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Four Days in Ojai, a Musical Utopia

The multitalented Barbara Hannigan organized this year's Ojai Music Festival, a well-balanced meal of programming that went down easily, without bloat.

By Joshua Barone June 11, 2019

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/arts/music/ojai-music-festival-review.html>



OJAI, Calif. — First there's Barbara Hannigan the singer, a fearless soprano who's more likely to give a world premiere than step into a repertory staple. Then there's Barbara Hannigan the conductor. She's even done the two jobs at once. So what's one more?

Meet Barbara Hannigan the curator. She programmed this year's Ojai Music Festival — a utopia where open-minded audiences welcome adventurous works presented against a backdrop of green hills, bird song and Pixie tangerines — with the help of Thomas W. Morris, the festival's outgoing artistic director. And she came up with a well-balanced meal: four days of concerts, talks and screenings that went down easily, without bloat or arduousness.

Among the regulars here — a few have been coming since the 1940s, and everyone seems to know everyone — some were quick to say Ms. Hannigan's festival is an improvement on last year's, organized by the violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja. Descriptions I heard of that event included "too dark," "a lot" and "not a good vibe." (Zachary Woolfe, who reviewed it for *The New York Times*, wrote, "While there's joy in the festival's too-muchness, the music would be better served by judicious pruning.")

I'm happy to report that this year's schedule, while still grueling for anyone who doesn't enjoy live music, consisted of a manageable three concerts a day — a short "dawn" program in the morning, and two more, around lunch and dinner, at the outdoor Libbey Bowl — and short early evening performances in a gazebo in Libbey Park. And even when the subject matter turned bleak, as it did in pieces by Mark-Anthony Turnage, Claude Vivier and Gérard Grisey, they were surrounded by leavening works that maintained, well, a good vibe.

This occasionally made for bipolar experiences; I'm still trying to make sense of the Saturday evening program, in which a world-music showcase worthy of a cruise ship was sandwiched between John Zorn's masterly "Jumalattaret" and Grisey's apocalyptic "Quatre Chants pour Franchir le Seuil" ("Four Songs for Crossing the Threshold"). But the misfires were few in Ms. Hannigan's festival, which began on Thursday with Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress" (sleepy but solid) and ended on Sunday evening with an exhilarating suite of Gershwin songs both conducted and sung by her.

Ms. Hannigan had a stacked roster of artists helping her bring the weekend to life — not least Mr. Morris, whose 16-year tenure at Ojai has been credited with broadening the festival's scope and ambition. Succeeding him is Chad Smith, who oversees the Los Angeles Philharmonic's bold programming. His first music director — under Mr. Morris, the position has gone to a different artist each year, ensuring ongoing freshness — will be the composer and conductor Matthias Pintscher, who so far has revealed plans for works by Pierre Boulez (a seven-time Ojai music director in the decades before Mr. Morris), Olga Neuwirth and Anna Thorvaldsdottir.

In addition to assisting Ms. Hannigan in planning, Mr. Morris appeared onstage twice: reciting poetry in "Façade" (William Walton's ridiculous "Pierrot Lunaire" sendup) and joyously jamming with the rest of the musicians in Terry Riley's "In C." After that piece, Ms. Hannigan surprised him with an affecting rendition of Kurt Weill's "Lost in the Stars."

Throughout the weekend, young singers from Equilibrium, Ms. Hannigan's artist development initiative — oh, yeah, she's a mentor, too — provided vocal muscle. Fleur

Barron, an earthy Baba the Turk in “The Rake’s Progress,” sounded like a Carmen in the making. The soprano Aphrodite Patoulidou was an entrancing soloist in Vivier’s “Lonely Child,” a head trip of a piece in a musical language both direct and mysterious. Doubled voices, like clarinets and violins playing in unison, made sounds thrillingly difficult to pinpoint, their ethereality matching lyrics like “The stars make prodigious leaps in space, / time, dimensions striped with colored zebra markings.”

With a natural command of the stage, James Way, a tenor with a delicate voice, was a consistent scene stealer. As the auctioneer Sellem in “The Rake’s Progress,” his mania was skillfully vaudevillian; similarly eccentric were his Noël Coward-esque segments of “Façade.” When he returned, in the final concert, in Stravinsky’s “Pulcinella,” his voice was lush and nimble, balancing the sound worlds of 18th-century Pergolesi and 20th-century neoclassicism.

Another group affiliated with Ms. Hannigan, Ludwig, a capable Dutch collective that backed her on her 2017 album “Crazy Girl Crazy,” provided as few as one instrumentalist — Ingrid Geerlings, fleet in Debussy’s flute solo “Syrinx” — and as many as a full orchestra. (Ms. Hannigan was a frequent conductor, among others including the percussionist Steven Schick.)

Ludwig’s shape-shifting adaptability kept the programming refreshing and free from reliance on large-scale works. Even Rachmaninoff, awkwardly inserted into an otherwise eye-opening tribute to the composer Oliver Knussen on Saturday, was reduced; Thomas Beijer’s chamber arrangement of “The Isle of the Dead” did the piece no favors by exposing its flimsy architecture.

But the most invigorating — and, thankfully, ever-present — guest artists were the players of the JACK Quartet, a perfect match for Ms. Hannigan’s voracious search for new music. They’re reliably surprising, and reliably impressive; their marathon performance of Elliott Carter’s string quartets earlier this spring remains one of the most gratifying concerts I’ve heard all season.

On Friday, JACK — the violinists Christopher Otto and Austin Wulliman; the violist John Pickford Richards; and Jay Campbell, a busy cellist who also appeared solo over the weekend — managed not to survive, but to triumph in three concerts, including one, of punishing John Zorn chamber works, that left me exhausted, as if I’d spent all day in a museum.

Mr. Smith, could you please give them their own festival as a reward?

Two American premieres at JACK’s 8 a.m. concerts, by Clara Iannotta and Catherine Lamb, experimented with perception in a way that prompted close listening — a mindful start to the day — and recalled the visual works of local Light and Space artists like Robert Irwin. Ms. Iannotta’s “dead wasps in the jam-jar (iii)” (2017-18) felt like a three-dimensional space that listeners were made to wander through, as if exploring their childhood homes underwater in a dream.

And Ms. Lamb's String Quartet (2009) explored tonal spectrums at a glacial pace. Attempting to track the changes, you risked slipping into a daze, only to be jolted awake by occasional pauses. Near the end, the JACK players arrived at perfect fifths — the interval used to tune string instruments — and the piece snapped into focus. But the transformations continued, microtonally, warping the harmony like melting wax.

The only conservative fare from the JACK men — conservative only by their standards — was Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2, whose final two movements feature a soprano. It was Friday night, 24 hours into the festival, and Ms. Hannigan was finally making her first appearance as a singer.

Her intensity completely changed the energy of the piece, and even of the concert itself. Her soprano was chillingly pure when unadorned, and heartwarming with vibrato. Her voice at one point leapt with us, rapturously, into the stratosphere, only to drag us to the depths of her range.

Ojai was at its best any time Ms. Hannigan sang — head-spinningly agile in "Jumalattaret," frightening in "Quatre Chants" and charming in "Façade," in which she, in Sprechstimme, recited unintelligible poetry at a sprint that would give Lin-Manuel Miranda a run for his money.

