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Ojai Music Festival Review: Rhiannon Giddens Leads by Example Mirroring the career of its music director, the 77-year-old festival continues to defy geographic and genre-based boundaries, from East to West and folk to opera

By David Mermelstein

June 12, 2023

Rhiannon Giddens might strike some as an uncharacteristic choice to be the annual Ojai Music Festival's music director. She is only the fourth woman to hold the title not in partnership with a man, and one of its few nonwhite leaders. But well beyond her sex and racial heritage, which includes white, black and American Indian ancestors, Ms. Giddens is a boundary breaker, a quality this 77-year-old festival has variously celebrated since its inception.

Ojai remains primarily a classical-music jamboree with an emphasis on newer works. Ms. Giddens, on the other hand, and despite her early training as an opera singer at the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, defies neat description as a musician. She is still most widely known as a roots artist. In addition to singing, she performs on fiddle and banjo and cofounded the now-defunct Carolina Chocolate Drops, among other achievements—like being selected as a MacArthur Fellow in 2017 and sharing this year's Pulitzer Prize in music with Michael Abels for their opera "Omar." All of which demonstrates that her vibrant, infectious creativity will not be contained by categories.

And so it was on Friday night, when Ms. Giddens shared the rustic stage at the outdoor Libbey Bowl with her musical (and life) partner Francesco Turrisi on piano in an evening of eclectic song (and the occasional solo-piano piece composed by Mr. Turrisi). A sort of *al fresco* cabaret, the program featured Ms. Giddens in a host of vocal guises, all delivered with extraordinary heart, paying tribute to Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters, as well as singing in Italian, Spanish, even Farsi and Japanese. And if her "La Vie en Rose" (sung in French) wasn't exactly idiomatic, her slightly tweaked rendition of Paul Simon's "American Tune" brought many in the audience (including me) to the brink of tears.

More typical for Ojai was Saturday night's premiere of "Omar's Journey," a truncated concert version of "[Omar](#)" crafted specially for this festival. I did not see "Omar" in any of its four fully staged productions to date, but I found this condensed take on the true story of an educated African Muslim forced into American bondage in the early 19th century to be disappointingly didactic and inert, even with Ms. Giddens's brief spoken interjections assisting the narrative. The six vocal soloists, including Ms. Giddens as the slave Julie and the tenor Limmie Pulliam as the sympathetic title character, could not rescue the

musically bland, textually clumsy material. The one highlight was a tender aria sung by Ms. Giddens's character fondly recalling the father from whom she was forcibly separated.

Music in all or part derived from Eastern, rather than solely Western, traditions has long been an Ojai staple, exposing many festivalgoers to instruments, and scores, largely unfamiliar to them. This year was no exception. But the impression may have been greater given Ms. Giddens's appointment in 2020 as artistic director of the Silkroad Ensemble, the famed East-meets-West cooperative founded by, and long associated with, the cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Including Ms. Giddens, eight of the featured performers at this year's festival are also members of Silkroad, including the Chinese-born *pipa* player Wu Man. With her lute-like instrument, she lent authenticity and authority to an embellished performance at the Ojai Valley School on Friday afternoon of Tan Dun's "Ghost Opera," a chamber piece from 1994 composed for her and string quartet—the Attacca Quartet superbly filled that role this time. The score also requires manipulation of water and paper, as well as vocal interjections, all augmenting the work's haunting atmosphere. But here a dancer and a lot of extraneous movement for the players were added, stifling the work's delicate textures instead of enhancing them.

More successful was Ms. Wu's appearance earlier that day, closing the morning program at the Libbey Bowl with Lei Liang's "Vis-à-vis" in duet with the percussionist Steven Schick, himself an Ojai Festival music director in 2015. The piece was an exciting study in contrasts—a battery of struck instruments vs. a single plucked one; a standing performer running about vs. a seated one—but there were also plenty of surprises, especially from Ms. Wu, who could, impressively, make what emanated from her instrument sound as though tins cans were being dragged through gravel.

Two others on instruments not typically heard in the classical concert hall also achieved outsize impact: the Iranian-Kurdish Kayhan Kalhor (playing the *kamancheh*, a spiked fiddle bowed like a cello) and the Senegalese Seckou Keita (playing the *kora*, a West African string instrument that's part harp, part lute but more than the sum of its parts). Each performed solo during the festival, mesmerizing audiences, but a highlight of the final concert on Sunday evening was their pairing in improvisatory music, with the former typically stock-serious and the latter almost never without a beaming smile and his head thrown back.

Similar to last year's festival, when the collective AMOC was in charge, it all ended with a musical group-hug, a jam session of disparate talents united in purpose, sending both themselves and the crowd home on a high note.



Rhiannon Giddens Curates Ojai. Part I

Spiritual and Historic Journey

By: Susan Hall - Jun 13, 2023

Rhiannon Giddens curated the Ojai Music Festival this year. She often sings “I shall not be moved.” And yet, in the strong force you feel in her wake, you know and feel she is moving and you are moved. Giddens is fond of the double and triple entendre. For four days we are sailing with her and we are also in her wake.

The list of awards she’s won is familiar. If you're unaware, just scroll through the list in your mind and you can check most of them. She does not like the word genius which the MacArthur uses.

Yet Giddens does not feel modest. Instead, you get a refreshing sense of direct contact. She is respectful and adventuresome, mixing feeling and knowledge into a song, a pluck of the banjo or even an opera.

Ojai gives artists much latitude, and Giddens presses the boundaries of performance.

Her deep concern, as a mixed-race American, is to flesh out our American story. For so long we have suppressed the knowledge of slavery's impact on human beings. As Giddens says, slaves were not put on boats to ride out in the Middle Passage. People were. They ended up slaves in America when they were auctioned off on our shores.

