

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



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June 13, 2012 5:45 AM

A summery afternoon melted into evening and the 66th Ojai Music Festival melted into history, on Sunday night, and all seemed right with the world for a fleeting moment. Ojai's Libby Bowl filled with the pre-modernist, modernist and post-modernist comfort food sounds of Debussy, minimalist era John Adams, atmosphericist John Luther Adams and the two-piano version of Igor Stravinsky's 1913 masterpiece "The Rite of Spring."



We were again warmed by the knowledge that Stravinsky and Adams are on the stellar roster of past directors and performers at this festival, along with Aaron Copland, Pierre Boulez and countless other luminaries.

Still and all, the wrap-up concert of this year's happily dense, four-day festival had a certain old school quality, by the high, historically-charged standards of the Ojai Music Festival — still the highwater mark of internationally-important classical music events in this general area. We often hear Adams and Stravinsky on the final concert, and Debussy also makes his appearance in this slot. The two-piano "Rite of Spring" was played here by the Buggalo-Williams duo in 2005, which seems recent to those among us who are longtime, lifer Ojai Festival goers.

For this year's festival, whatever the usual suspects in the programming, the most memorable and fresh turf came from Scandinavia, as it should be for a festival with the great Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes as music director, and the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra as visiting ensemble. Also on the roster of visiting artists were Belgian mezzo-soprano Christianne Stotjin, soprano Lucy Shelton, violist Antoine Tamestit, and Swedish clarinet phenom Martin Frøst, whose many impressive turns included his agreeably gimmicky but virtuosic showpiece of music, mime and dance on Saturday night's "Peacock Tales," by Swedish composer Anders Hilborg.

To these ears, the festival's real highlight came with Saturday night's program, opening with Icelandic composer Hafidi Hallgrímsson's tersely lyrical string orchestra invention "Poemi, Opus 7," followed by the American premiere of the commanding Danish composer Bent Sørensen's Piano Concerto No. 2, "La Mattina," the real show-stealer of the weekend. Inspired by the playing of Mr. Andsnes, who

offered up a performance which felt perfectly enchanting (an operative word for this archetypically dreamy work).

Sørensen's masterful concerto defies easy description or categorization, like most great music, but it has a light, strange and soothing character, and something of the internal logic of a dream. Suddenly, the chamber orchestra members are meting out loose rhythms with claves or humming, between their alternately firm and ambiguous string parts, and it all comes together with impressionistic pageantry and secret meanings to be decoded later.

More generally speaking, Mr. Andsnes' smartly-designed program fell in line with the recent trend at this traditionally untraditional, contemporary music-minded festival — especially in the current regime of artistic director Thomas Morris, here since 2004 — for blending contemporary music with music of old, of finding continuities and affinities between music separated by centuries and cultural differences. But where other recent years have handled the juggling act more clumsily, the Andsnes year handled the task more artfully and thought-provocatively.

Thus, we heard the American premiere of Dutch composer /conductor Reinbert de Leeuw's "Im wunderschoenen Monat Mai," a time and mind-twisting song cycle in which the composer rewrites history, in the form of refiltered and post-modernized Schumann and Schubert songs (beautifully rendered by Ms. Shelton). Late on Saturday night, we heard Jan·cek first string quartet interspersed with readings, by Norwegian actor Teodor Janson, of the Tolstoy story "The Kreutzer Sonata," an inspiration for Jan·cek. The idea sounds better on paper than in the real time forum, where one source struggled to get along with the other.

Living Hungarian legend Gyorgy Kurtag (who, incidentally, visited the Ojai Festival many years back) is no stranger to new/old pacts in his music, but with integrity intact, and here, we heard his elliptical "Homage a Robert Schumann," to close the Saturday night concert, and in a special "donors" recital at the Ojai Art Center on Sunday afternoon, Mr. Kurtag's beguiling miniatures were mixed with short, romantic pieces by another famous Hungarian of an early time, Franz Liszt.

