

# THE NEW YORKER

## Anything Goes at the Ojai Festival

*This year's musical gathering was more freewheeling than ever.*

By **Alex Ross**

June 27, 2022



Audiences at the Ojai Music Festival, the Southern California new-music jamboree, are accustomed to unpredictable goings on, but this year's edition may have caught even veteran attendees off guard. A percussionist ran in circles, banging tubular bells; a cellist played his instrument while sitting on a skateboard in motion; another cellist entered a performance venue with a wardrobe slung over his back; dancers in inflatable triceratops costumes waltzed in the town park. The festival culminated in a gloriously raucous rendition of Julius Eastman's "Stay on It," with dancers streaming off the stage and into the audience.

*In Or Schraiber's "The Cello Player," a soloist plays laments for two antic dancers.*

*Illustration by María Medem*

The Ojai festival, which has been rattling an idyllic mountain valley for seventy-five years, has a different music director each season. This time, the job fell to the American Modern Opera Company (AMOC), a youthful collective of seventeen singers, instrumentalists, and dancers founded five years ago by the composer Matthew Aucoin and the stage director Zack Winokur. Some members of the group have

already found fame in the classical-music industry: Aucoin's opera "Eurydice" was staged this past season at the Met, and AMOC's resident singers—Paul Appleby, Julia Bullock, Anthony Roth Costanzo, and Davóne Tines—all have international careers. Yet AMOC, which is based at a commune-like complex in southern Vermont, allows more freedom than larger institutions can readily accommodate. Rigid hierarchies are replaced by a more democratic, borderline-anarchic practice. Specialization breaks down: dancers sing, singers dance, instrumentalists do both.

Democracy can be a messy process, and not all of AMOC's concoctions jelled. There was a minor surfeit of precocious nuttiness; more than once, I felt as if I were watching a brainstorming session for a future piece rather than the piece itself. But the let's-just-try-it spirit delivered more than a few jolts of insight. Tines, in a program note describing AMOC's approach to Eastman's unswervingly radical music, wrote, "What is possible if all members of a performing ensemble are present for every step of the creation of a performance?" Ojai made the possibilities clear.

Although AMOC has "opera" in its name, it spurns conventional definitions of the genre. Anyone expecting eventful plots, well-defined characters, or elaborate sets would have come away from Ojai disappointed. In another sense, though, AMOC's presentations are truer to the roots of opera than most modern manifestations of the form. The courtly masques of Renaissance Italy, from which opera arose, placed music, dance, and poetry on equal terms, with a playful spirit predominating; the idea of a composer masterminding a coherent drama came later.

The emphasis on dance and movement gives AMOC an especially original stamp. Its four dancer-choreographers—Bobbi Jene Smith, Or Schraiber, Julia Eichten, and Winokur, who studied dance at Juilliard—help to shape works from the start. Smith and Schraiber, who are married, met as members of the Batsheva Dance Company, in Tel Aviv, where they absorbed the "gaga" practice of the renegade Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin—a liquid, loose-limbed, ever-gyrating form of movement that can be adopted by people who aren't trained dancers.

Enter the brilliant young cellist Coleman Itzkoff, carrying a wardrobe on his back. In Schraiber's piece "The Cello Player," Itzkoff played the role of a troubadour who brings his music from place to place—a clutch of laments, by Giovanni Sollima, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, and György Ligeti. After retrieving his cello from the wardrobe, he interacts with a pair of dancers, Schraiber and Yiannis Logothetis, who seem to be isolated souls—perhaps brothers, perhaps friends—locked in an eternal coexistence. The duo alternates between listless poses and precise bursts of synchronized movement: folkish prancing, slapstick pratfalls, belligerent lunges and swipes, moments of sensual embrace that slip away. It's a study in the complexities of male bonding, with the music suggesting a ritual that plays out time and again.

Related in spirit was a larger-scale work, "Open Rehearsal," which Smith conceived and directed, in collaboration with a dozen musicians and dancers. The piece grew from a pandemic-era project, titled "Broken Theater," that imagines a group of artists confronting existential questions when their audience disappears. In Ojai, musicians again stepped out of supporting roles and into the melee. The violinist Keir GoGwilt sauntered about playing Bach's Chaconne in D Minor while tensions among the artists built to a moment of violence. At the end, the dancer Vinson Fraley sang a piercingly gorgeous rendition of Pete Seeger's "One Grain of Sand," which had the effect of an otherworldly consolation.

The sense of a return to operatic origins was heightened by the participation of the early-music ensemble Ruckus, whose founder, the bassoonist Clay Zeller-Townson, is married to Aucoin. At a riveting afternoon concert in the Libbey Bowl, the festival's chief venue, Ruckus added improvisatory flourishes and jaunty dance rhythms to an array of pieces by Bach, with the flutist Emi Ferguson virtuosically carrying the upper lines. At another concert, Ferguson joined the pianist Conor Hanick to premiere two

movements from Michael Hersch's evening-length flute-and-piano cycle "scars plummet to the earth"—music of introverted intensity that promises to yield a large-scale AMOC work in the future.

Compositional styles ran a wide gamut at the festival, from the ethereal simplicity of Cassandra Miller's "About Bach" to the riotous, pop-flavored eclecticism of Doug Balliett's mini-opera "Rome Is Falling." Aucoin contributed a new chamber-orchestra song cycle entitled "Family Dinner." This greatly gifted but still developing composer did best when he shook off influences from older colleagues (John Adams, Thomas Adès) and found his own agile, spiky rhythm. The highlight of "Family Dinner" was a quicksilver setting of Frank O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You"; Appleby fired off the text as if it were avant-garde Gilbert and Sullivan.

One crucial member of AMOC missed the Ojai festivities: Bullock withdrew after testing positive for covid. She was to have sung in Winokur's staging of Olivier Messiaen's kaleidoscopic song cycle "Harawi"; no one could assume her role on short notice, though the soprano Ariadne Greif adroitly took up some of Bullock's other festival assignments. The flexibility of the AMOC apparatus enabled a quick substitution for "Harawi." Tines, already scheduled to perform an all-Eastman program, added on his well-travelled conceptual recital "mass," which ranges from Bach to gospel.

These appearances provided fresh evidence that Tines, recently the star of Anthony Davis's "X," at Detroit Opera, is one of the most spellbinding singers before the public today. In the Eastman sequence, he displayed visceral force and ironic intelligence in equal measure; in a rendition of Frederic Rzewski's minimalist classic "Coming Together," he applied a welter of nuances to the spoken text (a letter from the Attica prison inmate Sam Melville). And in "balm," his and Aucoin's elaboration of the spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead," Tines broke Ojai's relaxed mood by recounting a racist slight that he had endured the previous night. In the town park, he reported, a woman had said to him, "I don't like anything about you, but I love your voice."

