

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

At 75, the Ojai Music Festival Stays Focused on the Future

This storied California haven of contemporary classical music returned, organized by the composer John Adams.



By Joshua Barone

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OJAI, Calif. — Returning is a process. Rarely is it linear.

The Ojai Music Festival, for instance, returned, Sept. 16-19, to celebrate its 75th year after a long pandemic absence. But there were setbacks among the comebacks. Compromises were made to accommodate its move from spring to the final days of summer. An artist was held up in Spain by travel restrictions. Diligently enforced safety measures slightly harshed the vibe of this storied event, a rigorous yet relaxing haven for contemporary music tucked in an idyllic valley of straight-faced mysticism and sweet Pixie tangerines.

This edition of the festival is the first under the leadership of Ara Guzelimian, back at the helm after a run in the 1990s. Each year, the person in his position organizes the programming with a new music director; for Guzelimian's debut, he chose the composer John Adams, the paterfamilias of American classical music, who happens to have been born the year of the first festival. Uninterested in a retrospective for the milestone anniversary, they billed their concerts as a forward-looking survey of young artists — fitting for a festival that has long focused on the future.

But in music, past, present and future are always informing one another. Bach and Beethoven haunted new and recent works; the pianist Vikingur Olafsson treated Mozart, as he likes to say, as if the ink had just dried on the score. There is no looking forward without looking back.



The Chumash elder Julie Tumamait-Stenslie led a storytelling hour on a misty field at Soule Park on Friday. Timothy Teague

Guzelimian and Adams looked back about as far as possible in weaving the valley's Indigenous history into the festival. The cover of its program book was the Cindy Pitou Burton photograph "Ghost Poppy" — the flower's name given by the Chumash people, the first known inhabitants of this area, who after the arrival of Europeans were nearly annihilated by disease and violence, and who no longer have any land in Ojai.

It's a history that was shared, among more lighthearted tales, by the Chumash elder Julie Tumamait-Stenslie, who opened Friday's programming with storytelling on a misty field at Soule Park; that evening, she began a concert with a blessing.

Despite the best of intentions, these were among the more cringe-worthy moments of the festival. The predominantly white, moneyed audience responded to details of colonial brutality with an obviously affirmative hum, not unlike the way it later cheered on Rhiannon Giddens's "Build a House," a searing and sweeping indictment of American history — as if these listeners weren't implicated in its message.



Members of the Attacca Quartet with Giddens and her partner, Francesco

Turrisi. Timothy Teague

The festival was at its best when the music spoke for itself. (Most of the concerts are streaming online.) It should be said, though, that the programming still had its limits; just as this review can't possibly address the entire event, Ojai's three days (and a brief prelude the evening before) represented only a sliver of the field, and excluded some of the thornier, more experimental work being done.

Adams was nevertheless interested, it seemed, in artists who operate as if liberated from orthodoxy and genre — far from what he has called “the bad old days” of modernism's grip.

Beyond the composers, that translated to the performers, a roster that included the festival orchestra (no mere pickup group with the brilliant violinist Alexi Kenney as its concertmaster); members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group; and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. And soloists like the violinist — for one piece, also a violist — Miranda Cuckson, who summoned the force of a full ensemble in Anthony Cheung's “Character Studies” and Dai Fujikura's “Prism Spectra,” and nimbly followed Bach's Second Partita with Kaija Saariaho's “Frises” in place of the partita's famous Chaconne finale.



The violinist Miranda Cuckson in Samuel Adams's Chamber Concerto, conducted by his father, John Adams. Timothy Teague

Olafsson, whose recordings have demonstrated his brilliance as a programmer — with a sharp ear for connections within a single composer's body of work, or across centuries and genres — persuasively moderated a conversation among Rameau, Debussy and Philip Glass, as well as another of Mozart and his contemporaries, with masterly voicing and enlightening clarity.

Giddens was also at ease in a range of styles, her polymathic musicality and chameleonic voice deployed as affectingly in an Adams aria as in American folk. Performing with her own band (whose members include Francesco Turrisi, her partner) she was deadpan and charismatic; alongside the Attacca Quartet, she simply sat at a microphone with a laser-focus stare, commanding the stage with only her sound.

Attacca's appearance was all too brief, but could justify their own turn at directing the festival one day. Whether in works by Adams, Jessie Montgomery or Caroline Shaw, in Paul Wiancko's vividly episodic "Benkei's Standing Death" or Gabriella Smith's jam-like "Carrot Revolution," these open-eared and open-minded players don't seem to bring a piece to the stage until it is etched into their bones, so fully is each score embodied.

There was overlap of composer and performer in Timo Andres, whose works were well represented but who also served as the soloist — twinkling, patient and tender — in Ingram Marshall's humbly gorgeous piano concerto "Flow."

Andres later gave a chilly Sunday morning recital that opened with selections from "I Still Play," a set of miniatures written for Robert Hurwitz, the longtime and influential leader of Nonesuch Records. It continued with one of Samuel Adams's Impromptus, a work of inspired keyboard writing designed to complement Schubert, with flashes of that composer along with warmth and subtle harmonic shading to match. And it ended with the first live performance of Smith's "Imaginary Pancake," which had a respectable debut online early in the pandemic but truly roared in person.

In very Ojai fashion, there were so many living composers programmed that Esa-Pekka Salonen didn't even qualify as a headliner. If anything, he was a known quantity that unintentionally faded amid the novelty of other voices. Carlos Simon's propulsive and galvanizing "Fate Now Conquers" nodded to Beethoven, but on his own brazen terms. And there continues to be nothing but promise in the emerging Inti Figgis-Vizueta, whose "To give you form and breath," for three percussionists, slyly warped time in a juxtaposition of resonant and dull sounds of found objects like wood and planters.

Much real estate was given to Gabriela Ortiz, who in addition to being performed — providing a blissfully rousing climax for the festival with an expanded version of her "La calaca" on Sunday evening — stepped in as a curator when a recital by Anna Margules was canceled because she couldn't travel to the United States. That concert, a survey of Mexican composers, offered one of the festival's great delights: the percussionist Lynn Vartan in Javier Álvarez's "Temazcal," a work for maracas and electronics that demands dance-like delivery in a revelation of acoustic possibilities from an instrument most people treat as a mere toy.



From left, Emily Levin, Abby Savell and Julie Smith Phillips in Gabriela Ortiz's "Río de la Mariposas." Timothy Teague

Ortiz's chamber works revealed a gift for surprising acoustic pairings, such as two harps and a steel plan in "Río de las Mariposas," which opened a late morning concert on Sunday. It's a sound that had a sibling in a premiere that ended that program: Dylan Mattingly's "Sunt Lacrimae Rerum," its title taken from the "Aeneid."

The work is also for two harps (Emily Levin and Julie Smith Phillips) — but also two pianos that, microtonally detuned, could at times be confused with a sound of steel pan. There is a slight dissonance, but not an unpleasant one; the effect is more like the distortion of memory. And there was nothing unpleasant about this cry for joy. Ecstasy emanated from the open pianos, played by Joanne Pearce Martin and Vicki Ray, as they were lightly hammered at their uppermost registers, joined by music-box twinkling in the harps.

The mood turned more meditative in the comparatively subdued middle section, but the transporting thrill of the opening returned at the end: first in fragments, then full force. "Sunt Lacrimae Rerum" was the newest work at the festival, a piece that looked back on a year that was traumatic for all of us. But Mattingly met the moment with music that teemed with defiant, unflappable hope for the future.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 5 of the New York edition with the headline: At 75, Ojai Festival Keeps Looking Forward

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Ojai Music Festival begins a new era with exciting emerging talent



Ojai festival music director John Adams stands to acknowledge the Attacca Quartet performing his compositions at Libbey Bowl during the Ojai Music Festival. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

BY MARK SWED | CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

SEPT. 21, 2021 6:20 PM PT

Here's what was lost by moving the Ojai Music Festival from the second weekend in June to the third in September: The damn Delta variant stole a potential pink moment that might have lent a uniquely Ojai ending to the festival. The late-afternoon Sunday finale, always the most attended concert of the festival, ended just after 7, and the sun already had set.