It was fitting that she closed her festival with "Girl Crazy Suite," a Gershwin medley arranged by her and Bill Elliott. Here was Ms. Hannigan in all her polymathic glory: the impresario who commissioned the piece; the conductor whose persuasive authority demonstrated that it was no vanity project; and the alluring singer, bright and magnetic, who wasn't above ending on a literal high note.

Who could ask for anything more?

Los Angeles Times

Review: Ojai Music Festival witnesses Barbara Hannigan, Wonder Woman in Wonderland

By MARK SWED

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<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ojai-music-festival-review-20190610-story.html>



Barbara Hannigan sings and conducts Gershwin at her closing concert Sunday as music director of the Ojai Music Festival at the Libbey Bowl. (Allison Zaucha / For The Times)

We aptly idealize Ojai as another word for another world, a spiritual escape from industry. In fact, the opposite is also true.

The famed pink moment that comes in the evening glorifies an industrious valley of marvelous mystics, artists, craftspeople, growers, vintners, brewers and olive oil makers.

And on the second weekend in June, Ojai is home to the most obsessively motivated musicians, and audiences, on the planet.

The Ojai Music Festival, four days of programming that can go from early morning to late night, has become a trial of endurance for its music director. This year that was the indefatigable Barbara Hannigan, for whom the festival became an iron woman musical triathlon of exacting singing, vital conducting and inspiring mentoring. No music director of the 72 earlier festivals has had quite that combination of skills.

But beyond the sheer quantity, even beyond the conventional quality, what makes the festival essentially Ojai is an obligatory questing spirit. Music experiments might bomb or performances disappoint, yet the festival can produce a transforming effect on musicians and listeners if the intention is profoundly searching. Disenchantment in an Ojai state of mind is the tried and true.

The unique challenge and greatness of this festival, then, is for music directors to be stimulated to push beyond what might seem possible and in so doing, deplete their defenses, allowing for an enlightened openness to new experiences. For that a guide is required.

Since 2004 Thomas Morris has been the Ojai festival's Obi-Wan Kenobi, seeking a music director each year rather like a Tibetan monk looking for a reincarnation of a spiritual leader and then guiding the development. This was his final year as artistic director, and his presence was more prominently displayed than it usually is. Morris will be particularly remembered for his surprising and unconventional choice of brilliant risk takers as game-changing music directors, especially opera director Peter Sellars, choreographer Mark Morris, percussionist Steven Schick and, last year, violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja.

Hannigan, on the other hand, was an inevitable appointment. She can do it all. If her festival had less vision or spiritual nourishment than some earlier ones, there wasn't a lack. She is a rigorous perfectionist who could reach her level of accomplishment only through intense devotion, which is, of course, its own kind of spiritual activity. Both Hannigan and Morris seemed intent on including a kind of Ojai Festival summing-up for this, its 73rd iteration. Looking back in festival history, Hannigan offered substantial works by Stravinsky and Schoenberg. In continuing Morris' own contributions, Schick was again on hand as percussionist and conductor; the JACK quartet returned; afternoons in Libbey park resonated once more with John Luther Adams' percussion music; filmed documentaries were screened of performers and composers. There was also a tribute to Morris' first choice for music director when he arrived, with a moving hour of the late Oliver Knussen's chamber music.

The schedule, though, was less punishing than in nonstop recent years, allowing for a fraction more free time in the afternoons and no 11 p.m. concerts, although the provocative 8 a.m. sunrise events continue (all of which I unfortunately had to miss). But I doubt it could have been any less punishing on Hannigan herself.

Having opened the festival Thursday night in Libbey Bowl conducting Stravinsky's opera "The Rake's Progress," the first full-length opera production ever attempted by the festival, Hannigan was the emotionally gripping soprano soloist in Schoenberg's trailblazing Friday night. She followed that by conducting the excellent Dutch chamber orchestra Ludwig in Schoenberg's "Transfigured Night" and Canadian composer Claude Vivier's "Lonely Child." Later in the night, Ludwig let down its hair with ballroom dancing, and Hannigan, who also has dance training, impressively cut the rug. The next night Hannigan was the incomparable vocal soloist in John Zorn's "Jumalattaret," which she proved not to be unsingable, and in French composer Gérard Grisey's ephemeral death meditation, "Quatre Chants pour Franchir le Seuil" (Four songs for Crossing the Threshold).

Sunday morning was all silliness with William Walton's "Façade — an Entertainment," which Hannigan conducted and acted as a reciter along with other singers, including Morris, each performer competing in outlandish dress. In the late afternoon finale, Hannigan conducted Stravinsky's complete "Pulcinella," Haydn's Symphony No. 49 ("La Passione") and the "Girl Crazy" Suite, an arrangement of hit tunes from the Gershwin musical by Bill Elliott.

On top of all this, Hannigan oversaw appearances by the seven singers from seven countries in her Equilibrium Young Artists initiative, or EQ, along with a feisty young conductor and keyboard player, Edo Frenkel, who works closely with EQ. Although the singers were not always shown to their best advantage in "The Rake," each shined in later appearances that included a set of folk songs from their native lands.

As a singer Hannigan is simply an astonishment. Zorn's "Jumalattaret," which used Finnish texts from "The Kalevala" and was accompanied by pianist Stephen Gosling, was a series of vocal dares for Hannigan, each of which she scaled spectacularly. She proved funnily deft in "Façade." She brought the house down with her Gershwin. But it was only in Grisey's "Quatre Chants," for orchestra and electronics and superbly conducted by Schick, that you got a sense of her depth in this mystical evocation of weary civilization.

As a conductor, Hannigan throws herself bodily into her interpretations. She was at her best in Haydn, where every phrase danced to life. But she also caught the perfect Ojai moment in exotic "Lonely Child," a gorgeous performance featuring the EQ soprano

Aphrodite Patoulidou. We were left with magical gong vibrations of struck Tibetan bowl that managed to hang in the air long after the piece ended.

It turned out that the bowl procured for the performance from an Ojai resident had previously belonged to famed Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh. "Only in Ojai" may now seem an expression so overused as to be a cliché. It's not, and Hannigan at her most substantial earned her a place in its pantheon. But no need to take my word for it. All of her performances can be watched on the festival website.

Los Angeles Times

Stravinsky's exceedingly slow 'Rake's Progress' from West Hollywood to Ojai

MARK SWED

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<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ojai-stravinsky-opera-review-20190608-story.html>

A dazzlingly daft Barbara Hannigan in the title role of Gerald Barry's madder-than-a-mad-hatter "Alice," given its premiere by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2016, left a listener wondering whether there was anything the Canadian soprano can't do. It was a rhetorical question.

She is a fearless femme fatale actress, dancer, athlete, sports psychologist, educator, cook and rising star conductor. And now she is music director of this year's Ojai Music Festival, which began Thursday night with a semi-staged performance of Stravinsky's opera "The Rake's Progress," in which she demonstrated yet another skill.

The performance began with Hannigan coming onstage at the Libbey Bowl in black tights and sleeveless top performing a stagehand's duty of spraying theatrical fog. She then ascended to the podium to conduct.

This was Hannigan's "The Rake Project," which she created for Equilibrium Young Artists, her mentoring initiative that facilitates young singers in their typically trying first professional years. With 20 singers from 11 countries in the program, she has trained three casts and made a touring production first given by the Gothenburg Opera in Sweden and then throughout Europe.