Ojai fancies itself a progressive place, even if in recent years it has become a playground for the Los Angeles elite. There were grumblings afterward: Did the incident require such a pointed response? Yet Tines was right to speak out, particularly given the awesome dexterity with which he did so. Instead of stopping to tell the dismal story, he *sang* it, improvising vocal lines as the AMOC ensemble vamped behind him. Whatever discomfort he engendered had ebbed away by festival's end, when white-haired spectators were shouting "Stay on it!" and dancing in their seats. Sometimes, politicizing art makes it more beautiful and true. ♦

Published in the print edition of the July 4, 2022, issue, with the headline "Anything Goes."

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Ojai Music Festival Review: Collaborative Creativity

Back to its pre-pandemic vigor, the festival still manages to adapt and amaze

June 13, 2022

By David Mermelstein



*Ojai, Calif.*

The Ojai Music Festival has always been more than the sum of its considerable parts, thanks to its compact duration (little more than a long weekend), eclectic classical programming, embrace of other disciplines (including theater, dance and spoken word), and sustained ability to attract luminaries to its still delightfully rustic outdoor setting—Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland and Pierre Boulez remain the most famous of its annually appointed music directors. Yet this year, something else pervaded, too: a feeling that the center of the classical-music universe, at least from June 9 through 12, was right here.

For the first time since 2019, things at the festival—this year marked the 76th—were largely back to their pre-pandemic state (proof of vaccination and optional masking notwithstanding). And that certainly contributed to the joyous mood of the sizable, albeit not teeming, crowds. So did seeing eminences like the architect Frank Gehry and the composer John Adams milling about

the Libbey Bowl, the primary concert venue. But more than anything else, it was this year's choice of music director, the cheekily named interdisciplinary company AMOC (American Modern Opera Company), that gave the festival its overwhelmingly sanguine spirit—to say nothing of its collaborative ethos. Though Ojai has long entrusted the role of music director to more than one person, that number remained below four until 20 years ago, when the Emerson Quartet was offered the job. In 2009, the instrumental collective Eighth Blackbird took the position, but from then till now the title has been bestowed on just one person per year.



Matthew Aucoin

PHOTO: TIMOTHY TEAGUE

AMOC counts 17 performers (instrumentalists, singers, dancers) within its ranks, bringing a new level of diffusion to Ojai's division of artistic labor. As always at Ojai, creative decisions involve intense collaboration with the festival's artistic director, a job now held once again by Ara Guzelimian, who previously occupied the position between 1992 and 1997. Among his activities between his tenures at Ojai, Mr. Guzelimian served as dean and provost at the Juilliard School in New York, where he encountered as students more than half the future members of AMOC, which was founded in 2017.

Though the composer-conductor Matthew Aucoin and the director-choreographer Zack Winokur are credited as the group's artistic directors, as well as its founders, AMOC rebels against traditional notions of hierarchy. That philosophy extends not to just the company's structure, but also to how it creates and expresses art. So though music courses through all of AMOC's enterprises, dance and theater also figure prominently.

In a festival as densely packed as Ojai is, taking in so much so quickly can result in sensory overload, all the more so when multiple disciplines are involved. But some things leave indelible impressions, no matter how cluttered the brain. A late-morning concert on Friday devoted to the once-neglected Minimalism of Julius Eastman proved unforgettable for both its programming and the conviction of the musicians who performed it—most notably the incomparable bass-baritone Davóne Tines, whose range (musical and dramatic) is equal to his charisma.



Davóne Tines

PHOTO: TIMOTHY TEAGUE

Mr. Tines displayed his mettle that night as well, when a program of his own devising replaced what was to be a festival highlight, a staged version of Olivier Messiaen's daunting song cycle "Harawi" with the lauded soprano Julia Bullock, sadly canceled because she contracted Covid-19. Instead, we got an expanded version of a collection of relatively short works—Bach, Caroline Shaw, Margaret Bonds, Moses Hogan, etc.—titled "Recital No. 1: Mass," usually performed with just piano and voice, but here augmented by cello, percussion and an additional piano. To say that Mr. Tines commanded the stage merely hints at his impact.

With Ms. Bullock absent, his only rival in star power was the celebrated countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, but commitments at the Metropolitan Opera in New York confined his exposure almost exclusively to the final concert late Sunday. Still, Mr. Costanzo wowed, singing music of the Italian Baroque and Philip Glass with equal, thrilling vigor. Yet Mr. Tines staked his own claim on this program, leading the final number: an exuberant, extended performance of Eastman's "Stay On It" that brought all the performers together, including dancers, in something of a farewell love-in.

Of the works that more fundamentally integrated theater and dance, "Open Rehearsal," directed by Bobbi Jene Smith and performed indoors (masks required!) on Friday and Sunday, made the best impression. With obvious debts to Pirandello and other innovators, it was, by design, both a work in progress and a finished product that thoughtfully balanced the antic and the discreetly sublime.

Saturday morning's nearly all-Bach concert performed by Emi Ferguson, AMOC's flutist, and Ruckus, a Baroque ensemble with close ties to AMOC, brought unalloyed satisfaction before the final work, Cassandra Miller's 30-minute string quartet "About Bach," which hinted at transcendence until monotony supplanted it. But nothing marred the excellent pianist Conor Hanick's sensitive Sunday-morning performance of Hans Otte's little-known "The Book of Sounds," which over the course of 65 minutes proved entirely transfixing.





Emi Ferguson with members of AMOC  
PHOTO: TIMOTHY TEAGUE

Similarly apt for this setting was Andrew McIntosh's "Little Jimmy," a large-scale work for two pianists, two percussionists and field recordings documenting in music a campground in the Angeles National Forest. A fully enveloping sonic experience that held listeners rapt on Saturday night, it appears destined for greater exposure. Alas, the festival's big commission, Mr. Aucoin's "Family Dinner," featured on the same program, emerged as unfocused and arbitrary—full of clever moments and novel choices but lacking definition.

With AMOC's boundary-pushing tenure at an end, Ojai has once more proved the most elastic of music festivals. And it seems clear that Mr. Guzelimian intends to continue stretching things.



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## AMERICAN MODERN OPERA COMPANY IMPROVISES A MAGICAL START TO OJAI 2022

by Josef Woodard, June 13, 2022

[American Modern Opera Company Improvises a Magical Start to Ojai 2022 | San Francisco Classical Voice \(sfcv.org\)](https://www.sfcv.org/american-modern-opera-company-improvises-a-magical-start-to-ojai-2022)



Davóne Tines performs at Ojai | *Credit: Timothy Teague*

Despite our high hopes in this ostensibly waning pandemic period, COVID continues to sneak in from the sidelines. It did so on short notice at last weekend's Ojai Music Festival. Just days before the substantive 76th-annual celebration of music of our times, designed and directed by the ambitious, young American Modern Opera Company (AMOC), a key member of the collective, soprano Julia Bullock, had to back out due to a positive COVID test.



That meant we were deprived of the Friday night premiere of a new, semi staged version of Olivier Messiaen's *Harawi*. Also jettisoned was Bullock's planned performance of music by Bob Dylan, John Cage, and Nina Simone.

