

Los Angeles Times

Vijay Iyer jazzes up the Ojai Music Festival



(Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

By Mark Swed | June 9, 2017

The Ojai Music Festival began Thursday night by demonstrating three sides of Vijay Iyer. There are more, which the festival promises to unveil over the weekend. But three is a start.

Iyer is the first jazz musician to be the festival's music director. He comes from a long line of jazz musicians who have moved out of the category, notably back to Gershwin and Ellington, but with roots as far back as the 19th century Gottschalk. Indeed identity has been so much an issue of *jazz* for so long that many have come to dislike the term, stuck with it we pretty much are.

In Iyer's afternoon talk Thursday, the elegant, soft-spoken 45-year-old pianist and Harvard professor cattily noted that he found music critics to be homogenous, no doubt a term of some disparagement for this multitasker. There is probably some truth to it, and he seems to know of which he speaks. The pressure for homogeny has ever been an obstacle for progressive jazz musicians who attempt to collaborate with the classical world.

Where do you find common ground that doesn't lead, as it usually does, to bland homogeny? If uncommon is more productive, how do you get away with it?

The evening began with the American premiere of “Emergence,” in which Iyer’s jazz trio interacts with a chamber ensemble. The world premiere of what you might say is Iyer’s classical violin concerto, “Trouble,” with Jennifer Koh as the dazzling soloist, followed. After intermission, Iyer joined the great West Coast trumpet player Wadada Leo Smith for an intimate, meditative set of very personal, very jazz duos.

In “Emergence,” which had its first performance in Poland last year, Iyer has more success than most have had in combining a jazz ensemble with an orchestra. That was to a considerable degree due to the trust his fine trio — on bass Stephan Crump and, significantly, on drums Tyshawn Sorey, himself a genre-busting composer of notable promise and an attraction for this year’s festival.

The heart of “Emergence,” which begins and ends with a pulsing piano heartbeat, is Iyer’s dialogue with Sorey. In their interaction, for instance, a commonplace melodic motif becomes less commonplace, whereas it remains commonplace in the orchestra’s hands.

Each member of the trio has a solo. Crump stays flashy; Iyer takes off from his luminously large tone into cautiously exploratory realms; Sorey throws caution to the winds of sonic imagination.

The chamber ensemble, composed of the crack International Contemporary Ensemble and the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble, enjoyed the advantage of highly flexible non-dogmatic players and, in Steven Schick, a conductor whose strong suit is his acute rhythmic sense.

Still, the awkwardness of orchestra and jazz ensemble can never be overcome. Iyer gets away with a certain amount of interaction between big band and trio, but the big band is simply not as interesting in a jazz context as are the jazz players, so it must always serve as either orchestral support or foil.

Although Iyer says that “Trouble” is not a programmatic concerto, it takes its title from U.S. Rep. John Lewis’ explanation of “good trouble” and “necessary trouble” as strategies for the civil rights movement. Beyond that, though, little can be said, since the half-hour score has six movements with descriptive, but unexplained, titles.

The prelude, “Erasure,” begins like “Emergence,” by getting into a groove — here Koh and droning orchestral flute. Each movement has its mood and style. “Normale” is a Minimalist elaboration of a phrase that sounds like it could have come from Terry Riley’s “In C.” Later in the concerto there is a repetitive elaboration of a downward scale more in the manner of Philip Glass.

Iyer writes in the program notes that he rejects the concerto cliché of individual against the masses. But the fact is he clearly recognizes and he clearly relishes writing for a remarkable individual.

The show belongs to Koh, whether playing soulful melody, making the raspy scraping sound of strings into poetry, or just tossing off plain, fabulous old-fashioned virtuosity. Next to her, the orchestra, sorry to say, sounds homogenous. Not that the players are critics, but they're not equals either.

Nor really are Iyer and Smith, who played the seven numbers of "A Cosmic Rhythm With Each Stroke," their luminous recent ECM recording. Smith stood on one side of the stage, never looking up, getting to what is now the reductive essence of his once wild side. He demands deep listening — the taking of each utterance, each sound, having immediate expression but ineffable meaning.

Switching between grand piano and electric, Iyer, 30 years Smith's junior, seemed in this context like the kind of acolyte whose own brilliance brings forth a wisdom in his old master. Once more, issues of identity and equality were too interesting to be resolved, because Smith was, on his own, simply too engrossing for that. He was too engrossing, period.

At the end of the inspired 40-minute set, the trumpet player collapsed in Iyer's arms as they hugged. Smith had become dehydrated and was rushed to the hospital. The Friday report was that he was to be released and is fine.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ojai-festival-opening-review-20170609-story.html>

The San Diego
Union-Tribune

Ojai Music Festival opens with triumphant debuts — and a big scare

By George Varga | June 9, 2016

The 71st annual Ojai Music Festival opened Thursday with a triumphant debut — make that, *several* triumphant debuts — and a scare that silenced the cheering audience at the conclusion of the opening night concert at Libby Bowl.

The triumphs, about which more in a moment, can be credited to Vijay Iyer, the 2017 Ojai music director, native San Diego flutist Claire Chase, composer and former UC San Diego professor George Lewis and longtime UCSD professor Steven Schick, who conducted the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble and the Chase-founded International Contemporary Ensemble with equal sensitivity and verve.

The scare came seconds after Iyer and the revered trumpeter and composer Wadada Leo Smith completed a haunting duo performance of their jointly composed suite, “A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke.” It featured Iyer on acoustic and electric piano, as well as laptop computer, which he used to do real-time processing and looping.

When Iyer and his mentor Smith embraced afterward in front of the audience in the historic outdoor venue, the trumpeter faltered on his feet. Iyer helped steady Smith, who then nearly collapsed.

As stage hands rushed to help, followed by a doctor who was attending the concert, Smith was gently lowered onto Iyer’s piano bench. The bearded trumpeter remained there for several minutes before being taken backstage.

More than half an hour later, after nearly all of the audience had departed, medics wheeled Smith, 75, on a stretcher to an ambulance. The trumpeter gave a thumbs up to signal he was alright.

Vijay Iyer (left) and Wadada Leo Smith brought Thursday's opening Ojai Music Festival concert to a more dramatic finish than either planned.

Happily, fears that Smith might have suffered a stroke proved unfounded. His near-collapse proved to be a combination of dehydration and the fact he had been fasting Thursday for Ramadan.

At Friday morning's Daybreak Concert at Zalk Hall, Ojai Artistic Director Thomas W. Morris told the audience: "The most important thing I can say is: Wadada is fine... He asked that I extend his apologies that he did not get to play his encore last night."

A few minutes later, vocal wizard Jen Shyu prefaced her remarkable Daybreak solo performance by sharing her most recent communication with Smith.

"Wadada texted me at 2:15 a.m.: 'I am OK.'"

"So this (concert) is for him."

Exceptional music-making

Smith and Iyer's performance brought to a close the opening night of the Ojai festival, which is now in its 71st year.

By selecting the borders-leaping Iyer as the music director for this year's edition, Ojai has significantly extended its reputation for taking impressive creative risks. The first jazz artist in the event's history to oversee the festival, he is stretching its parameters in exciting and fascinating new ways.

While Iyer Thursday demonstrated his command of the contemporary classical music that has long been Ojai's focus, he did much more than that, especially with the American premiere of "Emergence."

A stunning opus for jazz trio and chamber ensemble, "Emergence" doesn't blur the lines between jazz and classical as much as it renders them largely meaningless.

Most such fusions alternate between orchestral arrangements and improvised jazz solos, with some unison parts employed for good measure. The orchestra usually adds textural ornamentation and a veneer of "serious" intentions, but not much more.

Not so "Emergence," which seamlessly combined jazz and classical in a manner that spotlighted and celebrated their similarities more than their differences.

At one point Thursday, the ICE and Oberlin ensembles' string and wind players played a freewheeling passage with exceptional intensity and abandon, apparently leaving the

score behind altogether. Schick stopped conducting, the better to appreciate the uninhibited artistry taking place directly in front of him.

Like few others, Iyer's writing manages to integrate the two with skill and sensitivity. He has the rare ability to craft and perform music that lives up to Duke Ellington's ultimate accolade of being "beyond category."

Or as Iyer put it during his Thursday afternoon talk to a rapt audience in Ojai Valley Community Church:

"My approach (to this year's festival) was that, instead of genre, we should talk about community. Perhaps that is a better term for classical music or jazz. It's about people (and) their shared history.

"There's an openness and tolerance to others who might be new. The other thing about a community is it is intergenerational and it turns over. ... So that gives me a sense of music-making that is not so much about aesthetics, unless we call it an aesthetic of ... openness, welcome and tolerance.

"I decided to let that simple truth resound across the music and artists I brought here. And Ojai honcho Tom (Morris) just kept failing to say 'no!' It kind of even shocks me — 'Wow, we pulled all these strands together'."

Violin concerto debut

The American-born son of Indian immigrant parents, Iyer grew up playing classical violin and as a keyboardist in a rock band before turning to jazz and also embracing the music of his parents' homeland.

At Sunday's festival-closing concert, he will perform with his jazz sextet and in a quartet setting with tabla master Zakir Hussain, singer Aruna Sairam and fellow Indian-American saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa. On Saturday, he will team with Schick, ICE and Sorey for "Radhe Radhe: Rites of Holi," Iyer's unique response to Stravinsky's epic "The Rite of Spring," which will be performed first.

Violinist Jennifer Koh and conductor Steven Shick helped make the Ojai Music Festival's opening night a memorable one. (Photo courtesy of Ojai Music Festival)

Thursday night's concert featured the world premiere of "Trouble," Iyer's audacious violin concerto. A thrilling showcase for Jennifer Koh, who has performed other pieces by Iyer in the past, "Trouble" takes its title from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It was then that U.S. Rep. John Lewis cited "necessary trouble" and "good trouble" as productive means for affecting positive change.

