



# Ojai Music Festival

## All That Jazz

Richard S Ginell

For the first 50 years of its existence, it was an unwritten rule that the Ojai Music Festival's music director (a different one each year) had to be a conductor. That began to crumble a bit in 1997 and 1998 when pianists Emanuel Ax and Mitsuko Uchida were the directors, but conductors Daniel Harding and David Zinman were then listed as co-music directors. By 2002, with budget constraints probably a factor, the Emerson Quartet shattered the rule, and in 2007 pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard was the sole music director.

Since then, the chair has been occupied by an unpredictable mix of professions. It is apparently no longer feasible to bring large orchestras like the Los Angeles Philharmonic or the Atlanta Symphony to this small town of 7,627 where lodging has become increasingly scarce and expensive. So under the avuncular eye of Artistic Director Thomas Morris, Ojai has seen a soprano (Dawn Upshaw, 2011), a choreographer (Mark Morris, 2013), a stage director (Peter Sellars, 2016), and a maverick new music ensemble (Eighth Blackbird, 2009) set the direction of the festival, which still takes place mostly in the town's friendly Libbey Park.

This year's festival was from June 8 to 11, with Vijay Iyer [VID-jay EYE-yer], who covers more musical territory than any of his predecessors. Iyer, 45, an American musician of Tamil heritage, is best known as a progressive-minded jazz pianist of considerable dexterity and versatility, and that ties into Ojai's jazz tradition. Ojai used to have a regular jazz slot on Sundays, and I remember hearing swinging sets by the Heath Brothers, Milt Jackson, the Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin big band, and others underneath the big, gnarled sycamore tree in the park (which still shades concertgoers on hot afternoons). That ended sometime in the 1980s, though, and there have been only a few sporadic outbreaks since, like The Bad Plus's appearance in 2013.

But Iyer had a much larger vision than merely bringing jazz back to Ojai. It extended past the boundaries of style, form, ethnicity, and country. Sometimes the musicians he brought in went so far out in pursuit of on-the-spot creativity that they forced some of us to won-



Vijay Iyer





Jennifer Koh

der where the line is between music and noise. Given the warm reception of every concert I attended, the line may not exist at all for Ojai regulars. Yet some of the more extreme examples tried the patience of the paying audience, provoking sotto voce grumbling among some attendees.

Iyer gave a sampling of his wide range in his opening concert, starting with the US premiere of his *Emergence*, played by the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) and the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble under the energetic direction of Steven Schick (the de facto resident conductor for most of the festival). When Iyer's jazz trio laid down the pulse, the ensembles entered the flow with surprising ease, and there was a freeform out-break for everyone that ever so gradually re-assumed some kind of shape for the conductor to work with. As classical-jazz fusions go, this one was fairly effective.

The next Iyer piece, the world premiere of his violin concerto for Jennifer Koh called *Trouble*, came down completely on the classical side, with plenty of room for Koh to display her usual burning intensity. Its folk-like finale in 5/4 time made for a satisfying conclusion. To conclude the evening, the ensembles left the park and Iyer dug in on acoustic piano, electric piano, and laptop with trumpeter-composer Wadada Leo Smith in a scintillating set of improvisations called *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke*. Smith has become a phenomenon in his 70s with a series of major compositions. He blew long and eloquently with anguish and introspection, going all-out to the point where he fainted from dehydration at set's end (fortunately he was OK).

Smith is a member of the long-running Chicago consortium called the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians

(AACM). Fellow member George Lewis thought that this group's tumultuous history would make a good opera. He was right; the migration from the Deep South, the internal arguments and debates, and the triumph of having the world take them seriously would make a fascinating opera. Alas, Lewis's *Afterword*, staged in Spartan form the night of June 9, is not that piece. Although his libretto, taken from interviews and recordings of AACM meetings, makes great reading, the fragmentary, dissonant, high-blood-pressure, one-size-fits-all score lets it down, hardly varying at all in its 100 minutes. How ironic that the story of emerging black musicians would be illustrated by European post-serial angst.