On the upside, the Friday night slot quickly shifted to a thrilling program in the AMOC catalog, spotlighting another major singer, bass-baritone *Davóne Tines*. He delivered one of the weekend's commanding performances, an integrated program involving music by J.S. Bach and Caroline Shaw and soulful hymn-based material, all titled *Recital No. 1: MASS*.

Founded only in 2017, with Matthew Aucoin and Zack Winokur at the helm, AMOC has quickly established itself as a highly collaborative consortium to listen and watch out for. Its central musical agenda is complemented by elements of poetry, new definitions of opera, and dance, as seen in choreographer Bobbi Jene Smith's bracing and meta-minded *Open Rehearsal* at Ojai.



A moment from American Modern Opera Company's *Open Rehearsal* | Credit: Joshua S. Rose

Crossing cultural and racial borders is important to the group's mission statement, and the Ojai package included such notable ventures as a concert featuring the wonderful Taiwanese American violinist Miranda Cuckson. She built a program around the premiere of *the echoing of tenses*, composer/keyboardist Anthony Cheung's song cycle based on Asian source material.

Echoes of past Ojai Festivals have become central to the presenter's sense of continuity over seven-plus decades. But whereas in the past, that lineage might include music of Ojai luminaries like Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, Olivier Messiaen, and John Adams, this year's events acknowledged the stamp of such contemporary composers/thinkers/jazz musicians as George Lewis, Roscoe Mitchell, and Tyshawn Sorey.

All appeared during the Vijay Iyer-directed 2017 festival. The imaginative strategies for “guided improvisation” works by Lewis and Mitchell were the subject of an 8 a.m. concert on June 10 at the Zalk Theater, with a consort of AMOC folks surrendering themselves persuasively to the moment. Sorey, an unabashedly Morton Feldman-influenced composer, prevailed with his coolly contemplative solo piano work *For James Primosch*.



The crowd in Libbey Bowl on Friday night | *Credit: Timothy Teague*

For longtime visitors here (myself included, going back to the early 1980s), time felt a little askew this weekend, with concerts arriving only nine months after Ojai’s delayed 75th festival last September. Then, John Adams was the returning hero as music director (with Rhiannon Giddens — who also returns in 2023 as music director— bringing in a broader populist audience), but he wisely put the focus on younger composers, including his son, Sam.

This year, Adams was on hand as an innocent, open-eared bystander, and it was interesting, sitting a few rows behind him, to watch his head nod and bob in rhythmic approval when hearing music that had an obvious affinity with his own work. On the Thursday night program, those moments included Eric Wubbels’s thrumming *gretchen am spinnrade* and Aucoin’s feisty, concert-closing *Shaker Dance*.

But that evening’s high point came in the form of two movements from Michael Hersch’s moving *scars plummet to the corners*, for piano and flute (Conor Hanick and Emi Ferguson). The musical trajectory moves from tender to tough to chillingly still and mysterious in its slow, lingering final section. This late-night juncture was one of those magical Ojai moments, when the ambient cricket chorus in Libbey Bowl and a beaming moon overhead seem like interactive elements with the music.



Pianist Conor Hanick and cellist Coleman Itzkoff | *Credit: Timothy Teague*

Minimalist influences and pulses filtered across the 2022 programming, as well as groove-driven pieces from the 1970s and '80s like Frederic Rzewski's *Coming Together*, with Tines intoning the mesmerizing lines of an Attica prisoner who died in that infamous riot. Less well known, but in a similar vein, was German composer Hans Otte's solo piano epic *The Book of Sounds*, which was masterfully played by Hanick.

More significantly, a deserved Ojai welcome was given to the work of reascent composer Julius Eastman, the Black gay individualist in the minimalist world who died too early and too obscure in 1990. Tines naturally embodies and enhances the spirit of Eastman's music, as heard in a late morning tribute titled "EASTMAN," which ranged from the spiritually inclined *Our Father* and *Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* to the deconstructionist anthem *Stay on It* (a longer version of which closed the festival on Sunday night).



# The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## In a Jam-Packed Weekend at Ojai, a Musical Family Gathers

Specializing in energetic interdisciplinary collaborations, the American Modern Opera Company, or AMOC, organized this year's Ojai Music Festival.



*A scene from Bobbi Jene Smith's "Open Rehearsal," with, from left, Jesse Kovarsky, Stephanie Troyak, Yiannis Logothetis, Vinson Fraley and Conor Hanick. Credit Joshua S. Rose*

**By Zachary Woolfe**

June 14, 2022, 12:29 p.m. ET

[In a Jam-Packed Weekend at Ojai, a Musical Family Gathers - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/14/arts/music/ojai-music-festival.html)

OJAI, Calif. — “We are multiple, fractious and free,” a trio of voices sang with mock formality here on Saturday evening. “We call you to the table of a loving family.”

As a mission statement for the 2022 Ojai Music Festival, you could hardly do better. Each year this four-day event is programmed by a different music director — it could be a violinist, a conductor, a composer — who leaves a stamp on the offerings.

This time, the stamp was collective. This fertile, post-bohemian valley north of Los Angeles was swarmed last week by the fast-rising American Modern Opera Company — known as AMOC, pronounced as in running ... well, you know.

Many in the arts these days talk a big game about interdisciplinary collaboration, but few walk the walk like AMOC, which counts composers, choreographers, dancers, singers, instrumentalists and a stage director among its 17 core members. At its best — whether performing a zany new pop musical about the fall of Rome; a witty dance theater piece about rehearsing; or the intense, expansive music of Julius Eastman — AMOC is a party, a communal happening, a family dinner.

Pursuing a vision of opera as free-floating, lightly staged assemblages more than traditional score-and-libretto productions, AMOC works in shifting configurations. Many of those were showcased here last weekend in a range of spaces — inside and out, under the broiling midday sun and, more happily, the mild stars.

How tightknit is this group? As Ojai proved, enough to confidently execute complicated, sprawling structured improvisations by George E. Lewis (skittish) and Roscoe Mitchell (luminous) — at 8 in the morning.



*Emi Ferguson played Bach with Ruckus, a Baroque band that shares members with AMOC, at the Libbey Bowl, the festival's main space. Credit Timothy Teague*

**THERE IS NOTHING IN** music quite like Ojai, now three-quarters of a century old, with that packed morning-to-night-schedule, its variety of spaces and the stalwart curiosity of its audience.

Led by Ara Guzelimian with a steady hand, the festival is Southern California relaxed — T-shirts and shorts, maybe a hoodie at night — but the repertory tends rigorous and recondite. Even the warning that a concert is about to begin isn't the usual docile bells, but a spreading roar of electronics from “Répons” by Pierre Boulez, a tutelary spirit here for decades.

Hypercomplex Boulezian modernism wasn't on offer this year: The composer Matthew Aucoin, who founded AMOC in 2017 with the director Zack Winokur, wrote witheringly in *The New York Review* not long ago about the “supersaturated sameness” of Boulez's music.