Iyer's "Trouble" explored a broad range of emotions and musical approaches with consistent wit and imagination. Even when employing specific strategies — from recurring minimalistic patterns to skittering flourishes that surely would have made Edgard Varèse smile — Iyer put his own stamp on the music.

In Koh, who combines dazzling virtuosity and deep emotional conviction, he had an exceptional solo voice. (She will be featured in August during the 2017 edition of the La Jolla Music Society's annual SummerFest.)

In Schick, he had a conductor who has long embraced and performed new music with boundless vigor and keen attention to detail and nuance. With further exposure, "Trouble" has the potential to become a showcase for violinists who share Koh's ability, stamina and appetite for aural adventure.

Combined with "Emergence" and his luminous extended duet with trumpeter Smith, Thursday's concert offered a nicely balanced display of just some of the facets of Iyer's artistry.

Earlier Thursday evening, Chase and electronic sound manipulator Levy Lorenzo performed a free pop-up concert in the Libby Park Gazebo. The first of their two selections was George Lewis' "Emergent," a shape-shifting work that allowed Chase to demonstrate her exceptional range on the flute.

With her dramatic physical twists and turns, Chase seemed to be using her body language as much as her admirable breath control to play the flute. Lewis' finely calibrated composition required pinpoint dynamic control and the ability to make extended techniques sound natural and effortless.

Chase, not surprisingly, was up to the challenge. Lorenzo carefully followed Lewis' cues to electronically tweak and process the music in real time.

The result, much like the rest of the music heard Thursday, was by turns serious and playful, challenging and rewarding, provocative and profound.

<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/music/sd-eth-music-ojai-opening-20170609-story.html>

Los Angeles Times

Transcending genre labels, Vijay Iyer leads the Ojai Music Festival toward bold new territory



Vijay Iyer on Rhodes electric piano at the Ojai Music Festival's opening night June 8, 2017. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

By Chris Barton | June 12, 2017

Standing near the lip of the stage, Vijay Iyer struggled for the right words as he addressed the Ojai Music Festival crowd Saturday night at a sold-out Libbey Bowl. Reaching for some way to describe his feelings heading into the performance, Iyer settled on “something between a family gathering, a rock concert and that TV show ‘This Is Your Life.’”

On the night’s bill was a piece called “Radhe Radhe,” a tribute to Stravinsky’s beloved “Rite of Spring” with music by Iyer, who was set to collaborate with the International Contemporary Ensemble, or ICE, and composer Tyshawn Sorey, the longtime drummer in his trio.

Rhythms bustled, melodies spiraled and the churning string section made time to clap in a sort of punctuation with Sorey’s drive of bells and drums. It was an ecstatic piece to

match ecstatic visuals by the late filmmaker Prashant Bhargava of the Hindu rites of Holi, Iyer's restless piano circling the piece's framework from the rear of the orchestra.

The set was just one of many shifts in direction for Iyer and for the Ojai festival as a whole. Though it proudly boasts a long-held tradition of reinvention that rises from each year featuring a new music director from a different discipline, the festival has been most associated with classical music, albeit while allowing for the occasional nod toward jazz (a 1962 appearance by Eric Dolphy has been a frequent touchstone).

This year offered something of a reverse, a move that inspired *The Times* to offer impressions of the festival from both the classical and jazz perspective.

And while the four-day festival undoubtedly bore Iyer's unique stamp as a musician, there was an increasingly clear sense that any temptation to categorize that impression — a sort of "Ojai goes jazz" shorthand — felt like a diminishment and a betrayal of the broad, borderless and ultimately communal view of music that Iyer aimed to convey.

Certainly, if you went looking for jazz at Ojai this weekend, you would find it. Quotations from Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane and Charles Mingus topped a number of performance descriptions inside the festival program, and the closing concert from Iyer's sextet — a rambunctious, furiously funky set that the pianist introduced as "his easy gig" with a horn section of Mark Shim, Steve Lehman and Graham Haynes — offered the sort of head-bobbing drive and invention that has landed Iyer on multiple best-of lists over the years and, in part, into this gig too.

But his music and the festival at large was much harder to pin down and gratefully struck a considerable blow against the genre labels that Iyer and so many artists before him have vigorously resisted.

Where, for instance, would you file Saturday afternoon's "Conduction" performance? Featuring ICE in a continuation of the work of the late Butch Morris, the piece found Sorey conducting the ensemble's improvisations with a variety of gestures. A flick of the wrist spurred a few clanging of bells and a sweep of the arm drew ideas further forward. Other gestures — four pointers jutting from Sorey's hand, or a hand-held whiteboard bearing some directive to the musicians on the bandstand — were more inscrutable.

Claire Chase boldly leaned into multiple ventures on flute, and Rebekah Heller conjured the spirit of Albert Ayler on bassoon. The music, which featured all manner of clicking valves and unexpected sound across the stage, was stormy and raw and also ventured somewhere well beyond words.

Of a similar spirit, an early morning free concert between three lions of Chicago's AACM in Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell and George Lewis displayed a mastery of open improvisation. Mitchell, who has a double-album "Bells for the South Side" due on ECM this summer, shifted between (or shared) two saxophones as Lewis, seated behind

a table and alternating between trombone and laptop, shadowed him electronically or otherwise over a spacious, ever-shifting piece. Abrams, his head low over the piano, conjured dense, fog-like rumbles that were briefly recast by Lewis with a bassy, trance-like pulse that continued to shift until it dissolved, another moment that arrived, was addressed and was gone.

Late the night before, Iyer shifted into chamber music with the Brentano Quartet for a stormy piece dedicated to the late poet-activist Amiri Baraka, but it was framed by two startling vocal contributions. Strikingly bathed in a stark spotlight, baritone Davóne Tines summoned a kaleidoscope of emotions as he stretched and carved into the familiar form of “Amazing Grace,” and Courtney Bryan’s much-anticipated “Yet Unheard” summoned the spirit of the late Sandra Bland through lead vocalist Helga Davis. As it closed, the piece was received with a moment of haunted silence that had been unprompted; there was simply no other way to respond.

Sunday also brought together another anticipated collaboration in Iyer with longtime friend and alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa along with tabla great Zakir Hussain and vocalist Aruna Sairam.

Iyer and Mahanthappa, both South Asian Americans, have a long history of incorporating their shared background into their music (while, as Iyer put it in the program notes, “negotiating the pitfalls of pigeonholing and self-exoticization”), and here the group gracefully navigated territory beyond labels. Seated on a drum riser next to Hussain with her arms twisting before her with every extended syllable, Sairam’s voice arced amid the rustle of the trees to open “City of Sand,” an Iyer piece that as his piano bounded to the forefront seamlessly twisted into a sort of blues.

As the set went on, Carnatic ragas of Sairam’s South Indian tradition merged with the Hindustani classical tradition of Hussain. Improvisation and invention from two continents staked out new ground somewhere in between. Was it jazz? Maybe. But as a whole, this year’s gathering in Ojai thrived under its long-held, suitably broad umbrella of “music festival,” and an excellent, engrossing one at that. Ultimately, those are the only labels that matter.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ojai-music-festival-jazz-20170613-story.html>

Los Angeles Times

Elders and the next generation convene at the Ojai Music Festival



Tyshawn Sorey on drums Thursday night in Libbey Bowl at the Ojai Music Festival. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

By Mark Swed | June 12, 2017

For some heading into Libbey Park for this year's Ojai Music Festival, the first musical encounter was an oddly alluring sound installation, "Rio Negro II," which included bamboo sculptures and rain sticks by the multi-instrumentalist and artist Douglas R. Ewart. Evoking Brazil's black river, the installation suggested blackness and, through the impermanence of sound, the transience of nature.

Blackness and sonic transience happened to be of profound matter to the first Ojai festival in 71 years to make a jazz pianist its music director, although "jazz pianist" barely begins to describe Vijay Iyer's musical reach. It was Ewart who put it best, bristling slightly at being referred to as an elder at one of the festival talks. Life is like this, he said. "Either you go or you stay. And if you stay, you get old."

Iyer's Ojai festival was not about jazz as much as it was about what it means to stay and to pay attention to those who do. Of all of today's art forms, jazz, whatever else it is, is very good at sustaining those core values.

The flashy festival theme was that codification only gets in the way. After the opening concert (reviewed [last week](#)), the 45-year-old pianist joined the Brentano Quartet for his "Time, Place, Action," a traditional piano quintet written in memory of Amiri Baraka; he put together an Indian-themed quartet for himself, vocalist Aruna Sairam, saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa and tabla player Zakir Hussain; and he closed the festival with his Vijay Iyer Sextet playing straight-away jazz compositions of the last decade.

In addition, Iyer could be heard in dialogue not only with jazz or Indian musicians but also with Mozart and Stravinsky. The Brentano played Iyer's completion of a Mozart fragment, the E-minor Allegro, K. 417d, that the quartet had commissioned. Asked four years ago for a companion piece to "Rite of Spring" to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Stravinsky's ballet, Iyer created a piece for him, drummer Tyshawn Sorey and a new music classical ensemble to play live with Prashant Bhargava's "Radhe Radhe: Rites of Holi," a film depicting the Hindu spring festival in India. This was performed by the International Contemporary Ensemble at Ojai on Saturday night in a concert that began with a thin new 12-instrument arrangement of Stravinsky's "Rite" for ICE that was most exciting in the flamboyant, vital solo playing.