I don't know whether irony was meant with the fog, but for all the interest in hearing these sophisticated young singers, the main object of this "Rake" seemed to be to lift the fog — and pollution — from Stravinsky's only full-length opera.

The heaviest lifting was Hannigan's conducting. It has all her virtues as a singer, which she also plans to display over the weekend in works ranging from the avant-garde to Gershwin. Those virtues include precision, rhythmic alacrity, a high level of theatricality

and, of course, her remarkable versatility.

The “Rake” is not an opera easy to illuminate or propel. Written in the late 1940s by Stravinsky and his British librettist, W.H. Auden, it adds a Faustian framework to the 18th century William Hogarth lithographs about a naïf falling prey to the temptations of the big city.

A devil deceives Tom Rakewell, who exchanges his ever-true country fiancée, Anne Trulove, for London’s houses of pleasure; marries a famed bearded woman, Baba the Turk; and, returned too late to Anne to be saved, winds up in Bedlam. Auden’s lines are arch. Stravinsky houses 18th century Mozartian opera style in mid-20th century modernism.

Hannigan had many reasons for wanting to start her festival with this “Rake.” Anne was the first role she learned a quarter-century ago when she was 23. Ojai was Stravinsky’s playground for trying out both neoclassical and modernist scores in the 1950s. Plus, this now-standard repertory opera written in West Hollywood has had little success in Southern California. Los Angeles Opera has never staged it. The L.A. Phil has, but only in Paris.

With all that baggage, Hannigan necessarily as much propelled “The Rake” as conducted it. She has brought LUDWIG, the cheeky Dutch chamber orchestra named after Beethoven but more at home with Moondog and minimalists, as the ensemble for her festival. And she conveyed a springy instrumental transparency that had Stravinsky’s score seeming to leap off the page.

There was less leaping onstage, however. The stately production directed, designed and lit by Linus Fellbom makes its strongest impression with its look, and especially the strikingly fashionable costumes by Anna Ardelius. The billowy pants-skirts worn by the men and women were suitable for an Antwerp runway.

The main set is a large shipping crate. The sides fall down, and it serves as a kind of empty, and sometimes negative, space. The result is stately Stravinskian ritual, particularly in the formalized use of the Los Robles Master Chorale, creating an 18th century morality play for the 21st century.

The hipness, though, becomes hard to carry off. Anne here is a sophisticate. Tom’s a doofus. Nick Shadow, the devil, is chained to hell, to show his lack of free will. The hard-working, multicultural Equilibrium cast was most impressive as an ensemble. Elgan Llyr Thomas’ Tom never quite managed to figure anything out throughout his evening’s worth of abuse, although he died touchingly. Aphrodite Patoulidou’s elegance

as both singer and actress put her a class above Tom, who thus became less her love than a charity case.

Yannis Francois' heavily accented English and imposing stage presence made Nick truly seem a creature from elsewhere, even in a top hat. Fleur Barron's Baba was, maybe, the one revelation. Her meltingly rich mezzo-soprano and flair removed the ridiculousness. Likewise, there was a welcome reaction against silliness from James Way as Sellem, the auctioneer, and Antoin Herrera-Lopez Kessel in three small parts.

Still, this "Rake" belonged to Hannigan. Many singers have successfully turned to conductor. But none has done it quite like Hannigan.

Barbara Hannigan's Ojai Adventure

Richard S. Ginell June 10, 2019

https://www.musicalamerica.com/news/newsstory.cfm?storyid=42938&categoryid=4&archived=0&utm_source=Newsletter+6-14-2019&utm_campaign=Newsletter+6-14-19&utm_medium=email

OJAI, CA—Historically, the venerable, incorrigibly adventurous Ojai Festival has appointed a conductor to be its annual music director. There are a few exceptions, including the ensemble Eighth Blackbird and soprano Dawn Upshaw. But there has never been an individual who was both a conductor *and* a singer, at least until last weekend, when Barbara Hannigan took the reins. As to as which of her talents was better, I wouldn't want to say. She's really good at both.

Besides the remarkable debut of Hannigan, the other main topic running through the June 6-9 event and the always-copious printed program book was that this was Thomas W. Morris's last stand as artistic director after 16 seasons. Under him, the festival became more diverse in scope and more abundantly stocked, with something or other going on from sunrise to past midnight. Yet Morris's final festival, oddly enough, saw a relaxation of the frantic proliferation of events. There was room to breathe between concerts, room to revisit old haunts, and take in the relaxed ambience of this little town, pop. 7,582, located 75 miles northwest of Los Angeles in the verdant Ojai Valley.

Given free rein in programming, Hannigan chose a big project to launch things in Libbey Park: Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. About time, too. Though Stravinsky wrote *The Rake* when he was living in the Hollywood Hills about 70 miles southeast of Ojai, there have been scarcely any performances of the work in Southern California (outside of university or small-company projects). And how appropriate that it would take place at the Ojai Festival where Stravinsky actually conducted in 1955 and 1956.

While there have been semi-staged operas at Ojai—most memorably the hilarious Steven Stucky/Jeremy Denk confection *The Classical Style* in 2014—this *Rake* was

billed as the festival's first full staging of an opera. Call it what you will, but Linus Fellbom's bare-boned, portable production that he likened to a "ritual" sure didn't look fully staged.

The "set" was a black cubic box whose walls blew open and fell on the ground during the tiny Prelude to form a thrust stage, leaving a cube of black girders in its wake. Onstage behind the singers were Hannigan and LUDWIG, a Dutch collective of mostly young musicians who found themselves at loose ends after several Netherlands orchestras disbanded due to severe funding cuts. The choristers of the Los Robles Master Chorale mostly sat on either side of the stage, vocal scores in hand. The cast's movements were restrained—in the case of Nick Shadow, literally by a chain—and the lighting effects subdued. How was this a full staging?

Yet the perhaps-unintended effect of this economy of means was to let Stravinsky's brilliantly inventive neo-classical score, so unfairly disparaged when it was new in 1951, speak for itself. And in Hannigan's hands, it spoke well. She's only been conducting since 2011, yet her innate musicality comes through in her graceful motions, and she navigated the score's often tricky, yet wonderfully dislocated rhythms by keeping the pulse clear at all times.

The cast of fine young singers came from Hannigan's Equilibrium Young Artists (EQ) project, which appears to be doing great work in training aspiring vocalists to step up to the world's stages. Tenor Elgan Llyr Thomas was a forceful, impetuous, headstrong Tom Rakewell; soprano Aphrodite Patoulidou poured forth lovely, full-blooded sound in Anne Trulove's big number "No word from Tom"; and mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron's alternately petulant and wise Baba the Turk was an abundantly characterized show stealer. Alas, bass Yannis Francois's Nick Shadow sounded smooth but conveyed little of the sinister aspects of this Devil role, and having bass Antoin Herrera-Lopez Kessel sing the mezzo-soprano role of Mother Goose in falsetto made no sense to me except as a joke (he also tripled as Father Trulove and Keeper of Bedlam). Mostly, though, this was an invigorating, musically satisfying *Rake*.