In Georgia today, on a new plantation, the auctioning off of a woman and her baby is re-created. The auctioneer says the purchaser has an option: buy the woman with her baby or without. Watching the ritual, we cannot help but feel the woman's pain at the notion that her newborn will soon be taken from her.

This year, Giddens and her collaborator Michael Abels, another mixed-blood American and familiar to filmgoers as the creator of scores for Jordan Peele, including the remarkable “Get Out,” tackled the story

of Omar bin Said, a Muslim from Senegal who was captured and shipped to America at age 37, and survived here by adhering to his faith, despite the requirement of writing the 23rd Psalm over and over: 'The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want,' cannot suppress Allah.

The Spoleto Festival had come to Giddens with the small autobiography Omar bin Said had written. He died in North Carolina in 1864. Giddens, a North Carolina native, was appalled that she did not know his story. She is a person inclined to say "yes" when someone comes to her with an idea, and she said "yes" again to Spoleto. She was going to make sure Omar's story was widely known.

Covid was a horror, she acknowledges, but one which gave her an extended opportunity to work with Abels on What's App. The shutdown gave Omar the opera quiet gestation time.

If we are to flesh out our story, it is experiencing Omar's. It may help us if not not understand at least appreciate what Black slaves have suffered in this country. And also how they survived.

When Abels and Giddens talk about the tree images and rootedness in the opera, it is hard not to see a rope hanging from a tree branch and the triangular peaks of those white caps gathered in the dark of night to take their version of justice into their own hands.

What is fascinating about artists today like Giddens, Julia Bullock, Davone Tines and Curtis Stewart among others is that they are classically trained, highly educated and also technically superior. They bring this mix to performing arenas. They are not going to be told by a big business music organization what to do.

That someone like Clive Gillenson at Carnegie can bring these artists into the iconic Hall is a tribute to him. Davone Tines got up on the stage for his debut there and told this story: He was sitting on a hill in Vermont chatting with a fellow artist who asked him why he didn't sing in Carnegie Hall. Tines replied: Why would I want to sing there? Gillenson provided the answer. The Met Opera brass, reading Tines on social media where he claimed they were racist, refused to hire him. Different strokes for different folks.

Giddens is an Oberlin graduate. There she sang Manon, among other traditional roles in the opera canon. She returned home after college and made a mark in the Carolina Chocolate Drops, bringing to sound-light the folk songs of Blacks in the region which had been unearthed. She performed with Chocolate Drop Justin Robinson on fiddle at Ojai.

Some say Giddens is a scholar. She is deeply thoughtful but claims that others point her onto virginal paths. (This is an adjective you wouldn't deploy after you hear her take on Alberta Hunter's "The Handyman").

Giddens is extremely generous in her praise of her collaborators. She always picks people who are more talented than she is, she claims.

The young cellist Karen Ouzounian is a case in point. She performed often at this year's Ojai. Most striking was the role she was given in the ensemble performing a staged chamber version of the Omar opera, *Omar's Journey*, commissioned by Ojai. She is not a show off, but you could not help hearing her musical lines and the vigor and passion of her delivery as the opera progressed.

Lunching with Ouzounian's husband the composer Lembit Beecher in 2017, we got around to the subject of an artist's development. I noted that after the technical demands had been mastered, the next phase was listening. He said at the time that this was a realization Karen had just come to. We hear its rich results in Ojai.

Mazz Swift was another standout among standouts in Ojai. She is a Silk Road artist. She says: "Since I was a little kid, the sound of the violin has always been attractive to me. I think something about the soaring melodies of the Romantic period was what first caught my attention. As soon as I found out what a violin was, and that a violinist played the violin, I went around telling everyone I met that I was a violinist — forcing my parents to eventually get me a violin and some lessons! It was meant to be for sure!"

Her riveting rendition of Carlos Simon's *Between Worlds* concluded the work. *Between Worlds* is a selection of four four-minute works for violin, viola, cello and double bass. Although each work is written to be performed sorrowfully at the start, Swift rapidly took us into a frenzy that could only be called joyful.

Ojai is always an ear-opener.

https://www.berkshirefinearts.com/06-13-2023_rhiannon-giddens-curates-ojai-part-i.htm

Handed Festival Reins, Multifaceted Musician Pushes Its Boundaries

By Rick Schultz June 14, 2023



OJAI, Calif. — During her vocal recital at the 77th annual [Ojai Music Festival](#) at the outdoor [Libbey Bowl](#) on June 9, the eclectic Grammy-winning folk singer, multi-instrumentalist, and musical polymath [Rhiannon Giddens](#) offered the sold-out audience some simple advice: “Surround yourself with people way better than you.”

As Ojai’s music director (a different one is selected annually), Giddens applied her words to a festival (June 8-11) that often proved stimulating. As usual, the long weekend was loaded with talks, pop-up concerts, and free community events in Libbey Park, some of them courtesy of percussionist and former music director [Steven Schick](#).

Giddens and [Francesco Turrisi](#), her partner and musical collaborator — a Sicilian whose specialties are jazz piano and early music — intriguingly mixed genres, happily and sometimes successfully ignoring perceived musical borders.

But that kind of thing is usual for Ojai, which prides itself on pushing the musical envelope. What wasn't usual was Giddens's brief forays into connections between music and the history of race and injustice in America — our shared dark secret.

The Friday-night recital got off to a serious start with the haunting ballad "At the Purchaser's Option," with Giddens, a conservatory-trained opera singer, bringing us emotionally into a woman and her baby's horrifying plight on a slave-auction block.

