

The Most Open-Eared Festival in America Is Ojai

Birds joined in for the blissed-out sounds of concerts organized by the adventurous flutist Claire Chase at the Ojai Music Festival in California.

Story by Zachary Woolfe | June 10, 2025

Ojai, Calif.

[5 Highlights From the 2025 Ojai Music Festival - The New York Times](#)

A crowd had gathered at the Ojai Meadows Preserve early Saturday morning. The nearby mountains were still shrouded in mist, and the cool, gray quiet was interrupted only by the sound of birds.

Then a throaty quivering of flute emerged from behind the audience — and a stab of clarinet from another spot, a distant burr of saxophone, pips from a second flute. An almost avian quartet gradually coalesced from specks of song and chatter among the instruments, in conversation with the animals in the trees. This was Susie Ibarra’s “Sunbird.”

That a couple of hundred people showed up at 8 a.m. for an experimental performance in the middle of a field speaks volumes about [the Ojai Music Festival](#). Since the 1940s, this annual event, nestled in an idyllic valley in Southern California, has catered to audiences eager to be challenged.

Each year, a different music director is invited to guide the programming. For this installment, which took place Thursday through Sunday, morning to night, the festival looked to [the flutist Claire Chase](#), one of the most important nodes of creation and collaboration in contemporary music.

Chase, a founder of the International Contemporary Ensemble and the instigator of [“Density 2036,”](#) an [ongoing](#) 24-year commissioning project to create a new repertoire for her instrument, has an aesthetic well matched to Ojai. Her approach is rigorous yet relaxed, with an improvisatory, cooperative, nature-loving, even hippie bent — meditative, sunny and smiling, encouraging open minds and open ears. Two dozen musicians performed in shifting combinations throughout the weekend, so you had the feeling of being dropped in the middle of a joyfully bustling commune.

About 40 works were played over the course of the festival. Here are a few that stood out.

‘Sky Islands’

Ibarra’s “Sky Islands” won the Pulitzer Prize in music last month, but Chase, one of the best-connected and most curious figures in the field, had programmed it for the festival well before that.

Like many of the pieces at Ojai this year, “Sky Islands” was an unpredictable, amorphous, kaleidoscopic soundscape, its structure intentionally loose and good-natured. The effect was of a series of lovely moments: a dialogue among tall sticks of bamboo struck against the ground; the cheerful clangor of gongs traditional to the Philippines; the appealingly moist sound of amplified tapping against the leaves of a plant. As one of two percussionists in the small ensemble, Ibarra was calmly commanding — as she was throughout the weekend, in music by both her and others.

With a flexible score and with improvisation an integral part of its realization, “Sky Islands” was of a piece with much of the music Chase programmed. The branch of contemporary composition that was largely on offer is aligned with jazz and John Cage-style, Zen-influenced conceptualism. Consider the two-sentence score of Pauline Oliveros’s “Horse Sings From Cloud,” performed in the meadow on Saturday morning: “Sustain one or more tones or sounds until any desire to change the tone(s) or sound(s) subsides. When there is no desire to change the tone(s) or sound(s) then change.”

‘bayou-borne’

[Anne Lockwood](#), born in 1939, was one of the veteran composers who were touchstones of Chase’s festival. Lockwood, a grinning presence in the audience all weekend, paid tribute to Oliveros’s Texas upbringing with “bayou-borne,” in which nine players improvised with a map of Houston’s natural waterways as their score, taking the meandering curves, dilations and contractions of rivers and tributaries as inspiration for the music-making.

Skittish quiet — Ibarra waving her brushes in the air; a trumpeter mewing from a nearby tennis court like a somber animal; delicate, wandering clarinet lines — built suddenly to ringing noise, like a creek swelling into rapids.

‘How Forests Think’

Wu Wei is a master of the sheng, the traditional Chinese reed instrument whose plangently wheezing sound is a little like that of an accordion or tiny organ. His playing was a highlight of the weekend, whether in “Sky Islands” or [Liza Lim’s](#) “How Forests Think,” in which he also recited Chinese poetry and had passages of Tibetan throat singing.

Lim creatively combines unlikely instruments, as in the eerie, darkly bronzed rightness of a mixture of sheng and saxophone. The four movements of “How Forests Think” culminate in

“The Trees,” as spare and flickering as the light dappling a jungle’s floor. At the end, a doleful English horn line gives way to rustles through the ensemble, like a gentle cacophony of dry leaves.

‘Pan’

The most magnetic performer of the weekend, unsurprisingly, was Chase herself. Few musicians seize a stage with her energy, whipping her flutes around with piper charisma, and “Density 2036” has been producing a slew of works tailor-made to her talents since she got it started in 2013. The Chase-iest “Density” piece of all may well be Marcos Balter’s “Pan,” in which she raced around the stage enacting the story of the roguish, pipes-playing god, trailed by an intergenerational horde of followers drawn from the town of Ojai.

“Pan” was performed at the Libbey Bowl, an outdoor amphitheater in a downtown park. While the festival now sprawls across a range of venues, the bowl remains its heart and soul — open to the air, as well as to the sounds of birds, frogs, church bells, sirens. Any music feels fresh in this space, and “Pan” was a living ritual: funny, poignant, mysterious.

‘Pulsefield 3’

Chase’s style of making music, so proudly focused on building a community onstage, is risky: The players sometimes give the sense that they’re performing for one another more than for the audience, and you end up feeling like you’re watching a fun house party from outside.

But during the premiere of [Terry Riley’s](#) “Pulsefield 3,” which closed the festival, the exhilaration conjured among the ensemble flooded over the crowd, too. The piece is not much more than a simple, hopeful riff — repeated and developed and, in this iteration of the wide-open score, initially just played and eventually also sung.

The fact that most of the musicians singing it were far from professional vocalists was the point. As he has since the 1960s, Riley, who turns 90 on June 24, created a space in which virtuosity could meet amateurism and the everyday could become sublime. Like Ojai itself, it was a little woo-woo — and utterly irresistible.

[Zachary Woolfe](#) is the classical music critic of The Times.

Los Angeles Times

Why this year's Ojai Music Festival was one of the best

By Mark Swed Classical Music Critic

June 12, 2025 3:28 Pm Pt

[Ojai Musical Festival soars with Pulitzer winner Susie Ibarra - Los Angeles Times](#)

OJAI — You can't escape nature in Ojai. That meant that flutist Claire Chase, this year's Ojai Music Festival music director who is often called a force of nature, fit right in.

[Chase](#) is the proudest flutist I've ever observed. And the most expressive. She holds her head high whether playing piccolo or the 6-foot contrabass flute, as if her instrument were a magic wand used to activate her voice in the highest registers and the deepest.

The activism is more than an analogy. Chase is also a joyous and entrepreneurial music activist, MacArthur "genius," educator, founder of New York's impressive International Contemporary Ensemble and commissioner of a vastly imaginative new flute repertory in her ongoing Density 2036 project. The current surge of interest in [Pauline Oliveros](#) is largely her doing.

For Ojai, Chase collected concerned composers on a quest for a kind of eco-sonics capable of conjuring up the pleasure of nature and, in the process, saving our sanity. Over four days of concerts mostly in the rustic Libbey Bowl, the names of many of the works gave away the game.

"The Holy Liftoff," "Horse Sings From Cloud," "How Forests Think," "Spirit Catchers," "A Grain of Sand Walked Across a Face, on the Skin of a Washed Picture," are a few.

The festival's proudest moment (30 minutes to be precise) was the West Coast premiere of Susie Ibarra's "Sky Islands." It was the last work in a resplendent Sunday morning program that Chase described as "multi-spiritual" and "multi-species." The sun found its way through the trees as the composer and percussionist Levy Lorenzo stood in front of the stage and began with a ceremonial pounding of bamboo poles.