The following evening (June 7), Hannigan switched her focus to Stravinsky's onetime L.A.-based rival for leadership in 20th-century music, Arnold Schoenberg. The JACK Quartet returned from the 2018 Ojai Festival to perform (with Hannigan) Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2—one of just a few times in Western music where you can hear

history turning a corner in mid-piece. Over its four movements, Schoenberg makes the transition from Wagnerian chromaticism into free-floating atonal space, with a soprano adding a text in the final two movements. Hannigan made it sound downright operatic, pushing her voice to expressionistic limits with a rapid flutter as the members of the JACK bore down.

Later in the evening, in a segue after flutist Ingrid Geerlings played Debussy's *Syrinx* off in the distance, Hannigan led LUDWIG in a stunning *molto appassionato* performance of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, conjuring tremendous climaxes and perfumed tenderness in lyrical stretches. The concert should have ended right there, but Hannigan followed up with a favorite of hers, fellow Canadian Claude Vivier's *Lonely Child*. Here, LUDWIG and singer Aphrodite Patoulidou assumed a blank, pallid, downcast timbre that was appropriate to the piece but sprayed harsh cold water upon Schoenberg's hothouse.

Earlier on Friday, the JACK participated in a late-morning program wholly devoted to recent chamber music by John Zorn, whose antennae have been compulsively reaching into all styles throughout his life. His chamber pieces are mostly atonal, notable for quick changes in mood, extreme aggression, and the quietest flutterings and rustlings. The large-scale Zorn quartets on the program (*The Alchemist*, the five-movement Bartók-influenced *Necronomicon*) were interesting journeys fun to follow, but the pieces for piano trio (played by JACK violinist Christopher Otto and cellist Jay Campbell with pianist Stephen Gosling) weren't as cogently organized.

Over the weekend, Hannigan led a number of her other favorites, like Walton's *Façade* with a cavalcade of guest speakers, Stravinsky's complete *Pulcinella* ballet, and Bill Elliott's Berg-tinged suite of songs from George Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* (as featured on Hannigan's 2017 album with LUDWIG, *Crazy Girl Crazy*).

Conductor/composer Matthias Pintscher will be the music director in 2020. Also next year, Chad Smith, COO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, succeeds Morris as Ojai's artistic director; if his track record at the Phil is any indication, adventure will continue to be a priority under Libbey Park's ancient sycamore tree.

Santa Barbara Independent

Walk on the Wild Side

Hannigan Explores Limits of Composition at Ojai

Music Charles Donelan & Josef Woodard June 11, 2019

<https://www.independent.com/2019/06/11/walk-on-the-wild-side/>

[Editor's Note — *For the first time since the Independent has been covering the Ojai Music Festival, we have the benefit of two sets of ears, as I am joined in filing this report by my worthy colleague Josef Woodard. Woodard is a dedicated Ojai regular with contents of 38 consecutive festivals stored in his copious biological hard drive. I'll be writing about the concerts I witnessed in person, and Woodard will be adding details for those and others from his perspective.*]



By Charles Donelan:

The festival began in earnest on Thursday evening with Igor Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*, which was retitled as *The Rake Project* according to the legend on the large square box in the middle of the stage that comprised the abstract set's chief element. Festival artistic director Barbara Hannigan emerged before the cast did to anoint the cube with stage fog from a spray can the size of a fire extinguisher. Then, the sides of the cube flapped down, revealing Welsh tenor Elgan llyr Thomas as Tom Rakewell, the protagonist of Stravinsky and W. H. Auden's looney Faustian riff on William Hogarth's series of narrative paintings. Soprano

Aphrodite Patoulidou gave a magnificent performance as Anne Truelove, a role that launched Hannigan's operatic career.

I was back at the Libbey Bowl on Saturday for an evening program that combined the sublime and the not-so-successful. Hannigan gave two of the most extraordinary vocal performances ever seen anywhere, and took a breather in between while her vocal proteges in the Equilibrium mentorship program tested the patience of not a few veteran attendees with a medley of folk songs that were judged by some in the audience to be "not very Ojai."

The first shattering Hannigan appearance of that night was in John Zorn's "Jumalattaret," a song cycle based on the Finnish epic *Kalevala*. From giant, breath-defying held notes to huffing, whooping, and whispering, Hannigan took this story of the creation of the world through praise of multiple goddesses to places only a musical goddess could go.

Later on, after the folk songs had done their presumably palate-cleansing work, she returned with the festival highlight, a wild piece by the spectralist composer Gérard Grisey called *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*. One of the great pleasures and values of the Ojai Festival is how it points the way toward a new canon of great musical works, and in recent years this implied map of the canonical future has been leading us in the direction of Grisey and his fellow spectralists. Using a remarkable array of unusual techniques including a "false interlude" of brushed percussion at the opening of the fourth chant, the piece was a dynamic sonic exploration of the threshold between life and death, and possibly also the end of the world. Drawing on texts that included the epic *Gilgamesh* and an inventory of the contents of an Egyptian tomb, these songs provided a new way of imagining what music can be.

By Josef Woodard:

For her fascinating if uneven turn as music director of Ojai's 73rd annual fest, brilliant soprano-conductor Barbara Hannigan opened and closed the program with Stravinsky's more accessible side. Her brave new semi-staged *Rake's Progress* shook the stage on Thursday's opener, and the ever-comfy neoclassical Pulcinella shared a Sunday finale program with the friendly stuff of Haydn's "La Passione" symphony, and Gershwin, à la the "Girl Crazy" suite (from Hannigan's Grammy-nabbing 2017 CD). Hannigan, making complexity look easy, handily juggled her roles as maestra and chanteuse.

Between the Stravinsky bookends came highs and, if not lows, uncomfortable middling moments. Some music felt plainly out of place in this, one of America's most daring and contemporary-oriented festivals, well-known around internationally. Ill-fitting mainstream items included Rachmaninoff, a bland "world music sampler plate" of songs, and Schoenberg's mealy mouthed Mahler facsimile "Verklärte Nacht" (sounding meek compared to the program's spikier, more "Schoenberg-ian" *String Quartet No. 2*).

On the other hand, and from the "other" end of the spectrum, the festival highlight was the late Saturday night performance of Gérard Grisey's *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*. Grisey's "Spectralist" ideas filtered through some of this festival's finest, and yes, most esoteric moments, as heard in "Lonely Child" by Claude Vivier (whose ritualistic opera *Kopernikus* was a memorable pinnacle of 2016's fest), with Hannigan conducting the resident LUDWIG orchestra,

and stellar soprano Aphrodite Patoulidou embodying the mystical texts. Early bird 8 a.m. concerts continued this post-spectral thread, with JACK taking on the hypnotic microtonal, textural and time-warping scores of Clara Iannotta, Tyshawn Sorey and Catherine Lamb.

What made the album *Crazy Girl Crazy* fascinating was Hannigan's provocative, effective blend of Gershwin, Berg and Berio. But on Sunday evening, arranger Bill Elliott's "Girl Crazy Suite" capped the fest with just the right American Songbook show biz buzz. Hannigan's got rhythm, virtuosity, fierce intelligence, a will to entertain, and other bracing virtues. She also has Grisey down.