But the power of the festival was, curiously, elsewhere than in Iyer's own elegant, generous, intelligent and inquisitive music-making. The compelling feature was in what appeared to be Iyer's own quest to find examples of how to take the next step and make the music your own.

For that he brought some of the great masters of day, with special and illuminating attention on Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Music. Friday night, Iyer presented the West Coast premiere of George Lewis' brilliant 2015 opera, "Afterword," written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of AACM. Sunday morning, the 65-year-old Lewis (who was taken in by AACM as a 19-year-old Yale student and trombonist in 1971), 86-year-old pianist Muhal Richard Abrams (one of the AACM founders) and 76-year-old saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell (who was at AACM from the beginning) got together for an hourlong improvisation.

Now, these really are elders, there is no other word for it. And hearing them on a chilly, misty Ojai morning was — and there is no other word for this, either — shamanistic, to say nothing of being in the presence of the three hippest musicians on the planet.

Staring straight ahead, not at the audience but something more third-eye-ish, Mitchell began by breathing through his instruments, making sounds, not playing notes. Abrams, his keyboard angled away from the audience and his body hunched down so that all you could see of him was his bald head, made a barely audible rumbling noise on the base register. Lewis, who worked a laptop and played his trombone (separately and together),

opened a soundscape, connecting breath and rumble with the rustling trees and the sound of car tires on Ojai Avenue.

These musicians have, in the course of long careers, made more kinds of music and mentored more kinds of musicians than most of us could count. But as the Trio they leave their baggage behind and show themselves ready to simply follow the sounds into the bardo.

How they got to this enlightened point was conveyed in “Afterword.” Lewis is another of, and the best of, the uncategorizable ones. A distinguished academic with whom Iyer studied at [UC Berkeley](#) and now a professor at Columbia, Lewis has written the definitive history of AACM, “A Power Stronger Than Itself.” He illuminates the often insular music, and the far-from-insular social history, of an organization devoted to finding an original musical voice of black musicians who immigrated from the South to the South Side of Chicago.

The book’s afterword is a collage of those South Side voices, and Lewis adapts that approach for what he calls “a coming-of-age opera of ideas, positionality and testament.” There are no characters, just the voices of a great many sung by three compelling singers (Joelle Lamarre, Gwendolyn Brown and Julian Terrell Otis), as the opera elusively follows the movement: the northern migration, the founding of AACM, the argumentative forging of its ideals, a foray to Paris and finally a better sense of its identity. It is the story of developing a language that allows for complete individuality that can only be developed through community.

I know nothing quite like this opera. The two acts, each around an hour, are grueling to listen to. The vocal lines are rarely descriptive or dramatic and can produce great tedium. The musicians in ICE, who were conducted with forceful concentration by Steven Schick, seem never to play two notes the same way twice.

It takes a long while, like learning a foreign language. You start to catch on to the gibberish. Once sensing the musicians’ collective urge for something bigger than themselves — something that is, in fact, their selves — I found that not just authentic but astonishingly moving. Only when the opera was over did I feel as if I was ready to begin to hear it.

Unfortunately, that was not the case with the premiere of the chamber version of Courtney Bryan’s “Yet Unheard.” It concerns the Texas death of Sandra Bland in police custody. Bryan had the advantage of the charismatic Helga Davis as soloist, backed by a very good vocal quartet, ICE and the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble, led by Schick. But the composer’s attempt to find catharsis and identity from tragedy felt like a cliché was around every corner .

The next generation was clearly evident over the weekend, with considerable attention put on Sorey. As a drummer, he is a force of nature, unstoppable. As a composer he is a

force of unstoppable nature. In an hour's worth of excerpts from his exhaustingly inventive "The Inner Spectrum of Variables" for his Double Trio, the violin, viola, cello, bass, piano and drums came unhinged.

With his hands holding as many as four batons, or a whiteboard with instructions of what to do, Sorey enticed members of ICE to reach for their inner something-or-other in an hour of mayhem — "Conduction Autoschediasms for Creative Chamber Orchestra." This included ICE's star flutist, Claire Chase, channeling the more extreme of pieces she played earlier in the festival, giving Sorey as much, if not more, than he asked for.

I heard nearly everyone complain that while Sorey's pieces were extraordinary, they were far too long. But it is too early for him to edit. Let him let it all out, lest he miss something — Richards, Mitchell and Lewis once had to — and let us be patient.

Then again, Iyer may want to think about reining Sorey in a little in the Sextet. A phenomenal drummer he obviously is, but he blew everyone away almost all the time in the festival's closing set.

Where all this is going musically, who knows? But the festival itself now heads to Cal Performances at UC Berkeley. The festival Monday announced that next year, when the irrepressible violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja is music director, she will take a little Ojai with her to Aldeburgh, on the British coast, where Benjamin Britten founded a festival.

Meanwhile, Ojai needs to pay more attention to Ojai. Six years ago, the city rebuilt the Libbey Bowl shell and did an embarrassingly banal job. There have been a few improvements since, particularly to the amplification. Right now the city is debating whether to spend a quarter-million dollars undoing the worst mistake and build an incline, restoring those with inexpensive tickets views of the stage.

Many like me caught the Ojai bug as a student on that grassy knoll. Either you go or you stay. Were yesterday's hill today's flat lawn with flat-screen monitors, my choice might not have been the same.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ojai-festival-weekend-review-20170612-story.html>

2017 Ojai Music Festival

Music Director Vijay Iyer Embraces Many Forms

By Charles Donelan | June 13, 2017

Proving once again that for the truly fearless, nothing is impossible, the 2017 Ojai Music Festival effectively erased the boundaries between jazz, classical, traditional Indian music, and more over the course of four sound-packed days in and around Libbey Bowl. Thursday evening's performances focused first on Music Director Vijay Iyer's skill as a composer, with two pieces for orchestra, one involving Iyer's own jazz trio as a musical foil, and the other introducing the brilliant violinist Jennifer Koh in a composition titled "Trouble" that could be considered Iyer's answer to the concerto tradition. Then, after a short break, Iyer returned to the stage with longtime friend and collaborator Wadada Leo Smith for a breathtaking series of duets employing piano, Fender Rhodes, and electronics in counterpoint to Smith's trumpet. The abstract yet hypnotic sound these two achieve together sent the audience home transported to another dimension, even as Smith, who was severely dehydrated and felt faint following the set, was transported to the hospital. After some attention there, he was fine and able to participate in the rest of the weekend without further incident.

Friday evening's 8 p.m. concert was devoted to the West Coast premiere of *Afterword*, an opera by George Lewis about the formation of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). Written in a contemporary classical idiom, the piece tells an uplifting story of collective resistance leading to creative expression and aesthetic validation. Singers Joelle Lamarre, Gwendolyn Brown, and Julian Terrell Otis brought the ideas and vision of the founders of the AACM, several of whom were in the audience, brilliantly to life. Steven Schick conducted the International Contemporary Ensemble with splendid vigor, drawing deeper meaning out of such lines as "Those who survived the cotton fields of death had no idea at first / How long it takes to come into your own." Saturday's late-night offering of *Yet Unheard*, a chamber opera by New Orleans-based composer Courtney Bryan, demonstrated that Lewis's breakthrough piece was no fluke — more great African-American opera awaits in our musical future.

When Iyer and his close collaborator Rudresh Mahanthappa took the stage on Sunday afternoon with Zakir Hussain and Aruna Sairam, it was to cement the implicit connection between post-Coltrane improvisation and the traditional music of India that influenced it. Drawing equally on the jazz and Indian idioms, the group produced an intricate music that delivered immediate, earthy pleasure. Iyer has mastered so many musical forms that for him the boundaries between them have simply ceased to exist. May the roads he travels in sound be open to many more musicians in his wake.

<http://www.independent.com/news/2017/jun/13/2017-ojai-music-festival/>

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Ojai Music Festival was a globe-trotting delight, with a strong San Diego contingent

By George Varga | June 14, 2017

No visas were required to explore a wonderfully wide world of aural adventure at the [2017 Ojai Music Festival, which concluded its four-day run on Sunday night with a rousing flourish.](#)

Now in its 71st year, Ojai has long been regarded as a singular showcase for contemporary classical music. Thanks to visionary pianist, composer and band leader [Vijay Iyer](#), this year's music director, the festival grew in a number of exciting new ways.

Jazz, Indian classical, chamber music, experimental, free improvisation, Bach partidas and fugues — Iyer embraces them all with equal skill and enthusiasm. And he showcased a dizzying array of guest musicians, including [some top current and former San Diego artists who played a major role.](#)

Iyer, the son of Indian immigrant parents, is a 2013 MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” recipient. He strongly believes music should not be labeled by style, but embraced as a multifarious whole.

“My approach was that, instead of genre, we should talk about community. Perhaps that is a better term for classical music or jazz. It's about people (and) their shared history,” Iyer told a rapt Ojai audience last Thursday.

“There's an openness and tolerance to others who might be new. The other thing about a community is it is inter-generational and it turns over. ... So that gives me a sense of music-making that is not so much about aesthetics, unless we call it an aesthetic of ... openness, welcome and tolerance. I decided to let that simple truth resound across the music and artists I brought here.”

Those ideals underpinned the entire festival, which offered 18 concerts and discussions over four days.

UC San Diego music professor Steven Schick, who was Ojai's 2015 music director, returned to conduct several key concerts. They included the world premiere of Iyer's stunning violin concerto, "Trouble," and the American premiere of Iyer's "Emergence," an equally splendid opus for jazz trio and chamber music ensemble that all but eviscerated the differences between jazz and classical.