“Sky Islands” evokes the magical Philippines upper rainforests, where sounds scintillate in a thinned atmosphere that gives gongs new glories, where animals capable of great ascension exclusively live, where the mind is ready for enlightenment. Ibarra wrote the score for her Talking Gong Trio (which includes Chase and pianist Alex Peh) along with added percussion and a string quartet, here the Jack Quartet.

To the head-scratching surprise of the music establishment that has thus far paid little attention to Ibarra, “Sky Islands” won the 2025 Pulitzer Prize for music. A Filipino American from Anaheim who is now based in New York, Ibarra is best known as a percussionist in experimental jazz and new music with a strong interest in environmental sound installations and Indigenous music.

The head scratching stopped in Ojai. In the three works by Ibarra on the program, she proved a capacious sonic visionary. She is a superb mimic of nature’s aural realm — the sounds of animals, of a river, of trees in the wind, of rocks falling down a hillside. She stirs spirits with the barely heard whooshes of drum brushes waved in the air. She connects with the underground as a resonant gong master. She stops to smell whatever there is to smell. She’s often funny.

Mainly, though, she simply entrances, whether she spread her percussive wares in “Kolubri” or writing for other musicians in “Sunbird” on a misty early morning at Ojai Meadows Preserve. Her lovingly sly Haydn-esque wit came out in the premiere of “Nest Box,” a duo for her and Wu Wei on sheng, the Chinese mouth organ.

Gauging by the audience response, “Sky Islands” was the clear favorite of more than three dozen new or newish works. It is a complex piece that appears to set off on a well-apportioned journey led by Chase into the unknown. But at every turn, the music surprises with a melody that feels familiar until it suddenly doesn’t.

Ibarra leaves room for improvisation as a way for the performers to react to what they are encountering. Chase and Ibarra may, for instance, begin a dialogue as nervous chit-chat with staccato flute interjections with drummed responses that soon turn to broad expressions of wonder. At the end the musicians pick up percussion instruments and leave the stage in a slow, winding procession of dance steps, as if marching into the unknown.

Chase brought together other composers from all over. And she brought together superb musicians from L.A. (particularly members of Wild Up) and New York. The music was all of our time with the exception of three small pieces of early music, but even that was modernized. There was long-winded indulgence and lovely itty-bitty works, over in a flash but suggestive of a full and lovely life, like that of an insect.

The spirit of the Ojai festival need not be conveyed by a laundry list of composers and works or by value judgments. At its best, the event is a musical wilderness, like no other festival of its caliber. The audience goes on a walk in the woods, with nature calling for discovery.

Around every corner you encounter a different musical voice. Hawaiian composer and violist Leilehua Lanzilotti rocked. Cuban composer Tania León added dollops of exciting modernism. Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir commanded long stretches of empty landscape. Brazilian composer Marcos Balter conjured up the mythological Pan in a sometimes outrageous nine-part theatrical extravaganza for Chase.

New Zealander Annea Lockwood offered a 90-minute journey down the Housatonic River captured by loudspeakers in surround sound. In contrast, Australian Liza Lim, in raw instrumental outbursts, revealed the less agreeable possibilities of what forests may think (of us?).

And then there was, at long last for Ojai, the elephant in the minimalism room, the iconic California composer Terry Riley. His “In C” is the one piece Ojai has previously programmed. As [Riley](#) now approaches his 90th birthday (June 24), Chase unveiled three parts of an epic cycle of uncategorized pieces Riley has been working on since moving to the mountains of Japan five years ago.

“Pulsing Lifters,” in an arrangement for two pianos and harpsichord, is like a delicate dew. “The Holy Liftoff” realized by Samuel Clay Birmaher for flute and string quartet, opens with Chase on all five of her flutes, one played live, the others prerecorded. The effect is that of being submerged in a lush wash of beautiful flute chords. Riley then softens the spectacularly rigorous Jack Quartet with Ravel-like melody.

In “Pulsefield” pieces numbered 1, 2 and 3, Riley returns to the modular roots of “In C” a half century later. Here repeated rhythms are overlayed by a large ensemble featuring all the festival performers in ecstatic elaborations.

If this, one of the best and truest Ojai festivals in recent years, is meant not for explication but discovery, please do so. The festival has been slowly evolving a system of outdoor amplification, and it captures excellent audio on streams of the Libbey Bowl concerts. They remain archived on the Ojai festival [YouTube page](#).

Next year Esa-Pekka Salonen will return for the first time in a quarter century.

Ojai Music Festival 2025 Review: Uneven Adventures in Sound

Story by David Mermelstein | June 9, 2025

Ojai, Calif.

Now in its 79th year, the Ojai Music Festival is nothing if not boundary-pushing. And despite its casual vibe, music is taken seriously here. Among its distinctions, the largely outdoor festival has long shone a spotlight on a diverse array of performers, many of whom have held the title of music director, a job filled annually by a figure (occasionally more than one) who sets the gathering's tone. Some have been world famous (Stravinsky, Boulez, John Adams), others far less so. But each has lent the music-making a distinctive perspective.

This year, from June 5 through 8, the role fell to Claire Chase, a Southern California-born, Brooklyn-based avant-garde flutist who delights in expanding her instrument's profile. A 2012 MacArthur "genius" grant recipient, the 47-year-old Ms. Chase plays not just the standard transverse flute but several other types—among them pan, bass and contrabass—and all (even an Aztec death whistle) were on vivid display throughout the festival.

Ojai lets music lovers draw their own conclusions about what each year's festival means to them. But some signs are unmistakable. This year, living female composers dominated. On the various bills at the Libbey Bowl and elsewhere were works by Annea Lockwood, Liza Lim, Tania León, Anna Thorvaldsdóttir, Leilehua Lanzilotti, Susie Ibarra and Bahar Royae. Sofia Gubaidulina, who died in March at age 93, was still living when her pieces were programmed. But Pauline Oliveros, who hovered over the festival like a spirit guide, has been gone since 2016.

Oliveros, with whom Ms. Chase feels great kinship, was many things, but chiefly a gleeful rule-breaker. She questioned, and often simply abandoned, precepts of what constituted music or how it should be notated. In homage to her, much of this year's programming challenged expectations—be it in its scoring, the profusion of spontaneity and improvisation, or the spirit of play.

Yet for all the energy expended in breaking with tradition, a peculiar sameness crept into the programming, if not the performances. Differentiating pieces from one another as the festival progressed became difficult. Contrast—the odd work from the Second Viennese

School; some Ives; or something by the Europeans Ligeti, Kurtág or Lachenmann, say—was in short supply.

Exacerbating the problem was Ms. Chase's near-ubiquity. The festival's music director should be present—but not suffocatingly so. Ms. Chase is an extraordinary artist in terms of ardor, stamina and technical prowess, but she is also a showboater. And all those weird mouth-sounds and the endless shifting among various kinds of flutes wears thin after awhile. One stops paying attention.

A composer whose work did emerge from the pack was Ms. Lockwood, now age 85, whose “bayou-borne” (2016), performed at Thursday's opening concert, was meant as an 85th birthday gift to Oliveros. The unconventional placement of the work's odd assortment of instruments—including sheng (a Chinese mouth organ), electronic hurdy-gurdy, varied percussion, clarinet, trumpet and trombone—created a true soundscape, one that evolved as several players changed locations. When combined with the natural sounds of Libbey Park at night (crickets, frogs, a bird), the result was arresting.

Ms. Lockwood, present at the festival (as were many of the composers), was also featured in Sam Green's extraordinary and profound documentary “32 Sounds” (2022), which reinaugurated the festival's collaboration, after a decade-long hiatus, with the Ojai Playhouse, a 1914 movie theater recently restored and upgraded. Her short work “Spirit Catchers” (1974) also received a late-night performance there, but the improvisatory piece (with four live speakers overlapping), reminiscent of Samuel Beckett, didn't quite find its footing. And her 77-minute “A Sound Map of the Housatonic” (2010), which traces that river's course via a series of recordings, would have worked better in a less busy environment, rather than the yoga studio in which it was installed.

