

CONCERT REVIEW: Swinging and mostly moving, to the finish : For the two Sunday concerts in last weekend's 65th annual Ojai Music Festival, jazz composer-bandleader Maria Schneider was the star of the day

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On Sunday morning in the Libbey Bowl, some Ojai Music Festival purists might have raised an eyebrow and an earlobe upon hearing the fare — jazz, by any other name. Then again, any diehard Ojai Festival fan knows better than to don a purist hat too snugly. Flexibility is built into the festival agenda, along with deep, abiding "serious music" lore, in progress.

In some way, the early Sunday concert from the Maria Schneider Orchestra — a much-acclaimed jazz big band — amounted to possibly the most successful ladling of jazz into the Ojai Festival context in its history. This comes after some forgettable experiments in the past and at least one powerful jazz-classical contender, Marc-Antony Turnage's dazzling genre-crossover "Blood on the Floor."

It helps that Ms. Schneider is a classically trained composer who forged her own emotional-yet-sophisticated language with the band she has kept for more than 20 years. From the slowly building, opening strains of her chart "Journey Home" on, the Schneider magic was in good standing here, before an audience presumably largely unfamiliar with her work — so far.

Apart from the strengths of her writing and inventive arrangemental thinking, Ms. Schneider benefits from the technical and expressive strengths of her musicians, as improvisers and ensemble players. Among the memorable solos in the show were Scott Robinson's baritone sax wild-then-mellifluous adventure, Alex Morris' fluid, hot flugelhorn turn, and pianist Frank Kimbrough's flowing work throughout.

As strong as the concert was, overall, the best came last. In the second set, Ms. Schneider unveiled a moving, American-esque and sweet-spirited new work, "The Thompson Fields," in tribute to a family of eco-conscious farmers in Minnesota (Ms. Schneider's home turf before she landed in New York City).



Bandleader Maria Schneider and her orchestra play Sunday at the Ojai Music Festival.

TIMOTHY NORRIS FOR OJAI MUSIC FESTIVAL

Another kind of nature lineage comes through in her impressive piece "Cerulean Skies," commissioned by Peter Sellars for the Mozart Festival in Vienna, and featured on her 2007 album "Sky Blue." The leitmotif here is birdsong, and it stands up as a tribute to the wonder of migratory birds. She mixes bird calls and effects with her usual eloquence, employing textural and thematic soundscape painting.

After tenor saxist Donny McCaslin gave what was probably the strongest solo of the concert, accordionist Victor Prieto issued abstract birdsong gestures in the high range of his keyboard, resulting in half-accidental ambient dialogues with the birdsongs naturally heard in Libbey Bowl. It was the most charming bird-centric interchange between the stage and the skies of Ojai since Olivier "birdman of France" Messiaen appeared at the festival in 1985.

Ms. Schneider's fascinating and ear-friendly performance on Sunday morning may have been a demonstration of this artist in her long-standing element. But in the Sunday evening concert, we caught wind of a more newly emerging (or re-emerging) side of her music, as a composer for a "classical" setting. In a concert featuring another of this festival's spotlight artists, violinist Richard Tognetti's strikingly fine Australian Chamber Orchestra, soprano Dawn Upshaw (this year's festival music director) gave a typically strong, unerring and spot-on world premiere performance of Ms. Schneider's lovely, poignant song cycle "Winter Morning Walks," based on the short, reflective poetry of Midwesterner Ted Kooser.

Ms. Schneider's new piece is a resoundingly strong, heartfelt and intelligently "accessible" score, with some almost poppish melodic designs folded into classical structures. She also managed to cleverly work her jazz instincts into the mix, with the help of a few of her big band players improvising alongside the classical crew.

In a potentially nervy but ultimately intriguing programming move, the ACO concert opened with an interweaving, movement by movement account of Anton Webern's masterful miniature suite from 1910, "Five Pieces for Strings, Opus 5," and George Crumb's famous anti-Vietnam tone poem "Black Angels." Also on the program was another captivating, five-part muscular model of economy, Béla Bartók's "Five Hungarian Songs," with Ms. Upshaw taking charge of the Hungarian lyrics with her usual flair.

Rather bizarrely, though, Mr. Tognetti and company ended Sunday's concert, and thus the festival, with the bland romantic sashay of Edvard Grieg's String Quartet in G Minor, Opus 27, which felt completely irrelevant to the contemporary-ish flavor of the festival we'd just experienced. It was as if he hadn't gotten the memo about Ojai's great legacy, and the time-honored "tradition" of ending the festival with an agreeable modern-ish work, by Stravinsky, Copland or John Adams, for instance. The only logical explanation might be that this served as a teaser for next year's Norwegian-flavored program with Live Ove Andsnes as music director.

For encores, the ACO headed south and north in world culture, from Argentine master Astor Piazzolla's haunting beauty "Oblivion" to a sweet Finnish fiddle tune, in honor of the two Finns in the band.

Apart from the strange Grieg misstep on Sunday evening, the 2011 Ojai Music Festival proved to be another diverse and satisfying adventure, one of the better fests in recent years. In its own particular way, the 2011 program lived up to this grand little festival's insistence on celebrating the sweep of music, right up to the tingle of the new.