Along with love songs, some sung in Italian and Spanish, Giddens offered "Underneath the Harlem Moon," a 1930s song associated with [Ethel Waters](#). Giddens sang Waters' revised lyrics, which even today remain a powerful act of agency and reclamation. ([Waters' version is available on YouTube.](#))

Following in that tradition, Giddens sang [Paul Simon's](#) 1973 "American Tune" with two lines changed by [Simon](#), opening the lyrics up to a fuller vision of the American Experience. One of many festival highlights, the song changed "We came on the ship they call the Mayflower" to a more inclusive "We came in a ship in a blood-red moon." Giddens' encore, [Alberta Hunter's](#) spicy "[Handy Man](#)," showed her sassy, raucous side.

Saturday night brought *Omar's Journey*, the festival's centerpiece, in a premiere of a concert version of the 2023 Pulitzer Prize-winning opera [Omar](#), with music co-written by Giddens and [Get Out](#) film composer [Michael Abels](#) with a libretto by Giddens. Both Giddens and Abels are of mixed-race.

The nearly three-hour version of *Omar* premiered at the [Spoleto Festival](#) in Charleston in May 2022, then moved on to [Los Angeles Opera](#) and other houses. The work's next stop is [San Francisco Opera Nov. 5-21](#).

Based on the 1831 autobiography of [Omar ibn Said](#), an enslaved African-Muslim man who died in 1864 at age 93, the opera loses and gains in its shortened format. I didn't see the full opera, but several people who did agreed that they missed the sets and especially the choruses. But the shorter version likely brought some of the drama into more vivid focus.

With Ojai atypically overcast and rainy — Giddens, who lives with Turrisi in Limerick, called it "Irish weather" — the grim first act, which ends with the "bad" Masa crying "Fetch the dogs!" felt even more horrifying.

As Omar, tenor [Limmie Pulliam](#) conveyed sensitivity and incipient panic. He's a big man with a big voice, which only underscored his characterization of helpless vulnerability when he sang "they took me on the big ships on the big sea." Though he gives the role remarkable dignity and power, it doesn't save the longer second act, which comes off as confusing and somewhat didactic. Why all the repetitive stuff about Jesus and Allah, especially when the Muslim Omar has essentially rebuffed his evangelizing "good" Massa by saying he's already set when it comes to his faith?

Omar's Journey runs 79 minutes, and though Act Two loses narrative drive, it does retain the poignant and purely lyrical "Julie's Aria," touchingly rendered by Giddens. Abel's score, mostly rhythmic and

tuneful, employs familiar instruments. At times, it would make a good fit for a Broadway musical. The composer conducted fluently throughout.

[Tan Dun's](#) 1994 *Ghost Opera*, given two afternoon performances, was another major highlight. Performed indoors at the Ojai Valley School, it is a lively theatrical work, originally written for renowned pipa player [Wu Man](#) and the [Kronos Quartet](#). Here the [Attacca Quartet](#) got the honors, dropping their hands and bowed gongs into water bowls lighted from below, creating a ghostly effect on their faces. They occasionally shouted "Yo! Yo!"

Dun's work is in five acts, lasting about an hour, which flew by. The first act is called "Bach, Monks, and Shakespeare Meet in Water." Instruments included stones, cymbals, a paper whistle, tam-tam, Tibetan bells, paper, and, of course Wu Man's glorious pipa playing. Now *this* is what Ojai is all about.

The Ojai production added a dancer, [PeiJu Chien-Pott](#), who also choreographed her own agile, tireless movements throughout the piece. She was a mass of sweat by the end. At one point, she put on a body stocking that distorted her features (the ghost), but with her initial gyrations, it bore an unfortunate resemblance to those inflatable "tall boy" air dancers one sees outside a car dealership.

That said, this often effective, inventive, and haunting production will be presented at the [Kaatsbaan Cultural Park](#) in Tivoli, N.Y., in October.

Among the other hits at the festival, not enough can be said about the incredible musicality of [Kayhan Kalhor's Solo Improvisation on kamancheh](#) ("little bow" in Persian), a small Iranian stringed instrument with a long neck, at Saturday's morning Bowl concert. Just as wonderful was his *Duo Improvisation* with [Seckou Keita](#) on [kora](#), a West African instrument that combines features of a lute and harp with a resonator, at Sunday's finale.

The festival's final piece brought everyone out for a rousing jam session, ending with the Attacca and four other festival musicians as dueling string quartets.

Festival misses included moving the morning concerts to 10 a.m. (the unrealized threat of heat was blamed), instead of the normal 11 a.m. That extra hour can help people living outside Ojai, and some musicians may not have been at their best at the earlier hour.

Next year, the Ojai Festival returns to more traditional cerebral ground with the refined and imaginative pianist [Mitsuko Uchida](#) as music director. Concerts will also feature, among others, the [Mahler Chamber Orchestra](#), the [Brentano String Quartet](#), and clarinetist [Anthony McGill](#).

<https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2023/06/14/handed-festival-reins-a-multifaceted-musician-pushes-its-boundaries/>

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WORLDWIDE

By Richard S. Ginell
June 15, 2023

Part One

OJAI, CA – “I don’t believe in borders.” Thus spake Rhiannon Giddens at the outset of the 2023 Ojai Music Festival, an edition unlike any other that this small Southern California town (pop. 8,202) has hosted in its 77 installments.

The idea behind Giddens’ stint as music director-du-jour of the festival was to give musicians from diverse places and idioms a chance to have musical conversations “between worlds” through “liquid borders” – to quote the titles of two of the pieces. While there have been infiltrations of world music in Ojai Festivals past – I particularly remember a Ravi Shankar concert that generated a Woodstock-like vibe in the crowd on the back lawn – never had there been such a concentration of cross-genre concerts over the span of four days.

It’s not too surprising that most of the events at this Ojai fest were sold out in advance, for Giddens has been in the musical and mass media spotlights a lot over the past year. If the parallel intent was to attract a newer, younger audience to Ojai, the familiar sea of gray heads in the seats throughout the long weekend (June 8 - 11) was more of an indication of the openness this particular audience has always had for the new and unusual than any shift in demographics.

