc-André Hamelin, Swedish clarinetist Martin Fröst, and two Dutch artists, mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotijn and conductor-composer Reinbert de Leeuw. Local talent included percussionist Steven Schick and soprano Lucy Shelton.

Northern Lights

Nordic works came from a smorgasbord of Scandinavian composers, one each from the Icelander Haflói Hallgrímsson, Norwegian Eivind Buene, and Swede Anders Hillborg, and several from the Dane Bent Sørensen. (Finland, tellingly, was not represented.) Proceeding on a polar route north by northwest were three works by the Alaskan John Luther Adams, two of which kicked off the festival.

Self-described as an environmental composer, Adams seeks in hypnotic percussive sounds to attune to nature's music. His *Inuksuit* received its West Coast premiere in Libbey Park's tree-studded grounds, conducted by Schick, with 48 percussion and piccolo players spread out amongst an enchanted standing audience. "Inuksuit" refers to the anthropomorphic stone markers used to guide the Inuit peoples on journeys across the vast sub-arctic tundra from Siberia to Greenland.

Two other works of Adams, the piano-percussion *Red Arc/Blue Veil*, opened the program at Libbey Bowl Thursday evening, its low rumble rising like flood waters to a peak and subsiding again into nothingness. The more somber *Dark Waves* was featured in the last concert in a version for two pianos and tape. While the memorability of this elemental music may be subject to a short half-life, it cannot be denied that its momentary engagement in the here and now is intense.

After the zeal of this environmental start, the festival's tone shifted to melancholic, with Russian and Austro-German composers prominent. Works of angst-ridden romanticism and expressionism followed over the next two days.

Dark Shadows

Dmitri Shostakovich's *Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva* are bitter, late in life settings of six poems with stark, even desiccated, piano accompaniments. They found Stotijn's voice subdued, and Andsnes, with little to offer her, struggling to support. Tsvetaeva's lyrics are rueful or angry musings at personal attractions and public atrocities. The composer took them a step further into outright nihilism.

Marc-André Hamelin's brilliantly introspective rendition of the Charles Ives *Concord Sonata* followed like an interloper. "Transcendentalism" was an otherwise absent theme in this year's programming. (Jeremy Denk, an Ives specialist who gave the rarely performed first piano sonata an outing here in 2009 and who returns as music director in 2014, would be the more

logical one to take up the *Concord*, considered by many to be Ives' greatest work. Why it was given here this year remains a mystery.)

Friday early evening's featured work, one of the more talked about in the festival, was Reinbert de Leeuw's *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*, a remix of Romantic song-cycles, taking its name from the first line of Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, and using also Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* and other songs. I [reviewed it](#) separately earlier.

Andsnes was pianist and Stotijn the singer on Friday's late-night survey of music based on lullabies and memorials, joined occasionally by members of the NCO. Three piano lullabies by Danish composer Bent Sørensen, pieces he composed for his own children, reminded that Andsnes is a new father. Yet their context here focused more on eternal separations than childhood slumbers. Three larger works that were paired up with the lullabies one-by-one began with Mahler's *Rückert Lieder*, likewise reflections on life's tenuous hold. Busoni's gentle *Berceuse élégiaque* and Alfred Schnittke's meltingly lovely *Piano Quintet* were both tributes to their respective composers' mothers. As if to drive home that all births are death sentences, the lullabies preceded each work without interruption. Andsnes, on piano in the lullabies, joined by Stotijn in the Mahler, applied delicacy and restraint, as did the NCO in the Busoni and Schnittke works, but the grim narrative implications of each of the three couplings could not go unnoticed.

In similar fashion, Saturday morning's splintered couplings of Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder* with Berg's *Four Pieces for clarinet and piano* continued the Ojai Festival's fanciful contrivance of slicing and pairing unrelated works. (Last year it was Webern and Crumb subjected to the same treatment.) The four epigrammatic Berg pieces are more suggestive than revealing. Tucked inside the five Wagner lieder bursting with amatory desire, they serve as discreet reflections on long-ago incidents of a love affair.

The *Wesendonck Lieder* were, in part, a study for *Tristan und Isolde*, and their poems by Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of Wagner's friend and patron, chronicle the dangerous romantic attachment the two shared at the time of the work's composition. Originally for piano and voice, the five songs were arranged for chamber orchestra by Andreas Tarkmann. Stotijn's voice opened up during the course of the cycle and she and the NCO performed the songs with both intensity and tenderness.

Eivind Buene's string orchestra piece, *Langsam und Schmachend*, taking its title from Wagner's "slow and languishing" markings for the *Tristan* prelude, and incorporating themes from the opera, served as an apt overture at the beginning of the combined sets.

Serving as coda, Berg's *Four Songs Op. 2* followed, expanding on the dream-like lieder with melting chromatic harmonies. Joined by the sensitive piano of Marc-André Hamelin, Stotijn, with her voice in full bloom at this point, imbued them with warmth and conviction -- her finest outing at Ojai.

In another program anomaly, at the end of this Romantic *Liebesschmerz*, Andsnes provided a floating, aristocratically poised performance of Beethoven's *Waldstein Sonata*. Placed last in the program, this optimistic icon of the Classical Enlightenment negated the mood of neurotic love-sickness so convincingly nurtured before, almost declaring it a passing trifle of no serious concern.

Nordic Landscapes, Folksong and Jazz, and a Beguiling Clarinet

With Saturday evening's program, the mood of the festival began to lighten. Hafliði Hallgrímsson's *Peomi* was a lexicon of string techniques (the program had wrongly identified it with wind parts) that set an intriguing dialogue between violinists Per Kristian Skälstad and Tørje Tønnesen, with string ensemble support.

