

No sign of retirement here : In its 65th annual edition, the Ojai Music Festival came on strong, artful and fresh, thanks to a few stars of varying substance

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By the old-school definition, the age of 65 marks the dawn of the "golden years," the finale of the active work force years. Yet for the ever-impressive and world-renowned Ojai Music Festival, this year's 65th birthday celebration over the weekend felt much less attuned to the feeling of endings or closure than a renewing, rebirthing occasion.

Such an impression came through loud, clear and subtly in the musical element itself. An inspired and nicely diversified programming charge was led by music director/soprano Dawn Upshaw, towering jazz composer/bandleader Maria Schneider, and the Australian Chamber Orchestra, with its de facto leader, violinist Richard Tognetti in especially fine spotlighted form.

But in addition, there was bold new spirit evident in the foundational bones and veins of the venerable festival's logistical life. This was the "unveiling year" for the extensively renovated and fortified new Libbey Bowl, with its sturdier stage and backstage and a newly outfitted and shifted seating and lawn area, with a ceremonial arch ? celebrated sculpturist Trimpin's new, permanent "Sound Arch" public artwork ? denoting the passage from the bowl to the outer park area.

Sadly, the ambitious project's Ojai-based architect, David Bury, died on Thursday morning, the official opening day of the festival. He lived to see his grand handiwork completed and readied for a life of festival service, hosting this incredible festival. It's safe to say that festival No. 1 in Libbey Bowl 2.0 rose to the high standards established by this institution.

Just as the renovated Bowl refers and taps into the past structure here while cautiously embracing a new now and future, so went the program this year. For one, this year's program fostered freshness through an expanded stylistic palette ? from the "world music" set by traditional Afghanistan musicians and the famed Afghan singer Ustad Farida Mahwash late on Friday night, to the Sunday morning concert presence of a bonafide, Grammy-award winning jazz ensemble, the Maria Schneider Orchestra, the finest "jazz moment" in this festival's history, in memory.



Dawn Upshaw, center, pianist Gilbert Kalish and red fish, blue fish ensemble perform in Peter Sellar's world premiere production of George Crumb's "Winds of Destiny" at the 65th Ojai Music Festival at the Libbey Bowl.

Timothy Norris for the Ojai Musi

In fact, deviation from Ojai Music Festival norms began at square one on Friday evening's program (Thursday night's pre-festival concert showcased young singers involved in Ms. Upshaw's program at Bard). Director Peter Sellars, the mind behind a spare but intriguing world premiere staging of George Crumb's 2004 song cycle "Winds of Destiny," gave an extended introduction to his own concept, and then surprised most of us by introducing the composer himself to the stage.

In an onstage Q&A with Mr. Sellars and pianist Gilbert Kalish, Mr. Crumb, a normally publicity- and public-shy composer, spoke in his gracious, unassuming way, about such subjects as his semi-intuitive manner of commenting on social and political themes in his music. "Music has a way of pulling things in from the air," Mr. Crumb said. "You'll never get a pretentious answer out of this man," noted Mr. Kalish. "He's as honest as the day is long."

In this imaginative, engaging and elegiac Sellars-conceived version of "Winds of Destiny," Ms. Upshaw drew on her deeply enmeshed skills as singer, actor and x-factor stage artist, using a bed, pillow and USMC camouflage garb as props. Mr. Crumb's genius here involves creative resourcefulness, especially in the blending of the solo voice and a many-colored percussion ensemble score (featuring the respected ensemble red fish blue fish, plus Mr. Kalish) in bringing new colors and reconstituted meanings to American songs we all know.

In this staging, Ms. Upshaw's implied roles included soldier, grieving mother of a slain soldier, Madonna, martyr and sage. She worked through liquid-y takes on "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory" and "Shenandoah" to frame the eight-song set (with an instrumental interlude in the middle) and deconstructed versions of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" and "Go Tell it on the Mountain," eerily modulating downward, as if pulled down the mountain, by gravity.

Given the current state-of-war references to the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, Mr. Sellars' programming of a late set from the site and culture in question was a small stroke of genius, and in keeping with the director's globally attuned cultural perspective. A respected, seasoned singer, the captivating Ms. Mahwash sang songs of love, Sufi devotion and other traditions, and was joined by the formidable Sakhi Ensemble, with Pervez Sakhi on rubâb (like an Indian sarod), Khalil Ragheb on harmonium and Zmarai Aref on tabla.

A tacit message encoded into this cultural evening, via the combined musical forces of the program, referred to the proverbial universal nature of music, and also to human needs, foibles and emotions.

On Saturday morning, the calmly commanding violinist Mr. Tognetti was joined by pianist Mr. Kalish for a wonderfully balanced recital, opening with Janacek's appealingly folky-cum-modernist Violin Sonata and closing, after intermission, with Beethoven's well-known "Kreutzer" Sonata No. 9.

But the most interesting material came in the middle. Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe's wistfully atmospheric solo violin piece "Irkandi I" (translating, in Aboriginal language, to "faraway, lonely place") makes inventive use of space and the delicate art of conjuring an alluring "interior dialogue" character for violin, alone.

In the best piece of the concert, musical dialoguing went both exterior and interior for Prokofiev's fascinating and rarely heard Sonata for Two Violins in C, with Australian Chamber Orchestra member Satu Vänskä expanding the onstage violin population by a

hundred percent. Two flashier outer movements frame a stately classical-esque Andante slow movement, in a work deserving much wider recognition.

For an encore, Mr. Tognetti made an implied reference to Friday night's mournful opus, via Mr. Crumb, and played Ravel's lamenting song of mourning, "Kaddish."

In a way, the most contemporary "difficult listening" moment of the otherwise fairly easy-going festival's first three concerts came at the beginning of a cleverly designed Saturday night concert by the Australian Chamber Orchestra. A brief, hypnotic work by the cult heroic mystic composer Giacinto Scelsi's 1965 piece "Anâgâmin" basked in the composer's famously ethereal language of microtonal, micro-motional structures, and segued directly into Alfred Schnittke's powerful Trio Sonata, in its expanded version for string orchestra. Written in homage to serialist composer Alban Berg, on his 100th birthday year, the Schnittke work offered up an alternately fierce and rueful sound world, with abrupt shifts in dynamics and mood.

For comic, virtuosic relief, Mr. Tognetti's own witty arrangement and house-of-mirrors recasting of Paganini's Caprice No. 24 mixes up the original's tour de force whirligigs for violin with a fracturing contemporary filter, to roundly expressive ends.

After intermission, we were treated to another specialist corner of this sensational ensemble's gifts, in the Baroque zone (which Santa Barbarans heard in the memorable ACO Lobero concert two years ago). J.S. Bach's Violin Concerto in A minor, BWV 1041 was followed by a concert-capping swoop through Schoenberg's warmly gushing late romantic number "Verlärte Nacht" ("Transfigured Night"), one of those pre-12-tone, pre-revolutionary works that fits in the category of "Schoenberg for those who hate Schoenberg."

Bringing Saturday's altogether strong musical offerings to a full circle finale, Mr. Tognetti announced an apt, brief encore to end the evening's concert, composer Janacek's sweet little lullaby "Good Night."

(Sunday's concerts will be reviewed in tomorrow's News-Press).