The Attacca Quartet set the eclectic tone immediately and most convincingly on Thursday’s (June 8) opening concert in Libbey Bowl. Following Steven Schick’s touching, delicately shimmering tribute to the late Kaija Saariaho (the fifth movement of her *Six Japanese Gardens*) and performance of Gabriela Ortiz’s grooving *Liquid Borders* with red fish blue fish, Attacca embarked on a 78-minute mashup to end all mashups.

They started with the Andante from Haydn’s Op. 77, No. 2 Quartet that sounded otherworldly and wiry in a cloud of reverb. Then the conclusion of the Haydn faded imperceptibly into the drone of a tanpura, making an impossibly smooth transition into Zakir Hussain’s *Pallavi* that found the Attacca playing with a gradually keen feeling for the Indian raga idiom (particularly cellist Andrew Yee). The foursome sailed through Philip Glass’s *Mishima* Quartet; a song by the late rock star David Crosby; Caroline Shaw’s “Stem” and “Root;” interventions from kamancheh virtuoso Kayhan Kalhor, Francesco Turrisi’s frame drum and Giddens herself; the clunking mechanism of John Adams’s *John’s Book of Alleged Dances*; and finally the busy, buzzy electronic rhythm track behind SQUAREPUSHER’s *Xetaka 1*. It was an extraordinary journey that actually made unified sense, and the hard-working Attacca seemed to be having a ball with it.

The next morning (June 9), Ojai dodged a bullet, for when pianist Leonard Hayes had to cancel his opening set due to an injury, the festival landed a star replacement on very short notice – classical radio host and recording artist Lara Downes. She played arrangements of three spirituals and as serendipity would have it, a selection from Hayes’s program, “Iconoclasm,” that Michael Abels originally wrote for her Leonard Bernstein tribute album – a piece that faintly evoked the Bernstein brands of jumpy rhythms and lyrical yearning.

Later on, the Attacca Quartet teamed up with pipa master Wu Man for two semi-staged performances of Tan Dun’s ritual-like *Ghost Opera* in the Ojai Valley School’s small Greenberg Auditorium (I caught the one on June 9). The score is a bit of a stylistic mashup itself, with liberal quotes from J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier Book II* amidst the dialogue between Europe (the string quartet) and Asia (the pipa) bookended by “found” sounds of water, paper, metal and stone. While the musicmaking was sharp and the staging minimal, the real highlight was the incredibly flexible dancer PeiJu Chien-Pott writhing and prancing to her own choreography all around the cramped space, at one point while completely enveloped in a ghost costume.

From here onward, Rhiannon Giddens’s own multifaceted talents mostly held the floor. She is a remarkably versatile singer, soaking up diverse vocal styles like a highly-absorbent sponge and pouring them out in timbres unmistakably her own. She demonstrated a good-sized portion of her abilities in her previous Ojai appearances two years ago, but that was just the warmup for the tour-de-force to come.

Admittedly, some of Giddens’s programs showcasing her versatility and urge to make international connections worked better than others. In league with her Sicilian artistic and personal partner Francesco Turrisi on piano, she tried to transform an art song recital June 9 into something that went stylistically all over the map, from a slave auction (“The Purchaser’s Option”) to the Buena Vista Social Club, Ethel Waters, Paul Simon, “La Vie en Rose” and too many other destinations to mention. She left no doubt that she can sing just about anything, switching voices on a dime from selection to selection in several languages. As a host, she was personable, funny, sensitive, whip-smart.

But a 100-minute-long program of mostly serious, ballad-heavy material with several solo piano interludes and no intermission break resulted in some long stretches where the pace sagged. I wish that she could have sprinkled more songs with pizzazz into her set – like the encore, “You Put the Sugar In My Bowl,” an Alberta Hunter number loaded with double entendres. Even Giddens seemed to realize that in her comments toward the close of the evening.

Giddens also turned up at an “early music” program curated by her artistic and personal partner Turrisi Sunday morning (June 11), revealing yet another of her many voices as Turrisi mixed and matched European and Asian musics from 1000-year-old Silk Road melodies to excerpts from their ballet, *Black Lucy And The Bard*. At a free concert hastily moved from Libbey Park’s gazebo to the nearby Chaparral Auditorium due to threatening weather conditions that afternoon, Giddens read her children’s book *Build A House* (a parable of Black people’s struggles in America), sang her catchy song that inspired it, and led her audience of kids and adults in a delightful, interactive percussive chant.

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WORLDWIDE

By Richard S. Ginell

Musical America.com, June 16, 2023

Part Two:

The headline event of the 2023 Ojai Music Festival was the world premiere under unusually threatening Ojai skies of a cut-down concert version of Rhiannon Giddens's and Michael Abels's much-lauded opera *Omar* – retitled *Omar's Journey* in this version – Saturday night (June 10). The idea was to make this work – which dramatizes the autobiography of the enslaved West African Muslim scholar Omar Ibn Said – and its subject available to wider audiences that might not have access to a full production.

The pruning was considerable – trimming the opera's length from 135 minutes to 80 minutes, eliminating various characters, reducing the pit orchestra to an eleven-person onstage ensemble, having the six remaining characters double as the chorus. Just enough of the score remained to remind us of its direct simplicity and even eloquence, the dramatic arc of which is somewhat filled in by a narration taken mostly from Omar's writings and spoken by Giddens.