Then what was the prevailing style? In keeping with the openness of many young artists now, it was broad. Adaptations of folk music were in — including spirituals, the violinist Keir GoGwilt's feathery fiddling renditions of Scottish ballads, and Aucoin's hoedown “Shaker Dance.”

So was play with texts, including explorations of how singing and spoken word could share space in a musical context. But the biggest new pieces in this vein — Carolyn Chen's collaboration with the poet Divya Victor, and Anthony Cheung's “The Echoing of Tenses” — would benefit from prudent trims.



*Conor Hanick playing Hans Otte's solo piano epic “The Book of Sounds.” Credit Timothy Teague*

**VARIOUS FACETS AND MOODS** of Minimalism and its legacy were represented, including Philip Glass songs and, performed in the middle of Libbey Park, part of Tom Johnson's 1979 solo “Nine Bells.” That featured the percussionist Jonny Allen jogging a precise route around the bells, hitting a gradually evolving riff — sometimes with delicacy, sometimes with violence.



To roiling music, Frederic Rzewski's "Coming Together" (1971) harps on its text, a letter written by an Attica inmate who died in the uprising there, spoken with ironic bravado here by the bass-baritone Davóne Tines, the weekend's most valuable player. A very different definition of the minimal: On Sunday morning, there was a rare opportunity to hear Hans Otte's "The Book of Sounds," a solo piano epic from the late 1970s and early '80s, played by Conor Hanick with control and sensitivity.

The material here is deceptively simple: undulating lines, sometimes slowed to expansive chords and sometimes sped to a Glass-style arpeggiated flood. The harmonies subtly thicken and thin; the emotions remain ambiguous, the mood meditative.

The birds in the trees around the outdoor Libbey Bowl, the festival's main space, added flickers, and acoustical illusions began to emerge from Otte's trance; I could have sworn, near the end, that a mellow horn call was coming out of the piano textures. And on Saturday morning, rotating your head, as the cellist Jay Campbell suggested, brought out different pitches from the densely vibrating mix when he played Catherine Lamb's "Cross/Collapse" (2010), his long drones hovering beside oscillating electronic tones.



*From left, Hanick, Jonny Allen, Garrett Arney and Matthew Aucoin performing Andrew McIntosh's "Little Jimmy." Credit Timothy Teague*

**AS GOOD AS ANYTHING** this weekend was Andrew McIntosh's "Little Jimmy" (2020), a quartet for two pianists and two percussionists that takes its name from a campsite in the San Gabriel Mountains. McIntosh made field recordings there a few months before it was devastated by a fire, and the resulting piece is a subtly rending reflection on the climate crisis, and what can be salvaged from ashes.

Restrained in his deployment of the recordings, McIntosh conjures an enigmatic, shadowy, quietly colorful world, sometimes bone-dry, sometimes softly shimmering. Piano strings are manipulated with fishing line for a metallic whine; bowing a vibraphone while a tubular bell is gently struck ends up sounding like how a shiver feels.

Attending Ojai this year, you might have been convinced that no music was written from about 1800 to 1970. The early-to-contemporary pipeline was in full swing here, with period and modern instruments mixing freely. Composers including Cassandra Miller, Michael Hersch, Kate Soper and Reiko Fütting played with antique styles and fragments; Ruckus, a small Baroque band that shares members with AMOC, was a guest throughout the weekend, joining the flutist Emi Ferguson, her tone silky and tender and her ghostly multiphonics astonishing, in spirited Bach on Saturday morning.

Some of the weekend's collaborations were more sincere than successful. It wasn't clear what sudden, stretching choreography added to Allen's already entrancing movement in "Nine Bells" or in Iannis Xenakis's "Rebonds." There was a whiff of trying-it-out college theater in Chen's "How to Fall Apart" (a disco ball swings; a croissant is thrown) and in the dancer Or Schraiber's "The Cello Player" (a musician carries an armoire on his back; a metronome solemnly ticks).

But "Open Rehearsal," directed by the choreographer and dancer Bobbi Jene Smith, felt more nuanced. An outgrowth of Smith's recent work "Broken Theater," it is a wry, sometimes uproarious and poignant metatheatrical riff on the process of creation.

The performers inhabit archetypes — the moody director, the horny actor, the warring brothers — in charged, wild episodes that suggest auditioning, going through material and putting it onstage. Life and art blur, as do traditional roles: Instrumentalists dance; dancers sing.

The piece had an important absence: The superb soprano Julia Bullock tested positive for Covid just before flying to California. She would have been featured throughout the weekend, and her staged version of Messiaen's "Harawi" promised to be a highlight.



*The bass-baritone Davóne Tines (with the cellist Coleman Itzkoff) performed his “Recital No. 1: Mass” when another singer’s production was canceled. Credit Timothy Teague*

**IT SPEAKS TO AMOC’S** agility and the depth of its bench that it was able to replace “Harawi” with Tines’s “Recital No. 1: Mass,” a blending of soul songs and spirituals with Caroline Shaw’s graceful settings of the words of the Latin Ordinary. (Ariadne Greif valiantly stepped in for Bullock in other pieces.)

Though he sounded tired and muddy in two Bach arias, Tines was radiantly powerful in “Mass,” his voice careening from airy to rock-solid in Moses Hogan’s “Give Me Jesus.” “Mass” charts a path from being lost to being healed — here, by way of Tines’s improvised, preacher-style account of what he described as a racially charged comment from an audience member the night before.

He was also the magnetic center in a Friday morning performance of works by Eastman, the once forgotten and now acclaimed gay, Black composer, that conveyed this music’s mixture of sternness and exhilaration, its ingenuity and malleability.

Tines was commanding in the chanted exhortations of “Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d’Arc.” “Gay Guerrilla,” originally done on four pounding pianos, was here more kaleidoscopic with a more varied ensemble; its quotation of the hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” usually played, took on new potency when Tines belted it. Starting out as a peppy jam, “Stay On It” moved toward a forceful march before drifting into quiet, lilting elegy.

“We call you to the table of a loving family” worked as metaphor — but for AMOC, it was also literal, evoking the meals that are a fixture of the group’s annual Vermont retreats. The line was sung in Aucoin’s “Family Dinner,” given its premiere on Saturday. Billed as a set of mini-concertos evoking collective energy and individual talents, the piece felt like an awkwardly paced work in progress, its mixture of instrumental passages, spoken text and poetry settings still finding its form, its ending an abrupt anticlimax.

The more compelling family dinner was “Rome Is Falling,” Doug Balliett’s brainily bubble-gum, lovably shaggy rundown of ancient history — and its obvious contemporary parallels — reminiscent of “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson” and “Hamilton.” The performers were grinning as much as the audience was.

And, for family dessert, a reprise of “Stay On It” closed the festival early Sunday evening. Presided over by Tines, it was a sweetly dancing, full-ensemble jamboree — like both Ojai and AMOC, multiple, fractious and free.