But here's what was gained: everything else that has made the Ojai festival beloved for a full three-quarters of a century.

Against unsettlingly uncertain odds, Ojai's 75th anniversary festival happened as hoped and promised, and it was special. Ojai in September can be blistering and threatened by fire, but this year the weather was ideal. Golden brown hills glistened rather than burned. Requirements for full vaccination and masking were perceptibly welcomed by the outdoor crowd at Libbey Bowl (although a motley handful of outsiders protested in front of the park on one occasion). Socializing in this friendliest, and now possibly safest, of festivals was little hampered.

The occasion represented a transitional moment in other ways. Ara Guzelimian has returned as artistic and executive director. He headed the festival from 1992 to 1997, before then holding prominent positions at Carnegie Hall and the Juilliard School. Composer John Adams served for a second time as music director (Guzelimian invited him way back in 1993). Esa-Pekka Salonen, who was the festival's [music director in 1999](#), was on hand, one of the featured composers.

But given that the tradition of Ojai has long been invention, there was little looking back. Two tiny nods were made to Stravinsky and Pierre Boulez, who did much to put the festival on the map. Thursday night's prelude concert began with Stravinsky's five-minute "Élégie" for solo viola as a graceful memorial to those lost in the two years and three months between festivals. Guzelimian turned a whooshing passage from Boulez's electronic "Repons" into the new Ojai chimes, calling the audience to its seats.



A distanced, masked audience on the lawn of Libbey Bowl attends the Friday morning concert by the Attacca Quartet as part of the 2021 Ojai Music Festival. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Even so, Thursday's prelude concert, "Future Forward," served to introduce six of the featured composers — five of whom were born between 1985 and 1991 and four of whom were mentored by Adams, who has himself picked a bone with Boulez's modernism throughout his career at this festival.

This year had its own stars: the Icelandic pianist [Vikingur Ólafsson](#) and genre-breaking singer, composer and podcaster [Rhiannon Giddens](#). Adams conducted.

Local musicians included members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, but there were also spectacular performers — violinist Miranda Cuckson, the Attacca Quartet and composer-pianist Timo Andres — who have had far too little West Coast presence.

My own attendance at the festival this year was curiously hybrid, attending concerts on Friday and Sunday and watching the others streamed (and, with one exception, archived) on the [festival website](#) so that I could attend the [opening](#) of Los Angeles Opera. The contrast between being in magic and virtually conjuring

it will have to wait for another discussion, but a WiFi glitch meant I missed much of Samuel Adams' Chamber Concerto conducted by his father.

For a quick takeaway of a long weekend, there were three outright sensations: Ólafsson, Attacca and the young composer Gabriella Smith, whose music Adams has been strikingly featuring at the L.A. Phil in his role as creative chair. The young composer Carlos Simon is a find. The composer [Gabriela Ortiz](#) contributed, as expected, dazzling moments. Giddens, for a hybrid-goer, made a less-than- expected impression, but her best moments were memorable.

I caught only one of Smith's three festival pieces live, her string quartet and best-known piece, "Carrot Revolution," fabulously played by Attacca. In his early morning recital that revolved around short pieces written for former Nonesuch Records visionary Bob Hurwitz, Andres added Smith's "Imaginary Pancake," and there was a performance of her 2017 mixed-instrument sextet, "Maré." A composer from Northern California who lives in Norway, she writes with an explicitly ecological conviction, "Maré" is her response to the tides on a Brazilian island.

Drawing from many sources, old and new, Smith can be funny and/or furious. Her scores have an explosive energy that gives the impression of being an aural sugar produced by a kind of musical photosynthesis. She surprises and delights without seeming like she's trying to do either.

Simon, a composer from Atlanta who comes from generations of preachers and has gospel music in his DNA, is suddenly upon us. The L.A. Phil played his "Fate Now Conquers" at the Hollywood Bowl last month, and Adams conducted it arrestingly in Ojai with L.A. Chamber Orchestra. Friday, L.A. Opera will premiere a digital short of Simon's "The First Bluebird in the Morning."

Simon turns to Beethovenian struggle for "Fate" and to the artist Bill Traylor, who was born into slavery, for the solo violin piece "Between Worlds," which was played with concentrated ecstasy by Cuckson. In both, Simon refashions musical

history as excitable new realms with an unmistakable musical purpose essential for our times.

Ólafsson wowed in two concerts. For a Saturday morning recital, he relied exclusively on music he has recorded, but he found a new dialogue between Philip Glass, Rameau and Debussy, employing the past, he told the audience, as a key to the future, just as Simon proved. The second half was from his recent recording of Mozart and his contemporaries. Even on the livestream, the playing was transfixing. On Sunday, he was all the more transfixing live as soloist in Mozart's intensely dramatic Piano Concerto No. 24, forcefully conducted by Adams. A close-up of his fingers striking the keyboard created such a timbral glow that I turned down the brightness of the computer screen to let the sound do the illumination. In the concerto heard live, Mozart and Ojai nature merged.

Deplorably, Ólafsson's record label, Deutsche Grammophon, allowed the stream to be archived for only 48 hours. Ólafsson might consider switching to Nonesuch, which had a huge presence at the festival, not only in the Hurwitz tribute but as the label of Adams as well as Giddens and Andres and that of Attacca's Grammy-winning "Orange," devoted to the works of Caroline Shaw.

Among other highlights were Attacca's dynamic Friday morning program, which included vibrant excerpts from Adams' "John's Book of Alleged Dances" and Shaw's musical garden of delights, "Plan & Elevation." On Sunday morning, Ortiz's "Rio de las Mariposas" for two harps and steelpan began the L.A. Phil New Music Group program with the wake-up call of plucked string splashed over struck steel. It ended with the premiere of Dylan Mattingly's "Sunt Lacrimae Rerum," for pairs of harps and de-tuned pianos.

Mattingly explained in his program note that he was drawn to write the piece a year ago on a day "when the sun refused to emerge" through the toxic dark orange haze of wildfires. He needed to clear the sky with music, and he does in a

joyously upbeat, dance- driven, repetitive score that reaches for daylight in the outer sections and evokes a sparkling clear night sky in the middle.

On the same program, Salonen's "Objets Trouvés," a solemn but playfully detailed piece for solo viola and pre-recorded drone, received its first concert performance in a rapt delivery by Teng Li.



Versatile pop and classical singer Rhiannon Giddens, left, appears with the Attacca Quartet members Amy Schroeder, Domenic Salerni, Andrew Yee and Nathan Schram, left to right, at Libbey Bowl for the Ojai Music Festival on Friday. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Giddens was hard to place. Her main appearance was Saturday night, when she performed live from her latest album, "They're Calling Me Live," which she and her multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi recorded during lockdown from their home in Ireland. Sync problems (I couldn't tell if they were coming from my end or Ojai's) made it unwatchable. The recording itself is a modest effort despite its many imaginative byways between traditional and classical music. At best, Giddens's singing and arrangement of a Monteverdi madrigal achieve remarkable eloquence.

She sang traditional numbers effectively with the Attacca on Friday. A trained opera singer, she added two Adams arias Sunday, with the composer conducting. She was out of her element in a strained “Am I in Your Light?” from the opera “Doctor Atomic.” But “Consuelo’s Dream” from “I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky” might have been written for her.