Schick also conducted the West Coast premiere of former UCSD professor — and fellow MacArthur Foundation recipient — [George Lewis' wildly ambitious and provocative "Afterword, an opera."](#)

Ace flutist Claire Chase, a San Diego native who is also a MacArthur recipient, performed at least five times. For violinist Pauchi Sasaki's "Gama XV," Chase and Sasaki both played while wearing speaker dresses equipped with dozens of small (and functioning) audio speakers.

Chase is also the founder of the celebrated International Contemporary Ensemble, which very ably served as Ojai's house band this year. ICE, as it is often called, features at least two gifted UCSD music alums, percussionist Ross Karre and flutist Alice Teysier.

For good measure, Fiona Digney, the festival's assistant producer, is a member of the Schick-led San Diego percussion ensemble red fish blue fish. She was in near-constant motion during the weekend concerts at Ojai's Libbey Bowl and the adjacent Libbey Park Gazebo.

"Ojai has fabulous performers and all sorts of music. And it's in such a beautiful environment, so I suggest anybody try it," said San Diego's Sharon Griswold, who attended the festival for the third consecutive year with her husband, Bill.

"The caliber of the performers and the excitement of the audience is really something," Bill added.

"The audiences at Ojai are absolutely amazing," agreed Daniel Atkinson, UCSD Extension's Director of Arts & Humanities. "They have an amazing sense of adventure. The opportunity to be presented with the unknown is why they are there."

Under Vijay Iyer's borders-shredding curation, that opportunity was greater than ever. He made a festival with a history of daring and risk-taking become more vital and daring than ever.

At Classical-Leaning Ojai Fest, Iyer Builds Bridges to Jazz

By Josef Woodard | June 16, 2017



Vijay Iyer (center) performs with the Brentano String Quartet on June 10. (Photo: Courtesy Ojai Festival)

For several decades, the idyllic small town of Ojai, California, has been the annual site of one of America's more important festivals dedicated to contemporary classical music, an enlightened retreat hosting some of the great composers and musical figures of the 20th century and beyond. Early on, Aaron Copland and Igor Stravinsky came to Ojai, followed by John Adams, a few memorable visits from Pierre Boulez as music director, Olivier Messiaen, Gyorgy Kurtág and, just last year, the great Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho.

To that list, the annals now include jazz icon-in-the-making Vijay Iyer, who was tapped by artistic director Tom Morris to head up the 2017 edition, the 71st annual. Despite the running commentaries and dialectical debates about the constricting division of jazz vs. classical aesthetics, Iyer can be deemed as the musician who nimbly helped to make Ojai Festival safe for jazz—or idioms and subdivisions thereof—for the first time in the fest's history.

Before the festival, I asked Iyer, whose Ojai experience was his first official festival curation project, if one of his missions in devising this program was to blur and question notions of genre. “It may look that way,” he said. “It’s not really a theme in the sense of trying to cross off a lot of items on a checklist. Everybody involved is a friend or colleague of mine, or [someone] who I have fostered a relationship with. I guess it doesn’t feel to me that I’m moving between worlds. It just feels like I’m having another party,” he laughed.

But, of course, it was a *serious* party, in the “serious music” sense. His musical friends and musical/philosophical allies included multi-faceted drummer-composer-experimentalist Tyshawn Sorey, trombonist-composer George Lewis, flutist-composer Nicole Mitchell and members of the bedazzling contemporary music ensemble ICE (directed by Steven Schick, a masterful percussionist himself and the inspired music director of the 2015 Ojai Festival), and a prominent focus on the still-vital, 52-year-old cultural phenom that is the AACM.

“It’s not like I’m trying to force them into relevance. If you think about artists from previous generations—I’m 45 and a lot of them are in their 70s—that was a previous generation that dealt with, I don’t want to say blurring genres: it’s more about mobility. That’s the way George would put it. Who’s out there who wasn’t afraid to write string quartets and orchestra music? Who asserted a place for that, how was it received, and why?”

“The idea of me being tagged as a jazz musician who is dabbling in chamber music is basically how they were seen, too. But the reality is something very different, which is that it’s integrated. It’s one vision that manifests itself in a lot of different ways. In that way, they are not only precedents, but have been huge influences on me, individually and also as a community.”

(Interestingly, the Ojai performer list also entailed something of a “six degrees of Steve Coleman” network of connections, given a Coleman alumni list including Iyer, Sorey, saxophonist Steve Lehman and dynamic vocalist Jen Shyu, who gave a fascinating solo performance of her folkloric roots-discovery project, inspired by research in East Timor, Vietnam and elsewhere).

At the Ojai Fest, there have been occasional brushes with jazz in the past, as when Maria Schneider premiered her work “Winter Morning Walks” with soprano Dawn Upshaw here, and when jazz-informed British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage’s piece recorded with John Scofield, *Blood On The Floor*, was played on the Libbey Bowl stage (with Mike Miller as guitarist). Three years ago, The Bad Plus offered up its maverick version of Stravinsky’s masterpiece *Rite Of Spring* (something of a theme song at this festival, and heard this year in a sinewy chamber orchestra arrangement).

Yet never before was the j-word so embedded in the festival’s fiber. Iyer was ideally suited to the task, as a composer, performer and conceptualist with an unusually open-minded view of cultural border-crossing. One of the powerful surprises of the weekend was the poetic and racially-politicized, “Black Lives Matter-“ related and, yes, jazz and

gospel-infused work “Yet Unheard,” by venturesome composer Courtney Bryan, and featuring striking soprano Helga Davis as a victim of police violence and abuse.

Over the weekend, we heard Iyer in multiple settings. He showed his ever-deepening attributes as a composer, most notably in the impressive world premiere of his engaging Violin Concerto, “Trouble,” for style-flexible virtuoso Jennifer Koh (whose late-night solo concert “Bach And Beyond,” melding Bach, Berio and others, was a bold highlight of the weekend).

Tapping his acclaimed 2016 ECM album, *A Cosmic Rhythm With Each Stroke*, Iyer embarked on a spare, moving late-night duet set with veteran trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, and ventured into some feel-good Indo-Jazz in an all-star quartet featuring saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, tabla master Zakir Hussain and the profound Carnatic vocalist Aruna Sairam. He closed out the program on an indisputably jazz-related note, with a potent set by his jazz sextet (with longtime bassist Stephan Crump, scene-stealing drummer Sorey, saxophonists Lehman and Mark Shim and Graham Haynes on cornet and flugelhorn).

Caution and jazz-affiliation reticence was, at festival’s end, cast to the wind, and the ambient natural noises which are an integral part of Ojai’s outdoor festival experience (the village’s cricket choruses and bird song performers are world-renowned, appreciated by no less a lofty fan than Messiaen).

Ojai is also a famously spiritual ex-urban enclave, home to regular visits and sagely lectures and meetings with Krishnamurti and other spiritual leaders. In that context, there was an intriguing moment when AACM co-founder and veritable jazz sage Muhal Richard Abrams spoke during a panel discussion onstage.

Abrams dispensed some pithy and occasionally salty wisdom about the origins and aesthetic agenda of the AACM. Then, the stage was turned over to the West Coast premiere of Lewis’ AACM-related opera, *Afterword*, an often strong and certainly well-meaning but also sometimes labored piece, bogged down in revolutionary rhetoric and a stern post-serialist musical language.

There was nothing stern or forbidding, however, when Lewis joined his elder AACM comrades Abrams and Roscoe Mitchell in The Trio, a powerful unit with the deceptively simple name. During its hour-long Sunday morning concert, rife with uncompromising abstraction and deep interactive listening (not to mention Lewis’ stealthy dollops of humor on trombone and spatially-dispersed electronics), the threesome demonstrated why The Trio is one of the greatest and most well-balanced groups in jazz of this moment. Not incidentally, history runs more than a half century deep in the ranks.

Improvisation was a radical constant in the program, nowhere more persuasive than in Sorey’s stunning display of “Conduction”—the guided improvisation technique pioneered by the late Butch Morris and with a refined and personalized style by “Conduction” heir

apparent Sorey (whose heightened limb and finger awareness, as a drummer, must have informed his conduction style).

Creating the impromptu ensemble piece with members of ICE, compared to the jazz players often involved in Morris' work, conjured up a detailed and unique ensemble sound painting, a triumphant hour in the park this year.

Music involving structure and freedom, music on paper and in the moment, was also a prominent theme in the work of Anthony Braxton, whose entrancing "Ghost Trance Music" piece found ICE musicians moving on and off the stage of the Libbey Park Gazebo, and in and out of fixed and free play commands.

"The Inner Spectrum Of Variables," for Sorey's Double Trio (mixing classical string trio and jazz-wise piano trio instrumentations), also willfully mixed up score-meets-improv ideas, as did music in the ruggedly fine and delightful early morning concert featuring Nicole Mitchell's work. Opening with solo flute, she sat down in the allotted composer's seat for the world premiere of the chamber work "They Witnessed An Unfolding" and joined the ranks, in a circle, for the first performance of "Inescapable Spiral," similarly blessed with the power of thoughtfully deployed improvisation amidst structural pillars.

For the 2017 edition of the Ojai Festival, Iyer succeeded in shaking up norms, irking some status quo factions in the crowd, and—most importantly—also confirming core progressive musical values in Ojai. **DB**

<http://downbeat.com/news/detail/at-classical-ojai-festival-iyer-builds-bridges-to-jazz>

Jazz-tinged rites of late spring

Acclaimed jazz pianist-composer Vijay Iyer gets experimental at 69th Ojai Music Festival

Josef Woodard | June 18, 2017 6:53 AM

Deep into the ear-friendly and challenging thicket of last weekend's 69th annual Ojai Music Festival, this year's designated music director Vijay Iyer addressed the capacity crowd in Libbey Bowl for the first time during the four-day "serious musical" outing.