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## THE ARTISTS RUN WILD AT THIS YEAR'S OJAI FESTIVAL

Jim Farber (SFCV) June 14, 2022

[The Artists Run Wild at This Year's Ojai Festival | San Francisco Classical Voice \(sfcv.org\)](https://www.sfcv.org/the-artists-run-wild-at-this-year-s-ojai-festival)



Julia Eichten and Bret Easterling dance to Ion Ivanovici's *The Danube Waves* | Credit: Timothy Teague

Like the tale of the blind men trying to decipher the vastness of an elephant, the attendees of the 76th-annual Ojai Music Festival were given the challenge of constructing a four-day portrait of the multidisciplinary collective known as AMOC.

The name is a paradoxical acronym. On the one hand it stands for the organization itself — the American Modern Opera Company. At the same time, the word *amok* (its roots in the language of Malaya) describes a condition, to quote Merriam-Webster, “often born out of too much brooding,” where anything can happen.

The artistic identity of AMOC (cofounded in 2017 by composer/musician/conductor Matthew Aucoin and director/choreographer/dancer Zack Winokur) is deeply rooted in a process of collective decision making. Coming together on a farm in rural Vermont, members all have an equal voice. It results in a creative process that Aucoin describes as “deliciously messy!”

Multidisciplinary by design, the exceedingly talented members of AMOC include musicians, dancers, singers, writers, and composers. Its self-described mission is to break down barriers between music, poetry, theater, opera, and dance. As a result, Aucoin told me, the puzzle process of putting together the four full days of Ojai programs “evolved out of hundreds of hours of Zoom meetings.” Even so, no one could have anticipated that at the last minute one of the group’s stars, soprano Julia Bullock, would be forced to cancel when she tested positive for COVID.

Bullock’s loss had a profound impact on the festival that resulted in cancellations and rapidly conceived program changes, including substitute performances by the fine soprano Ariadne Greif. As a result, the first two days of the festival, Thursday and Friday (June 9–10), were decidedly dark and brooding. The one blazing exception was AMOC’s performance of Julius Eastman’s *Stay on It* (part of an all-Eastman program) that showcased the dynamic talent of bass-baritone Davóne Tines.

It was an all-Bach program Saturday morning — featuring the period-instrument ensemble Ruckus and AMOC’s star flutist, Emi Ferguson — that shifted the mood of the festival 180-degrees. Suddenly, there was a tangible sense of joy as the musicians infused Bach’s sonatas, partitas, and preludes with a combination of period precision and jazz-like energy. It inspired the audience and was echoed by a chorus of birds in the trees that surround Libbey Bowl.





Flutist Emi Ferguson and Ruckus | *Credit: Timothy Teague*

Then, like a cloud of Calvinist guilt, the mood was all but extinguished by the 257 repeated measures of Cassandra Miller’s *About Bach* for string quartet. To be fair, had the piece been performed in a more intimate (air-conditioned) setting, its series of crystalline repetitions might have succeeded brilliantly. But to be forced to endure it under the blazing sun was, as one audience member observed, “like being condemned to purgatory.”

### **A Family Dinner**

When the members of AMOC gather at their farm, dinner is a communal ritual that begins with a prayer of thanks. So, it’s not surprising that one of the most eagerly awaited premieres of the festival was Matthew Aucoin’s *Family Dinner*, which would feature the full musical and vocal forces of AMOC.

From the initial chiming of bells that summons everyone to the table to a succession of mini-concerto “toasts,” *Family Dinner* is a multi-voiced celebration. “What do you wish to say?” the host inquires, and the responses are wide-ranging, from poetic and profound to chit-chatty and raucous. These multiple personalities provide Aucoin a perfect opportunity to employ a wide variety of orchestral and vocal styles (both sung and spoken). Dinner with AMOC can feel like a movie, as it does in the movement “Meridian Response,” droll with New York sophistication in “Frank O’Hara’s Toast.” There’s even a wink to John Adams (who was in the audience and programmed last year’s festival), titled “Song of Gratitude to Be Back in California.”

*Family Dinner* offered Aucoin a chance to go for broke, to push the envelope, but he never really takes it. He’s a composer who seems to be always watching over his own shoulder to make sure

he doesn't take unnecessary chances and risk offense or criticism. It's a self-protective shell he needs to break out of. And if there was ever an opportunity for Aucoin to run amok, this was it.

Last year's 75th Ojai Festival celebrated the next generation of California, specifically Berkeley, composers. This year focused predominantly on East Coast academia. There was, however, one distinctly West Coast composition, Andrew McIntosh's *Little Jimmy*. Its interpolation of natural-sound field recordings (made in the San Gabriel Mountains) evoked the spirit of John Luther Adams. Composed before and after the Bobcat Fire swept through the Little Jimmy campsite of the title, the work begins rhapsodically to the tones and overtones of bells, marimba, and string-bowed pianos. This first-movement idyll (with its recorded birdsong) suddenly gives way to a fire alarm of pounded metal sheets and the sense of an immolation of flames. A very different sense of place returns in the third movement, with recorded sounds McIntosh made after the fire as nature tries to heal.

### Breaking Loose

All the audience knew was that they were invited to a free public concert Sunday called "Dance in the Park." It would feature Julia Eichten and Bret Easterling dancing to *The Danube Waves*, by Ion Ivanovici. It was described as "a celebratory happening of tenderness, togetherness, and fiery joy." No one could have imagined that *Jurassic Park* was about to come to Libbey Park.



The dancing triceratops in Libbey Park | Credit: Jim Farber

As the audience settled in beneath the spreading bows of an ancient oak, two gaily clad triceratops, one pink, one blue, slowly insinuated themselves into the audience. They sat behind patrons oblivious to their presence. But when one of the playful creatures ambled up to festival director Ara Guzelimian, a concerned security guard interposed himself, asking, "Is he supposed



to be here?” What followed was a joyous, frolicking pas de deux of love, extinction, and human evolution — Charles Darwin meets *Fantasia*. It was an Ojai moment of the first order.

But that was just the beginning. At a second free event/concert, the members of AMOC performed the world premiere of a rock opera on historical themes, *Rome Is Falling*, something “Paul McCartney-ish,” with music, lyrics, narration, and lead guitar riffs by Doug Balliett. This fully staged production featured the musicians and singers of AMOC, the world’s only period-instrument rock band (Ruckus), and the Ojai Festival Children’s Choir. Think of it as *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* meets *Jesus Christ Superstar*, performed by Monty Python.

There was exuberant mugging from Davóne Tines, the soaring soprano of Ariadne Greif (filling in for Julia Bullock), and, fresh from his performances at the Metropolitan Opera in Philip Glass’s *Akhmaten*, countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo as a Roman emperor with a fetish for chickens. It was all great fun.



The premiere of *Rome Is Falling* | Credit: Timothy Teague

Sadly, the festival’s final concert was meant to feature Bullock singing *She Is Asleep*, by John Cage and “Four Women” by Nina Simone. The cancellation of these works threw off the balance of a program that then relied too heavily on the inconsistent voice of Costanzo in a series of Baroque arias and Philip Glass excerpts.