Next year, Ojai expects to return to its usual June weekend and, in its fashion, run AMOC. American Modern Opera Company, Matthew Aucoin’s collective that includes the singers [Julia Bullock](#), [Davóne Tines](#), [Anthony Roth Costanzo](#) and violinist Cuckson, will function as music director.



John Adams conducting at the 2021 Ojai Music Festival | Credit: Timothy Teague

It’s difficult to gauge the degree to which the powerful impact of the latest [Ojai Music Festival](#) — returning after a pandemic-mandated two-year-and-three-month gap — had to do with absence making the heart grow fonder or the innate strengths of the programming and performances. No doubt, both factors were at work in this conscientiously homecoming-oriented long weekend in Ojai, Sept. 16–19.

Also adding to the heady and festive mix was the celebrated contemporary music-minded festival’s gala 75th year, and the eagerly awaited return of [John Adams](#) — also 75 — as music director. Adams last took that role in 1993 with a program highlighted by his then-new Chamber Symphony.

This year, in effect, he dodged the impulse to retrace Ojai’s storied past, instead generously spotlighting younger and attention-worthy composers. He also literally brought the family, extended and otherwise, with work by his well-established, now 37-year-old composer son Samuel, and proteges including festival standouts [Gabriella Smith](#) and [Dylan Mattingly](#), and, on a parallel axis, pianist-composer [Timo Andres](#).

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Timo Andres | Credit: Jonathan Walker

Stravinsky, functioning as a kind of patron saint for the festival he directed in the early days and whose music is a staple here, showed up glancingly, but significantly: His brief *Elegie* for solo viola (Nathan Shram) opened Thursday's concert, which Ojai's new artistic director Ara Guzelimian explained was in honor of the many who were lost during the pandemic. Stravinsky's miniature segued into a showcase for composers hereby dubbed the "Ojai Six" — festival-featured and formidable Mexican composer [Gabriela Ortiz](#) (with the virtuosic *Huitztl*, for solo flute, here Emi Ferguson, strong despite the nattering car alarm in the distance), Smith, Mattingly, [Samuel Adams](#), Andres, and Carlos Simon.

To these ears, the most dazzling composer was Smith (also mysterious by virtue of her absence, being presently hunkered down in Norway). Each of her pieces this weekend were riveting concert-closers: the rough-then-rigorous maze of the sextet piece *Maré* on Thursday, the bubbling cauldron of *Carrot Revolution* on the Attaca Quartet program (with its microtonal feint among other elements of surprise), and the fiendish solo piano workout *Imaginary Pancake*, closing Andres's early Sunday morning recital. This music bristled with wit, free-ranging idiom-tapping, and restless invention: Smith's is a fresh and refreshing musical voice in progress.



John Adams conducts Miranda Cuckson and the Ojai Festival Orchestra in Samuel Adams's Chamber Concerto | Credit: Timothy Teague

Although he was the festival's *de facto* conductor of different ensembles, Papa Adams's composer role was surprisingly downplayed and lacking recent works, as he let the limelight shine on the younger generation. We got a solid sense of the younger Adams's musical voice via the West Coast premiere of his Chamber Concerto, with violin protagonist Miranda Cuckson enmeshing and tangling with the Ojai Festival Orchestra; his semi-Schubertian *Impromptus* in Andres' solo recital; and his violin-piano duo *Violin Diptych*, lovely and tonal, but with liberties carefully taken (a strategy not unlike his father's m.o.).

One unique factor in this year's program was the inclusion of resident artist, MacArthur Grantee [Rhianon Giddens](#), possessing her own brand of genius, and a mission to explore roots (including her venerable black and North Carolinian roots) and on a mission to champion cultural systems of musical and racial parity. Other Ojai programs in recent times have delved into musical turf beyond standard brand "classical" or contemporary music quarters, including 2017's Indo-jazz-new-music agenda directed by commanding keyboardist-composer Vijay Iyer, and maverick theater director Peter Sellars's willfully eclectic mix and mash-up in 2016, both with uneven results.

Giddens, who studied at Oberlin before launching her specialized musical trajectory, was perfectly at home drawing a different type of audience for her Saturday night set with three musicians, including new multi-instrumentalist partner Francesco Turrisi, on bodhran and banjo. He was particularly adept as an accordionist, bursting out of drone duties for a few dazzling, jazz-tinged solos. Giddens showed her usual aplomb and

versatility, along with an easy stage charisma. As is her wont, Giddens made the case for musical diversity, organically traversing vintage blues, traditional folk/bluegrass, Celtic music, and impressive original songs, capping it off with an apt “I Hear Music in the Air,” originally by the late, great Sister Rosetta Tharpe.



The Attacca Quartet with Rhiannon Giddens and Francesco Turrisi | Credit: Timothy Teague

Some of the same material was cast in different contextual garb on her appearance in a concert featuring the fast-rising, Juilliard-born Attacca Quartet, with arrangements by Gabe Witcher and others. A question abuzz in Ojai, though, was how she would fare in operatic form, singing arias from Adams’s operatic oeuvre, from *Doctor Atomic* and *I Was Looking at the Ceiling but Saw the Sky*. If she appeared atypically nervous onstage during that final concert with Adams conducting the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, her vocal performance was luminous and true to form here. Might opera be yet another avenue for the curious Giddens? The prospect was at least validated in Ojai.

In the relatively youthful population of composers and performers, Esa-Pekka Salonen appeared as something of an *eminence-gris*-in-training. The mighty Finn plays a critical role in the serious musical culture of California, having led the LA Phil to global glory during his tenure as maestro (1992–2009), now embarking on his tenure leading the San Francisco Symphony, and having devised an especially juicy Ojai festival as director in 2001. (He was also slated to lead the 2018 festival, but scheduling conflicts led to a memorable substitution turn by [Patricia Kopatchinskaya](#) that year.)

Even with just two brief pieces on this year’s program, Salonen’s presence felt somehow central here. On the “premiere” front, his brief but intensive solo viola piece *Objets Trouvés* (Found objects), was lustrously played by Teng Li.

SoCal serious musical history was alluded to, obliquely, with Salonen’s *Fog*, dedicated to Disney Hall architect Frank Gehry, and the breathtaking venue itself — a symbol of L.A.’s qualitative flowering and worldly “arrival.” The “Ojai Festival Orchestra” fleshed out Salonen’s amicably muscular score, with its nods to Stravinsky and, yes, Adams.

That piece was preceded by violinist Miranda Cuckson, perched offstage, giving an excerpt from Bach’s Partita No. 3 in E Major. That was the piece played by LA Phil concertmaster Martin Chalifour when both Salonen and Gehry were nervously surveying the new hall’s acoustics. They approved. They wept. A Salonen composition/tribute was in order.

Another strategic Bach framing took place during Cuckson’s strikingly fine and innovative (and sometimes electroacoustic) Saturday afternoon recital at the Zalk Theater, as she played all movements of Bach’s famed D Minor Partita except the long, iconic Chaconne. Instead, she eased across epoch and genre into the semi-abstractionist sound world of Kaija Saariaho’s *Frises*.



Dylan Mattingly flanked by the artists who performed his *Sunt Lacrimae Rerum*: Emily Levin, Vicki Ray, Joanne Pearce Martin, and Julie Smith Phillips | Credit: Timothy Teague

Of special note among the younger composer crowd at Ojai 2021, Dylan Mattingly is a name and force to keep tabs on. He stated his poetic, almost mystical case on Thursday night and Sunday afternoon. In the former, the dynamic piano duo of L.A.-based new-music titans Vicki Ray and Joanne Pearce Martin (who also presided over the delicious sonorous hypnotism of John Adams's *Hallelujah Junction* on Sunday), coaxed the proper detached lyricism of Mattingly's *Magnolia*. It revels in echoes of Satie, but unhinged at the bar lines and other points of musical fixity.