In the Ojai Festival, certain realities are built into the nature — and the nature — of the operation, including stowaway bird songs, a lovely addition, and the inherent sacrifice of pristine sound quality. But it's an accepted and worthwhile payoff, given the idyllic setting of Libby Bowl, now in its second year in its new, refurbished (but tree-deprived) condition.

Other less welcome sonic intruders naturally appear. Each year, we get some of the unplanned "Ives-ian" effect, related to Charles Ives' famed love of colliding, ambient sound sources, and this year, it came literally in the middle of an encore song by Ives himself. While pianist Marc-André Hamelin and mezzo Christine Stotjin, following up a juicy take on William Bolcom's "Cabaret Songs," performed an Ives song, during which we could hear Chamber Orchestra violinists warming up

backstage and a car alarm going off in the distance, in polyrhythm. We had to wonder: was it planned?

Regarding the great outdoorsy setting of Libby Park vis a vis the musical activities here, the festival proper had as its uncommon introduction the west coast premiere of John Luther Adams' "Inuksuit," with 48 percussionist and piccolo players roaming through and sonically energizing the park outside the Libby Bowl, proper. I wasn't able to get there in time to catch that happening, but the Luther Adams subplot continued in the evening concert, with the entrancing "Red Arc/Blue Veil," played by Hamelin and percussionist Steven Schick.

After Shostakovich's "Six Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva," with Andsnes and Stotjin in high, poetic form, Mr. Hamelin gave a stirring and lucid reading of Ives' great "Concord Sonata," a still-iconoclastic and transcendental piece which feels just right in Ojai.

On Saturday morning, the historical cross-hatching scheme was a moving one, with a strong Wagner connection. The program dubbed "After Wagner (and Before)" kicked off with Norwegian composer Eivind Buene's fascinating 1973 piece "Langsam und Schmachend" ("slow and languishing"), the very score direction on Wagner's immortal prelude to his opera "Tristan und Isolde." Buene's music slyly makes reference to "Tristan" but is a ruggedly modern entity, from the period before minimalism when dissonance had its expressive sway. The program then intriguingly interwove early songs of Wagner with music of serialist Alban Berg and Wagner hero Beethoven's "Waldstein" Piano Sonata, played with magnificence and subtlety by Mr. Andsnes.

If Saturday morning's Wagner-geared program leaned toward a darker end of the musical spectrum, Sunday morning brought goodness and light, and levity. Call it the sensual pleasure principle or the crowd-pleaser event. That's not a bad thing, especially when matters of greater substance and challenge are represented over the weekend, which was the case here.

Framing the program were two works famed for their linkage between clarinetist Benny Goodman and noted classical composers, Bartok's "Contrasts," a trio for clarinet, violin and piano, and Aaron Copland's Clarinet Concerto. In both cases, clarinetist Frøst delivered seamlessly and showcased more dimensions of his ample talent. For this concert, the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra came out in light, casual garb, and stood up (cellos excepted) to play Edvard Grieg's "Holberg Suite," the breezy, crowd pleasing favorite by Norway's best-known composer. For added Sunday morning feelgood sauce, a chamber orchestra bassist came forward and "danced" with his instrument to cap off the piece.

Come Sunday night, Norwegian harpist Ida Bang skillfully and alluringly drew us into the lilting folds of Debussy's "Danses sacrée et profane," before the orchestra deftly worked up the sonorously looping lather of Adams' "Shaker Loops."

After festival piano stars Mr. Andsnes and Mr. Hamelin summoned up the surging and compounded sonic wave action of Luther Adams' two-piano "Dark Waves" and then the challenging edifice of "Rite of Spring" — with the pianists in bracingly telepathic accord — some levity was in order. Mr. Andsnes paid respects to the festival and the audience, and then the pianistic pair launched into Stravinsky's "Circus Polka," but now with green clown noses attached. Ah, that Norwegian humor. Not to mention deep, probing musicality.