

CONCERT REVIEW: Dancing on a dangerous precipice - This year's Ojai Music Festival had Mark Morris as music director, for worse and better

By JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

June 16, 2013 1:17 AM

A funny, strange and not always happy thing happened in Ojai last weekend, as the internationally revered Ojai Music Festival slithered, pranced and danced its way through the 67th annual edition. Somebody had the odd idea of handing the keys to this legendary cultural event to a non-musician as music director, in the person of choreographer Mark Morris. No doubt, the decision was partly economic, in an attempt to lure in the dance crowd, but some of us Ojai diehards were left scratching our heads, while trying to keep an open mind, and open ears and eyes.

In short, after four days and nights and multiple concerts and other events around Ojai, this was a dizzying up and down weekend. As a whole, it was not one of the better fests of recent vintage, but certainly with enough high points to warrant another visit to what has been a "mostly" contemporary music Shangri-La for one late spring weekend every year.

On the downside, a creepy feeling hovered over Libbey Bowl for the first of three Friday evening concerts, when it became apparent that the musicians had been demoted, kicked off the actual stage, possibly for the first time in festival history (well, at least in the last 32 years I've been going). It seemed as if the dance component was a houseguest who came and forced the house owners to sleep in the barn.

Adding to the insult, the pieces on the first hour-long concert, spicy Stravinsky-ish String Quartets No. 3 and 4, and Charles Ives' compelling Trio for Violin, Violincello and Piano, were not written for dance; Mr. Morris' choreography, however inventive, was profoundly distracting.

Things got more comfortable for the second part of Friday night, mainly because the music — Barber's "Excursions for the piano," Cowell's "Suite for Violin and Piano" and Lou Harrison's "Grand Duo for Violin and Piano" — got less interesting. Under those circumstances, we could assuage our sense that dance probably doesn't belong in the Ojai Music Festival, yet appreciate the muscular grace, conceptual might and body-wise mastery of Mr. Morris' work.

More good news from the dance component came by surprise. As an unexpected addition to the Sunday morning concert, the wonderful, whimsical solo dance "Ten Suggestions" was nimbly performed by Dallas McMurray, in pink pajamas to suit the morning slot, to the tune of Alexander Tscherepnin's piano piece "Bagatelles."

One entirely positive note this year was the inclusion of that wondrously idiosyncratic jazz sensation, the Bad Plus, booked into the Thursday night concert slot. In its spotty attempts at weaving jazz into the program, the Ojai festival has periodically struck inspired programming chords, as with Mark-Anthony Turnage's jazz-chamber music years back, and the appearance of the great, and classically-influenced jazz big band leader Maria Schneider three years ago.

For its part, the Bad Plus was perfectly suited, not only because of the pluck and daring of its own music, but its new reputation and buzz in classical circles for its unique arrangement of Stravinsky's hundred-year old modernist landmark "Rite of Spring." The Bad Plus — pianist Ethan Iverson, bassist Reid Anderson and drummer David King — opened its concert with a set of originals, almost identical to its memorable show at the Lobero Theatre last month, which happened on a double-bill with the Brad Mehldau Trio.

After intermission, the trio's classical cred emerged in its full glory. Premiered two years ago, the Plus' ambitious and boldly played "Rite" puts the masterpiece into a new, rhythm section-formatted light. It may be an acquired taste, and a novelty compared to the profundity and range of the original — both the two-piano version (heard on this stage played by Buggalo-Williams in 2005, and last year by Leif Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin), or the orchestral version. But this personalized spin around the "Rite" is something well worth checking out, at least once. (A newly choreographed version was slated for a premiere in Berkeley on Wednesday, in the "Ojai North" arm of the festival.)

In the Ojai 2013 model, at Mr. Morris' behest, there was a whole lotta Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison, danced to and otherwise, right up through the anticlimactic Sunday evening program. A pair of Cowell quirks, "Heroic Dance (for Martha Graham)" and the grand kooky lark "Atlantis" — with grunting singers suggesting a cheesy monster movie morphing into a porn film — segued into Mr. Harrison's "Fugue for Percussion" and the finale, "Concerto for Piano with Javanese Gamelan."

Given the uneven quality or interest level of these composers' work over the weekend, one wonders if the excessive focus was really warranted. At the end of the festival, at least one listener felt as if the real stars of the show were two other great American maverick composers also heard multiple times — Charles Ives and John Cage.