It was on Saturday night, after the accomplished contemporary music ensemble ICE, led by Stephen Schick, gave us a sinewy cool reading of a compact chamber version of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," a veritable anthem or camp fight song for this festival, and Mr. Iyer's strongly Indian-flavored music for the music-film project "RADHE RADHE," about another festival, India's sacred bacchanalia known as "Holi."

Addressing the free range of musical ideas he was allowed to explore with the densely programmed weekend of music, the serious but also kindly and self-effacing Mr. Iyer called the experience "something between a family gathering, a rock concert and something like the old TV show 'This is Your Life.'"

Mr. Iyer might have also added, beyond this year in particular, that the event is one of America's most fascinating experimental extravaganzas, advocating contemporary classical music (and more, especially this year) and hosting the celebrity likes of Pierre Boulez, Stravinsky himself, Copland, Kurtag, Messiaen, the great Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho last year, and now Mr. Iyer. His 2017 model was an up-and-down affair, but an undeniably brave and intriguing musical encounter.

Ojai has always been all about diversity, and that leaning was more in evidence than usual this year. Among the bracing new sounds and ideas encountered: black composer Courtney Bryan's moving "Black lives matter" sub-texted piece "Yet Unheard" (featuring soprano Helga Davis); drummer-composer Tyshawn Sorey's rapturously leading ICE musicians using the late Lawrence "Butch" Morris' guided improvisational "conduction" technique; the sublime Carnatic singing of Aruna Sairam; and a spatialized performance of Anthony Braxton's "Ghost Trance Music," in and around the Libbey Park gazebo. For free. Now that's a festival.

Stretching diversity particularly in the last few years, as longtime artistic director Tom Morris has hand-picked such "outsiders" as choreographer Mark Morris and theater director Peter Sellars, and, this year, an artist still best known in jazz circles. Mr. Iyer took the opportunity to invite some of his best friends and artistic allies, including his band's drummer, Mr. Sorey, an expanding musical world

unto himself; the legendary trombonist-composer-scholar-gadfly George Lewis; trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith; and a focus on the 52-year-old great American musical phenom, the Chicago-born AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Music). We even heard the West Coast premiere of Mr. Lewis' well-meaning but rather didactically dry and over-long AACM-themed opera "Afterword," based on Mr. Lewis' much-acclaimed book about the organization he became part of as a precocious Chicago teen.

Curiously, or perhaps not, the word "jazz" is conspicuously absent or at least very sparingly used in the festival's press materials or in the expectedly generous and learned program book. That may be a market-wise avoidance of the elephant in the room, given that the j-word can strike fear or apathy in the hearts of many classical listeners — even those with an open-eared contemporary taste. More conceptually and intellectually, though, the very word and notion of "jazz," per se, are thrown into semantic and conceptual question by the artists at the center of this year's Ojai storm.

Controversy was in the air this weekend, with some regular hardliners who missed the presence of more established classical musical sources. To be fair, though, Bach had a strong presence, partly thanks to violinist Jennifer Koh's luminous "Bach and Beyond" program (heard in Santa Barbara on a few occasions), the Brentano Quartet's ripe selections from Bach's final work, "Art of the Fugue," some clever Mozart-iana programming, and Kurtag's miniaturist masterpiece "Moments Musicaux." Edgar Varese was given his due, as well, as the source and inspiration for ever-flexible ICE flutist Claire Chase's "Density 2036" project.

But the j-word was ever-abuzz about town. Are Mr. Iyer, Mr. Sorey (the drummer-composer who also appeared in Ojai last year, to a smaller degree), Mr. Lewis or the wondrous flutist/re-thinker — and daughter of Roscoe — Nicole Mitchell (whose early morning concert was an evocative stunner) categorically "jazz" musicians? They would say no, or at least "not exactly," preferring more non-confining, cross-idiomatic delineations for their musical vocabulary (or vocabularies). Such genre-based questions hovered over Ojai all weekend, as a kind of prominent thematic leitmotif, without easy answers. That said, though, whereas Mr. Iyer is something of a superstar in the jazz world — as a habitual poll winner in DownBeat magazine, winner of the MacArthur "Genius" Grant and Harvard professor, and also a polarizer for some conservative jazz fans who find him too "clinical" or cerebral — his reputation in the so-called "classical" field is much less established. He's something of an emerging artist on the classical side of the fence, whose obvious compositional powers are still a work-in-progress, as heard in the range of work in Ojai, but something very much to keep an ear on.

Mr. Iyer's imprint was strong throughout the weekend, even more than usual for a composer-music director for this venerable festival, closing out on Sunday evening with the weekend's most purely and inarguably "jazz" concert of the weekend, by his potent sextet, with Mr. Sorey one of jazz's most powerhouse drummers of the day. Mr. Iyer's strongest and most definably varied showing came early, with Thursday night's concert. After his trio (with Mr. Sorey and bassist Stephen Crump) joined ICE and other musicians for the American Premiere of his piece "Emergence," a world premiere of his new violin concerto, "Trouble," written for and featuring

Jennifer Koh. This newest, ink-still-wet Iyer work was also the most mature and masterful score, at once accessible and experimental, a delicate balance inherent in some of Mr. Iyer's best work.

After intermission, Mr. Iyer joined the recently revered elder jazz statesman, trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, for a striking and subtle — and mostly improvised — duet, such as heard on the critically acclaimed 2016 ECM album "A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Note." Yes, they lived up to the poetic implication of the title. Mr. Smith, currently being hailed as a late-era master in jazz, actually lived in Ventura County, in Piru, when the now New Haven-based musician taught for years at CalArts. The 75-year-old also alarmed us by fainting onstage, victimized by dehydration and exhaustion, just after the concert's last note. Mr. Morris informed us the next morning that he was fine, and that he wanted to express an apology for not playing an encore. Next time.

Speaking of improvisational profundity in the line of jazz, one of the great hours of the weekend was the Sunday morning performance by the group with AACM-linked titans known as The Trio, octogenarian AACM co-founder Richard Muhal Abrams on piano, reed player and circular breathing master Roscoe Mitchell, and Mr. Lewis as his own brand of trombone virtuoso and electronics-manipulator with the leavening sprinkling of humor at the ready. Simply put, this is one of jazz' greatest groups at the moment, dealing with pure, free improvisation in an utterly persuasive, space-loving and malleable context, with deep history in the wings.

What better place to embrace the liberating "now" of the moment and the grounding foundation of the past than at the Ojai festival? 2017's Vijay Iyer-directed Ojai fest posed questions, raised spirits and a little ire along the way. It was, in other words, a success by the ever-morphing terms of this aesthetic franchise.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

David Mermelstein | June 13, 2017
Ojai, Calif

The music making at the annual Ojai Music Festival, like the weather here, is unpredictable. And fans of this boundary-pushing gathering say that's half the fun. But for any such venture to succeed, the balance between welcome exposure to new frontiers and noble (sometimes ignoble) failures must be weighted toward the former. Even a spectacularly bad musical adventure can be forgiven when enough other things tilt the enterprise toward the positive.



This year's Ojai festival—the 71st, which, as ever, took place at the intimate, outdoor Libbey Bowl, and ran June 8 through 11—had a tough time achieving that golden mean. There were a few outstanding performances, a number of moderately engaging ones, and too many experiences that tried a listener's patience. Responsibility for those choices lies with the festival's artistic director, Thomas W. Morris (13 years on the job), and with Vijay Iyer, the jazz pianist, composer and academic, this year's music director (the holder changes annually).

Appointing a noted jazz performer to the latter position is a bold move for a festival primarily associated with classical music, albeit mostly of the modern sort. But Mr. Morris has previously filled the gig with other unconventional choices—the choreographer Mark Morris (2013) and the stage director Peter Sellars (2016)—and jazz is not unheard of at Ojai, though it has been scarce in recent decades.

Yet by elevating jazz to a position of primacy while re-engaging several artists prominently featured at the festival last year and the year before, Ojai's decision-makers created an atmosphere in which much of the programming seemed either out of place or regurgitated. Mr. Iyer was a welcome new face who brought ethnic diversity as well as ample talent to Ojai. But seeing a former music director, the percussionist Steven Schick (2015), on stage more frequently than his successor undercut the message. To be fair,

Mr. Iyer's music was abundantly represented, though not always well received, throughout the long weekend.

The sense of déjà vu was furthered by the return (for the third year in a row) of members of the versatile and virtuosic International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), serving as the house band in all but name. Claire Chase, an ICE flutist as well as a flamboyant soloist, was among them, but her presence became unwelcome following a self-indulgent recital on Friday afternoon. Ms. Chase is immensely talented technically, but her showboating stage manner (silver metallic shorts over black leggings, awkward dance-like effects) and overreliance on a limited number of performance gimmicks didn't wear well. (Enough already with the amplified lip smacks!)

An even more complicated situation arose with the return of the preternaturally gifted percussionist Tyshawn Sorey. It's hard to imagine a drummer of greater imagination and skill than Mr. Sorey. Even when surrounded by fellow virtuosos, he stands out. He was the clear favorite among the members of Mr. Iyer's all-star jazz sextet, which closed the festival on Sunday, and he elevated several earlier programs. Yet Mr. Sorey also composes, and his pieces dominated two afternoon bills. They were long, unvaried and pretentious.

One of the most cherished performers on last year's roster, the great Indian singer Aruna Sairam, was back as well. She is a hypnotic vocalist and a charming, modest presence, but even with master tabla player Zakir Hussain (in his Ojai debut) by her side, one couldn't help but feel a pang of "been there, done that."