A Day at the Ojai Music Festival

Posted by **Paul Muller** June 14, 2019

<http://www.sequenza21.com/2019/06/a-day-at-the-ojai-music-festival/>

The 2019 **Ojai Music Festival** began on June 6 and packed in a wide variety of styles and vintages of new music over four days and three nights. Everything from Haydn and Stravinsky to Catherine Lamb was on the program, along with films, pre-concert talks, picnics and special events that filled up every day from dawn to midnight. Barbara Hannigan served as the 2019 Music Director and this festival marked the final year for long-time Artistic Director Thomas W. Morris.

On Friday, June 7, the early morning concert featured the JACK Quartet performing pieces by Clara Iannotta and Tyshawn Sorey. The SANE Center was the venue, located just across the street from Libbey Park, and while cozy it was agreeably indoors and out of the cool morning mist. The first piece was the US premiere of *dead wasps in the jam-jar (iii)*, by Clara Iannotta, inspired by imagery from a poem by Dorothy Molloy. For this piece the JACK Quartet was augmented by an electronic sound track that played through speakers placed on both sides of the small stage. The composer writes: "While working, I pictured a kind of deep-sea environment, the lowest layer in the ocean, where constant pressure and perpetual movement seem to shape the stillness of time."

This piece opened with slow, whisper-like scuffing sounds from lightly bowed strings. There was a quiet, almost pastoral feeling to this, and the instruments were heavily subdued with a variety of mutes. This restful atmosphere was broken by louder sounds from the electronics that carried a sense of distant menace. The soft string sounds soon returned, but were again interrupted by a low roaring from the speakers, as if some beast was at large nearby. The roaring had an exotic but primeval sensibility about it, complimenting the calm environment established by the strings. *dead wasps in the jam-jar (iii)* is hushed and nuanced music, carefully played in this performance by the JACK Quartet to create a unique sound world where the natural environment and its organic processes are thoughtfully realized.

The West Coast premiere of *Everything Changes, Nothing Changes*, by Tyshawn Sorey followed, a piece commissioned by the JACK Quartet. Christopher Hailey writes in the program notes that "The piece is slow-moving and delicate, never rising above piano. The quartet plays sustained sonorities as a unit, individual voices perceived not as solo lines but as components of gently shifting harmonic textures." Accordingly, the piece starts out with quietly sustained tones that sound both mysterious and slightly dangerous. *Everything Changes, Nothing Changes* carries in it a more urban sensibility, as distinct from the open, feral feel of the previous Iannotta piece. The playing here was sensitive and nuanced, with just the right dynamic range

within muted boundaries. There was never anything flashy or fast, and the settled consistency throughout was impressive. In *Everything Changes, Nothing Changes* the exquisite playing of the JACK Quartet and Sorey's smoothly crafted harmonic textures combined perfectly to keep the audience fully engaged.

The mid-day concert in the Libbey Bowl was divided into two sessions and featured several works by John Zorn. The first session started with *The Alchemist*, performed by the JACK Quartet. This piece began with a sharp opening of rapid phrases, generous pizzicato and a rattling dissonance that filled the air with a frenzy of unexpected and constantly changing gestures. This is a complex piece that turns on a dime – at times warm and sustaining and then suddenly strident and dense. The playing by the JACK Quartet was superbly precise, fully meeting the challenge of this seriously difficult music. The Libbey Bowl sound system came through brilliantly, as usual, making every subtle detail clearly audible in the open spaces. As the piece proceeded the energy only seemed to increase, with bursts of pizzicato exploding like popcorn among the roiling waves of sound. A high, thin violin tone, sustained above the slower passages in the lower strings became a kind of signature moment, building tension. *The Alchemist* is an impressive and complex brew marked by continuous textural variations, rapid rhythms and strong dynamics.

A series of Zorn piano trios followed: *Hexentarot*, *Ghosts* and *The Aristos*. Pianist Stephen Gosling joined violinist Christopher Otto and cellist Jay Campbell of the JACK Quartet on the Libbey Bowl stage. The three piano trios were played through continuously and featured the same quick phrasing, rapid changes and showers of pizzicato passages heard in *The Alchemist*. With the presence of the piano and just two other strings, the texture was thinner and acquired a bit more clarity, especially in the slower sections. The piano was effective in adding a bit of tension, and it was at just such a point in the performance that a number of crows could be heard calling from the tree tops, contributing their own sense of menace to the music. Towards the end of the last trio, the piano became quietly introspective before turning active again, and then finally mystical. An expressive violin solo and some gentle strumming of the piano strings completed this part of the concert. Zorn piano trios can be explosively volcanic or as quiet as a cat – but always challenging to the listener as well as the performers.

After a 30-minute intermission, the second session of the concert began with cellists Jay Campbell and Alexa Ciciretti performing Zorn's *Ouroboros*. This opened with a frenzy of rapid phrases that bordered on panic, but the amazing skill of the two performers kept the piece firmly on the rails and moving forward, often at breakneck speed. All of the familiar gestures of Zorn were present, now shared between two players. There were fast passages in unison, haunting melodies in one cello with active and disjointed playing in the other, blizzards of pizzicato phrases and, rarely, sustained harmony. The coordination between the cellists attained an almost psychic completeness as they blazed fearlessly through this intricate piece. *Ouroboros* is surely one of the most technically difficult cello duos in contemporary music and the masterful effort by Campbell and Ciciretti was an impressive tour de force, rewarded by sustained and enthusiastic applause.

Two more Zorn string quartets followed, beginning with *The Unseen*. The JACK Quartet returned to the stage and the piece began with soft buzzing and trills, a high, sustained tone in the violin and a series of slow moving phrases. All of this had a questioning and tentative feel as furtive phrases emerged in the lower strings. High, quiet trills in the violins added a sense of

anxiety, as if some lurking menace was hidden nearby. The music became more characteristically active with a series of fast scales in unison, but overall this piece was unusually subdued compared to the previous Zorn pieces. A high, thin violin tone floating over tremolos in the lower strings punctuated the finish.

Necronomicon was the final piece in the concert program and this consisted of some five movements played continuously. This had more of the Zorn intensity and swiftly hopped between rapid and complex phrasing, independent and interweaving lines, copious amounts of pizzicato and waves of frenetic passages. There were stretches of strong unison notes that added some drama and a sense of danger. Sustained tones in lush harmony were occasionally heard – but not for long! *Necronomicon* continued to cycle through the Zorn vocabulary with different variations and densities, creating a kaleidoscopic tour of his remarkable artistic vision. Given the level of complexity and the technical demands of his music, John Zorn and the JACK Quartet are surely made for each other.

The late afternoon concert was Part II of *The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies*, by John Luther Adams. This percussion piece was performed in the Libbey Park gazebo by long-time Adams collaborator Steven Schick. The complete work was broken into three parts, and stretched over three days of the festival. Three of the inner movements of the piece were heard on this day: “Shimmer”, “Rumble” and “Burst.”

The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies is an exploration of the inner nature of percussion sounds as disclosed by combining live performance with processed electronic recordings. The composer writes “I began this work by composing a new cycle of quartets. Steve Schick came to Alaska and recorded these pieces one part at a time. I assembled the recordings and then began filtering them... The result was a series of ‘auras’ derived from the inner resonance of the instruments themselves. As the final step, I composed a series of solo parts to be performed within these sonic fields.”