Sørensen's *Piano Concerto No. 2* ("La Mattina"), much anticipated in its American premiere, proved less convincing. Described by its soloist Andsnes as a "dreamlike landscape", its portentous opening Bach chorale lead to colorations, glissandi, and clusters from low brass to high strings to claves (wood sticks that sound like castanets) in alternately lugubrious, luminescent, and misterioso effects, but with motivational connections that lacked a discernable architectural structure on first hearing.

Three oddly matched pieces with the unifying thread of Martin Fröst's brilliant clarinet work followed. The most attention grabbing of the weekend was Anders Hillborg's *Peacock Tales* for solo clarinet and tape, a spoof on vanity (in a drastic

reduction from its original concerto with orchestra form), which the technically dazzling Fröst served up in dance gestures wearing a satyr mask and preening like a peacock.

Two other contributions, Mozart's *Kegelstatt Trio* and György Kurtág's fairy-tale inspired *Hommage à Robert Schumann* (both with a sympathetic Andsnes on piano and Antoine Tamestit on viola) provided additional whimsy, with gorgeous clarinet and viola playing, although at this point Fröst's bobbing and weaving next to his more placid colleagues began to look like grandstanding.

Sunday morning's concert provided two more virtuoso outings from the indefatigable Fröst, both with folk and jazz infusions. Hungarian folksong and American jazz techniques blended wonderfully in Béla Bartók's *Contrasts*, with Øyvind Bjorå's spicy violin and Hamelin's spiky piano adding their touches to Fröst's paprika.

Aaron Copland's jazz-infiltrated *Concerto for Clarinet, Strings, Harp and Piano* with the NCO and Hamelin took as its spice the folk music of Brazil, sending the audience to lunch and Fröst off to his next engagement, a welcome if rambunctious Ojai guest. Christianne Stotijn's festival farewell came in a selection of William Bolcom's *Cabaret Songs*, letting her hair down with their witty texts, not always idiomatically sung, but crowd-pleasers after the heavy fare that preceded them.

Sunday evening's concert concluded with the NCO's fine performance of Debussy's *Danse sacrée et danse profane* and a particularly vigorous account of John Adams' famous *Shaker Loops*. Credit De Leeuw's conducting for bringing out the best in the NCO, as he had in earlier performances, including his own work.

Closing the festival was the two-piano version of Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* with insightful piano colorations, particularly from Hamelin on higher register duties, with Andsnes providing a steady rhythm on the lower-range part. It was a penetrating structural revelation of Stravinsky's singular masterpiece. Having recently heard a fine one-piano-four-hand version of this piece at Jacaranda's Music at the Edge in Santa Monica, I can report that this two-piano version, with more expansion for each pianist, allowed for more emphasis on colorings, but the four-hand version with two performers in the same space, enabled more propulsion.

Problematic Janáček

String quartets arranged for string orchestras are occasionally enlightening as comparisons with regular symphonic string writing. The late Beethoven quartets performed by string orchestras sound more advanced in many ways than his symphonies. But the two Leoš Janáček quartets that featured in this festival in string orchestra versions were ill served in both the decision to program them thus and in their haphazard, often ill-tuned performances.

The two works have programmatic narratives that rely on exact scoring and the sound of one instrument per part. The *String Quartet No. 2* ("*Intimate Letters*") chronicles Janáček's infatuation with a younger woman. The *String Quartet No. 1* ("*Kreutzer Sonata*") was based on the eponymous novella of Leo Tolstoy, a tragic love story. They contain effects -- jagged lines, sul ponticello passages, nervous tremolos and characterizations of single characters -- that are not appropriate in multiplicity. In both subject matter and sonics, the intended edginess was softened by a mushy orchestral sheen. Hearing these plush versions at Ojai was akin to public-sponsored voyeurism onto a private matter.

While the two Janáček quartets proved poor vehicles to employ the idle strings of the NCO when their woodwind counterparts were involved in other assignments, the strings did redeem themselves with a thoroughly polished version of Edvard Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, one of the Norwegian composer's more carefully crafted works, if not his most melodically inspired. Performed from memory and with most of its stringed musicians standing, the performance gave welcome opportunity for this ensemble to prove its considerable mettle and cohesion.

By the end of the concert, the NCO strings were ready for a little fun and let their collective hair down with a twirling contrabass dance that mimicked the antics of just-departed clarinetist Martin Fröst.

Let's Go to the Movies

Three documentaries of musical artists in the festival enhanced the audience's perspectives. *Pictures Reframed*, following the multimedia collaboration of the pianist Andsnes and video artist Robin Rhode, was brilliant up to and including Andsnes' magisterial piano version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* in a backdrop of enveloping visuals, climaxing with the

drowning of a piano in a storm-tossed sea. *Matchstick Man* confirmed that, while the music of Hungarian composer György Kurtág is great, his inarticulate explanations of it are not so great. Sometimes it's better to preserve a master's mystery. *Strange and Sacred Noise*, documenting composer John Luther Adams' wilderness performance of relentlessly hammering percussionists in the expanse of the Arctic tundra was a terrifyingly loud indulgence at the expense of the Arctic wildlife.

Afterthoughts

This year's the festival was extravagantly full. It raised a question not often asked in lean times: Can we have too much of a good thing? No one could complain they didn't get their money's worth, yet the programs sometimes challenged meaningful absorption: density nearly smothered intensity.

The festival needs spaces between its programs and compatibility of emotional tone within them to allow one later to cleanse the mind, breathe in serenity and recharge the desire for more music. Silences and continuities, along with sounds, are what make Ojai a special place.

<http://www.laopus.com/2012/06/ojai-music-festival-2012-northern.html>

<http://www.laopus.com/2012/06/reinbert-de-leeuws-im-wunderschonen.html>