But all's well that ends well. To complete the concert, the entire ensemble of AMOC dancers came on stage for a performance of Franz Schubert's "Ständchen" (from the company's *Open Rehearsal*, directed by Bobbi Jene Smith). Then, with a reprise of Julius Eastman's *Stay on It*, the dancers pranced arm-in-arm up the aisles and into the sunset. The 76th-annual Ojai Music Festival had come to an end.

# Los Angeles Times

## At the Ojai Music Festival, the sublime and the shocking

Mark Swed, Music Critic

June 15, 2022

[Ojai Music Festival: AMOC, Davóne Tines give us much to consider - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/music/story/2022-06-15/ojai-music-festival-2022)



Davóne Tines, center, leading Julius Eastman's "Stay on It," with members of AMOC and Ruckus to close the 2022 Ojai Music Festival at Libbey Bowl, on June 12, 2022.  
(Timothy Teague / Ojai Festival )

Like most theater, only more deliriously so, opera is not the art of happy families.

But there is American Modern Opera Company — a.k.a., and for good reason, AMOC. And there is the Ojai Music Festival. Both present themselves as happy families. So much for the so-called Anna Karenina principle, based on Tolstoy's famous opening line: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." There is nothing else like AMOC.

This Utopian collective of 17 extraordinary artists happily reinventing opera was the communal music director last weekend for the 75th anniversary of this ever-quixotic festival.

The weekend was far from untroubled, though. What family gathering dare be? Room had to be made for anger, as well as sweet humor and contagious exuberance. Conviviality was served in large portions — the idea of a shared dinner was an ongoing metaphor for how AMOC operates and also how it might present concerts — as was an inspirational sense of cooperation and support among the performers. But, of course, 17 stellar cooks are just as capable of ruining a dinner as they are of making an incomparable feast.

AMOC prides itself in being unclassifiably multidisciplinary. Summarizing the ambitious 18 programs that the collective produced between Thursday night and Sunday afternoon would miss the point. Works were by more than 50 composers, ranging over the past millennium. Music, dance and theater were hyphenated in all reasonably possible ways.

The collective was founded by the composer-poet-pianist-conductor-essayist and former Los Angeles Opera artist in residence Matthew Aucoin and director Zack Winokur in 2017 as an occasional refuge from the artistically anesthetizing commercial classical music business. Such stars as soprano Julia Bullock, bass-baritone Davóne Tines and countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo signed on. Bassist Doug Balliett, who teaches a course on the Beatles at the Juilliard School and writes cantatas for Sunday church services, as well as wacky pop operas, is in a class of his own. Three dancer-choreographers mean dance will never be far away.

A gig family guarantees that stuff happens. Bullock tested positive for COVID-19 as she was about to board a plane in Munich for L.A. The soprano — who made her unforgettable Ojai debut 11 years ago while still a student of Dawn Upshaw, that year's music director — was to have been the festival's starriest attraction. That meant canceling the premiere of a staging by Winokur of Olivier Messiaen's seldom-heard ecstatic song cycle, "Harawi," that was to have been the festival's biggest event. The premiere will now be next month at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence with a U.S. tour, including L.A., possibly next spring.

Coincidentally, another Upshaw student at Ojai in 2011, Ariadne Greif, was able to stand in impressively at the last minute for some of Bullock's repertory. For the Saturday night spot, [Tines](#), a regular partner of Bullock's, reprised his stunning solo performance of a racially pertinent "Recital No. 1: Mass" he had given last fall at First Congregational Church in L.A. This time, though, it was startlingly different.

The main events in the Libbey Bowl in the center of town are all livestreamed and permanently archived on the festival website for free. Free community events are in Libbey Park and nearby venues, as well as more exclusive performances further afield. The concert day starts at 9 a.m. with a meditative concerto and can run to 10 p.m. or later. To take it all in in person requires running amok. And it's often hot.

In the spirit of AMOC, I elected a hybrid festival. Thursday night and Friday, I watched the streams. Saturday and Sunday were live. Virtual cannot replace the experience of being in the place and the moment in this land of lost horizons. But there is an intimacy on the small screen.

Festival themes did emerge. On Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, big Bowl programs were essentially music making around the dinner table. Performers took turns demonstrating their wares, with wonders to behold. The music was all over the map. With one notable exception, there were no solos, only ensembles of two or more.



That exception was Tines, who began the first program with a mesmeric solo intonation of Julius Eastman's "Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc," a recitation in rage and awe of saints' names. Tines has been a major force in the revival of Eastman, who died in obscurity in 1990, identifying with a great Black, gay vocalist and composer who fatally struggled with identity. This year, Eastman became a bookend of the festival. His adamant "Stay on It" was a shouting festival finale for all the company, led by Tines beating the bass drum.

Staying on it was what AMOC did. Friday morning, an all-Eastman program featured Tines and was directed by Winokur. Beginning with sensual religiosity — "Our Father" and "Buddha" — it turned to the thrillingly, unstoppably repetitive "Gay Guerrilla," the quest being to illuminate body and spirit as one and the same.

While his music wasn't featured in Tines' "Mass," Eastman was the evident patron saint of this search for Jesus through music new and old, Black and white, queer and straight, Bach and Sam Cooke. For the spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead," Tines broke off to intone like a preacher an incident that had happened the night before as he left the park.



Davóne Tines in 'Mass' at the Ojai Music Festival on June 10, 2022.  
(Timothy Teague / Ojai Festival)

He described "a very old woman" telling him that she didn't like anything about him but that she loved his voice. Tines — who is a Black, gay, politically challenging and profoundly probing singer — repeated this over and over, each time with more outrage and hurt. He did not answer her and instead walked away. Tines asked for the balm to be provided by her people, the audience from which she came.

Seen on the screen, this proved powerful. The next day in Ojai, it seemed to be all anybody could talk about; Tines sent shock waves through a primarily white audience that has throughout the festival's history prided itself on artistic and spiritual open-mindedness.

Clearly, though, a Chekhovian moment had occurred of things falling apart. Added to this was Aucoin and crew's strong preference for somber poetry, which would frequently be read or set to music, allowing for a regular flow of darkness.

In Carolyn Chen's appropriately titled "How to Fall Apart" at the Besant Hill School, dance responded to an environment on the inevitable downslide (there go Ojai's turtles) combined with slight dalliance from violinist Keir GoGwilt and cellist Jay Campbell. AMOC's other cellist, Coleman Itzkoff, had his moment in a theater and dance piece created by Or Schraiber.

In the challenging dance piece "Open Rehearsal" at the Ojai Valley School, directed by Bobbi Jene Smith, the dance and musical selections were varied, violent, sexual and embracing. At one point, GoGwilt played Bach's well-known D Minor Chaconne the second Partita for solo violin to a dance that went through as many emotional ups and downs as Tines' performance. Equally rapt and raw was an unexpected dance to tenor Paul Appleby's sensitive singing of Schubert's "Ständchen," accompanied by Conor Hanick.