Among the more straightforwardly musical treats was the performance of Ms. Ibarra's “Sky Islands,” which recently won a Pulitzer Prize and closed the mid-morning concert on Sunday. Exuberantly celebratory, and deeply rooted in Filipino culture, the piece employs both conventional instruments (string quartet, piano, flute) and a host of exotic percussive effects from such objects as bamboo poles, banana plants and assorted gongs. It concludes with a coup de théâtre, all eight musicians exiting the venue in rhythmic single-file as the music tapers to a close.

Unfortunately, Ms. Ibarra's work suffers from prolixity, a complaint that marred much of this year's programming. An especially egregious example closed Saturday's mid-morning concert: “Ubique” (2023), a work for flute, piano, cellos and electronics by the normally gratifying and original Ms. Thorvaldsdóttir, who here trod familiar ground at needless

length. Nor did Terry Riley's late-stage Minimalism (the continuing "Holy Liff" and "Pulsefield" projects) provide much intellectual or emotional sustenance.

But if too many works blurred together or simply didn't appeal, there were always the performers to admire. Ms. Chase was unerring in choosing them. Chief among her wise picks was the JACK Quartet (Christopher Otto and Austin Wulliman, violins; John Pickford Richards, viola; Jay Campbell, cello), whose unassailable technique is matched only by its unity of ensemble and seriousness of purpose.

Three pianists—Alex Peh, Cory Smythe and Craig Taborn—all impressed with their facility, flair and fearlessness, but only Mr. Peh did double duty on the harpsichord. And his heroic battle with Ms. León's arduous "Rituál" proved stunning. The festival's biggest surprise must have been Wu Wei's mastery of the seemingly daunting sheng, to which he brought enviable finesse and warmth. Nor should one take for granted the return of the wildly talented percussionist (and conductor) [Steven Schick](#), who served as Ojai's music director in 2015 and has made regular visits since.

With this year's festival over, attention will soon focus on the return in 2026 of the conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen as Ojai's music director, after a quarter century. Get your tickets now.

Mr. Mermelstein is the Journal's classical music critic.

Listening With and To the Sounds and Sites of Ojai

Last weekend's Ojai Music Festival, Designed by Flutist Claire Chase, Was a Nature-leaning Contemporary Music Garden of Delights and Challenges

By **Josef Woodard**

Fri Jun 13, 2025 | 4:07pm

[Listening With and To the Sounds and Sites of Ojai - The Santa Barbara Independent](#)

Musical pairing for this review: Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening* [link](#).

By its very ever-changing nature, year after year, the Ojai Music Festival (OMF) means many things to many people and involves many musical *-isms*, 79 years into its internationally acclaimed adventure. This year's model, unfolding in a passionate and striking way over four days last week, holds the distinction of embracing a certain *Ojai-ness* of its host community, where mysticism, alternative life-styling, and eclectic spiritualities have never feared to tread.

Nature herself had an unusual degree of sway in this program, and not only in the usual presence of bird songs and insect choirs coating the concert experience, mostly in the outdoor Libbey Bowl. On opening night, scores of actual Ojai residents — about 50 of them — signed on as adjunct performers and “extras” in the pageantry of Marcos Balter's *Pan*, with the inimitable flutist Claire Chase — this year's OMF music director — as musical protagonist in the vulnerable center of her community horde.

Cut to early Saturday morning in the glorious and now protected expanse of the Ojai Meadows Preserve, and an al fresco gathering of audience and musicians situated around the meadow basked in a strong sense of a literally nature-connected performative experience.

One of the films screened in between live music events, in the beautifully restored and state-of-the-art Ojai Playhouse Theater, was Sam Green's unique and engrossing concept doc. 32 *Sounds*. (Its artful use of a good surround sound system in a theater setting made me think the Riviera Theatre would be a perfect place to see/hear this wonderful piece of cinema.) One of the recurring subjects in the film is the idealistic composer/thinker Annea Lockwood, who at one point makes the observation that it's advisable for us to “listen with nature, as opposed to

listening to it.” The notion seemed to refer back to this especially site-sensitive edition of OMF, a kind of accidental motto.

Surprisingly, this festival gave no performance time to the late, great conductor-composer Pierre Boulez, whose 100th birthday year has given rise to tributes elsewhere. He was a powerful presence in Ojai, as a three-time music director whose programs were some of the most memorable I’ve attended. Boulez was the point of focus ten years ago, when conductor-percussionist Steven Schick directed the festival program in tribute to the then 90-year-old composer, too frail to travel at the time.

Then again, Boulez’s cool-headed and precision-gear approach to music, not to mention his audience-challenging post-serialist writing, might have seemed out of place in this year’s distinctly different roster. Among the features here were an abundance of improvisational energy, naturally addressed by important jazz-connected musicians Craig Taborn and Cory Smythe on piano and Susie Ibarra, a wonderful jazz drummer, among other virtues.

Jazz snuck into Ojai in the strongest way since Vijay Iyer was the music director, in 2017, with the apex being a Friday morning concert sporting Smythe’s unique quarter-tone piano/synth format of a reshuffled take on John Coltrane’s “Countdown” and a spectacular two-piano improvisation with the masterful Taborn.

Chase, who has graced Ojai with her charismatic presence a few times in past years and whom the festival’s artistic director Ara Guzelimian called both “our around the clock music director” and “a comet,” was very much a central whirlwind force, a galvanizing performer, and organizer over the weekend. This may well be the OMF with more flute in the soloist spotlight than any other in its storied history, and with more performance focus on the active “music director.” But she also cast the program wisely in terms of themes and featuring roles for resident musicians on hand.

A dominant thread of the festival program was devoted to Chase’s own ambitious “Density 2036” project, commissioning new major works for flute. *Pan* was one of these, along with Liza Lim’s hour-long “Sex Magic”, a ritualistic piece performed in the Greenberg Activity Center, with Chase commandingly navigating sound on her formidable contrabass flute — taller than she — and named, by Pauline Oliveros, “Bertha.” Meanwhile, two tables cradling percussive noise-makers are eerily set to shaking in select moments of the work.

But the finest moment from her “Density 2036” sampler was Taborn’s thrilling hour-long piece “Busy Grievs and Endangered Charms,” for flute, as well as Taborn’s insightful touch on piano and gently tinkling electronics, drummer Ibarra, and clarinetist Joshua Rubin. Elements of jazz, atmospherics, and a wavering line between structure and freedom come to life in a new and mesmerizing way in this music. A recording would be a valued addition to the world’s musical knowledge.

In the OMF according to Chase’s agenda, a welcome point of attention went to women composers and performers, chiefly the dynamic drummer-composer Ibarra, an artist-in-residence and a bringer of jazz energy to the festival menu. We heard Ibarra give an entrancing solo drum kit/percussion solo in the Ojai Conservancy-protected Meadow Preserve on Saturday

morning and, as performer-composer with a particular vision, present her recent Pulitzer Prize winning Libbey Bowl highlight, “Sky Islands,” a percussion-driven chamber work with jazz and evocative rhythmic schematics in tow. No plants were harmed in this performance, but became part of the instrumental toolkit, from large bamboo sticks to transducer-equipped tropical plants in water buckets with actual koi along for the ride.

Tribute was paid to the environment-attuned Annea Lockwood and to her friend, the late, great Pauline Oliveros — who Chase dubbed the “fairy godmother” of the festival and of a certain faction of contemporary music and culture. A fascinating documentary, Daniel Weintraub’s *Deep Listening: The Story of Pauline Oliveros*, chronicled her remarkable life and philosophical visions, and her conceptual thinking fed into the musical programming: Saturday morning’s audience-reliant piece “Horse Sings from Cloud” transfixed the meadow-ing crowd, and the mutable, flexibly interpretable ensemble piece “The Witness” was an improvisatory blast of energies on Sunday evening.