Three percussion stations were assembled in the gazebo: a rack of triangles, a large bass drum and a number of different snare drums. “Shimmer”, the first section, not surprisingly, was performed on the triangles. Three different sets were played rapidly in pairs and the sounds mixed with the prerecorded ‘aura’ track in the speakers to produce in a brightly ringing shimmer. The brilliance of the combined sounds was stunning, and far beyond what the triangles alone could produce. The timbral character changed according to the speed of the playing – faster playing generally produced more pronounced interactions with the electronic track. When different pairs of triangles were rung, the new pitches and their subsequent interactions created new and scintillating shimmers of sound. The playing by Mr. Schick was animated, yet precisely controlled, as might be expected from a performer with such a long association with this piece.

“Rumble” followed and this was performed on the large bass drum. Great rolls of thunder swept outward from the gazebo as Schick powerfully pounded the drum head with large mallets. The sound was as much felt as heard, and engulfed the audience. The interactions with the recorded track were somewhat subdued, taking the form of a relatively soft washes at a very low frequency. This varied somewhat in character depending on the rate of the drumming and the force applied with the mallets. That a warm mix of sounds could result from such powerful percussion was an unexpected revelation.

The final section heard was “Burst”, performed on the snare drums. Schick was kept busy,

moving among the drums generating various rolls and patterns. The contrast and rhythms of the drumming was impressive, but the interactions with the recorded track were more hit and miss, perhaps owing to the open air acoustics. The best results seemed to occur when several different drums were struck loudly and quickly. *The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies* is a revealing study of the inner voices hidden in ordinary percussion instruments, ably performed on this occasion by Steven Schick, an acknowledged master of the art.

The 2019 Ojai Festival under Music Director Barbara Hannigan was, by all accounts, a great success. The variety and high artistic level of the music presented, combined with the masterful skill of the performers, extended the legacy of the Ojai Festival as an indispensable Southern California cultural event.

BLOG // LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Look at the 2019 Ojai Music Festival

By Scott Timberg June 17, 2019

<http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/current-events/look-2019-ojai-music-festival/>

If music is a journey, then the Ojai Music Festival is a serendipitous and often indirect one. The festival is one of the world's leading festivals devoted to contemporary art music: four days and three nights, a dozen-plus concerts, free "community" events that can take place in a park gazebo or amid children's play equipment, a new music director every year, and a focus on pieces as old as a century and as new as tomorrow. The surprises are sometimes pleasant, sometimes abrupt. Experimental music, like scientific inquiry in a lab, is not always successful. At Ojai, that's kind of the point. The festival is not quite a classical Coachella, but there is always a lot going on — sometimes too much.

This year's installment, which ran from June 6 to 9, was perhaps the most satisfying this listener can recall. (Point of order: I am a longtime music and arts journalist and serial Ojai attendee, but not a credentialed classical music critic. If you want one of those, I recommend the work of Alex Ross, Anne Midgette, or Mark Swed.)

The point of Ojai is, most obviously, to keep a few thousand people — some visiting from overseas or the East Coast, but most from greater Los Angeles and the verdant Ojai Valley — engaged in a program of more-or-less new music inspired by both Bach and John Cage.

The first and boldest surprise was the festival's general orientation. This year's music director — the curator, in effect — was Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan. There were a decent number of vocal pieces. (This may be the first festival yet that has inspired me to make a list of poetry volumes to grab.) But the musical geography was less Great White North than early 20th-century Paris and Lower Manhattan in the 1970s.

Much of this surely comes from Hannigan's taste — she does indeed live in France's capital — but derives in part from a hidden persuader: the soprano's significant other, Mathieu Amalric, is a recognizable French actor (having appeared in *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Munich*, *Venus in Fur*) who looks like he was born to appear in Godard's films. He is also, apparently, a major John Zorn zealot, as he made clear in the introduction to his unstructured but often fascinating Zorn documentary — with appearances by guitarists Marc Ribot and Julian Lage — screened in a Presbyterian church.

The festival has been moving closer to jazz in recent years: Pianist Vijay Iyer served as music director in 2017, and this year included a string quartet by rising-star percussionist Tyshawn Sorey. In any case, 2019 was heavy on Zorn's work without becoming in any way monochromatic: the program included the Zorn film (focusing on Zorn's Free Jazz groups), his chamber music, and his adaptation of the Finnish national epic *Jumalattaret* (okay, who saw that coming?) for piano and voice.

This year also saw a reasonably rare example of what we still call World Music, with a program of folk songs about love and loss that traveled from Morocco to Wales to Cuba. (This worked for

me, though some found it out of place.)

The festival's personality this year also came from the groups that did most of the playing: percussionist Steven Schick, who performed odd, sometimes fascinating fragments by Pulitzer-winning, Alaskan-inspired John Luther Adams; the ever-changing LUDWIG Ensemble, a Dutch group with which Hannigan has collaborated; the eclectic international Ensemble Young Artists; and the JACK Quartet. (What's with all the capital letters?) The New York-based lads of JACK made perhaps the strongest impression, performing several extremely difficult pieces, including the US premiere of Catherine Lamb's String Quartet. The piece is both austere and quietly rapturous, a very slow composition — performed here as a post-dawn concert — that relies on microtonal shadings and on violins, viola, and cello gradually falling in and out of consonance with each other. Lamb, an Olympia-born, Berlin-residing composer in her 30s, was new to me. This piece needs to be performed more often, and recorded.

✕

Ojai often reminds me that Southern California can take the angst out of nearly any experience. As grim, intense bebop turned easy-going with the cool jazz of the 1950s, as gritted-teeth Minimalism eased up with the arrival of John Adams, so the sunlight and cool breezes of Ojai can sometimes relax a piece of heavy European Modernism. This year, that meant two pieces of Arnold Schoenberg's — his second string quartet and the goodbye-to-the-19th-century *Verklarte Nacht* — and Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead* were less anguished than usual, the last two acquiring an almost French lightness. Even the setting (most of the concerts take place outdoors in a grassy, nicely mulched park) could not quite take the edge off Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Twice Through the Heart*, a vocal piece inspired by a woman who killed her abusive husband. This had a beautifully distilled libretto and the most utterly nuts backstory I've encountered in a classical piece.

Sunday morning got at the complexity of the Ojai Music Festival's mission. The first half of the program was a William Walton composition called *Façade — An Entertainment*, conducted by Hannigan, with numerous players and voices in a satiric piece originally performed in 1922 at the Chelsea home of Edith Sitwell. (The young poet recited the lines through a megaphone, concealed behind a screen. Waugh and Virginia Woolf were in attendance. Noel Coward was, I think, right to walk out.)

The very last piece I saw was Terry Riley's *In C*, written and first performed in the Bay Area in the early 1960s, inspired by both Asian music and jazz improvisation. It is widely considered the first Minimalist composition, and in some ways prefigures Psychedelia. It seemed like everyone who performed over the weekend was onstage banging or sawing on something here. This was hardly the most joyous I've ever heard it — maybe too many players? — but it's become something of an Ojai mainstay, a crowd-pleasing contemporary-music "classic," penned the same year as *A Hard Day's Night* and in its way as enduring.

The piece I was the saddest to miss was the Stravinsky opera, *The Rake's Progress* (with a libretto by Auden), which went up Thursday. Sunday evening included another Stravinsky work (*Pulcinella*), a Haydn symphony, and Gershwin's suite from *Girl Crazy*.