What was missing was the tremendous emotional impact that the full production made (as seen at Los Angeles Opera last October) – and here, I think, it is the absent details in the production, as well as the somewhat muted diversity of musical means and reduction of the chorus's part in the action, that make the difference. The idea of having the evil slave owner Johnson and kind slave owner Owen sung by the same bass-baritone (Andy Papas) – two sides of the same coin, in other words – was observed, but it didn't make nearly the same impact in a cantata-like presentation as it did in the theatre. And I missed little yet telling production details like the appalling auction price lists of slaves according to their age, or the blue vest signifying Christianity that devout Muslim Omar is obliged to wear which doesn't quite fit.

Omar doesn't try to hit you over the head with the obvious idea that slavery is wrong; rather, it gives a more nuanced, shaded look that still makes the point. While *Omar's Journey* does gain in intimacy what it loses in grandeur, this is a grand arc of a story and it needs a grand stage to fully come to life.

Yet *Omar's Journey* had the advantage of having its composers participate, with Abels conducting the ensemble with efficient, spare gestures and Giddens singing Julie's music in an authentic operatic voice with vibrato; clearly that's how she envisions the role. Omar was sung powerfully with the character's dignity intact by tenor Limmie Pulliam. Act I was preceded by a display of beautiful Senegalese kora music by Seckou Keita, while Act II found Giddens on banjo with fiddler Justin Robinson offering one-

chord North Carolina reels and folk tunes with a solid beat – a nice touch all around.

Throughout the festival, there were examples of musicians from Western and non-Western traditions exhibiting their virtuoso techniques and powers of invention, either solo or in duos. Percussionist Steven Schick and “pipa-ist” Wu Man locked horns in Lei Liang’s appropriately titled *vis-à-vis* June 9 in a titillating dialogue that sounded spontaneous until you realized that they were both reading their scores carefully. Kayhan Kalhor took a simple Persian tune and improvised a little over a half-hour of variations that grew more and more complex and agitated on his kamancheh (sort of a micro-cello) the morning of June 10. Pianist Gloria Cheng drew upon her family heritage – her father’s informal “coaching” - to perform Ge Gan-Ru’s “Gong” for prepared piano slowly so that it reflected “bells sounding through the valley, canyons and mountains,” letting the plucked tones resonate.

The festival’s final concert on Sunday evening June 11, “Strings Attached,” went all-out in one last mission to unite diverse cultures and see if they could play together. In three combinations – the Senegal-meets-Persia duo of Keita and Kalhor, Rhiannon on banjo while singing in Chinese (yet another facet of this endlessly open-minded singer!) with Wu Man on pipa, Robinson on country fiddle with Keita’s kora – the collaborations flowed with amazing sync and forward motion, the pairs of musicians listening intently to each other.

In the end, 15 musicians gathered onto the Libbey Bowl stage for an all-hands-on-deck cross-genre jam session on a tango rhythm in the Phrygian mode. It started tentatively, but finally picked up steam down the stretch when the Attacca Quartet on the right and another string quartet on the left started battling back and forth. This time, Giddens didn’t participate; she just sat on a stool in the center and watched the cultures joust and unite.

Next year looks to be less eclectic and more Western-music-oriented with pianist/conductor Mitsuko Uchida as music director, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra in tow, and an observance of Arnold Schoenberg’s 150th birthday in the works. But with Ojai, you never know for sure.

Sequenza 21/

Ojai Music Festival 2023

By Paul Muller

JUN 14, 2023

The Ojai Music Festival began on Thursday, June 8, 2023 at 6:30 PM with an informal 'Pop Up' performance of *Moon Viewing Music* (2016), by Peter Garland, presented at the gazebo in Libbey Park. Percussionist Steven Schick, a familiar figure at Ojai over the years, was the solo performer, and he brought along an impressive array of gongs and tam-tams gathered for the occasion from various museums and personal collections. *Moon Viewing Music* consists of six short pieces, each inspired by a Japanese haiku or short poem. As described by Peter Garland's concert notes, "This music is low and slow – an obvious correlation exists between tempo and pitch register." The gongs and tam-tams were helpfully mic'd into a sound board and speakers so that the subtle character and interactions of their tones were not lost in the open Ojai evening air.

Before the start of each piece, Dr. Schick read the haiku text as an introduction. The opening gong tone of the first piece was deep and clear, ringing out with surprising authority. A second gong with a higher pitch was struck, and this produced tones that interacted with the fading vibrations of the first. Then began a sequence of single gong tones, each separated by a short interval, but always overlapping in their ringing. The tam-tam occasionally entered with a rolling crescendo, and this added additional warmth to the overall sound. The effect was most engaging and in general the feeling was both calming and mysterious.

Other pieces followed, in more or less the same manner. In some sequences, more than two gongs were employed. The dynamics could be anywhere from a gentle softness to church-tower intensity. There were some variations in tempo, but the 'low and slow' pattern of the gongs was consistent. In the fifth piece an extended tremolo on the tam-tam was followed by strong gong strikes that together created a grand sound. At the conclusion of the sixth piece a great blow to the largest gong produced a memorable finish.

This is introspective and contemplative music from a composer known for radical simplification. That this is artfully accomplished strictly through the use of percussion makes *Moon Viewing Music* all the more remarkable.

Liquid Borders, by Gabriela Ortiz opened the main Thursday evening concert in the Libbey Bowl. This is a three-movement work commissioned by Steven Schick and was premiered at the Banff Centre in August 2014. *Liquid Borders* is scored for a percussion quartet and was performed on this occasion by red fish blue fish, directed by Steven Schick. Ms. Ortiz is a Mexico City-based composer who has "created a body of imaginative work animated by adventurous border crossings between strikingly different realms: folk

and avant-garde, Latin American and European, acoustic and electronic.”