Well-established Cuban composer Tania León was clearly a heroine of the weekend, as first heard in her solo violin and tape (Latin percussion fragments and looping violin) piece “*Abanico*” on early Friday morning’s JACK Quartet concert. Her powerful and highly detailed atonal chamber ensemble work “*Hechizos*” was gripping, the closest thing we got to a Boulez sensibility all weekend.

That piece was tucked into perhaps the strongest program of the festival, a Saturday night special, dubbed “Prayers and Spells.” The evening opened reflectively, with Bach’s Chorale Prelude, “*Vor deinen Thron*,” as arranged for the JACK and the ear-opening sound of Wu Wei’s *sheng*, followed by the recently belated Azerbaijani composer Sofia Gubaidulina’s content-morphing meditation on the same Bach chorale. Liza Lim’s “How Forests Think” (another direct nod to mother nature) took up the second half, starting with the sound of alto sax and *sheng*, and shifting into a score full of textural intrigue and a measured dramatic sensibility.

Another important woman composer making her presence known here was the famed Icelandic texturalist [Anna Thorvaldsdottir](#), whose music Santa Barbarans know first-hand from her piece for the Danish String Quartet, at Campbell Hall two years ago. She also snuck into a fluke board public spotlight as a plot point in Todd Fields’ classical music satire *Tár*.

In Ojai, her musical imprint came through the west coast premiere of her large-scale flute-featuring piece “*Ubique*,” described as an ode to the “musical qualities of nature.” On the intimate end of the spectrum, Thorvaldsdottir’s delicate solo viola piece “*Sola*” was given due grace by Hawaiian violist-composer Leilehua Lanzilotti.

Although many of us are not morning people, it always pays to make the often more experimental 8 a.m. programs, a theory proven valid again this year. Friday’s coffee with the JACK Quartet included Mexican composer Eduardo Aguilar’s beguiling “Hyper” — entirely percussive, using the *col legno* technique of striking strings with the wood of the bow, ending with rhythmic whooshes of said bows and musicians retreating to separate corners of the stage.

We also heard JACK take on Argentine composer Vincente Atria’s “Roundabout,” a clever maze of early music references, and “rounds,” contemporary tactics and snatches of Monk’s “Round

About Midnight” and Yes’s “Roundabout,” with microtonality in the mix. Atria’s piece is part of the quartet’s fascinating “Medieval Modern” project, also featured on Sunday morning’s concert, with quartet members retooling 14th century music with microtonal pitches beyond the tempered 12-note scale we have known and loved. (JACK’s “Modern Medieval” project was heard in one of last year’s greatest classical concerts, at Music Academy of the West last December.)

Other early morning musical exploits took us to the meadow on Saturday, and to the charming downtown Chaparral Auditorium on Sunday, where the fare included Iranian composer Bahar Royaei’s quietly dazzling solo percussion work with the aptly evocative title “A Grain of Sand Walked Across a Face, on the Skin of a Washed Picture,” for the ever-nimble percussionist Ross Karre. Karre worked his way, deftly and with wit, around a complex percussion setup which included Styrofoam bowls, radio static, a noisy lamp, and a large drum hosting a jumbo spring. The result was a lovely, contemplative mobile of sonic gestures with humor and household objects on the side.

For a finale, Sunday evening’s concert opened with Lanzilotti’s unpretentiously engaging “*ko’u inoa*,” an octet version of music she played in solo viola form earlier in the weekend. It’s a coloristic inward journey of a piece, minimal but not minimalist, per se. The minimalist cred of a world premiere by young-at-heart elder statesman Terry Riley closed out the concert/festival with a rugged bang. Virtually the entire festival cast joined the party for Riley’s “Pulse Field,” a delightfully funky and loose-jointed, three-part opus ruled by the power of riffs. It’s a bit of a mess, in the best way, counteracting the potentially robotic nature of other, Glass-y minimalism, with a kind of ruffian gameplan of “riff/resonate/recalculate/repeat.”

OMF 2025, a wild garden of contemporary-minded goodness, ended with a hypnotic riff laid out over four measures of 4/4 and one of 3/8. We left the Libby humming along with this odd-timed “hook,” duly hypnotized.

Next up, the 80th OMF with the legendary conductor-composer Esa-Pekka Salonen as music director. We might hear some Boulez that weekend.

Ojai Music Festival – June 6 Evening Concert

June 14, 2025 by Paul Muller

<https://www.sequenza21.com/2025/06/ojai-music-festival-june-6-evening-concert/>

The Friday evening concert was titled *The Holy Liftoff*, continuing the theme from the morning. There was a solo viola piece by Leilehua Lanzilotti, the USC Cello Ensemble led by Seth Parker Woods, with music by Sofia Gubaidulina, Julius Eastman and Terry Riley. The ever reliable Steven Schick conducted and the JACK Quartet joined with Clare Chase in the final work.

First up was *ko‘u inoa* by Leilehua Lanzilotti, a composer, violist and interdisciplinary artist based in Hawaii. “ko‘u inoa” means “my name” or “in my name” and is a Hawaiian term freighted with identity, ancestry and community. The piece was inspired by *Hawai‘i Aloha*, a traditional 19th century Hawaiian anthem. As Lanzilotti explains in the program notes: “*Hawai‘i Aloha* evokes not only a homesickness for place and sound, but this action of coming together — a homesickness that we’re all feeling right now, where music and human interaction are home.”

ko‘u inoa began with the composer/soloist walking in from offstage playing a low, repeating phrase that was soft and mysterious. Rising tones in this opening created a nice minimalist feel and the timbre of the viola seemed ideally suited to this warmly eloquent music. The texture thickened agreeably as Ms. Lanzilotti double stopped, sounding two notes at once. The piece proceeded as if a natural process was unfolding, understated and beautiful. Optimistic and expressive, the dynamics increased towards the finish without violating the intimate and reserved emotion in the music. The quiet ending was greeted with extended applause. *ko‘u inoa* and Leilehua Lanzilotti succeeded brilliantly in conveying the sweetness of Hawaiian sensibility in an elegant and intimate viola solo.

Mirage: The Dancing Sun, by Sofia Gubaidulina followed. This was performed by the eight massed strings that were the USC Cello Ensemble, all led Seth Parker Woods of the USC music faculty. The excellent program notes by Thomas May set out the ambitious intentions of the composer: “The late Sofia Gubaidulina’s *Mirage: The Dancing Sun*, scored for eight cellos, treats sound as spiritual metaphor, evoking the interplay of light and shadow, faith and uncertainty — an expression of her preoccupation with the sacred and the unseen.”

High, squeaky sounds from the upper register of the cello opened *Mirage: The Dancing Sun* along with some strident pizzicato. Seth Parker Woods played more sustained tones on top of the busy

texture, and this established a contrasting and questioning feel. This was followed by lush tutti phrases, lovely in tone and harmony, but with a tinge of sadness that set a contrast with the active opening. Good ensemble playing was on display as the various cello lines began to diverge and intertwine. Woods stayed in a solo role, commenting on the complex phrases coming from the ensemble. The slower tutti passages returned and alternated with active and tense stretches. The cellos were not monolithic and they seemed to act in separate sections of two or three. Now very rapid and chaotic sounds with extremely high notes swirled in an around mid-registers. This was followed by a slower arco section full of warm expression, certainly a expressing a convincing contrast between the forces of light and dark. The dynamics and tempo increased as the cellos soared upward to another section of rapid and chaotic notes. A sudden decrescendo, followed by silence, completed *Mirage: The Dancing Sun*. Much applause followed, not least for the discipline and technique of the USC Cello Ensemble. This was a challenging piece, ably performed as part of an important music festival.