Hannigan herself not only booked the shows but sang, conducted, and hung out with audience

and press between sets: she came across as winning, accessible and comfortable in her skin. And what a voice.

So for those of us who enjoyed the 2019 festival, it's a touch bittersweet to know that artistic director Thomas Morris, who arrived in 2004 and has been choosing the annual music directors since, retires this year. "Ojai was considered a little insular and Eurocentric," Zachary Woolf wrote recently in a *New York Times* article on Morris's legacy. "Its music directors were frequently conductors, and they'd come back for return stints, again and again. (Boulez served seven times.)"

Well, Tom had quite a run. The good news is that the next artistic director — the person whose team makes up the festival "deep state" that stays in place as star music directors come and go — will be Chad Smith, a youngish and well-liked *macher* at the LA Philharmonic. Smith has both wide-ranging tastes and a gift for diplomacy; he's been responsible for some of the Phil's strength in the Dudamel years, and observers expect good things from his role in Ojai.

Contemporary music can be a lot of things, but it should not be complacent and it should never be predictable. I'd like to see more music programmed for the lawn (what John Lennon would call the cheap seats, where it is impossible to see) and more young folks in the audience (at 50, I'm still far on the youthful side there.) But Ojai is changing its guard at a particularly fruitful time. For now, it's one of the best things about living in Southern California.

all about jazz

Ojai Music Festival 2019

By [JOSEF WOODARD](#)

June 19, 2019

In the storied and still-evolving story of the Ojai Music Festival, one of America's most important contemporary music-minded festivals, the roots system run deep into mid-century Modernism and late 20th century post-Modernist impulses and up to the current, pluralistic musical minute. The idyllic hideaway town of Ojai—an hour and a world away from Los Angeles—drew Krishnamurti here as a pilgrimage site-maker and lured subsequent waves of mystics, artists, urban escapees, bohemians, and, thanks to the now 73-year-old festival, a hallowed legacy of living classical musical giants for one week a year.

Stravinsky was here twice as musical director in the '60s, and his music continues to be a signature, as it was in June, when this year's inspired music director, conductor-soprano Barbara Hannigan opened the 2019 festival with her new take on Stravinsky's opera *Rake's Progress* and had his neo-classical charmer, *Pulcinella Suite*, on the closing night program. The list of composers who have directed and or been featured in Ojai includes Aaron Copland, John Adams, Lukas Foss, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Gyorgy Kurtag, Olivier Messiaen and several visits by the late, great Pierre Boulez.

Quite naturally, jazz—along with serialism, the most important musical invention of the 20th century—has a place in the larger matrix of the musical program here but has had a checkered history of finding its way into the festival's conversation. The festival has experimented with token jazz sets by Los Angeles players, with strange results. Perhaps the most successful jazz-rooted occasion at least in this Millennium came in 2001, when British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage's powerful jazz-classical piece *Blood on the Floor* was a featured work: originally done with John Scofield as soloist, the Ojai performance put guitarist Mike Miller in the spotlight, and he rose to the challenge beautifully. Suddenly, in the past few years, the jazz portion of the story has been shifting and expanding in relevant ways. The process has been twofold, in terms of ushering into the festival musicians primarily associated with jazz and reflecting the recent phenomenon of jazz artists who refuse to be pigeonholed strictly as jazz artists, and who are skillfully venturing into "chamber" variations on the j-word, through-composed commissions and other classical music manners. This new trend hit a high mark in 2017, when Vijay Iyer was brought on as music director by long-standing artistic director Tomeka Reid, Kyoko Kitamura, Taylor Ho Bynum, Joe Morris (who retired this year), and whose musical plan included an Indo-Jazz concert, Iyer's own "serious" music (including a new Violin Concerto featuring Jennifer Koh), George Lewis' AACM-geared opera, the Iyer sextet, and the reckoning force that is Tyshawn Sorey—as drummer in his band, leader of a "conduction" performance and as composer. Significantly, the 2017 "jazz year" also gave a high-profile venue to one of the last

performances by The Trio—the super-trio with Roscoe Mitchell, Lewis and Muhal Richard Abrams, who died not long after that great Sunday morning encounter in Ojai's Libbey Bowl.

In the 2019 program, Sorey—who had also appeared in the 2016 Ojai festival, premiering a workshop version of his Josephine Baker meditation for the sensational soprano Julia Bullock—again showed up, only as composer in absentia. Sorey's piece *Everything Changes, Nothing Changes* was performed by the ever-on-it JACK Quartet on the first of three "sunrise" concerts at 8 a.m.—among the more provocative events of the long weekend. This concert took place at the meditation outpost called "SANE Living Center" (a very Ojai moniker, that), and opened with Clara Iannotta's atomically atmospheric *dead wasps in the jam-jar*, an ideal concert-mate for Sorey's dogmatically soft, breathing, microtonally-inflected and dissonant chords laid out by the string players with a calm reminiscent of Morton Feldman's music.

Also on Hannigan's 2019 roster, for that matter, was another figure the jazz world likes to claim as one of their own, against his will— John Zorn in composer mode (and not physically present), offering scores by the bushel (mostly in his knotty and naughty "classical" mode, nailed by the JACK Quartet, though with gleaming bits of his natural jazz language sneaking in). Zorn's classical work can be both exciting and taxing, with a complexity fixation that can seem overwrought, as if he's trying too hard to be accepted in the "serious music" orbit and hasn't learned yet to relax in that mode. That said, the high point was Zorn's five-movement *Necronomicon*, with its mix of in-your-face atonal gymnastics and moments of subdued, enigmatic beauty, even with moments suggesting jazz balladry and harmony.

We also savored another jazz-infused—and tragic themed—work by Turnage. His works have often been infused with sad circumstances, from the drug overdose death of his brother in *Blood on the Floor* to the melancholic twist on Ralph Vaughan Williams, ala jazz, *A Man Descending* (featuring Joe Lovano as soloist). This year in Ojai, we got his spin on the true story of an abused woman sent to prison (now released) after defending herself against her raging husband in his 1997 piece *Twice Through the Heart*. Turnage is unique in his ability to weave together a post-serial language evoking Anton VonWebern with viable jazz fluent lines, revealing his deep love of Miles Davis and other jazz influences, without that idiom-clashing "Third Stream" aftertaste.

Sunday night's finale went to another jazz-connected icon, George Gershwin: Berklee-based Bill Elliott's arrangement of tunes from "Girl Crazy," from Hannigan's Grammy-winning album *Crazy Girl Crazy*, which found Hannigan handily juggling both conducting the resident Dutch ensemble LUDWIG and singing with gusto (from an operatic soprano angle on show tunes, versus anything resembling a jazz approach).

One takeaway verdict from this year's festival was a sense of awe over its music director. Hannigan, who began as a soprano to the stars of contemporary music twenty-plus years ago and has shown herself to be an important conductor in recent years, is staggeringly and organically gifted. All weekend, she dazzled, as a soprano who navigated "Embraceable You," the thorny twists of Zorn's alternately lyrical and spidery *Jumalattaret*—based on the Finnish epic Kalevala and premiered at last year's Jazz em Agosto fest in Libson—as well as the haunting incantations of the late "Spectralist" master Gerard Grisey's *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*, quite possibly the pinnacle of the entire festival.