High expectations greeted his world premiere, on commission from the Ojai Festival and the LA Phil, of his mesmerizing *Sunt Lacrimae Rerum* (These are the tears of things). Descriptions don't do justice to this quirky music for two harps and two "detuned" pianos," but the piece is a jewel of microtonal minimalism, with hints of Adams and La Monte Young and something personal. A recurring 14-note motive forges ever-forward and detours into an ethereal passage before reaching its transcendent climax, which was worthy of its standing ovation.

In Ojai, circa 2021, themes of "homecoming" and pandemic-related dynamics struck emotional chords beyond the provocative and consoling musical goods. Absence and vibrant presence made the heart fonder.

CORRECTION: As originally published this article misidentified Esa-Pekka Salonen's tenure as music director of the LA Phil.

Josef Woodard is a veteran journalist-critic-author, writing for the Los Angeles Times for 25 years, is an ongoing contributor to DownBeat magazine, and has written for many other music publications, including Rolling Stone, Strad, and Chamber Music, as well as the Santa Barbara Independent in his hometown. In addition to penning numerous album liner notes, he won an ASCAP Deems Taylor award for jazz writing and has published two jazz books, on Charles Lloyd and Charlie Haden for Silman-James Press, and published his debut novel in 2020. As an active musician/guitarist/composer, he has released many albums on the Household Ink Records label. Among other things, he is also fond of jazz festivaling and diner grub.



Emily Levin, Abby Savell and Julie Smith Phillips perform Gabriela Ortiz's *Río de la Mariposas* | Credit: Timothy Teague

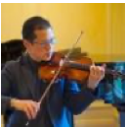
Birthdays offer a time for celebration and reflection. This was particularly true for the **Ojai Music Festival**, which lost an entire festival season to the pandemic and had its 75th birthday celebration postponed from June to Sept. 16–19.

“With such a history,” John Adams, 2021’s music director, wrote for the program, “what does one do to mark such a special year? We could have made a festival that celebrated Ojai’s long legacy, but instead we’ve chosen to look to the future.”

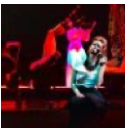
For Adams, who has often incorporated Hispanic characters and themes into his operas (*Girls of the Golden West*) and oratorios (*El Niño* and *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*), it was important that the festival interpolate a melodic Hispanic thread. For that purpose, he chose the Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz.

Over the course of the festival, audiences experienced five of her compositions: *Huitztl* for solo baroque flute (bravely performed by Emi Ferguson over the intrusion of a blaring security alarm); *Alejandrías Sonoras*, also for solo flute; *Atlas-Pumas* for violin and marimba; the diverse sonorities of *Río de las Mariposas* for dual harps (played by Emily Levin and Julie Smith Phillips), accompanied by Abby Savell on the steelpan. And Ortiz was also allotted

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the festival-ending spotlight for her revised edition of *La calaca*, performed by Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the piece’s swaying rhythms conducted by John Adams.

It was important for the festival to combine elements of history, Adams and festival Artistic Director Ara Guzelimian explained during a lengthy discussion panel, to recognize that we were gathering on ground held sacred to the Chumash Indians who were the original settlers of the valley, as well as the Spanish who came later.

Adams and Ortiz also confided that in their own compositional lives they found it necessary to break with the restrictive academic edicts of European modernism (which is a bit ironic, since that tradition has been a mainstay of the Ojai Festival experience from Igor Stravinsky to Pierre Boulez). Adams embraced his identity as a Yankee-turned-Californian; Ortiz, after studying in London, allowed herself the freedom to celebrate the Mexican folk heritage that played such an important role in her early life.

Throughout its illustrious history, the Ojai Music Festival has been known for a series of unpredictable, serendipitous musical experiences that become known as quintessential *Ojai moments*. One such moment stood out as a highlight of this year’s festival— an “Ojai Dawns” concert that took place at 8 a.m. on Sept. 18 at the Zalk Theatre of Besant Hill School.

Performed with the intimate theater’s stage doors open to reveal the early morning landscape of oaks and rolling hills beyond, the program was all Mexican composers, music by Ortiz, Javier Álvarez, and Georgina Derbez.

Born out of necessity, the concert had to be hastily assembled when the scheduled soloist, Spanish recorder virtuoso Anna Margules, was unable to obtain a visa to attend the festival. Working in tandem, Guzelimian and Ortiz cobbled together a program that would offer a bold and colorful statement about the diverse voices of contemporary Mexican composers.

“This concert is important to me because it speaks to the issue of diversity,” Ortiz said in an impromptu interview. “It’s urgent to see that it’s not only Europe that is the future of concert music. This is an opportunity to show that in Mexico we have really good composers. And not only in Mexico but throughout Latin America. I think having a Hispanic music director someday for the Ojai Music Festival would be a wonderful idea.”

At that point, into the lighted doorway stepped flutist Emi Ferguson to perform Ortiz’s four (partially improvised) movements, the music alternating between bright shafts of melodic light and windy, wispy breaths that seemed to mirror the sun slowly burning away the fog.

But it was what came next that was totally unexpected.

Percussionist Lynn Vartan appeared in the doorway aglow in a thousand-sequined jacket and with a pair of maracas in her hands. With the seductive sway of a dancer, she performed Álvarez’s *Temazcal* for maracas and electroacoustic sounds. Its rhythms pulsated, accentuated by Vartan’s gyrating hips and flashing eyes. It was a total delight, as intricate as it was enchanting.

The percussion was followed by Derbez’s *Tonada de la luna llena* (Song of the moon) for flute and electronics, here in its first live performance. Performed by Ferguson, the work (in two sections) combines a melodic song with pre-recorded and live electronics that blend and distort the playing of the soloist.

Ortiz’s *Atlas-Pumas* brought the concert to a close; its shifting melodies for violin (Shalini Vijayan) and marimba (Vartan) evoking a sonic walk through the streets of Guadalajara.



Gabriela Ortiz | Credit: Gabriela Ortiz Torres



Gabriela Ortiz | Credit: Gabriela Ortiz Torres

When I asked Ara Guzelimian about the need for the Ojai Music Festival to appoint its first Latino music director, he was rather crafty in his answer.

“I don’t want to give too much away,” he said with smile of contentment. “But, of course, I’m open to the idea.”

Jim Farber wrote his first classical music review in 1982 for the Los Angeles Jewish Journal. Since then, he has been a feature writer and critic of classical music, opera, theater, and fine art for The Daily Variety, the Copley Newspapers and News Service, and the Los Angeles Newspaper Group (Media News).

75th Ojai Music Festival Continued

Joe Woodard Reviews the Ojai Concerts



CONCERTO SOLOIST: Violinist Miranda Cuckson and John Adams came together for the Samuel Adams's Chamber Concerto. | Credit: Timothy Teague

By **Josef Woodard**

Wed Sep 22, 2021 | 10:31am

Pandemic-waylaid, the Ojai Music Festival finally erected its contemporary-music-geared Big Top with one of its strongest programs of late. The world-renowned festival's 75th anniversary was boldly led by America's great composer John Adams, who last appeared here as music director in 1993.

Adams opted to eyeball the future, showcasing such inspiring younger composers as his gifted son Samuel Adams, Dylan Mattingly (remember that name), and my own personal “discovery,” the potentially conceptual and idiomatic border-crossing Gabriella Smith. Brilliant outlier/resident artist Rhiannon Giddens showed her roots but also integrated beautifully into arrangements with the Attacca String Quartet and on operatic turf in Adams arias.

Music by women and people of color abounded, including festival framing by Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz — the Berio-esque solo flute piece *Huitztl* (featuring Emi Ferguson, unfortunately accompanied by a car alarm) and *La calaca*, the suitably celebratory orchestral finale.