Even with just a few pieces worked into the programming matrix, Mr. Ives loomed large over the weekend. That old Ives-ian charm and rebel spirit was powerfully moving, from the powerful String Trio (once you closed your eyes to block out the intrusive, uninvited dance component) and gutsy and quote-happy String Quartet No. 2, masterfully delivered by the American String Quartet on Sunday morning, this coming after several beautiful Ives songs on the concert's first half (wonderfully sung by soprano Yulia Van Doren, mezzo-soprano Jamie Van Eyck, and bass-baritone Douglas Williams).

Possibly the two most ear-opening, mind-opening concerts of the festival were the two Cage-devoted performances, unfortunately stuck in the margins of the late night Libbey Bowl times. On Friday, Mr. Iverson came out in a kitschy blue cape and performed the weirdly beguiling thirteen-movement piano piece "Four Walls," with its tart, almost jazz-flavored harmonies and cryptic, echoing shapes, and one short vocal interlude.

On the next late night, the brilliant percussion ensemble red fish blue fish delivered a program from Mr. Cage's acclaimed percussion library, highlighted by the tautly navigated wild ride "Credo in US," in what was probably the high point of the entire festival.

Two classic 20th century avant-garde greatest hits made their way into the weekend mix. Saturday morning's concert fare was proto-minimalist Terry Riley's 1964 novelty "In C," making its Ojai debut, surprisingly. Mr. Riley's infinitely variable scheme of motifs is also infinitely variable in quality, but this was a top drawer, hour-long performance.

Unfortunately, this piece with a dogmatically, definitively limited harmonic palette — all in or around the key of C — came during one of the most harmonically dull and static festivals in memory, whereas it would have been more welcome as a palate cleanser in an edgier overall program. Here, it felt a bit bland on bland, in context.

On Saturday evening, Mr. Cage's classic silent piece "4'33'" made its meditative presence known in the middle of a lovely little concert on toy piano in the Libbey Park playground, with the tall Yegor Shevtsov hunched over a pint-sized piano. Mr. Cage's "Suite for Toy Piano" exerted its large charm on a wee instrument to close the aptly short concert.

Also on that program was music of Satie's child-g geared piano music, which lost its tonal richness and melodic clarity as heard on "real" piano, but was something magical the context of actual playground ambient sounds.

It can be said that more attention was paid in the Mark Morris year to alternative venues and new programming ideas, such as the two free-to-the-public gamelan concerts in the park's gazebo, featuring traditional work and pieces by Mr. Harrison, played by the fine Berkeley-based Gamelan Sari Raras, or the two 8 a.m. (ouch) concerts featuring music of composer-in-residence John Luther Adams. On Sunday morning, Mr. Adams' sweet avian lark "songbirdsongs" was performed by red fish blue fish in the magical, vista-endowed setting of Meditation Mount, up by Thatcher School, with the local bird population adding its welcome riffs to the mix.

Mr. Adams' airy grace on Sunday morning came the morning after his swoopy and wave-like "for Lou Harrison" in the main Saturday night concert, which seemed about twice as long as it should have been (when it ended, before applause, a wise guy in the crowd yelled out "one more time!"). That followed the most impressive Harrison work of the weekend, his multi-style, multi-era "Suite for Symphonic Strings," although the forces of the MMDG Music Ensemble sounded surprisingly sloppy, at least by Ojai Festival standards.

In another case of winking, sneaky programming, Sunday's fare brought with it certain dollops of agnostic religious kitsch. The Sunday morning concert ended with Carl Ruggles' faux hymn-like "Exaltation" (replete with audience sing along led by Mr. Morris) and the fine organist Colin Fowler gave a rare organ-centric performance at the festival that afternoon, including work by Ives, Cowell, William Bolcom, Pershichetti and, natch, Harrison.

Amidst the generally lightweight, edge-phobic condition of the music this year, one of the refreshingly meaty moments of the weekend came in an unofficial capacity. The Sunday afternoon private donor's concert at the Ojai Art Center brought the American String Quartet to the center of the room to lavish us with four movements from Bach's final piece, "The Art of the Fugue" and Bartok's final work, his powerhouse String Quartet No. 6. Ah, the power of pure music, revitalizing sagging spirits and making life worth living.

Next year, Ojai's asylum keys are handed to music director designate Jeremy Denk, who makes his living playing piano, blogging about and thinking about music.