The three movements of *Liquid Borders* each portray a different facet of life in modern Mexico. “Liquid City”, the first movement, portrays Mexico City as it copes with an influx of people from the countryside seeking greater economic opportunity. This opens with quiet xylophone arpeggios that suggest the soft light of a dawning day. As the city rouses itself, a series of metallic sounds are heard that evoke the activity and bustle of the waking populace. Living conditions for newcomers to the city are often rough and ready, so the percussion builds by gradually incorporating a variety of bottles, cans and other found objects. This manages to sound both chaotic and purposeful at the same time, attesting to the skill of Ms. Ortiz in orchestrating these unusual elements. A loud bass drum enters, and the strong beat adds a sense of effort and organization to the start of the working day. A nice groove breaks out as the red fish blue fish ensemble reaches full force. The impressive assortment of found percussion perfectly captures the gritty yet lively reality of the “Liquid City.”

The second movement is “Liquid Desert” and this opens with the soft rustling of maracas and a light hand drumming that creates a remote and rural feeling. The sound of a wood block and the striking of two stones add to the sense of isolation. A bass drum roll enters quietly, and slowly crescendos into a sinister presence. The social context is the exploitation of poor women for cheap labor in the maquila factories scattered throughout the northern Mexican border towns. Women have been known to disappear from such factories and the solemn and ominous character of “Liquid Desert” reinforces the gravity of these crimes.

The final movement of the piece is “Liquid Jungle” and this takes us to the southern borders of Mexico with Central America. A series of active marimba arpeggios are heard in the opening and this develops into a nice groove that evokes the buoyant commotion of a busy border town. The driving pulse brings the music of Steve Reich to mind, and the mood is tropical with a distinctly African feel. The playing by red fish blue fish is precise and carefully coordinated throughout, and is especially impressive given the fast tempos and often intricate layering of the rhythms. As the piece continues, the dynamics ebb and surge, but the active feeling remains consistent. Towards the finish some tension creeps in as the bass drum begins beating and the rhythms become even more frenetic. “Liquid Jungle” ends with a rousing finish, expertly delivered by red fish blue fish.

Liquid Borders delivers a remarkable depiction of three different sides of contemporary Mexican life through the masterful use of unusually expressive percussion materials. The 21st century musical sensibility of Ms. Ortiz eludes regional stereotyping and offers the possibility of a better understanding across previously wide cultural divides.

After the intermission, the Attacca Quartet took the stage. ‘Attacca’ is a musical notation term that instructs to the performer to proceed immediately to the next piece. The playlist for this part of the concert program consisted of no fewer than ten pieces in styles ranging from a Haydn string quartet to pieces by Philip Glass, John Adams, David Crosby and Rhiannon Giddens. These were not in the form of medleys or arrangements, but rather complete works or movements played serially, without pause. Attacca is a standard string quartet but called on percussion, vocals, a dancer and others as each piece required.

Given the amount and wide variety of music in this program, the Attacca Quartet did a splendid job of summoning up the spirit of each style and genre. The Haydn *String Quartet in F major* was instantly recognizable and the more contemporary pieces in the program were played with confidence and flair.

Perhaps the most impressive performance was *Pallavi*, by Zakir Hussain, a complex piece employing four separate ragas. As the composer wrote in the concert notes: “Unlike the traditional Pallavi based in one raga, I have used four different ragas and tried to find a way to give each instrument its own personality with a raga assigned just for it. By doing so I hoped to address the Western system, which employs counterpoint and harmony, through multi-tonal play of the four ragas working in tandem in certain passages.” The result was an exquisite combination of sounds from the conventional Western string quartet, infused with the passionate energy and exotic harmonies of the classical raga.

Lullaby, by Rhiannon Giddens was a simple and lovely folk song, beautifully sung by the composer. The “Stem and Root” movement from *The Evergreen*, by Carolyn Shaw was another elegant piece, inspired by coniferous trees on the Canadian border and the general climatic uncertainty. The Attacca portion of the program lasted almost an hour, a testament to their skill, adaptability and extraordinary stamina. This was rewarded with enthusiastic applause from the audience and brought the initial evening concert for the 2023 Ojai Music Festival to a satisfactory conclusion.

<https://www.sequenza21.com/2023/06/ojai-music-festival-2023-saturday-morning-concerts/>

Santa Barbara Independent

Rhiannon's Journey, Ojai Takes It Easy

The 77th Ojai Music Festival, with Rhiannon Giddens as Music Director, Offered Rewards While Deviating from the Famed Festival's Primary Objective

By Josef Woodard
June 16, 2023



Last weekend, the Ojai Music Festival descended on its idyllic host town — idyllic even in gray-to-drizzly weather — and proved once again why it remains one of the greatest and most significant cultural events in the 805. By design, this festival, now up to its 77th edition, is built on strengths of both consistency and diversity, and this year's model, boldly designed and led by the radiant and exploratory Rhiannon Giddens, pushed the diversity button more than usual.

OMF 2023 is ultimately best appreciated for what it was, not what it wasn't. The four-day program gleamed in terms of supporting the view of Giddens as a still-rising national treasure. She was primarily showcased in a duet concert with her partner (in life and music) Francesco Turrisi on Friday night and

with Saturday night's *Omar's Journey*, a chamber-ized new version of her recent opera *Omar*, which earned the Pulitzer Prize for her and her composer collaborator Michael Abels. The Pulitzer now shares her mantle with a 2018 MacArthur Grant.

Giddens also showed up for brief onstage moments throughout the festival, with her powerful presence as impassioned genre-hopping vocalist, banjo player, and fiddler. She even wowed the overpacked Chaparral Auditorium crowd of young and old at the reading/song event for her new children's book, *Build a House*. Among the jewels of her pop/blues-oriented duet concert were blues outings by Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters, her stunning take on Paul Simon's Bach-inspired "American Song" (her version should be considered among the best interpretations to date), and Shawn Okpebholo's haunting beauty of an art song, "Ahmaud," about the cruelly murdered Georgian runner Ahmaud Arbery.