The festival centerpiece was the premiere of Aucoin's "Family Dinner" on Saturday night, a series of musical toasts as tiny concertos for different AMOC-ers, catching what are likely the personal qualities of each. Aucoin, whose opera "Eurydice" was a mixed bag when L.A. Opera staged it a month before the first COVID shutdown, has a lively, arresting style when writing for a gang that takes its cues from a wealth of possibilities.

AMOC shares some members with the East Coast early music group Ruckus. A program "About Bach" featured a glorious flutist, Emi Ferguson, who took Bach pieces to pretty places before making them into a ruckus, jazzed up. This was followed by an abstract modernist violin solo, Reiko Fütting's "tanz.tanz," arrestingly played by Miranda Cuckson, and Cassandra Miller's "About Bach." The latter was a string quartet that was about very little, Cuckson's birdlike violin singing in its highest pitches, the other players slightly varying a simple idea for a half-hour. In the blazing noon sun, the piece all but melted all the Bach that went before it, which was, if you let it be, a very nice sensation.

What else? Hanick passed a meditative Sunday morning hour with the quiet mystery of Hans Otte's not-much-happening "Book of Sounds." Balliett pulled out the electric bass for his goofy opera "Rome Is Falling" in the Libbey Park gazebo, delighting those passing by. Costanzo whisked his way to the festival after singing Philip Glass' "Akhnaten" at the Metropolitan Opera in New York on Friday night. On Sunday he dazzled in bits of neglected Baroque (Vivaldi and Sigismondo d'India) and neglected Glass ("Liquid Days" and an excerpt from "1000 Airplanes on the Roof").

To carry the dinner analogy one final step further, AMOC really does run amok in its reinvention of opera by throwing whatever the 17 artists cook up against the wall to see what sticks. They all want to get into the act, so percussionist Jonny Allen's virtuosic Xenakis percussion solo was danced by Julia Eichten. Whether it needed to be or not was probably never a question.

Everything for AMOC is sacred in that it needs to perform at the highest level, but nothing is so sacred that it can't be rethought musically, socially, racially, sexually, theatrically, physically.

The danger is that the collective can lose collectiveness by tempting an excess of individuality in order to stand out from the crowd. AMOC is a big, happy family, after all. Something's got to give from time to time. But the safety net is that this is a family as support group and balm-giver in a profession and society where mean competitiveness and all-around unhappiness is all too common.

Next year, Rhiannon Giddens will be artistic director.



## Review | A Wrap on the Ojai Music Festival

### New Music Village Beat, Squared

By Josef Woodard

Thu Jun 16, 2022 | 8:40am

[Review | A Wrap on the Ojai Music Festival - The Santa Barbara Independent](#)

For all its worldly trappings, as an annual gathering point for internationally-respected musicians composers, conductors, plus visitors and press from near and far, the unique power of the Ojai Music Festival ([ojaifestival.org](http://ojaifestival.org)) is partly rooted in its “village” concept. As the cliché goes, it “takes one” to pull all the festival pieces together and it is one, a golden west coast destination spot.

To that list, we can add that it hosted a village unto itself this past weekend, in the form of the self-contained but always collaboration-eager young NYC-based group American Music Opera Company (AMOC\*). After 75 years of one or two visiting music directors each year, this was the first time a group was invited — by executive director Ara Guzelimian — to take over the Ojai Fest “village.” They took on the challenge, with glee, lateral thinking, imagination, and energy.

Founded in 2017 by Matthew Aucoin and Zack Winokur, AMOC\* served up an unusually thick, maybe too thick, schedule of concerts and modern dance — such as the powerful, fourth wall-minded Open Rehearsal. The token opera was Doug Balliett’s silly, and thankfully short, comic pop opera number Rome is Falling, in the Libbey Park gazebo. In all, AMOC\* created a rich if rambling, smorgasbord-ish self-portrait of what they’re about. This smart, artful traveling circus came out west and impressed.

The late Julius Eastman, a gay black renegade minimalist who died in relative obscurity in 1990, has enjoyed belated attention in the contemporary music scene in recent years and had his spotlight in Ojai this year. The festival opened with should-be superstar bass-baritone Davóne Tines intoning the hypnotic a cappella Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d’Arc, and closed on Sunday evening with Stay On It, with an all-Eastman program on Friday morning. That five-work set showcased the composer’s striking Gay Guerrilla, a rough, renegade minimalist masterpiece.

## TINES TIME

Ojai 2022's major setback was the absence of trailblazing soprano Julia Bullock, laid low by COVID just days before the festival's start. Without her, the festival had to sideline the major new semi-staging of Olivier Messiaen's song cycle *Harawi* and Messiaen was missed in the program's overall balance.

By serendipitous happenstance, though, Friday's substitution cast a deserved spotlight on the truly remarkable and flexible Tines, in a suite-like tapestry of Carolyn Shaw's *No. 1: MASS*, J.S. Bach, Tyshawn Sorey, and re-arranged gospel/spiritual settings. Clearly, Friday night was Tines' night, and a high point of the festival.

Tines, it so happens, has been a major presence in the 805 just within a few months, starting with the innovative musical theater invention *Everything Rises*, created with violinist Jennifer Koh, which had its world premiere at Campbell Hall in April. Ironically, one sub-theme of that piece, concerning the odd tension of the classical world's audience and patronage system and people of color, was sadly cross-referenced in Ojai. In the midst of the reconfiguring hymn "Balm in Gilead," Tines slipped into preacher mode, relaying his experience the night before of having a woman tell him "I don't like anything about you, but I love your voice."

Apart from the higher-profiled evening fare, such as the Saturday night focus on the multi-gifted composer-conductor Aucoin's double shot of works (including the world premiere of his prodigious if unanchored sampler plate *Family Dinner*) there were great reasons to get up early. Friday at Zalk Theater, a contingent of game AMOC\* admirably took on the organized improvisation schemes of black jazz/new music titans George Lewis and Roscoe Mitchell (both were in Ojai during the 2017 festival, directed by Vijay Iyer). Saturday morning cellist Jack Campbell (the "C" in the JACK Quartet) entranced us on the theme of one 45-minute note—albeit with a roving rainbow of microtonal variations and beats-between-notes, courtesy of composer Catherine Lamb's cross/collapse.

On Sunday morning, pianist Conor Hanick (on the faculty of the Music Academy of the West) gave what, to these ears, was a clear festival highlight — a rare and sensitive performance of German composer Hans Otte's complete hour-plus solo piano work *The Book of Sounds*. Somehow, Otte ventures from his cooler-headed Minimalist style to tonal detours, with influences of Messiaen, Satie and even a touch of his compadre Karlheinz Stockhausen in the almost mystical mix.

Hanick also captivated with his Tyshawn Sorey's new *For James Primrosch*, commissioned by the Music Academy. The dreamy-stately piece again reveals Sorey's unapologetic debt to hero Morton Feldman, but to artful, next-generation ends.