Another highly anticipated work, offered at 11:50 PM on June 10, was Courtney Bryan's *Yet Unheard*, hyped as an opera about the plight of Sandra Bland, the woman who died in police custody in Waller County TX after a routine traffic stop in 2015. Well, it wasn't an opera; it was a 17-minute cantata with a line of tension that reached a crescendo as five singers pounded the obvious black-lives-matter theme home with earnest bombast. Is there such a thing as being too righteous?

The drummer in Iyer's jazz trio, Tyshawn Sorey (a master of polyrhythmic complexity), who is also a conductor and composer, had an inordinate amount of time to indulge in both activities. For 67 minutes he led his double trio in an alternately lyrical, mournful, arid, and rambling marathon of written and unwritten instructions under the title, *The Inner Spectrum of Variables*. The next day Sorey came back for more with an excruciatingly tiresome 61-minute group improvisation for ICE called *Conduction: Autoschediasms for Creative Chamber Orchestra*, which he directed with as many as four batons in the right hand and half of one in the left. Amid the blips, bloops, grunts, smears, and such, I wondered whether this was secretly meant to provoke. But it takes more than that to infuriate Ojai's audiences; I counted only three or four walkouts and no boos.

A ball of energy and spunk known as Claire Chase was another constant presence at the festival. George Lewis's *Emergent*, performed in Libbey Park's gazebo as a pop-up event, was an arresting showcase for Chase's manically physical flute playing and digitally delayed electronics. The following afternoon she performed several works from her long-term



commissioning project, *Density 2036*. Varese's *Density 21.5* served as the launching pad, and the compositions grew more and more radical to the point where, in Sorey's *Bertha's Lair*, Chase seemed to be hyper-ventilating into her giant contrabass flute. The set ended with an extended excerpt from Marcos Balter's *Pan* where several volunteers formed a ritual circle on stage rubbing the rims of tuned wine glasses underneath Chase's flute, piccolo, pan pipes, bass flute, and contrabass flute. At one point the amplified harmonics transformed her into a wild one-woman flute choir.

The Brentano Quartet offered a change of pace from the avant-garde with a finely-blended performance of Mozart's Quartet No. 16 and deeply-felt renderings of excerpts from Bach's *Art of Fugue*. They brought a Bartokian sensibility to György Kurtag's *Moments Musicaux* (whose harmonics were echoed by the birds in the sycamore) and propulsive passion to the close of Iyer's take-off from a Mozart fragment, *Mozart Effects*.

Another reversion to the mainstream occurred when Schick and 11 members of ICE rocked and socked their ways through Cliff Colnot's chamber-group arrangement of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It contained some unavoidably strange new voicings. They fol-



Claire Chase

lowed that with a brilliant paraphrase of *Rite* by Iyer called *Radhe Radhe* (performed with the film, "Rites of Holi"), which inherited the structure and dynamics of Stravinsky's piece and fitted them with entirely new music in an entirely different, Indian-flavored idiom. You could call it a "tone parallel," to borrow a phrase from Duke Ellington.

The final day's concerts veered well out of the so-called classical orbit. They were: a reunion of three respected AACM elders (Lewis on trombone and laptop, saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell and pianist Muhal Richard Abrams) in a sometimes cacophonous yet finally hypnotic group improvisation; an at first uneasy and then workable fusion of Hindustani and jazz rhythmic systems with Iyer on piano and Zakir Hussain on tablas; and the Iyer Sextet's closing set of roiling, broiling progressive jazz, powered—or overpowered—by Sorey's drums.

So, once again, Ojai more than lived up to its reputation as a festival that takes chances and pulls its loyal audience along with it. But I wouldn't expect Iyer's vision to be developed by the next three music directors: violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja (2018), soprano-conductor Barbara Hannigan (2019), and Uchida again (2021). 2020s music director had yet to be announced at press time.

Steven Schick and ICE perform *Rite of Spring*