On the other hand, this year's festival program was something of a stylistic anomaly in terms of this festival's main agenda and purpose — to champion contemporary classical music and shades of modernism stretching over the past century. By that well-established institutional measure — which has made the festival an international sensation and landing place for such icons as Stravinsky, Copland, Boulez, Messiaen, John Adams, and many others — this year's event often turned to more accessible zones of folkloric, pop, and generally genial fare. It also had the desired effect of luring new and different demographics.

That said, though, the weekend was full of fascinating and thoughtful music, as well as Giddens' strong social and historical conscience in her work. Themes and echoes of slavery and other Black American injustices serve as a powerful, ongoing subject and point of research for Giddens, as heard in her duet concert's opening song, "At the Purchaser's Option," and as the illuminating saga of *Omar*, based on the writings of Muslim scholar-turned-slave-turned slave/scholar Omar ibn Said.

Resonances of slavery-related themes also showed up at the Greenberg Center auditorium, in the form of composer Carlos Simon's *Between Worlds*. A Smithsonian exhibition of art by former slave Bill Traylor (1853-1949) inspired Simon's alluring and genre-flexible pieces for solo string instruments, with fragments of Traylor's art as a visual backdrop to the performers.

Interestingly, Thursday night's opening concert with the Attacca Quartet (a group that made its Santa Barbara debut at Hahn Hall this spring) and Ojai regulars, percussion group red fish blue fish, opened with a short piece by the recently-belated Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, sensitively played by red fish founder/leader Steven Schick. This festival was dedicated to Saariaho, a focus of the 2016 OMF, but little of this year's program approached the level of her uncompromising and sometimes atonal music.

In the main, the contemporary classical focus this year turned into a rich sidebar showcase of "serious music" by Chinese-American and Iranian artists (from the Iranian Women Composer's Association). Brilliant Iranian kamancheh player Kahan Kalhor appeared in various spots, including an engaging solo improvisational invention on Saturday morning.

Among the standout music of Chinese origin was an expanded version of *Tan Dun: Ghost Opera* (written for the Kronos Quartet in 1994). In this version, its mesmerizing ritualistic staging was enhanced by pipa master Wu Man, a strong presence in Ojai this year, and lithe-bodied/minded Taiwanese dancer/choreographer Peiju Chien-Pott.

Other Chinese music seizing my senses was the utterly bewitching *Echoes from the Gorge*, by the influential yet underrated composer Chou Wen-Chung. *Echoes* was exactly performed by red fish blue fish in the first of three 8 a.m. concerts — programmed for eager early birds and/or completist music nerds, present company included.

Chou's music bewitched again in the form of *The Willows are New*, a calligraphically impressionistic solo piano piece delivered with due sentience by Gloria Cheng. That same Saturday morning concert also featured the ever-compelling Wu Man and Attacca violist Nathan Schram on Lei Lang's *Mother's Song*, as well as Iranian composer Niloufar Nourbakhsh's *Veiled*, lovingly rendered by cellist Karen Ouzounian.

Come Sunday, the rippling hypnotic goodness of the Senegalese Seckou Keita's kora massaged early morning ears on a wet day in Ojai, followed by the Turrisi-curated and winkingly titled "Early Music" program in the Libbey Bowl. Ranging from 17th century Italian music for the giraffe-necked lute called the theorbo (Joshua Stauffer) to a piece by Monteverdi with Giddens in vocal control as usual, to "medieval minimalist" Arvo Pärt and the Giddens/Turrisi ballet *Black Lucy and the Bard*, the morning concert proved a journey both shamelessly broad and emotionally cohesive.

Sunday's finale concert — a slot which often features a program both substantial and celebratory — proved anticlimactic, leaning into the celebratory factor and settling for loose, improvisational party timing. The prize moment there: a sonically and culturally empathetic duet between Wu Man on pipa and Giddens on that African instrument, the banjo. Giddens even extended her linguistic range into Chinese song, for our listening and admiring pleasure.

Thankfully, Giddens has been no stranger to the area, and the trend officially continues. UCSB Arts & Lectures has announced two (count 'em) Giddens appearances in the 2023-24 season, as director of the Silk Road Ensemble (November 9, Granada Theater) and as herself, in the program "You're the One" (April 23, 2024, also at the Granada).

Ojai Music Festival diehards and regulars can take heart in news of next year's music director, pianist Mitsuko Uchida, who will no doubt return to the regularly scheduled program after this year's delightful diversion.

<https://www.independent.com/2023/06/16/rhiannons-journey-ojai-takes-it-easy>



This Year's Ojai Festival Irritates the Traditionalists

Josef Woodard on June 13, 2023

The 77th annual Ojai Music Festival, through the lens of the category-busting and diversely gifted artist Rhiannon Giddens, who served as this year's music director, was fine and inspiring. Giddens was arriving at Ojai in the wake of having garnered the 2023 Pulitzer Prize in Music, along with composer and collaborator Michael Abels, for the opera *Omar*, presented at Ojai on Saturday in the form of *Omar's Journey*, a compact chamber version of the work.

The nagging problem was that this year's festival (which ran June 8–11), strong as it was by its own standards, often seemed an ill fit for the Ojai mode we've come to know over the decades. In what may have been the most accessible festival yet, Giddens's worldly gathering satisfied in simple, rootsy ways but lacked the depth or challenge of the usual Ojai perspective. On the plus side, the program was interwoven with explorations of Chinese and Iranian composers, the latter via members of the intrepid Iranian Female Composers Association.

Ojai's legacy is a lofty one, tinged with the institutional memory of visits by Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and the late Kaija Saariaho (to whom the 2023 festival was dedicated). This year's model was enlightening from an outlier perspective and as a pleasurable anomaly in the festival's history book.