The festival’s dawn concerts rewarded with challenging fare. Saturday’s special had a Mexican/Latin American focus, including Ortiz’s music and Javier Álvarez’s virtuosic maracas/electronics treat “Temezcal” (with percussionist Lynn Vartan, live and vivid). Early Saturday, prominent pianist-composer Timo Andres presented delicious miniatures from the “I Still Play” tribute to retired Nonesuch Records head Bob Hurwitz (in the house), and closed with Smith’s senses-seizing “Imaginary Pancake.”

Violinist Miranda Cuckson’s solo recital was a stunner, bridging the sometimes electro-acoustic worlds of Anthony Cheung, Dai Fujikura, Bach, and Kaija Saariaho.

Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson tapped his new Mozartean project and merged Baroque Rameau with Debussy, with Philip Glass tossed in (his mechanical minimalism sounding especially stiff here). Given this festival’s forward-leaning legacy, the mostly “dead white male” parade felt contextually alien, however profound its delivery.

On living composer terrain, heroic Esa-Pekka Salonen dazzled with his orchestral piece *FOG*, dedicated to Frank Gehry’s Disney Hall, and the probing solo viola piece *Objets Trouves*, putting Teng Li in the spotlight for this first concert performance.

One Ojai epiphany came with Sunday’s world premiere of Mattingly’s *Sunt Lacrimae Rerum* (“these are the tears of things”), a deceptively simple yet powerful work scored for two harps and two pianos slightly detuned to create a mesmerizing between-the-tonality-cracks texture. Call it a microtonal minimalist jewel.

The unofficial theme song of Ojai 2021? Giddens's fervent gospel strains of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's "I Hear Music in the Air." The rich and fresh smorgasbord of music in the Ojai air proved transformative.

Read Charles Donelan's review [here](#).

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Fri Sep 24, 2021 | 21:12pm

<https://www.independent.com/2021/09/22/75th-ojai-music-festival-continued/>



Josef Woodard

75th Ojai Music Festival

John Adams Leads Forward-Facing Ojai Festival



Rhiannon Giddens | Credit: Timothy Teague

By **Charles Donelan**

Mon Sep 20, 2021 | 5:04pm

Thanks to a strong tradition of thoughtful programming and the loyalty of one of the world's most sophisticated audiences, the Ojai Music Festival consistently delivers a uniquely satisfying experience, and this year, after an 18-month COVID delay, was no exception. John Adams made an ideal music director for this homecoming-themed edition, and his decision to use the occasion to highlight the work of a new generation of composers was brilliantly on target. After living through a live music drought of unprecedented length and proportions, coming back to the serene beauty of Libbey Bowl to hear so much great work for the first time felt just right.

Beyond the sheer pleasure this decision granted to listeners was the sensitivity shown to the COVID-battered dreams of this talented cohort of musicians in their thirties. It's one thing to lose a season when you have already had a few to get your bearings in the musical world, and quite another to see a year and a half slip by in which you expected to establish yourself.

The West Coast premiere of Samuel Adams's *Chamber Concerto* on Friday, September 17, left no doubt that this second generation of Adams composers has what it takes to move music forward.

Mesmerizing, soulful, and structurally sound, the piece will enter the standard repertoire. Violinist Miranda Cuckson was splendid as the soloist, returning after the short interval to play a section of a Bach partita while standing offstage under a tree — a very Ojai touch.

Friday morning's 11 a.m. concert with the Attacca Quartet and Rhiannon Giddens offered a major work from the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Caroline Shaw. *Plan and Elevation*, a five-part string quartet composition, was written while Shaw was in residence at Dumbarton Oaks. Perhaps this is simply the joy of hearing great music performed in person again, but during this Friday daytime concert, I felt like I was hearing the sound of a new approach to music in the work of Shaw and the other younger composers on the program. The freshness of the works by Paul Wiancko and Gabriella Smith in particular felt like a pure emanation of this new spirit.

Rhiannon Giddens was an inspired choice to anchor the festival with multiple appearances, including a rousing concert of her original/traditional material on Saturday night. She's carved out a distinctive place in the music world, combining classical chops, academic scholarship, and lived experience as a working musician and a person of color. The result is breathtaking — imagine Nikole Hannah-Jones singing like Aretha Franklin. The careful ways in which Giddens introduces and contextualizes the music she plays never cloy or over-inform. Her skill with words equals her facility as a player of violin and banjo. The concert on Saturday night resonated with all of the pain and struggle we have experienced over the last two years in a way that was at once healing and grounding.

Sign up for Pano, Charles Donelan's weekly newsletter that captures the full range of arts and entertainment available in our region in one panoramic weekly wide shot, scanning our cultural horizon for the best in theater, visual art, film, dance, music, and more.

No great classical music festival would be complete without at least one great piano recital. This festival had two – Víkingur Ólafsson on Saturday morning, and Timo Andres on Sunday. These recitals were among the most indicative events in relation to the generational change that the music appears to be undergoing at this moment. As digital natives, Ólafsson and Andres listen and absorb musical ideas in new forms, giving birth to recitals like these that reflect a “playlist” sensibility, rather than a more traditional approach. How else to explain the astonishing feat of memorization required for Ólafsson, for example, to play 21 separate works ranging from the 17th to the 21st century in a single performance? His recent recording titled *Mozart and his Contemporaries* served as one key text for understanding this year's festival as a whole, the concept being that we should listen to and perform the music of the past as though it were written today. Ólafsson has said that when he plays Mozart – or Rameau, another favorite – it's like the ink was still wet on the page. Of course, that page is most likely displayed on an iPad, but no matter.

The Timo Andres recital early Sunday demonstrated a similar “playlist” sensibility, this time because it was based on an actual playlist – a set of short pieces written in honor of Robert Hurwitz on the occasion of his retirement as president of the Nonesuch record label. Among these 11 pieces, all of them sparkling with wit and ingenuity, one stood out as pointing the way toward Sunday afternoon's highlight, and that was John Adams's “I Still Play,” which set the stage for a dazzling performance of the composer's “Hallelujah Junction” for two pianos by Joanne Pearce Martin and Vicki Ray. Adams was everywhere during this weekend – onstage conducting, backstage conversing and encouraging, and beneath the gorgeous musical surface as inspiration and reminder of all that music can do. Hearing Ray and Pearce Martin charge through the madcap hocketing finale of “Hallelujah Junction,” a hair-raising challenge of collaborative precision and timing, made it seem as though anything were possible.

The 76th Ojai Music Festival is now less than a year away, and, with the creative juggernaut known as AMOC (for the American Modern Opera Company) at the helm, it should prove to be every bit as revelatory and thrilling as this one. Congratulations to director Ara Guzelimian and his team for delivering a flawless performance, and here's to many more seasons under the canopy in Libbey Park.

Read Josef Woodard's review [here](#).