Yet one of the festival's two most compelling programs took something familiar—very familiar—and made us hear it anew through refashioning and recontextualization. Saturday night's double-bill paired Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" (in a reduced arrangement for 12 ICE players conducted by Mr. Schick with his trademark cool precision) with Mr. Iyer's "Radhe Radhe: Rites of Holi" (performed by a similar complement of ICE members in sync with Prashant Bhargava's joyous film of the Hindu spring festival).

The other program that really resonated, also led by Mr. Schick, lacked such feral excitement but offered instead a thoughtful exploration of music closer to home. George Lewis's sui generis chamber opera "Afterword" (2015) chronicles the founding of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, of which Mr. Lewis is a proud member. Eschewing the genre's typically bold gestures and outsize emotions, this opera tells a complicated story of self-empowerment with laudable directness and simplicity, its three-member cast characterful and affecting.

First-time performers at the festival were largely relegated to less prominent berths. On Thursday night, Jennifer Koh gave the premiere of Mr. Iyer's "Trouble," a violin concerto in six parts, with Mr. Schick leading ICE and the Oberlin Contemporary Music

Ensemble. Her performance remains in the memory for its energy and dazzle, even as Mr. Iyer's score doesn't. On Friday night, she followed Mr. Lewis's opera with a solo recital of Bach, Luciano Berio, Missy Mazzoli and Esa-Pekka Salonen. Her technically flawless accounts flattered the newer works, less so Bach's D-minor Partita.

A similar fate befell the Brentano Quartet, whose rendition of Mozart's String Quartet in E-flat major (K. 428) was dull on a Saturday-afternoon program that included lively readings of György Kurtág's "Moments Musicaux" (2005) and Mr. Iyer's endearing "Mozart Effects" (2011). But the group's late-night appearance on Friday with excerpts from Bach's "Art of the Fugue" rightly kept a large crowd spellbound.

Next year, Ojai returns to a format more in keeping with its traditions, as the rising Moldovan-born violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, an Ojai novice, assumes the music directorship. To keep his festival fresh, Mr. Morris should make certain that other new faces join her.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/treasures-and-pitfalls-amid-musical-adventures-1497382915>



SECOND INVERSION

RETHINK CLASSICAL

Community and Empathy at the 2017 Ojai Music Festival

by Alexander K. Rothe Posted on June 14, 2017

This year's Ojai Music Festival (June 8-11) in Ojai, California was the chance of a lifetime to experience how music can serve to imagine and also activate a world of greater tolerance and social justice. The theme of this year's festival was community and empathy, and the innovative programming of Vijay Iyer provided a space in which to reflect on this theme in a variety of different contexts. Iyer didn't tell the audience how to interpret the theme, but rather framed the question in such a way that it invited further discussion. Each concert approached the theme from a slightly different angle, but there



was a common thread connecting each one: the featured artists and composers had either participated in or been influenced by the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a collective of African-American musicians founded on the South Side of Chicago in 1965.

A highlight of the festival's first evening was the spectacular

world premiere of Iyer's violin concerto for Jennifer Koh. Koh, who was interviewed later during the festival, is a warm, intelligent person, and this was reflected in her performance of Iyer's violin concerto. The concerto—a genre that traditionally involves a hierarchical relationship between the hero-soloist and the orchestra—was instead reconceived here as a dialogue between equals. The soloist was depicted as a vulnerable figure responding to the musical material of the orchestra. For example, at one point during the concerto, the violinist sustains a single pitch while the orchestra plays the melody. When Koh performed this section, she drew her bow close to the bridge, resulting in a brittle, fragile sound—like a voice on the verge of breaking.

The festival's second day was especially rich in its musical offerings. The afternoon concert featured two artists who were both inspired by the AACM. Claire Chase gave a magnificent demonstration of her *Density 2036* project, performing a series of compositions based on Edgard Varèse's revolutionary 1936 musical work *Density 21.5*. Later during the panel discussion on the AACM, Chase mentioned that she couldn't have conceived of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), which she founded in 2001, without the history of the AACM.

The audience cheers for Claire Chase, who performed selections from her *Density 2036* project. Also pictured are composers Tyshawn Sorey, Pauchi Sasaki, and Vijay Iyer. The Friday afternoon concert also featured a performance of Tyshawn Sorey's brilliant composition *The Inner Spectrum of Variables*, which presents a fresh take on aleatoric procedures. The conductor performs a series of gestures instructing the ensemble which path to take in the score, a technique reminiscent of Boulez's *Eclat*. Sorey refers to this technique as "conduction," which is an elaborate system of conducted improvisation that he adopted from Butch Morris. Sorey, who also participated in the AACM panel, emphasized the organization's influence on his personal and professional development. Having grown up in a poor neighborhood in which funding for the arts was not readily available, Sorey turned to the history of the AACM as a source of inspiration to guide him in his quest for self-determination.

The Friday evening concert was the West Coast premiere of George Lewis's *Afterword*, an opera about the history of the AACM. Compared to the 2015 world premiere in Chicago, the Ojai staging was more minimalist—there were no dancers and only a few props—and the gestures and movements of the three singers were much more transparent in meaning. This staging worked well because it highlighted the powerful message of the libretto—the transformative nature of creative music and the ultimate success of the AACM. The most impressive aspect of the performance was the superb singing and dramatic intensity of Gwendolyn Brown, Joelle Lamarre, and Julian Terrell Otis. The International Contemporary Ensemble did a wonderful job supporting the singers, and one had the sense that both were in dialogue with each other. In sum, the opera was a great success, and the audience was clearly moved.

Another highlight of this year's festival was the world premiere of the chamber version of Courtney Bryan's *Yet Unheard*, to a text by Sharan Strange. The rich, nuanced voice of Helga Davis was juxtaposed with a chorus mourning the tragedy of Sandra Bland. Sharan Strange's deeply moving text serves as a site of empathy, creating a community of listeners honoring the memory of Sandra Bland.

In conclusion, this year's festival accomplished its aim of creating a new kind of community through diverse and innovative programming. Pre-concert talks encouraged open dialogue between composers, performers, and audience members. After each concert, many of the performers and composers would come out and interact with the audience on the festival grounds. Moreover, the focus on the impact of the AACM—as a

collective of musicians transcending genre boundaries—was especially effective for making connections between communities normally assumed to be separate. The juxtaposition of improvised and notated traditions—as well as examples that draw on both—broke down the hierarchy that often exists between the two. The programming of artists and composers fluent in multiple traditions further contributed to this tendency. On a personal note: this year’s festival was a profound experience that will always remain with me. I will strive to adhere to the tolerance and open-mindedness demonstrated by the festival programming. Finally, I eagerly await next year’s festival, which will be directed by the amazing violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaya.

The Jazzcat

by LeRoy Downs

For many decades, the Ojai Music festival has been presenting music to a well-seasoned community of listeners. One of the most vital elements of experiencing sound is not so much hearing but, listening is key. So many take music and artists for granted and fill venues, stadiums and amphitheaters with an energy that says, "I want to hear THIS". From my short few days with the Ojai Music Experience, I witnessed such exuberant openness. Ready to hear and experience a world of work, familiar or unfamiliar to the ear did not matter. Openness, the ability to seek, discover new sounds, tones, cultures and be ready to let these vibrations sink into your being and embrace them is a truly respectful the art.

I'm sure each artist who performed has felt this overwhelming generous canvas on which to perform and in actuality, that generosity created a more richer, rewarding experience for the artist and the audience, an energy of one! Vijay Iyer has just been extraordinary in amassing this global community of culturally diverse, like minded creatives who not only share and perform their compositions but, enrich lives allowing people to hear instruments, music and expand consciousness. When hear you something different, you learn something new about life and you experience a new awakening inside yourself as well. As adults, it's almost impossible to experience that childlike wonder once again. This festival, with these artists in particular, laid the pathway for new journeys and old dreams!

I missed the first day of performance which included opening afternoon talks with Vijay, Wadada Leo Smith and Steve Schick. Hearing from the artist is so instrumental in learning and understanding their being, their path, their personality, and the secret that makes them thrive. All of this blossoms inside the music and you begin to travel along the lines of their story while being spectator to a soundtrack that provides new prospectives to yours! I also missed the sound of my dear friend Wadada who gave his last breath to dehydration while on stage.

Ojai Music Festival took great care of him, got him checked out and made sure he rested well the next day. You have to take notice of the kind of loving soul that gives their everything to the audience ,not just for the sake of the music but, for the spirit of the moment. In music and in life there are moments, these are the special times that we relish as they happen and look back on as they are etched into the fabric of our being. That is the passion Wadada plays with, the relentless way in which he lives his life and all based on love and compassion for humanity. If you were there, you were the recipient of that overwhelming benevolence.

n early morning start, leading the pathways and piercing the veil of typical Friday morning Los Angeles traffic, I arrive. Yes a day late but, in quite enough time to inhale the sounds and capture the Day Break concert of the Seven Breaths of the mighty Jen Shyu. An artist that can not quite be described in any of the boxes where mere humans find their comfort. The only way to indulge this fine delicatessen is to silence your mind, bathe in the sound and story and as the darkness turns to light, become a spectator in your immobile shell and let your your active conscious be whisked away by operatic jazz dramatics painted by dance and song. As you enter, the screen above shows footage of a Timorese woman singing and villagers dancing. We are soul watchers as we peek into the past voyeuristically treading upon ancient sound that suddenly comes to life in this dimension. Vietnamese, Chinese, Taiwanese, intrigue at its finest always prevails through the pinnacle of cultural experiences all wrapped in one! Art on high meets truth, past, present and future and you can now consider yourself

closer to enlightenment. Just the true natural harmonies of Mandarin language has its genuine Bolero properties and Jen layers and intertwines each plane with seven languages cultivating a unique palette visual sonics derived from real life global journeys back in time. Watch, live, learn and listen to the stories. Language is no barrier to our many senses and through the sonics, you will discover that humanity is the answer. You start with the question and the journey always leads back to the answers within. Here is one of those stories...