## COME EARLY, COME ANEW



AMOC | Credit: Courtesy

I heard a DJ on KCSB describe the Ojai Festival as “extremely avant-garde,” which is by now an untruth. In recent years, the festival has strived to balance its own deep commitment to contemporary and experimental music with sounds from other shores, idioms and earlier “serious” music periods. Last year’s ear-friendly John Adams-directed program featured [Rhiannon Giddens](#) — slated as next year’s music director, in a move obviously geared towards luring a more general audience.

This year, the connection between early and new — a central tenet in AMOC\* land — reared its head in the “About Bach” program.” AMOC\*-linked group Ruckus played new arrangements of Bach Flute Sonatas (lovely, except for two horrific jazzing-up-Bach movements), capped off with Cassandra Miller’s fascinating *About Bach*, a hypnotic and vaguely Arvo Pärt-reminiscent reframing of Bach’s famed *Chaconne in D*.

A highlight of Thursday night’s program — and the festival — gently-moved from Michael Hersh’s profound, mind-altering flute-piano piece *Scars Plummet to the Corners* followed by the composer’s arrangement of music by Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625). In short, *new* met *early* in Ojai this year, and got along famously.

Sunday’s closer featured a menu of off-radar Baroque music by Ruckus, featuring counter-tenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, and idle spritzers of Phillip Glass – making the critical in-house point of Minimalism’s sympathies with early music. It all closed with Eastman’s *Stay On It*, in which all musicians and dancers get down on it, in alternately ecstatic and entropic ways, grooving on the work’s sly soul riff, dissolving into disassembled chaos and locking back into the riff/groove. Rinse, repeat, recharge. As in life.



# Ojai Music Festival – Julius Eastman

By Paul Muller  
June 19, 2022

The 75th anniversary edition of the Ojai Music Festival opened on June 9 and ran through June 12, 2022. A full program was scheduled by Music Director Zack Winokur including 17 core artists, 20 collaborators and participation by the American Modern Opera Company (AMOC). A wide variety of music was planned, from J.S. Bach to Andrew McIntosh and included a world premier by Matthew Aucoin. The Ojai weather was perfect and a sizable crowd surged in and around Libbey Park, almost as if the pandemic had never happened.

The Friday morning concert, titled *Eastman*, was given over entirely to the works of Julius Eastman and featured cellist Seth Parker Woods with five other musicians from AMOC, all led by director Zack Winokur. Davóne Tines, bass-baritone, wrote that each collaborator in the ensemble made a commitment to “...meet weekly, for over a year, to discover and digest Julius Eastman’s work, share personal stories about what his absence from our educations has meant, play his music and the music of his contemporaries, and build a collective knowledge and informed performance practice together. This work has culminated in more than just a concert, but a way of working collegially and collaboratively – with care and holistic engagement of material that seeks to honor it through deep conceptualization. This is our effort to pay homage,”

Julius Eastman was gay, Black and a composer of new music at a time when none of these things were popular. He died too young and penniless. Eastman’s long and difficult struggles might naturally be expected to inform his music with a certain anger and exasperation. The genius of this concert, however, was that of the five pieces selected for performance, the first four were grounded in a spirituality that illuminates Eastman’s music in a new and compelling way. This, along with the extraordinary dedication of the ensemble to thoroughly explore this music through extensive rehearsal, resulted in a truly memorable performance.

The first piece on the program was *Our Father* and, although one of Eastman’s last works, was the perfect invocation. Davóne Tines deep voice led with a powerful chant accompanied by the double bass and cello. The feeling was almost medieval with long sustained tones and spare harmonies that would have been at home in any cathedral. Eastman’s formative years were spent singing in church, and this influence was clearly very strong, even in his later career. *Budda* followed, a more evocative piece with soft piano notes and long, extended tones in the other instruments punctuated by pizzicato notes in the double bass. The vocal line was wordless and consisted of sustained tones. The lovely harmonies that formed give this piece an exotic and transcendental feeling.

*Gay Guerrilla* was next, opening with solemn, repeating phrases in the piano that evoke an air of expectation. Soon, four hands on the piano built up the density and tension. The piece proceeds in a general crescendo, and as the other instruments of the ensemble enter, there is a definite minimalist vibe. The sound turns more dramatic as the extraordinary bass voice of Davóne Tines enters in the lowest possible register, adding a sense of the ominous to the already anxious feel in the ensemble. The playing is expressive, yet disciplined, even as the drama builds. The dynamic increases and the entire ensemble is now engaged in full voice – the volume developed by such a small group is impressive. Dissonance creeps in, adding menace to the texture. The bass voice enters, again in a very low register, evoking an almost Biblical sense of judgment.

As the piece proceeds from this point, the intensity rises and falls, but the dynamic is always building with the sound becoming almost primal at times. The bass voice enters to dominate, quoting the text of “A Mighty Fortress” with all the power and immediacy of Luther’s original hymn. The ensemble is now at full cry and along with the deep bass vocal, the feeling becomes one of great strength. *Gay Guerrilla* is not animated by political activism or anger, but rather by the immense power of Eastman’s inner spiritual resources – a true masterpiece.

*Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d’ Arc* followed, perhaps the most overtly religious piece in the program. Davóne Tines again leads the way, chanting a series of repeating phrases: “Saint Michael said”, Saint Catharine said”, “Joan speak boldly.” The impact of Tine’s strong voice increases as these phrases are repeated over and over, sometimes singly and sometimes connected together. The accompaniment is all but submerged by the mighty words; this is praying that would be at home in any church. Eastman appeals to the saint directly, as the program notes state: “Dear Joan, I have dedicated myself to the liberation of my own person firstly. I shall emancipate myself from the materialistic dreams of my parents; I shall emancipate myself from the bind of the past and the present, I shall emancipate myself from myself.” Written just before he became homeless, *Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d’ Arc* is further evidence of Eastman’s remarkable inward strength.

*Stay On It* finished the concert, and this was an inspired bit of programming. One of Eastman’s earlier works, it is upbeat and optimistic, fueled by a relentless improvisational joy. The ensemble was bouncy, but precise, with sunny repeating phrases and a pleasing groove. A strong drum beat added to the intensity of the texture as the bass voice loudly proclaimed “Stay On It!”; one could only marvel at Davóne Tines vocal stamina. At about the midpoint of the piece, the rhythms became syncopated and irregular, and “Stay On It” is now heard as encouragement. The ensemble then resumes with its initial energy, reaching an almost Caribbean level of exuberance. This cycle of musical disassembly and recovery recurs so that “Stay On It!” becomes an outright exhortation. When heard through the lens of the previous Eastman pieces in this concert program, *Stay On It* becomes a statement of the composer’s dedication to his art, ‘staying on it’ despite the many challenges he encountered.

The group of musicians performing this concert at the 2022 Ojai Music Festival are based in Los Angeles and have demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to the music of Julius Eastman. This level of dedication and expertise deserves a wider audience – we can only hope that the larger performance venues in Southern California will schedule them soon.