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Fri Sep 24, 2021 | 21:13pm

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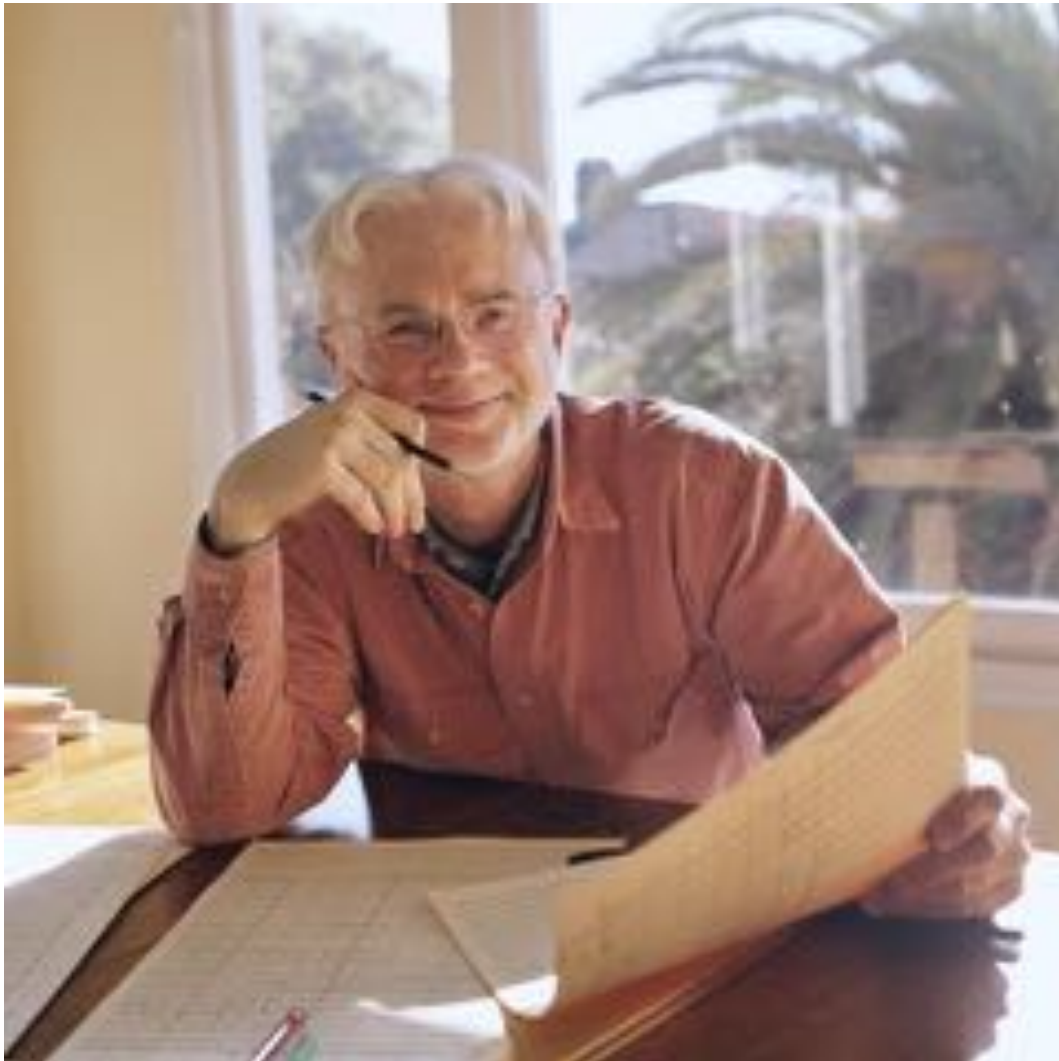
Charles Donelan

Executive Arts Editor

The Ojai Music Festival Is Now

John Adams Mixes a Potent Broth

Susan Hall Sep 22, 2021



John Adams Make Magical Music

The annual Ojai Music Festival is arguably the most exciting music event in this country. It "monitors the everchanging mood and directions of our musical atmosphere." A challenge to be sure. A challenge which is richly met and then some.

The notion this year, floating in the pink light that bathes the Ojai Valley, is that all music is *now*. While this may take a moment to grasp, performance of any music happens in the moment. Performers and audience alike take it in, the more deeply they inhale, the more satisfying the experience.

John Adams was music director for the 2021 homecoming. He had first directed the festival in 1993. The new artistic and executive director, Ara Guzelimian, fought with the composer to include his own music. He succeeded in convincing Adams to include the spirited *Book of Alleged Dances* on the first night, and to conclude the concert with Rhiannon Giddens singing Kitty's aria from *Dr. Atomic* and "I was looking at the ceiling and then I saw the sky."

The inclusion of Giddens throughout the festival was a masterful stroke. Currently all arts institutions are trying to make the case for diversity on stage. Some worthy efforts land awkward and obvious. Giving Giddens, the new artistic director of The Silk Road, an evening to present herself, a veritable potpourri of ethnic mixing, including African American and Native American, was perfect. She more than merits her rising star.

Clearly committed heart and soul to giving credit where credit is due, Giddens told the story of Alberta Hunter, who wrote "Nobody Wants You When You're Down and Out", a song often attributed to Eric Clapton. Unable to support herself as a musician, Hunter lied about her age to get into nursing school. After thirty years as a nurse, (and very late retirement after she was casting herself as a decade younger than her actual years), she returned to the music circuit, cutting a compelling figure. Giddens sings Hunter's song with passion and conviction, giving full credit to the creator.

A striking case for music being *now* was made by the Icelandic pianist Vikingur Olafsson. Adams had met him during a three months stay in Europe

and was captivated by his pianism and his programming.

In the first part of his solo concert, Olafsson played in succession the work of Jean Philippe Rameau, Claude Debussy and Philip Glass. Olafsson's touch is delicate but his ideas emerge clearly. Debussy himself was captivated by Rameau. He wrote that Rameau had captured space and time to make his work seem contemporary. Glass so admired Olafsson's performance of his own *Etudes*, written to improve his personal technique, that he invited Olafsson to tour with him.

The Steinway technicians who accompany their artists (Olafsson among them) were particularly careful to keep the tinkling top of the instrument bell-like and shimmering. It was very *Now*.

Young Composers at the Ojai Festival

Free to Be an Individual in Sound

Susan Hall Sep 23, 2021



Gabriela Ortiz, a young composer featured at the Ojai Music Festival

John Adams writes about his release from the shackles binding him as a Northeastern composer in the US. Coming to California as a young man, he was at last able to write the music he heard, whatever shape it took. He was free to be an individual.

Each of the young composers featured prominently in Ojai 2021 has clearly benefited from Adams' experience.

On the first night of the 2021 Festival, Dylan Mattingly offered *Magnolia*, a piece for four hands at the piano. The work was almost non-existent in its quiet. One could imagine a statement about the irrelevance of the piano as an orchestral instrument. Now it is often part of the percussion section. Mattingly's *Sunt Lacrimae Rerum* imagines Aeneas reflecting on his journey to Rome, and the devastation and death that lies in his wake. He deploys two harps and detuned piano. The slightly out of tune notes suggest angst. The harps offer torrents of tears. It is a beautiful work, suggesting the founding of the Roman Empire in the steps lying before Aeneas.

Gabriela Ortiz, a Mexican artist, was represented by *Huitztl*, written originally for the recorder. We hear the Baroque flute represent the sound of the bird, flitting in and out of stamen, wings a flutter. The performance by Emi Ferguson dipped as the bird dipped and often soared. It was a wonderful picture in Libby Bowl, where green surrounds the stage and audience.

Carlos Simon comes from four generations of preachers. Their voices echo in his music, which has the emotional uplift of gospel and the black church.

Samuel Adams tackles difference, pitting a solo violin against a propulsive piano.

Timo Andres, featured throughout the festival, talks about trying to capture sounds remembered, a Marcel Proust of music. Instead of going on for six volumes, he encapsulates his memories in 10 minutes of tones.

Her fellow composers joke that Gabriella Smith stayed away from the Festival so she did not have to explain herself. You know exactly what she means from her titles, like *Carrot Revolution* and *Imaginary Pancake*. If you don't get

it, you will when you listen. Her music is rich in texture, rhythm and dynamics, and brought down the house whenever it was performed. Timo Andres played on the piano expressively. Smith's *Mare* included a special group of musicians on flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola and cello. The performances rock.

The freedom each composer brings to a work is one element of the 'nowness' of music today. Music sounds fresh and very much of the moment. It both delights and moves in its Ojai setting.