Giddens, who crafted the long weekend program with her partner Francesco Turrisi and Ojai's nimble artistic director, Ara Guzelimian, first graced the festival's central Libbey Bowl stage in 2021 at the invitation of that year's music director, composer John Adams. She appeared with Turrisi and also navigated the turf of Adams's arias before delving deep into Black American roots music, her terrain as a North Carolina-born musician with a widening sphere of influence and growing public profile. The success of her first Ojai encounter led to this year's event, an idea no doubt also supported by the greater commercial and audience appeal of a Giddens-guided weekend.

Tying into the general festival theme of crossing genres and "bridging worlds," "Liquid Borders" was the apt title of Thursday night's opening concert, taken from a piece by Gabriela Ortiz, performed, with exactitude and spirit, by Steven Schick's percussion ensemble red fish blue fish. The evening's main event was a seamlessly woven 90-minute tapestry of short works by Ojai's resident ensemble, the Attacca Quartet, from Haydn (with reverb!) to Adams, Philip Glass, a couple of simple songs featuring Giddens, and Squarepusher's hyperactive electroacoustic *Xetaka 1*, replete with a thrilling unison line to close.

Also included was Zakir Hussain's *Pallavi*, written for the Kronos Quartet and here distractingly interpolating canned tabla into the otherwise live mix. The Kronos connection continued with one of the festival's high points, an expanded version of Tan Dun's Kronos-commissioned, ritualistic, and Bach-inflected *Ghost Opera* (1994), which had two performances Friday and Saturday. This version proved the work's timelessness, with the freshening addition of pipa virtuoso Wu Man and Taiwanese dancer and choreographer PeiJu Chien-Pott.

Friday night's duet show was craftily set up as an art-song recital — just piano and voice, with cellist Karen Ouzounian contributing to a couple numbers as well. But by any name, the evening was, in fact, just an artful pop concert, with a setlist that included "La Vie en rose," vintage blues numbers by Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters, Italian pop songs from the 1960s, and Giddens's poignant and profound take on Paul Simon's "American Tune," which she sang with the songwriter at his Grammy tribute evening in 2022. The closest thing to a contemporary art song here was Shawn Okpebholo's powerful and structurally rangy "Ahmaud," which addresses the killing of Ahmaud Arbery and was delivered with emotional control and measured indignation.

Giddens's noble and determined interest in grappling with the aftereffects of slavery and other injustices afflicting Black Americans found moving expression at Ojai — from the tale of the heroic slave and scholar Omar Ibn Said (the subject of her opera) to a captivating "reading" of her slavery-themed children's book, *Build a House*. Before an overpacked audience in Chaparral Auditorium, the sometimes banjo-bearing Giddens (with Turrisi on frame drum) magnetized children and adults alike by sharing a few songs and a bit of instrumental history.

The theme of slavery transformed into artistic urgency was also reflected in a special Sunday performance of Carlos Simon's *Between Worlds*. The four solo string pieces that make up this work were inspired by the artist Bill Traylor, who was born a slave in 1853 and lived until 1949. The viola movement, expertly played by Mario Gotoh, was the most effective, with its ambiguous stylistic stamp stopping in at church for a wisp of spiritual-like harmony.

One of the deepest and most persuasive concerts of the weekend was found on the festival's periphery. Friday morning's program at Besant Hill School's Zalk Theater radiated the kind of serious musical inquiry and uncompromising expression that Ojai is best known for. Among the concert's treats were *Density 21.5*, Edgard Varèse's modernist classic for solo flute, beautifully realized by Emi Ferguson, and *Echoes From the Gorge*, a percussion piece by the still-underrated Chinese composer Chou Wen-chung, given its due precision and power by red fish blue fish.

Echoes made for one of the ecstatic musical moments of the festival, which set the stage for more impressive Chinese and Chinese American compositions, including pianist Gloria Cheng's performance of Chou's poetic *The Willows Are New* and Wu Man and Attacca violist Nathan Schram's duet on Lei Lang's *Mother's Song*.

The "Morning Meditation" programs offered contemplative sessions by resident improvisors: Kayhan Kalhor on the Iranian kamancheh and Seckou Keita (also heard in an introductory solo spot before *Omar's Journey*) on the Senegalese kora.

The Sunday morning slot went by the coy name of "Early Music" (as in pre-Classical-era music at an early concert time). The wide-ranging program was curated by Turrisi, whose background includes work with

Renaissance music, along with jazz and various folk traditions. The setlist, announced from the stage, leapt from 17th-century theorbo pieces by Alessandro Piccinini, played with restrained flair by Joshua Stauffer, to the string-quartet arrangement of Arvo Pärt's *Summa*, played by the Attacca Quartet, to excerpts from the Giddens and Turrisi's ballet *Black Lucy and the Bard*. It made for an eclectic cohesion that didn't always work but was nonetheless ambitious and illuminating.

Sunday evening's disappointing and dissipating finale left much to be desired, consisting mainly of improvisational ventures from this year's troupe of musicians. The finest moment was an empathetic duet between Giddens on banjo and Wu Man on pipa, with Giddens's golden voice singing in Chinese. Elsewhere, though, a kamancheh-kora duet between Kalhor and Keita included a 15-minute jam on what were essentially the "Stairway to Heaven" chords (A minor, F, G), while the full ensemble vamped rapidly in Iberian mode to close. Suddenly, it felt like we weren't in Ojai anymore but at a hip jam-band festival.

Sincere kudos should be extended to Giddens and company for putting together a fantastic, fun-loving, but also historically conscious festival. I would have loved to enjoy it somewhere other than Ojai. Contemporary-music hardliners can take solace in the news that next year's music director is pianist Mitsuko Uchida, who will no doubt put the festival back in its modernist mode.

[This Year's Ojai Festival Irritates the Traditionalists | San Francisco Classical Voice \(sfcv.org\)](#)