The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc, by Julius Eastman followed and the USC Cello Ensemble was augmented by two additional players. Julius Eastman grew up singing in church, attended the Curtis Institute and by the 1970s was a significant figure in the New York Minimalist scene. Sadly, Eastman died penniless and alone in 1990; he was just 49 years old. His music has enjoyed something of revival, sparked by the efforts of composer Mary Jane Leach, who has worked tirelessly to collect and organize his existing scores. Seth Parker Woods was instrumental in bringing Eastman's *Gay Guerilla* to the 2022 Ojai Festival in a powerful and memorable performance.

The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc begins with a series of pulsing declarative tutti phrases from the cellos. There is an ominous feel to this and a single dramatic line of of sustained notes rises above the texture, adding further tension. There is a sense of danger and menace with the edgy, but controlled, playing from the ensemble. The many colors, emotions and contrasts conjured from ten identical cellos was impressive. More tension was added as the piece continued with dissonant and intertwined phrasing, all with that steady pulse underneath. A sudden, expressive cello solo was heard followed by faster tempo and more insistent passages. The pulsating and menacing sections seem to alternate and contend with slower, more reflective stretches. There is a brief Grand Pause, then a final cascade of more chaotic sounds. The piece concludes with a quietly gradual slowdown that leads to a long sustained tone at the finish. All of Eastman's passion and intensity were on display and this seems the more remarkable as it came from just ten cellos. Much applause followed for the players and the music.

After the intermission, *The Holy Liftoff* by Terry Riley was the final work on the concert program. This was just one part of a large scale work, still in process. The JACK Quartet and Clare Chase were the performers. The program notes give a clue about what to expect: "Groovy, buoyantly irreverent, and transcendent, *The Holy Liftoff* reflects what Chase calls 'a multi-modal way of making music,' echoing the communal, DIY spirit of Riley's *In C* (1964)." Terry Riley, one of the Mount Rushmore

figures of American Minimalism, will turn 90 this month and composed this lively piece expressly for Clare Chase. Riley is now living in Japan and could not make the trip to Ojai, but he was connected to the concert by the magic of video streaming. Clare Chase called for the audience to shout out a greeting to him, and this was done with affectionate vigor.

The Holy Liftoff runs to almost a full hour in performance and is a playfully disparate collection of styles, timbres and emotions. There are sections with warm flute passages, stretches that are almost inaudible and parts where independent lines rapidly break out, diverge, then combine again. There are fast and frenetic tempos as well as comfortably placid stretches. One section featured a bright repeating line in the cello with an infectious flute melody joined by a violin in counterpoint. At one point a classic minimalism groove developed, sunny and optimistic. Clare Chase had three flutes at her stand and used them all. She seemed to be playing continuously throughout the entire piece. The JACK Quartet reliably produced lush harmonies as well as rough or squeaky tones, as required.

As the piece barreled to its conclusion, ragged and skittering sounds were heard from in the strings with a strong pulse from the flute. The sound of blowing wind from the sound system evoked a chaotic feel. This was followed by a return to conventional consonance and harmony, even as some chaotic phrases in the strings try to break through. A powerful cadenza full of sharp, spiky notes was issued by the flute and the piece came a sudden finish.

The applause was long and sincere, in no small part for the stamina and endurance of the performers, notably Clare Chase. *The Holy Liftoff* was a tour de force for the players, a triumph for Terry Riley and a spectacular treat for the Ojai audience.

Photo Credit: Timothy Teague

Pied Piper (On Flutes) Leads Ojai On A Long, Winding Road To Fun

By [Rick Schultz](#)

June 12, 2025

[Pied Piper \(On Flutes\) Leads Ojai On A Long, Winding Road To Fun | Classical Voice North America](#)

OJAI, Calif. — In *Deep Listening: The Story of Pauline Oliveros*, an apt 2022 documentary shown at the refurbished and upgraded Ojai Playhouse during the 79th annual [Ojai Music Festival](#), someone describes the music emerging out of the 1960s experimentalists and avant-garde as “Not fun, not easy, and it goes on forever.” The comment generated knowing laughter from the full house.

Except for the “not fun,” that’s an accurate general description of programs at Ojai. The festival ran June 5-8, and its music director (a new one is chosen annually) was [Claire Chase](#), a collaborative artist and experimental flutist.

The Southern California-born Chase, 47, worked with [Oliveros](#), a pioneer of American music who died in 2016. Her spirit, along with composer [Terry Riley’s](#) (he turns 90 on June 24), enlivened the four crammed days of music-making, which included off-site indoor and outdoor events in the park. Most of the concerts took place in the ever-ambient (sounds of crickets, birds, frogs) outdoor [Libbey Bowl](#).

Chase, who founded the influential [International Contemporary Ensemble](#) in 2001, went solo in 2017. She’s known for exploring sounds on a variety of flutes and flute-like instruments, including tin, Aztec whistles, and a contrabass (two octaves lower than a standard flute) she calls “Big Bertha.”

As usual, the festival gathered cumulative interest. At the Saturday mid-morning concert, [Leilehua Lanzilotti’s](#) *ahupua’a* stood out as a languid deconstruction of a string quartet, expertly performed by the [JACK Quartet](#) (Christopher Otto and Austin Wulliman, violins; John Pickford Richards, viola; Jay Campbell, cello). Instruments are initially

brushed, then the cello adds a bit of percussive col legno textures, with the stick of the bow falling on the strings, before the piece finds a brief repose.

[Marcos Balter's](#) strident, slashing *Chambers* sank under a kind of relentless, over-complicated academic weight, while [Anna Thorvaldsdottir's](#) *Ubique* began promisingly, with rumbling electronics and Chase's glacial contrabass line. But 52 minutes of plucking piano strings, striking of instruments, and Chase's signature breathiness and growling on the flute started to feel gimmicky, suggesting how new music's arteries can harden into a deadening orthodoxy of extended techniques. It will be interesting to see if Chase can find ways to keep both the musical and performance aspects of her art fresh and involving. She's at a point where Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* might sound newly minted.

One of the most outstanding scores at the festival was [Sofia Gubaidulina's](#) *Mirage: The Dancing Sun*, played on Friday night by the USC Cello Ensemble. (The composer died in March at age 93.) [Steven Schick](#), a conductor and percussionist extraordinaire who was Ojai's music director in 2015, conveyed Gubaidulina's purity of intention and understanding of structure. Sure, strings were scraped, but the 12-minute work was a sustained adventure. *Mirage*, as well as her *Meditation* on the Bach chorale "Vor deinen Thron" (BWV 668), performed by the JACK Quartet on Saturday night, are worth revisiting.

Total cello immersion continued with [Julius Eastman's](#) *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*. Schick, the [USC Cello Ensemble](#), and cellists Campbell, [Katinka Kleijn](#), and [Seth Parker Woods](#) handled the restless score's shifting dynamics seamlessly, allowing layers of intensity to emerge. The work's sheer density of accumulating sound was compelling.

After intermission, a selection of movements from Riley's ongoing project, *The Holy Liff*, adapted for Ojai's stage — 46 minutes' worth — gave a vivid sense of the man's musical expansiveness. Riley reportedly bristled at being called a forerunner of minimalism, but his *In C* (1964) inspired the likes of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Adams, Eastman, and others.

Riley, along with Oliveros, became the festival's shamans-in-residence. Watching the concert via streaming from his home in Japan, Riley heard us all shout "Hi, Terry!" at Chase's request. Chase rendered the long opening *Liff* solo with flair as the JACK Quartet picked up the main theme, the five musicians alert to every dynamic change. There was also Riley's voice on tape intoning late in the piece, "All Rise." The moment elicited many smiles from the audience.

More smiles arrived Sunday mid-morning when sheng master [Wu Wei](#) presented the premiere of [Susie Ibarra's](#) *Nest Box*, composed for Ojai in honor of Schick's 70th birthday.