A poor, young, hungry, village girl, whose mother died while giving birth to her, takes care of her blind father Mr. Shim who falls in the river and is saved by a Monk who makes a proposition for daughter to become virgin sacrifice for band of sailors in order to restore father's sight, doesn't work. Sailor's ravish and toss naked body into the sea as she sings to her death, dragon kings-men hear and save her. King falls in love, marries and new Empress send out invitation and invites all blind men to banquet to reunite with her father who thinks daughter is dead and does not believe Empress but, his desire brings back his sight as well as sight of all the blind people and animals in the land. Now that's an opera!

Hop in your mode of transportation and travel on down the curves of Ojai Road to the center of town and you will arrive at Libbey park which encompasses the Libbey Bowl outdoor amphitheater, where most of the performances take place. In the park you will also find the Libbey Park Gazebo where a few of the Pop-up concerts (short 30 minute performances) are performed, well as a sonic installation of fine natural art made of rainsticks, rocks, wood and metal masks composed by Douglas Ewart and George Lewis, members in fine standing with the Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians, called the Rio Negro.



Clair Chase, flute master and founder of the International Contemporary Ensemble performed unconventional solo flute expressions. Loose lips normally sink ships but, in this case they are used as just one of the many colorful ways that Clair expresses her art of sound. Purring, sonic tone matches, voice and long wind articulations are just a few ways Clair communicates her compositions.

Solo yes but look! Amassed behind his kit of brass, silent at first, but shortly ringing the air with echoes of vibrations is Mr. Tyshawn Sorry. I say Mr. Out of respect to a man of youth with a world-wind of percussive wisdom!

Claire is playing a flute that is bigger than thou! It's called a contra bass flute and the two instruments together create a big story on the corner where genres become life long friends in pursuit of open invention and intervention. The audience is listening. No pre-conceived notions, only a willingness to ingest the nutrients of sound until the moment when sound is

all that is on the stage. Clair and Tyshawn have left and we are experiencing the stimulus perpetual vibrations.

From silver shorts to a skirt of 3 dimensional proportions, Claire returns with a voice and breath on the ethereal side. From the rear of the audience, her partner Pauchi Sasaki approaches as the two cross each other on stage and combine skill sets flute and violin! Thunder storms and tumultuous weather is the sound while we bask in the warmth of the sun. In a moments notice, 20 people are on the stage with Clair at the center playing various flutes and then its the dynamic International Contemporary Ensemble in full effect.

Brother, Master, musician, composer, conductor Tyshawn is in the house conducting and performing movements for his double trio strings and piano, bass and drums. So many wonderful sounds from Rubin Codheli on cello and Chris Tordini on double bass arco. Their duo combined with all four string instruments dropping such deep, deep luscious harmony and infectious love mixed with the sun and cool breeze make for a setting of perfection! Tyshawn seen composing out front one second with the lightest footprint, a quick sneak off to interject percussive mastery, then back to the podium. After a string section, Tordini drops down into that special place! The music is low resonating peaceful mastery and the counter balance between Corey Smythe on piano and Fung Chern Hwei on violin is playful and creates just the right texture. The most peaceful prelude in the most troubled of times only shows that LOVE prevails! This proves that all good music deserves great listeners and not confines of a box.

“A Power Stronger Than Itself”, A force, not necessarily to be reckoned with but, one that is undeniably united in a way of thought, a way of being. It’s mere existence begs the question of where YOU stand. It’s not a challenge or a threat it’s just a simple little fact that can only be determined through truth and honesty; fear plays no factor. And it’s okay if you don’t know, the fact that you question or even contemplate says that your mind is open to the experience, to the sound. AACM! “What is the AACM?” Well, if you know, then you are rich with wonderful echoes of sound, if you don’t and you asked the question, then you are welcome with open arms to experience a foray into new creative plateaus, freedom of expression, a discovery of self through sound, a whole new way to look at the same situations life presents and now have the ability to choose new outcomes!

Born and founded in Chicago, the AACM is an organization of creative musicians whose mission it is to nurture, perform, record and procure original music. Some of the dynamics that a composition is based on may at times be of a serious nature but, the intent is not specifically to create serious music. Trombonist and composer George Lewis is one of the original members and he is the author of “A Power Stronger Than Itself: And America Experimental Music”. Before the performance there was a panel discussion that included George, Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell along with Tyshawn Sorey and Claire Chase discussing the continued impact of such creative music. Dynamic insight from the creators themselves gives you a look inside-out into their views of freedom, complexity and relevance.

George wrote “Afterword, an Opera” and we had a chance to witness it’s West Coast Premier. “Originality self determination all of these things are in the opera. Some things based on tapes of old AACM meetings. Ethnographic sampling, it’s all in there. The opera is not a tragedy the AACM wins.” We were soon to discover quite a fascinating display of work. Conductor Steven Schick lead members of the International Contemporary Ensemble through two acts of incredible works that supported the powerful voices of soprano Joelle Lamarre, contralto Gwendolyn Brown and tenor Julian Terrell Otis. The work is based on the conception of the AACM, how the ancestors migrated to the windy city from the south, struggles with daily life and the yearning for better, the desire to establish a meaningful

future, the ideals of the first AACM Meeting and other scenes based of old recordings of the members, the death of visionaries and realizing the world is the audience. Yes, there were many dynamics going on that split my mind into about four parts, each trying to figure out the symbiotic relationships. A true engagement in logics, sonics and search for resolve. It's like life, if you had all the answers, it would already be over! As Muhal said, "it's important to get involved in the dialogue of the music. With the labels and things as such, the music needs acceptance more than cataloging."

We begin the Saturday morning daybreak concert began with the American premier of "Engraved in the Wind", a peaceful entrance as Nicole Mitchell comes in the back door playing solo alto flute. The audience here in Ojai really love and appreciate music. The lure of the solo flute is captivating and the way Nicole incorporates voice intermingled with her tone has indigenous implications. Always taking the instrument to new heights by stretching the imagination of sound. I would imagine being apart of the principled AACM organization instilled strong values of self creation. George Lewis is here on hand after success with his smashing operatic premier last night.

While the members of ICE are exuding celestial sounds, a slithering entity makes its way on the floor, dancing and slowly incorporating its presence into the fabric of the sonic and visual tapestry. Suddenly the tall elegant dancer reveals himself discarding his vail of red. Movement and sound stimulate multiple regions of brain activity. An exercise in thought and conclusion which has subjective interpretations of meaning. Life is not just a series answers to questions. I see, you see, we see differently and those differences teach us the things that we know we don't know about ourselves and others. The World Premier of "They Witnessed and Unfolding".

"Inescapable Spiral", the sphere of sound, bold and adventurous, rich with vast diversity and common in the language of love and music. A sound the world can learn from as we see and hear our tones represented, speaking freely in conversation and admiring our individual sonics as well as the strength of our unity! The poet Lord Byron Scot speaks as he lifts, twists contrasts and draws attention to the message. What is it, do you know? Are you perplexed? Do you need answers? What is it? Perhaps it is an exercise to make you see and hear outside of your own perspective; smelling and feeling the world with other optics. Tapping into other human universes deep inside yourself synonymously formulating and answering thoughts instantaneously! Brain activity is registering on higher artistic frequencies and all are enlightened! The ebb to your flow, the call to your answer, the dawn to your new day!

The afternoon performance in Libbey Park Gazebo was a quick ICE Pop-up concert featuring the World Premier pieces "Labrys" and "Mysterium" performed by Claire Chase, Josh Rubin, Rebekah Heller and Levy Lorenzo and an education workshop at the Ojai Art Center with elementary school students learning through music and enticing their audience to participate in movement and song. At Libbey Bowl, classical pieces by Kurta'g and Mozart were performed before hearing Vijay's composition "Mozart Effects".

Low frequency Electro magnetic energy with flute, violin, viola, french horn, oboe, bass, trombone, piano and percussion. A sound orchestration with no melody, no harmony, no rhythm but, loaded with improvisations and implications. Tyshawn Sorey's Autoschediasms for Creative Chamber Orchestra is a story slowly unfolding the sum of its parts revealing the mystery of its magic in a secession notes, mathematically arranged to produce emotional algorithms. The desired effect has relative implications, peaking intrigue in an audience that leans typically towards more traditional classical frequencies. As the piece enters the uncharted waters of the abyss, tone individuality unifies as land approaches. The father of the avant guard Muhal Richard Abhrams watches on from the audience witnessing and

contemplating what I gather must be inner joy, to see and hear visions of individual truth and sound manifest in a blossoming new generation!

The adventurous are all in attendance to witness the original sounds of the AACM! For decades these musicians have built their entire careers on approaching music on their own terms. Developing powerful sounds that reflect their ideology, philosophy, mores and life's experiences; those of their own and of the global human experience. Yes, these are different sounds indeed. Look at Roscoe playing two horns at once. One of course because he can but, more likely because these are the sounds that are necessary to convey this moment's message. Muhal Richard Abrams with his cascading chords of truth and dear brother George Lewis poignantly delivers vocal tones of clear determination. Life is full of beauty, pleasure, pain and suffering. This is the musical language that speaks for those who could not, cannot as well as for those who can. Bold statements that spin, politically corrected or watered down, however you want to put it, it's Black music plain and simple. You don't have to understand it, like it or fear it but listen and learn, open your minds and don't concede. This is culture at its finest and within the walls of these extraordinary sounds there are stories, messages, healing and love. Vibrations to and from our ancestors, respect for those who have suffered injustices brought to life in a world creativity expressed at a moment's notice.