Fri. Sep 24th, 2021

Sequenza 21/

CHAMBER MUSIC CONCERT REVIEW CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL OJAI

Ojai Music Festival – Friday Evening

By Paul Muller

© SEP 21, 2021



The Ojai Music Festival was re-scheduled this year from the traditional June to mid-September as a result of the continuing Covid pandemic. All the precautions were in place to meet local mandates – proof of vaccination was required for entry and masks must be worn in all concert venues. Even so, the crowds were as large and enthusiastic as ever despite the restrictions and a token anti-mask protest at the entrance to Libbey Park. It was a relief that the festival was finally happening and ready to present live music.

The Friday night, September 17 concert opened with a Chumash blessing by tribal elder Julie Tumamait-Stenslie, impressively arrayed in full regalia. This took the form of two chants in the Chumash language and a simple accompaniment with hand percussion. Elder Tumamait-Stenslie sang out in a clear, steady voice that filled the Libbey Bowl with warmth and welcome. This beautiful invocation needs to become an Ojai Music Festival tradition.

Danse sacrée et danse profane by Claude Debussy followed, with Emily Levin performing on solo harp. A small string orchestra accompanied, and the graceful music of Debussy proved to be the perfect segue from the gentle Chumash prayers. Emily Levin was flawless and seemed to be playing, from memory no less, in every measure of the piece. The ensemble was well-balanced and the excellent sound system in the Libbey Bowl reliably carried every 19th century nuance out into the still night air.

The quiet reserve of the Debussy piece set the stage for the West Coast premiere of *Chamber Concerto*, a dynamic five-movement work by Samuel Adams written in 2017. Samuel Adams is the son of composer John Adams and so grew up in the context of contemporary music. His wife, Helen Kim, is the principal second violin with the San

Francisco Symphony and his sister is also an accomplished violinist. *Chamber Concerto* combines Samuel's appreciation of the violin with a solid command of orchestral forms. The violin soloist for this piece was Miranda Cuckson, who gave what proved to be a compelling performance that delivered equal measures of power, drama and introspection.

"I. Prelude: One By One", the opening movement, begins with a poignant violin solo as the orchestra sections, entering by turns, combine in a beautiful tutti sound. This quiet beginning prefigures the general pattern – *Chamber Concerto* tends to merge the gestures of the soloist into the rest of the orchestra, amplifying the emotions, rather than having the violin stand apart in conversation with the orchestra. The solo passages weave in and out of the tutti sections with a smoothness and elegance that is both pleasing and effective. "II. Lines (after J)", the second movement, is faster and includes some quotations from John Adams' *Harmonielehre*. There is an uptempo and playful feel, especially in the woodwinds, and a general increase of activity in all sections. The solo violin adds a bit of tension to what is now a swirl of complex passages. The strings pick this up, frantically opposing a low growling in the double basses. The stress peaks with a piercing piccolo passage and the solo violin then discharges the built-up tension with a lovely melody line that is heard against a sustained deep tone in the basses. The movement ends in a powerfully reflective violin solo heard with the orchestra almost entirely silent.

The third movement, "III. Aria Slow Movements", continues this introspective mood with a solo line that was both solemn and restrained. The violin solo proceeds with a slow and almost mournful feel, working against gentle pedal tones in the basses. The result is very moving and provides a fine contrast to the frenzy heard in the heart of the second movement. The solo violin parts in movements 2 and 3 ran the range from complex and technically demanding to restrained and highly expressive – all masterfully handled by Ms. Cuckson.



Movement 4, "IV. Off/On" returned to the faster pace with all of sections of the orchestra joining in to create a cauldron of active syncopation. This eventually sorted itself into a more purposeful feel, with strong gestures passed around as the soloist darted in and out of the mix. The tension quickly increased in all sections and was only relieved by the arrival of the final movement, "V. Postlude: All Together Now". This completed the work with a suitably slow and reflective ending. *Chamber Concerto* is an amazing piece that stretches the listener, the soloist and the players to their limits. This was a signature performance for the Festival Orchestra musicians, Miranda Cuckson and Samuel Adams.

After a short break, the concert continued with the prelude from *Partita No. 3 in E major, BWV 1006*, by J.S. Bach. Miranda Cuckson returned to perform this work for solo violin. She was located off-stage by an oak tree in a sleeveless gown, exposed to what had become the chilly Ojai evening air. Nevertheless, all of the many musical virtues of J.S. Bach were on full display, complete with strong rhythmic propulsion and Ms. Cuckson's solid technique that sounded as if there were at least two instruments playing simultaneously. The Bach brought a bit of familiarity to the audience after the intensity of *Chamber Concerto*, and figured into the story behind the next piece on the program.

Fog, by Esa-Pekka Salonen followed, with orchestral forces that included strings, woodwinds and percussion. *Fog* was composed in honor of Frank Gehry, the architect of Disney Hall in Los Angeles. It was inspired by the Bach *Partita No. 3* which was the first music ever heard in Disney Hall, played while testing the acoustics of the space when it was still under construction. Esa-Pekka Salonen recalled the sounds of the violin drifting upward into the cavernous spaces of the new hall, as if it were a lifting fog or mist.

Fog begins with an active, uptempo feel in all the orchestra sections producing a pleasing variety of interesting sounds. Because it directly followed the *Partita No. 3*, there were definite elements of Bach DNA to be heard in *Fog* with repeating passages and strong, active rhythms. As the piece progressed, the density of the texture increased along with a noticeable element of syncopation. There was a fine piano solo midway, but the complex, swirling sounds eventually dominated, especially in the woodwinds. *Fog*, always in motion and full of sunny optimism, was a welcome return of the Salonen style to Southern California. The composer was on hand to receive a substantial ovation from the Ojai crowd.

The concert continued with *Flow*, a piano concerto by Ingram Marshall featuring Timo Andres as soloist. This work was originally commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic for the Green Umbrella series of 2016. Marshall has been a close friend of John Adams since their experimental music days in the 1970s Bay Area and this piece was written with Timo Andres in mind. *Flow* is a fitting title for this piece, opening as it does with deep, sustained tones in the strings while the piano quietly enters with single notes, tremolos and trills. The surging swell of sound in the orchestra, contrasted by the high running lines in the piano, nicely evoke a flowing stream or strong tide. As the piece proceeds, the piano line mixes in with the orchestra to complete the liquid feel. As Marshall writes “The music is all about flow, and I didn’t realize this was the case until I heard how fluid and smoothly running the material is.” Andres never forced the piano passages, artfully weaving the moving lines in and around the orchestra, or blending as needed. *Flow* precisely combines the available musical forces to capture the essence of a lively moving liquid.

The final work in the Friday night concert program was *Running Theme* by Timo Andres, for string orchestra. The piece has three sections, with harmonic and rhythmic variations based, as Andres writes, on the interval of “a fifth broken over a dotted rhythm.” The strong opening chords and syncopated passages against the bass line give a surging feel to this and the repeating cells provide a generally bustling texture. Later in the piece the rhythms in each orchestra section play off against each other until eventually a nice groove breaks out. *Running Theme* provided an energetic ending to a fine concert program.

The Friday, September 17 evening concert was thoughtfully programmed and precisely performed. The organizers and musicians deserve the credit for this, and the public responded by attending in gratifying numbers. The uncertainties and restrictions of the present pandemic had only a minimal effect on the 2021 Ojai Music Festival – and this is very good news.

Behind All The Masks, Vibrant Ojai Fest Brings Out Faces New And Old

By **Richard S. Ginell** - September 23, 2021



The Attaca Quartet applauding John Adams after performing his 'John's Book of Alleged Dances' at the Ojai Festival. (Photo by Timothy Teague)

OJAI, Cal. — The best news that could have possibly come from the 75th [Ojai Music Festival](#) Sept. 16-19 is that it happened at all.