Grisey might not immediately spring to mind on lists of classical composers most likely to have an impact on—or be considered a parallel language to—the jazz canon by any traditional definition. Even so, the world-renowned Ojai Festival's style scope is presently in a fascinating widening phase, taking into account six degrees of jazz and the shifting creative strategies of many emerging and presumable "jazz" artists. It's a trend worth keeping tabs on.



Hannigan Takes A Turn Steering Adventurous Ojai

By Rick Schultz

<https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2019/06/13/hannigan-takes-a-turn-steering-adventurous-ojai/>

OJAI, Calif. – Canadian soprano and conductor [Barbara Hannigan](#), music director of the 2019 [Ojai Music Festival](#), isn't interested in exclusively contemporary programs. From audience-pleasing silly fun to more challenging somber and cutting edge music, she likes to mix it up.

Ever since Thomas Morris became Ojai's artistic director in 2004, a new music director has been chosen each year for the intensive four-day festival, which offers concerts, talks, and screenings the second weekend of every June (this year June 6-9).

Hannigan, who has given more than 85 premieres and originated such roles as Agnès in George Benjamin's extraordinary *Written on Skin*, opened the festival at Libbey Bowl on June 6 with a semi-staged performance of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. Only this time, Hannigan didn't sing the role of Anne Trulove, which was among her early parts as a budding coloratura.

Instead, Hannigan conducted the versatile Dutch chamber orchestra Ludwig. The Ojai performance represented the first full-length opera ever done at the festival, which was founded in 1947. The composer didn't care much for opera, and it shows in how his rhythmically off-kilter and still-piquant dissonance almost totally dominates W. H. Auden's and Chester Kallman's floridly poetic and stodgily British libretto about a guy who sells his soul to the devil. It's *Damn Yankees* for the cerebral crowd.

That said, the opera does offer compensations, including the central role of Anne, here taken by the stunning soprano Aphrodite Patoulidou, one of seven superb singers at the festival who are part of Hannigan's international mentoring initiative, Equilibrium Young Artists (EQ).

Patoulidou became the heart of this tart, over-long confection, with mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron and tenor James Way earning some laughs as the bearded Baba the Turk and Sellem the auctioneer, respectively. Tenor Elgan Llyr Thomas made a charmingly open Tom Rakewell, bringing a Peter Pears-like English quality to his voice. Yannis François turned his lighter-sounding bass into a strength by giving an insinuatingly devilish performance as Nick Shadow.

Like Hannigan herself, her cast of attractive young singers moved with grace and character. These were singing actors, displaying Hannigan's riveting holistic approach to opera performance.

Hannigan, who has been conducting for around eight years, shows great promise. Everything she did, notwithstanding an overly careful opening Adagio in her account of Haydn's Symphony No. 49 "La Passione" on Sunday afternoon, was never less than musical. Acting with her body while she conducted, Hannigan was also fun to watch. Her entire being seemed immersed in the music-making. Bare-armed, she often, but not always, used her hands in the manner of choral conductors, and like last year's music director, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, she prefers bare feet.

As a singer, Hannigan made her first appearance on June 7 in a terrific reading of Schoenberg's 1908 String Quartet No. 2 with the dazzling JACK Quartet (Christopher Otto, Austin Wulliman, violins; John Pickford Richards, viola; Jay Campbell, cello). Her hypnotic rendering of Schoenberg's setting of poetry by Stefan George in the third and fourth movements made one wonder why introducing a soprano into a string quartet seemed so shocking to audiences at the time.

The Schoenberg quartet was just one work that underlined the Ojai festival's value as an outdoor laboratory for reevaluating 20th-century and contemporary works. Indeed, Hannigan's exquisite rendition as conductor on June 7, leading the Ludwig ensemble and soprano Patoulidou, of Canadian spectral composer Claude Vivier's ritualistic *Lonely Child* (1980) probably convinced a lot of holdouts about the power of timbre-directed compositions.

In Hannigan's sensitive hands, Vivier's incantatory 22-minute score, which he called "a long song of solitude," made touching emotional and narrative sense and conjured arresting timbres from the percussion instruments, including chimes and bass drum.

Percussionist and conductor Steven Schick (Ojai music director in 2015) led Ludwig and a radiant Hannigan in Gérard Grisey's 1998 *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* (Four songs for crossing the threshold) on June 8. Not as strictly spectral as Vivier's score, Grisey's other-worldly sounds can be dirge-like or like a weird jazz riff slowed way down – music for purgatory.



Steven Schick led Hannigan and players in Gérard Grisey's 1998 other-worldly 'Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil.'

Both conductor and singer were alive to every one of the composer's sounds, and a horn player's dropped mute, accidental or not, added the right touch to Grisey's theatrical-visual concept. He was a composer who invited ambient sounds, saying that perfect silence doesn't exist.

One caveat: Schick and Hannigan's account of *Quatre chants* is available on YouTube, but loses more than half its concentrated force there. The piece demands to be seen and heard live.

Two concerts featured music by John Zorn. Curiously, few people at the festival seemed to know who he is. On a June 7 morning program, the JACK Quartet gave gripping accounts of several moody, mostly atonal, Zorn quartets, as well as a richly textured account of his accessible piano trio, *The Aristos*, with violinist Otto, cellist Campbell, and the remarkable pianist Stephen Gosling. On June 8, Gosling accompanied Hannigan in Zorn's *Jumalattaret*, a song cycle based on the epic Finnish Kalevala, in which Hannigan's extended vocal techniques astonished.

Members of Ludwig and the JACK Quartet gave a fine tribute on June 8 to British composer Oliver Knussen, who died last year. Knussen was Morris' music director at Ojai in 2005. I asked Morris what he missed most about "Ollie," as he was called. "His laughter," Morris said. "He was a man full of joy."

On June 9, Hannigan used a baton to conduct Ludwig in Stravinsky's complete *Pulcinella*. It was an idiomatically punchy rendition (some might say punch-drunk), with impressive turns by Kate Howden, mezzo-soprano; James Way, tenor; and Antoin Herrera-Lopez Kessel, bass.

Morris, a trained percussionist, made two farewell appearances on stage on June 9. He recited poetry by Edith Sitwell from William Walton's silly-fun *Façade* while wearing a ridiculous costume. Hannigan, who conducted members of Ludwig, in addition to performing as one of the speakers, warned that some of the poems might be offensive. In the concert's second part, Morris jammed with festival musicians in what is widely regarded as the first minimalist piece, Terry Riley's *In C*.

At the June 9 finale, after Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* and Haydn's "La Passione," Hannigan conducted Ludwig and sang Bill Elliott's arrangement of Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* Suite, which includes such greats as "Embraceable You" (with alternating choruses from the men and women of Ludwig) and "I Got Rhythm." Hannigan once again showed herself an all-around musician who disappeared in the trenches with her players, all smiling. With every phrase and gesture directed towards the music-making, the thrilling effect on the audience was also palpable.

Next season, Chad Smith, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's chief operating officer, succeeds Morris as artistic director of the Ojai Festival. His first music director will be German composer and conductor Matthias Pintscher.

"It feels right," Smith said during a break at the festival. "As music director of the Ensemble Intercontemporain, which was founded by Pierre Boulez [a seven-time artistic director of the Ojai Festival], Matthias already has some roots here."