The sheng is a Chinese mouth organ capable of playing harmonies and chords. In Wei's hands, it could sound like a harmonica or as pure as an oboe. Ibarra accompanied him on percussion using wooden blocks, like a woodpecker speaking to Wei. Actual bird responses from around Libbey Bowl made Wei pause and look out into the trees.

Composer [Tania León's](#) devilishly difficult *Rituál* for solo piano (1987) received a transcendently headlong (the only way one can perform it) rendition from [Alex Peh](#). The pianist's deep dive into the bass register anchored the fiery, propulsive piece throughout.

Ibarra's 2025 Pulitzer Prize-winning [Sky Islands](#) ended the concert on a high. Here was a score with a bit of everything: Percussionists Ibarra and [Levy Lorenzo](#) opened the piece by striking bamboo poles on the ground, Chase played to the edge of audibility against the JACK Quartet, then, with Peh again on piano, the eight players jumped into an exhilarating jazz groove. The piece's various moving parts somehow held interest. There was more hissing and growling into the flute, but also rubbing and shaking of banana plants. To end, Chase, a 21st-century pied piper, played a simple figure, leading the musicians — each tapping a small percussion instrument — single-file out of the venue.

How do you top that? You don't. The festival's late Sunday afternoon finale brought Oliveros' *The Witness*, a rambling, seemingly improvised score for 12 musicians, with Chase displaying her reliable technical assurance. It's a very busy half-hour collection of sounds that I imagine Oliveros might have loved. As was said of John Cage, Oliveros reportedly remained a musician who "made the world seem safe for creativity."

The long weekend ended with Riley's *Pulsefield* — three Pulsefields, actually, each rising louder and louder. Schick on percussion swayed and gestured to signal transitions. There's a stirring section that would not be out of place in a triumphal movie sequence. The sense of everyone jamming, with musicians singing and a trumpet and trombone wailing away, concluded the celebratory festival on an exuberant note. Perhaps too long, not easy, but fun.

Conductor and composer [Esa-Pekka Salonen](#) is slated to return as music director for the festival's 80th season June 11-14, 2026, which also marks the conclusion of artistic and executive director Ara Guzelimian's tenure.

By Richard S. Ginell

Musical America.com, June 13, 2025

OJAI, CA – The Ojai Music Festival lately has been swinging from extreme to extreme as its music directors-*du-jour* pass through the revolving door. The eclectic world-folk-based Rhiannon Giddens festival of 2023 gave way to the mostly-mainstream verities of Mitsuko Uchida in 2024, while swerving way to the left this year with Claire Chase's avant-garde bent. Not that Ojai's historically adventurous, if not entirely uncritical, audiences mind; they go with the flow to the ever-amazed and delighted reaction of the guest musicians who perform in Libbey Bowl at this little-town festival that could.

Chase, the hyper-energetic flutist/entrepreneur whom Ojai artistic director Ara Guzelimian likened to a "comet," last appeared at the festival in 2017, where the boundaries of what is music and what is noise were being continuously tested. Like most comets, it took awhile for Chase to orbit back into view at Ojai – and once she did, you could be sure that she would come with more challenging installments from her immense *Density 2036* project in hand.

Named in the spirit of Edgard Varese's seminal work for solo flute, *Density 21.5* (as in platinum, the metal of which some flutes are made), *Density 2036* is a line of newly-commissioned works for flute and various combinations that started in 2013 and will continue annually until 2036, the year of *Density 21.5*'s centennial. All of the commissions through 2021 have been recorded and issued through the auspices of Meyer Sound, the creators of the breakthrough Constellation system that can convincingly simulate a plethora of acoustical environments. Those pieces are, as you might expect, a mixed bag, with an assortment of hits and misses.

A long excerpt from Marcos Balter's *Pan* had been performed at the 2017 festival (the piece had not been completed yet), but on Thursday June 5, the entire 49-minute work was played in a full production – and it made a big difference, even as seen and heard on Ojai's livestream at home. The earlier performance occurred during the daytime, the present one was done at night, heightening the haunting, ritualistic atmosphere and feeling of a journey to inner space. As before, citizens of Ojai were recruited to form a circle onstage around Chase and her flutes to represent Pan's community, bearing candles and twirling the rims of tuned water glasses with their fingers to produce an otherworldly high-pitched drone. The sound, as heard on good-quality headphones, was excellent, with sharp definition and a wide stereo image. (All Ojai livestreams are free and remain archived, a real service for those who cannot trek out to this small town for one reason or another).

Liza Lim's *Density 2036* solo feature for Chase of similar length as *Pan* had the provocative title, *Sex Magic* – and I suspect that the implication of those words led to a sold-out house June 6 at the nearby Ojai Valley School's Greenberg Center (suggested headline for a newspaper article:

“Sex Makes Magic at Box Office”). But if those attracted by the title expected something salacious, they might have been disappointed by this rather long-winded ritual about “the sacred erotic in women’s history” for Claire and her giant, pretzel-like contrabass flute (which she nicknamed “Bertha”). The relationship between Chase and “Bertha” seemed relatively chaste, though there were enlivening features. Two adjacent platforms loaded with tambourines, jingle bells and other hand instruments produced rumbling vibrations that resembled earthquakes when electronically stimulated to the max. The keys of “Bertha” were attached to a transducer microphone in order to produce thundering percussive effects, and at certain points, Chase tromped down on a kick drum, trilled expressively on an ocarina, and cut loose a single terrifying scream on an Aztec “death whistle.” For at least two minutes, nothing happened at all, just silence bracketed by two strokes on a metal prayer bowl.

Moving on, the acclaimed Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdóttir’s contribution to *Density 2036*’s 2023 edition is *Ubique*, whose West Coast premiere occupied the better part of June 7’s morning concert. Written for flute, two cellos, piano and electronics, *Ubique* is one of Thorvaldsdóttir’s more forbidding pieces, marked by the drones that undergird so much Icelandic music. Electronic rumbling from the rear speakers open the piece – at first, I thought it was the sound of passing trucks on State Highway 150 that occasionally disturb concerts in Libbey Bowl – but it also pops up later here and there, concluding in a distant storm. While there is some agitation in a central passage, the piece is mostly just long sustained tones that, uncharacteristically for this composer, wear thin at this length (52 minutes).

The evidently-ageless Terry Riley was represented in *Density 2036* with excerpts from an ongoing long-form project, *The Holy Liftoff*, that delighted the ear – long, flowing melodic patterns for Chase and frequent Ojai visitors JACK Quartet, with pre-recorded multiple flutes (played by Chase) and the occasional reminder of Riley’s jazzy past. And speaking of jazz, the last contribution to *Density 2036* on the agenda was Craig Taborn’s de facto free-jazz jam, *Busy Griefs And Endangered Charms*, with Chase, clarinetist Joshua Rubin, drummer Susie Ibarra, and Taborn on piano and MIDI keyboard. I caught the second of two performances on June 8 in which a series of solos and duets among the performers seemed to be not getting anywhere except when Ibarra struck up a swinging second line groove for a short time. Finally, at the 55:55 mark, the power suddenly cut out on Taborn’s electronic equipment, and after a few seconds of uncertainty, they wisely decided to call it a day.

By Richard S. Ginell

Musical America.com, June 17, 2025

Claire Chase's *Density 2036* selections (covered in Part One) were tied into the sprawling overall themes of Ojai Festival 2025 – the music in everyday places; the intermingling of music and environment; the processes of ritual over vast stretches of time; the freedom of improvisation; the collaboration among a diverse community of musicians. Above all, experiment, experiment, experiment.