The 74th festival last year had been canceled due to COVID, and this year's edition had been thrown off its axis, moved back to September instead of taking place as usual in June. The idea had been to give the pandemic extra time to fade away.



John Adams made his first appearance as Ojai Festival music director since 1993. (Timothy Teague)

In hindsight, it might have been less risky to do the festival in June since most COVID restrictions had been removed by California that month and the Delta variant hadn't reared its infectious head yet. Moreover, September is usually the peak of fire season, which has hit the Ojai Valley hard in recent years, and the peak of summer heat in Southern California.

Luck, however, was on Ojai's side. The oppressive heat suddenly let up the day the festival began, resulting in comfortable temperatures, with no fires in sight. The Ojai spirit of adventure was alive in the programming hands of music director *du jour* [John Adams](#) — his first appearance in that role here since 1993 — and the new artistic and executive director [Ara Guzelimian](#), who had been artistic director from 1992 to 1997 but never really went away, having led the Ojai Talks since then. All of the artists who were originally booked for June were miraculously available in September.



The Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra rehearsing at the Ojai Festival. (Photo by Richard S. Ginell)

Nevertheless, there were constant reminders that business was not quite as usual. Masks were required at all times in the outdoor concert area in [Libbey Park](#), along with proof of vaccination. The festival tried to limit intermissions to just 10 minutes, but they seemed no different than usual in length, and social distancing was impossible in the crowded aisles at the end of each concert, creating unease in some.

Anti-vaxxer demonstrators positioned themselves at the entrance of the park, trying to convince us to renounce our hard-earned protection against the virus. And the Thursday night opening concert Sept. 16, "Ojai Mix – Prelude to a Festival," which I viewed on a livestream at home (Ojai has been presciently offering livestreams during the last several festivals), sounded like an austere, subdued entryway — mostly uninteresting, rambling solo and small group works from the featured composers.

Once I made it to Ojai in person on Sept. 17, things had perked up in a hurry. The [Attacca Quartet](#) was given considerably livelier material that morning, furiously fizzing away with gusto at excerpts from Adams' *John's Book of Alleged Dances*, with the composer bopping to the beat from his seat in the audience. The sly pizzicatos, manic tremolos, and imaginative use of fading effects in [Paul Wiancko's Benkel's Standing Death](#) and [Caroline](#)

[Shaw's](#) witty, quote-filled tour through the gardens (the opening of the Ravel quartet being the most obvious theft) in *Plan and Elevation* continued the streak.



A masked Esa-Pekka Salonen attended the Ojai Festival. (Ginell)

Few composers are rising faster and more suddenly than [Jessie Montgomery](#). She writes pleasing, quasi-neo-classical pieces like *Strum*, which the Attacca played with verve and swing. Then there is Adams protégé [Gabriella Smith](#), whose terrific *Carrot Revolution* starts with a wild percussive-syncopated opening that becomes a stomping hoe-down evolving into chaos, backing down, and revving up to come back to where it started.

Mexico's [Gabriela Ortiz](#) scored with her engaging Caribbean/Mexican fusion for two harps and steel drum, *Rio de las Mariposas*, and the first performance of an inflated, expanded string orchestra version of the string quartet piece *La Calaca* to close the festival that evening.

The most impressive and best-received piece of new music was the world premiere Sunday morning of [Dylan Mattingly's](#) *Sunt Lacrimae Rerum*, whose daunting, *Aeneid*-inspired title camouflaged a hypnotically captivating piece for two conventionally tuned harps and two detuned pianos. The clash between the pianos and harps created a jangling, sparkling, tinkling Far Eastern-like sound that titillated the ear, but most pertinently, Mattingly's riffs could withstand repetition. There's no substitute for good musical ideas, and Mattingly had plenty of them to spare.



The Ojai Festival's Libbey Bowl. (Ginell)

One couldn't help but wonder, though, about the presence and dominance on Friday night's program of an interminable Chamber Concerto by Adams' son [Samuel](#), who has become a formidable composing voice independent of that of his dad. I've enjoyed some of Samuel Adams' other pieces but not this one — a complex, disjointed, often acerbic, 35-minute endurance test in which things seemed to resolve at a certain point, but then it just goes on and on. Violinist [Miranda Cuckson](#) was the hardy soloist and John Adams himself led the revived ad hoc Ojai Festival Orchestra. (I can't recall another example of a major composer conducting the work of his son.)

The idea behind Adams' plotting and planning was to look forward instead of backward for a 75th-anniversary festival, to concentrate upon young, up-and-coming composers. His arm allegedly had to be twisted before he would include some his own music, like the rousing performance of *Hallelujah Junction* by pianists [Joanne Pearce Martin](#) and [Vicki Ray](#), who have the Adams shuffle boogie groove locked into their nervous systems.



Rhiannon Giddens 'apparently can handle anything in any style.' (Timothy Teague)

All was not lost, though, when a lovely performance of Debussy's *Danse sacrée et danse profane* preceded Adams *père et fils* and a somewhat older generation of living composers succeeded them. Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Fog* (the initials of architect Frank O. Gehry) built joyfully upon the Preludio from J.S. Bach's Violin Partita No. 3 (the latter played by Cuckson as a preface). In doing so, Salonen took the opposite tack from Lukas Foss, whose *Phorion* (not performed) used to blow the same music to smithereens (both were former Ojai music directors). Ingram Marshall's attractive *Flow* starts with the composer's typical sheets of sound, while a middle passage uses Balinese gamelan scales. Timo Andres was the pianist in *Flow* and, immediately thereafter, the composer of *Running Theme*, whose repetitive minimalist patterns were a throwback to early John Adams.

Finally, on to a couple of remarkable featured performers. Rhiannon Giddens, a wonderful singer-instrumentalist who apparently can handle anything in any style, popped up in several settings — with the Attacca Quartet in fusions of Irish and American folk music, Indian drones, and a powerful spiritual in an assertive Odetta-like manner, "Build a House"; two sets with her own group; and singing two John Adams arias with the composer leading the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. She fearlessly managed an operatic timbre with a nice vibrato and good diction in "Am I in Your Light?" from *Doctor Atomic* and "Consuelo's Dream" from *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, sounding more comfortable in the latter piece than in the former one.



Víkingur Ólafsson was triumphant in a variety of works, including Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24. (Timothy Teague)

[Víkíngur Ólafsson](#), the brainy Icelandic pianist whose exquisite touch is matched by his yen for free-associative creative programming, gave a splendid solo recital (as viewed via livestream), reprising in order two-thirds of his just-released [Mozart & Contemporaries](#) CD (Deutsche Grammophon), along with pieces by Glass, Debussy, and Rameau from his other albums. The next night, he returned with Adams on the podium and the LACO on the stage with Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24. After a broad-paced intro by Adams, Ólafsson entered the fray with playing so soft and delicate that it registered as a shock. He would emphasize bass lines at the expense of the right-hand figurations, his 16th-note passages were as fluid and liquid-sounding as can be, and his first movement cadenza seemed like a grand prophetic statement from the 19th century.

No wonder Ólafsson's albums were the only ones that vanished from the racks of the festival boutique, all sold out; he is something special. As is the Ojai Festival, which despite the COVID-related obstacles and traumas retained its questing, maverick character while other organizations run for cover playing it safe. June 9-12, 2022, it will be the [American Modern Opera Company's](#) (AMOC) turn, COVID willing.

Richard S. Ginell

Richard S. Ginell writes about music for the Los Angeles Times and is the West Coast regional editor for Classical Voice North America. He also contributes regularly to San Francisco Classical Voice and Musical America. In another life, he was chief music critic of the Los Angeles Daily News. He plays acoustic and electric keyboards and has recently taken up the drums as well.