As they go through life, their journey has certainly not been to create one composition and continue to make a career out of playing that same composition for their entire lives. You don't sit on your laurels for the rest of your life after one success. Everyday has many gems and jewels that present themselves. These gentlemen have been spreading these jewels their entire lives. And once discovered, many other musical lives have been built on these principles. At the core are some pretty basic foundations; freedom, respect, kindness, love and human dignity. Only these Founding Fathers want this for everyone and not just the chosen few. In this beautiful outdoor amphitheater, you can hear the birds reply as part of the ensemble and the soundtrack could not be more perfect. Universal love!! This is not just his-story, it's yours too!

Tonight marks the first public performance for this incomparable quartet of Vijay Iyer, Zakir Hussain, Rudresh Mahanthappa and the brilliant Aruna Sairam. The world never made so much sense or felt so infectious. These four cast a love spell with such encompassing vibrations. One drink from this sonic potion and you have visions of a harmonious world where give, receive, share, honor and happiness are the virtue and sonnets by which we live.

Rudresh has an ancient sound that calls the spirits from the heavens down and connects us through this vibration he calls, "Eeeeeeee". Zakir is the thunder, the sound of magnificence literally right at his finger tips. Aruna, I am not sure what her name actually means but, it should be, "The Goddess of Sound"! Talk about incredible music in the world, this is happening right now, and it has all descended upon us this weekend.

Culture rich, incredible rhythms and Aruna's heavenly blessings making the sound is so much more intensely beautiful. Her transcendent aura is breathtakingly mesmerizing as she sculpts the sound into expanding rings of illumination; she is the drop of water, mother music herself! Dancing on a plane of possibilities is where the music lives and breathes. Vijay's "City of Sand", spectacular ragas simultaneously meditative and majestic. Aruna's rhythm and sense heavenly articulation is angelically unmatched. The birds sing in syncopation!

The Story – Lord Krishna, the Hindu God lived by the banks of the river Yamuna. Kaliya, the five headed snake killed all of the fish, trees and birds with its poisonous venom. They engage in a playful battle like dance where Krishna stamps out the serpent and restores life to the

village. Stravinsky's Rites of Spring adapted from dark to light in Prashant Bhargava's film RADHE RADHE: the Rites of Holi. Vijay scored this film of happiness and brilliant color symbolizing the union of Lord Krishna with the Goddess Radha, an explosion into spring through joy, dance, color and seductive passion! Prashant was a great friend of Vijay who recently transitioned at an all too early age and this work will forever mark an emotional milestone in collaborative creativity and true friendship.

After a short break the quartet inject their brilliance once again on one of Rudresh's compositions as he employs his staccato style articulations, Zakir with deep non stop rhythm on "Snap" and Vijay's tune "Abundance" all with timely natural improvisations by our singing, flying friends in the trees above. The low resonating melodies layered with tablas and topped with Aruna's mystical vocal magic is just the thing and with space for Rudresh embellishments makes for some Bad Ass music here in Ojai.

We end the festival with a group of cats that Vijay has played with for the last six years Graham Haynes, Steve Lehman, Mark Shim, Stephen Crump and the man who has made a significant mark of the people here in Ojai Tyshawn Sorey. They have a new album coming out in the fall called, "Far From Over" and you better believe that is guaranteed to be another incredible work of art. Tyshawn is a monster on drums; at times moving the entire drum kit with his exuding energy. Brilliant and hard core execution laying down a bed of sound together with Vijay in the trenches. Stephan Crumpt is amazing on bass as usual with his empirical bowing providing saturating texture and neutralizing all body and brain waves to match his frequency.

The most talented cats to have your back when it comes to sensational explorations and transcendent experiences! Super strong front line with Graham tearin' it up on coronet, Mark Shim throwin' down those sweet melodic lines on tenor, and new school alto mad science from Steve Lehman turning out the close of the festival with a heavy dose of J A double ZZ! Watch out, these cats dissect a groove like a one handed Rubix Cube wizard! One truly outstanding weekend of synapse firing beauty.

Forever Changed!

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

A blog about new classical music, art, and technology.

Emerging from Trouble at Ojai Music Festival

Aaron Wolff on June 22, 2017 at 6:00 am

The 71st Ojai Music Festival took place in Ojai, CA from June 8-11, 2017 with pianist and composer Vijay Iyer as music director. Since its beginnings in 1946, the festival has programmed music that mixes the new, the old, and the unusual. As such, it is a near-perfect home for a music director like Iyer, who views music not in the limited terms of genre or style but rather of community, people, history — a bustling convergence of the humanities and social sciences. For Iyer, a musical composition, however mechanic or digitized, does not exist in a vacuum, and cannot be extricated from communal social codes and norms giving rise to its conception and providing certain limitations in its reception.

In performance, too, Iyer thinks deeply about the exchange of energy and agency via power relations on stage, and in the American premiere of his work *Emergence* for trio and orchestra at Ojai on Thursday June 8, authority was in flux. One constantly asked if the conductor (Steve Schick) was leading, or the trio (Iyer, bassist Stephan Crump, and percussionist Tyshawn Sorey), or the orchestra (International Contemporary Ensemble with Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble). Or perhaps the composer was getting the better of them all. As a piece, it restlessly guides the listener through a series of brightening doorways, and on Thursday each arrival felt right and yet somehow unbelievable, like, “how did we get here?” The magic of *Emergence* lay in its balance of structural clarity and improvised pathways that allowed for a confluence of smoke, mirrors, and sheer satisfaction.

It began with an inquisitive chord, rolled casually by Iyer. As he continued, one imagined skipping stones and watching the ripples dissipate against a current of Crump’s persistent bass pedal. The string entrance was able to fly under the radar, and suddenly, Sorey’s grooves began to literally emerge, organically, but seemingly out of nowhere. When everyone onstage had joined in, *Emergence* continually re-revealed itself as a quotidian step, a caffeinated dance, a interruptive double bass cadenza, and a subtle drum and bass club beat. Eventually, the strings ditched their symphonic sheen for an addictive disco sound before the chrome ball abruptly shattered. Falling, or perhaps teleporting, through the dance floor, the listener found themselves in a dank basement, first stumbling in the dark and then examining cobwebs on the ceiling. One thing Iyer is remarkably good at is examining the other side of the coin of any well-constructed musical idea, taking the raw and the cooked as an inseparable unit. To bring *Emergence* to a close, the whole unit joined forces in mimicking electronic noises (think internet dial-up circa 2000), while all the double basses kept a stereo pulse, ICE and Oberlin on one side, Crump on the other. The chaos built towards a final arrival before dissipating into nothing.

Iyer’s new violin concerto, entitled *Trouble*, is one of a few new works of concert music that ruminates quite specifically on minority experience in the United States. Under Iyer’s leadership, the festival’s commitment to illuminating these works was clear and timely, and *Trouble* spoke to all minority experiences. Written by an Indian-American man and

performed by the Korean-American violinist Jennifer Koh, the work's second movement is dedicated to Chinese-American Vincent Chin, whose murder in 1982 "signaled an ongoing pattern of violent hate crimes against people of color" according to Iyer.

In this movement, the persistent seconds and sevenths coming from the solo violin signal the dissonance of forced assimilation, while the preceding "Normale" was a kind of nervous Moto perpetuo for the virtuoso, above the orchestra's Copland-esque chords on top of off-putting pedal-points. Other parts, like the scratchy violin drone against a lonely flute melody in "Prelude: Erasure" communicate a kind of baseline psychological harshness and uncertainty common to targets of discrimination. In the finale, "Assembly," Koh broke away in a scalar fit of desperation, signaling an unsupported dream, a faint glimmer of hope, or a glimpse at freedom—she seemed rise out of sea of orchestral cacophony. She thoroughly commanded the piece, fully pushing the possibilities of her instrument, and fully accepting the vulnerability that she had to communicate in the rare role of an antiheroic soloist.

To close out the evening, Iyer was joined by the 75-year old AACM legend Wadada Leo Smith to present their recent collaboration, *A Cosmic Rhythm With Each Stroke*, an odyssey through Martian sonic terrains. Iyer played the role of mad scientist, swiveling between a beat-machine, a synthesizer, a piano, and a Fender Rhodes keyboard, creating bass-heavy and spacious backdrops on top of which Smith's thick and yet piercing trumpet ruminations drew up deep and yet alien forms. One was alternately tugged in and projected out of their gravitational pull in seamless chapters that were not so much variations on a theme, but always logical steps forward. Of particular note was the pregnancy of all of Smith's pauses. Never before have I heard such engagement with the negative sonic space: an unpredictability with each stroke. And as for the cosmic rhythm? One could say it lay pulsing between the two of them. I found myself focusing not so much on the music as on the dynamic and energy flow between Iyer and Smith, the tenderness of each exchange or the matched intentionality of all of their statements.

After forty minutes, their journey came to a conclusion, and Smith walked slowly over to Iyer and let his forehead rest on his shoulder in what seemed to be a spiritual embrace. Seconds later, Smith nearly collapsed. The drama of physical reality crashed down on a profoundly metaphysical experience, while gasps ensued and doctors from the audience rushed the stage, guiding him out. Minutes later, Iyer came out for second bow and indicated that he was just dehydrated, shortly thereafter tweeting, "Mr. @WadadaLeoSmith is doing okay! Thank you, @Ojaifestivals." It was a visceral sign that musicians, however intangible and magical their creations, are bodies, vulnerable and imperfect. Thank you, Mr. Iyer, for the reminder.