Under these freewheeling conditions, inevitably some things worked better than others. Take the keyboard-dominated morning program on Friday June 6. Alex Peh was asked to roll first one, and then six superballs and a metal bottleneck slide on the strings of his prepared harpsichord in Thorvaldsdóttir's *Impressions* – which didn't relieve the music's spare, austere nature. Cory Smythe concocted what was supposed to be a re-imagination of jazz hero John Coltrane's "Countdown" for grand piano and MIDI controller, but the stuttering, droning textures blurred by microtones went nowhere and in any case, contained hardly a trace of Coltrane (possibly a note or two here and there). Yet when Smythe and Craig Taborn combined forces in a long, sometimes explosive duo improvisation, I was struck by how closely in sync their two minds were, no matter how turbulent, rambling or microtonal the line of thought.

There were homages to deceased champions of new music like Sofia Gubaidulina, who passed away in March *after* Chase made her selection of music for the festival. Her fascinating *Mirages* for eight cellos ranged from lush textures giving way to tortured descending trills and pandemonium that eventually descended into the depths. Following a rendition of J.S. Bach's last piece, an arrangement of the chorale *Vom deinen Thron* for string trio and Wu Wei's *sheng*, Gubaidulina's Meditation on the Bach Chorale from 1993 for harpsichord and string quintet grew increasingly tense, with rising anxiety alien to Bach yet quite gripping for a contemporary audience, like a post-traumatic cry of anti-Soviet protest. Steven Schick led the USC Cello Ensemble in *Mirages* on June 6 and the Meditation on June 7.

Schick contributed to the Julius Eastman revival June 6 by leading *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* for ten cellos, where an aggressive two-note motif is repeated, manipulated, and overlaid with sometimes discordant lines, almost always pushing forward with a steady pulse. That was a crowd favorite, judging by the heightened volume of applause. Pauline Oliveros had a significant presence as composer and posthumous influencer in works like *The Witness* – where among other things, Chase drew strange, whimpering sounds from an ocarina and got into a slapstick duel on slide whistle with trombonist Mattie Barbier. An informative, if overlong, film on Oliveros's life and work could be seen at the revamped Ojai Playhouse near Libbey Park.

Yet if there was one concert that stood above all the rest overall, it was the Sunday morning June 8 event entitled “Sonic Rituals.” Launched by the JACK Quartet’s neo-medieval opening numbers – Christopher Otto’s tangled *Angelorum Psalat*, after Rodericus and Austin Wulliman’s austere wandering *Dave’s Hocket: For Guillaume (Machaut) and Arvo (Pärt)* – the concert soon focused on the remarkable composing and percussive talents of Susie Ibarra. Her *Nest Box*, a world premiere, was an amazing, often humorous display piece for Ibarra, Wu Wei, and the ever-musical birds of Libbey Park improvising on the fly, as it were. Ibarra orchestrated an encyclopedia of sensitive, subtle techniques on a standard trap drum kit, and Wu Wei at last was turned loose to demonstrate the versatility of the *sheng*.

Following Peh’s performance of Tania Léon’s wild dance of a *Ritual* for solo piano, Ibarra’s *Sky Islands* received its West Coast premiere, which as Ojai luck would have it, was scheduled well before the piece won this year’s Pulitzer Prize in music. First, Ibarra and percussionist Levy Lorenzo established the rhythm up front with a pair of giant bamboo poles. Then they retreated to their respective kits and elaborated on the rhythm as Chase jammed on flute to the beat, the JACK Quartet offered rhapsodic support, and Peh dug in on piano. There were some passages for percussion duo that went on for a bit too long, but when Ibarra hit a swinging 9/8 groove on the traps about halfway through, the piece became a joyous racket of rhythm with plenty of Luzon rainforest color from Ibarra’s Philippine roots (at one point, the two percussionists were tapping on some large, amplified plants). In the end, the band grabbed hand instruments and formed a conga line, grooving and strutting off the stage as Chase tootled a four-note tune repeatedly on flute. It was a fun choice for a Pulitzer winner, no question.

Next year under the giant sycamore in Libbey Bowl it will be Esa-Pekka Salonen’s turn as Ojai music director – his third – and given EPS’s ever-sharpening skills as a programmer, expectations will be sky-high.



San Francisco Classical Voice

A Once-in-a-Lifetime Ojai Festival Cultivates Deep Listening

Jim Farber on June 16, 2025

[A Once-in-a-Lifetime Ojai Festival Cultivates Deep Listening | San Francisco Classical Voice](#)

The score for Annea Lockwood's 2016 composition *bayou-borne*, which was performed on the opening program of the 79th **Ojai Music Festival**, doesn't include a single note. Rather, she provides a map depicting the massive confluence of rivers and streams that flow together to form Buffalo Bayou, the waterway that passes through Houston, Texas.

Lockwood's map-score was the perfect metaphor for this year's Ojai Festival — an international convergence of composers and musicians who came together to produce four memorable days of concerts under the leadership of virtuoso flutist Claire Chase, this year's music director, and Ara Guzelimian, Ojai's artistic and executive director.

As we face the threats posed by global warming and species extinction, Chase focused attention on women composers who hail from around the world: Lockwood (New Zealand), Susie Ibarra (U.S.), Tania León (Cuba), Liza Lim (Australia), and Anna Thorvaldsdottir (Iceland), among others. They are all creating music with perspectives that situate the listener in a complex web of connected issues and histories. Their compositions evolve across a cosmic, tectonic sense of time; incorporate Indigenous musical traditions and field recordings; and relay a message that the natural world is fragile and in danger.

And what better setting than the Ojai Valley for an outdoor festival stressing a spiritual connection to the natural world? Glaciers, rivers, raindrops, bird life, the "language" of forests, and the rumble of volcanos — all of these were directly evoked or sampled in the pieces Chase programmed Thursday through Sunday, June 5–8.

Libbey Bowl was the perfect venue to host this environmental theme, for every concert there is accompanied by croaking frogs, twittering crickets, hooting owls, and cooing doves, while sunlight dapples through the leaves and the moon slowly rises.

Opening night was magical, one of the most captivating concerts I have experienced at this festival. With hindsight, I can say this is because we were at the start of a journey through ideas as well as music.

Oliveros championed what she termed “deep listening,” which asks audiences to open themselves to the spiritual depth of a musical experience. She called it a “practice” and explained, in words that echoed throughout this festival, “deep listening involves going below the surface of what is heard, expanding to the whole field of sound while finding focus. This is the way to connect with the acoustic environment, all that inhabits it, and all that there is.”

The almost totally improvised structure of *bayou-borne* provided an exquisite introduction to Lockwood’s free-flowing process of composition. The piece also introduced an ensemble of artists who would perform in various configurations throughout the festival: clarinetist Joshua Rubin, Chinese *sheng* player Wu Wei, trumpeter Dan Rosenboom, trombonist Mattie Barbier, M.A. Tiesenga on electronic hurdy-gurdy, and percussionists Ibarra, Steven Schick, Ross Karre, and Wesley Sumpter.

As described in the program book, “Lockwood translates map lines into parts, leaving it to the performers to make decisions about such factors as tempo or density of the musical texture according to where their lines thicken or curve.”

Lockwood, 85, was making her first Ojai appearance in this concert. *Bayou-borne* was created to honor a close friend, composer Pauline Oliveros, on her 85th birthday. Sadly, Oliveros died shortly before reaching that milestone, yet in a sense, she was the originating spirit of Chase’s festival.

But a listener, without being told, might never have known that Thursday’s performance was improvisational, so fluid was its execution. These musicians, all of them long accustomed to this way of working, created a performance that was so cohesive that it seemed like they were elaborating a composed score rather than improvising off a map that was projected on a series of screens.

Closing out opening night was Marcos Balter’s *Pan*, which Chase premiered in 2018 as part of her ongoing commissioning project *Density 2036*. The 90-minute-long work, in nine sections, tells the story of the mythological demigod and satyr who grew so proud of his musical prowess that he challenged Apollo to a competition. Pan lost and was forced to pay for his hubris.

Balter’s score is a masterpiece of musical artistry and dramatic storytelling, and Chase’s performance showed off her virtuosity and endurance. Fully staged with projections and elaborate lighting, this presentation featured a chorus made up of Ojai locals and audience members ranging in age from 9 to over 80.

Entranced by the magic of his flute song, the ensemble worshiped Pan like a rock star, only to turn on him after his defeat. All the while, the natural world, Pan’s domain, contributed its sounds, and the choristers, with lights on their fingers, moved through Libbey Bowl like forest spirits led by Chase’s flute. It was an Ojai moment like no other.

Another festival highlight came mid-Sunday morning in Ibarra’s 2025 Pulitzer Prize-winning composition *Sky Islands*, whose title refers to the high-altitude rainforests of the island of Luzon in the Philippines. It’s an endangered ecosystem that sits above low-lying clouds and is populated by animals found nowhere else.

Ibarra creates a panoramic sense of this unique environment, beginning with the rhythmic pounding of large bamboo poles. Indigenous dance rhythms blend with evocations of the natural world, accentuated by the rustling of huge palm leaves and a vast array of percussion instruments, including a battery of tuned gongs. The work was performed with a sense of pure delight by Chase, dual percussionists Ibarra and Levy Lorenzo, pianist Alex Peh, and the JACK Quartet: violinists Christopher Otto and Austin Wulliman, violist John Pickford Richards, and cellist Jay Campbell.

Traditionally, Ojai features a series of “Morning Meditation” concerts that begin at 8 a.m. Saturday’s open-air offering took place deep in the woods of the 58-acre Ojai Meadows Preserve. With the land shrouded in mist, the performance commenced with Ibarra’s harmonic convergence of instrumental avians, *Sunbird* (2021). The piece was so effective it was almost impossible to tell which sounds came from the musicians and which came from actual birds.

The concert that followed at 10:30 a.m. in Libbey Bowl ended with a towering performance of Thorvaldsdottir’s *Ubique* (2023), a 45-minute work composed for *Density 2036*. Powerful and disturbing, the piece is as dark and brooding as the Icelandic landscapes it evokes. Chase, pianist Cory Smythe, and cellists Katinka Kleijn and Seth Parker Woods performed the work, its thematically mirroring movements separated by the deep, ominous rumbling of a recorded volcano, as if to warn, “Something wicked this way comes.”

And then there was Lockwood’s 2010 soundscape *A Sound Map of the Housatonic River*, presented Saturday and Sunday at the Move Sanctuary yoga studio. The audience lay on mats or sat against the wall surrounded by a four-channel array of speakers. What followed was a collage made from multiple years of field recordings of the Housatonic River, from its headwaters to its outflow delta at the Long Island Sound.

The experience, however, was anything but documentary, and Lockwood sees her work as a musical composition. She painstakingly edits and cross-fades her recordings, here producing a musical tour de force of constantly shifting rhythms, multilayered tonalities, and vibrant colorations. This music isn’t made by instruments but by the endless variations of water flowing, birds singing, cicadas buzzing at nightfall, and even a train passing, ending with the soft lapping of waves on the shore.

For audience members, it’s a journey that requires patience and a willingness, quite literally, to go with the flow. It’s one of the masterworks of the 21st century. And like the rest of this year’s festival, the experience invited listening on multiple levels, incorporating the sounds around us as an integral part of the composition. Somewhere, Oliveros’s spirit was smiling.



San Francisco Classical Voice

This Year's Ojai Festival Makes Time for Terry Riley

Richard S. Ginell on June 16, 2025

While the bulk of this year's **Ojai Music Festival** was given over to Music Director Claire Chase's mammoth *Density 2036* project and female composers in general, a seminal contemporary figure nearly got lost in the shuffle. This would be Terry Riley, who will turn 90 on June 24 and miraculously remains a productive contributor to the new-music scene.

Currently living in Japan, Riley ultimately couldn't make it to Ojai — out of sight but hardly out of mind. He reportedly watched the concerts via livestream, and on Friday night, June 6, shortly before some of his music was played, Chase had everyone in Libbey Bowl say hello to Terry on the other side of the world.

You could think of Riley as the fountainhead of a good deal of what audiences heard at the festival. His influence largely comes down to a single work, *In C*, which in its day represented an unthinkable break with not only the serial-music orthodoxies that dominated academia and criticism but also everyday programming in concert halls. Conceived in 1964 and recorded in 1968, *In C* advocated simplicity, repetition, process, ritual, and a dedication to tonality that fueled the minimalist rebellion to follow. Riley would go in other directions from there, emerging as a prolific composer of string works for the Kronos Quartet, concertos for organ and electric violin, solo piano music, world-music hybrids, and so much more.

Yet there was nothing retrospective about Riley's contributions to Ojai 2025. The works that he provided were up-to-the-minute reports on what the soon-to-be nonagenarian is pursuing.

The biggest offering was an airing of excerpts from *The Holy Liftoff*, a massive ongoing project that Riley has been compiling for *Density 2036*. Some of these "scores" were on display near the Libbey Bowl entrance — fanciful drawings of birds and other creatures surrounding floating lines of notation. They're supposed to be collaborative pieces, with the drawings providing the "liftoff" for performers to fill out the compositions.

"Everything is going up, it doesn't matter what it is. It's kind of like gravity has suddenly released everything," Riley says with characteristic mysticism in an interview in the festival's program book. "I'm going to lift off too, in the not-too-distant future. I'm looking forward to that!"

A brief sample from Riley's levitation exercises could be heard during Friday morning's concert, which led off with the composer's *Pulsing Lifters* (2024) in Alex Peh's arrangement for two pianos, harpsichord, and droning electronics. The work has an ethereal atmosphere — enhanced ad libitum by the ever-musical birds in Libbey Park — that emerges ever so slowly, very much in tune with today's chill-out music. Cory Smythe and Craig Taborn manned the pianos, Peh the harpsichord.

A much wider selection of material from *The Holy Liftoff*, as realized by Samuel Clay Birmaher, was presented the same night as the centerpiece of a program appropriately titled "Varieties of Transcendence." Lasting about three-quarters of an hour, the excerpts, played without pause, opened with a gorgeously melodic, electronically multilayered flute solo from Chase, her thread soon taken up by the JACK Quartet. At times, the string players would set repetitive patterns for Chase to soar over, or there would be a call-and-response between Chase's bass flute and the foursome. Late in the sequence, a jazzy stream of thought, reflecting Riley's early career playing in piano bars, took over, with the JACK Quartet thumping out pizzicatos.

What all of these lovely pieces have in common is a sense of ceaseless flowing, like that of a river. At certain transition points, we heard the recorded voice of Riley himself announcing the titles of these excerpts: "E-flat Minor Ishi," "All Arise," "The Tragedy of What We Lost," and finally, "Liftoff Harmony."

For the traditional late Sunday afternoon finale on June 8, Riley sprung a new composition, *Pulsefield* (2024–2025), upon Chase and Ojai. This 22½-minute work in three continuous sections was very different — brash, full of beans, taking off on a stuttering three-note unison pattern. It was not clear if the first two sections were world premieres; only *Pulsefield 3* had that undisputed distinction.

As for the performance, it was everyone-into-the-pool time. Virtually all of the musicians who took part in the festival crowded onto the stage, loosely led by Steven Schick, who signaled the changes in rhythm. As long as Schick, the marvelous drummer and composer Susie Ibarra, and the other percussionists were maintaining the pulse, the thing rocked like a machine gone wild. But when they dropped out, the piece seemed to disintegrate, and only when Ibarra and Schick reestablished the beat did the ensemble get out of the ditch.

At the end, everyone onstage was advised by Riley to sing the catchy riff as the volume dropped, but only some did. Ultimately, *Pulsefield* was a joyously raucous way to conclude a provocative festival.