

Ojai 2009: The Kids Are All Right

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OJAI, Calif. -- For 63 years, the Ojai Music Festival has been a West Coast beacon of new music. Its system of changing music directors -- Stravinsky one year, Copland another, Boulez, Adams and, this year's genre-busting choice, eighth blackbird [sic] -- continues to provide a kind of built-in guarantee of self-renewal, from season to season.

The Chicago-based blackbirds, all born in the 1970s, represent the ascendant generation of postclassical music, and their programming reflected it. By bringing in a couple dozen of their friends — composers and musicians whose work shares little beyond an age demographic and a willingness to transcend genre boundaries — the four-day festival felt like a true 21st century American postclassical music party.

Relentless pursuit of the new brings risk; some of the repertoire worked, some did not. Without exception, the most satisfying pieces originated from previous generations. In a nod to the al fresco setting, 8 bb (pianist Lisa Kaplan, violinist/violist Matt Albert, cellist Nicholas Photinos, clarinetist Michael J. Maccaferri, flutist Tim Munro, percussionist Matthew Duvall) opened the event on June 11 with gorgeously atmospheric music by John Luther Adams, born 1953 (“Dark Waves”), George Crumb, born 1929 (“Music for a Summer Evening”) and the late Toru Takemitsu, born 1930 (“Rain Tree”), all of which blended beautifully with the Libbey Bowl’s resident crickets, tree frogs and assorted creatures of the night.

Charles Ives’s Piano Sonata No. 1 J.S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations (the festival’s annual token golden oldie) provided Saturday morning’s repertoire, with Jeremy Denk managing to rescue both works from frequent interpretive weightiness. In his able hands, Ives’s seemingly abrupt transitions from nostalgia into ferocity followed an emotional rather than narrative logic. And his emphasis on the Goldbergs’ jaunty dance rhythms offered a lively antidote to the too solemn, often soporific interpretations that may stem from the questionable story of the Goldbergs-as-sedative.

Choreographer Mark DeChiazza revitalized Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire” in an intriguing new staging, performed Saturday night by eighth blackbird, soprano Lucy Shelton and dancer Elyssa Dole, successfully returning the prickly speech-song cycle to its expressionist musical theater roots. And Sunday morning brought a taut, rapturous rendition of Steve Reich’s 1976 classic, “Music for 18 Musicians.”

Pop/postclassical band Tin Hat's appropriately crepuscular music set the stage for the festival's big event: the world premiere of "Slide," by California born, Princeton based composer- performer Steve Mackey and the amazing librettist/tenor/actor Rinde Eckert. Co-commissioned by the festival, the work tells the story — in Eckert's characteristically allegorical fashion — of a psychologist named Renard, sung/spoken by Eckert, whose charismatic stage presence and conceptual creativity have produced some of contemporary music's finest combinations of music and theater. Still wounded by a fiancée who left him on their wedding day, Renard reminisces about an experiment in which he humiliated his subjects and now longs for the pianist in his chamber music ensemble, which may or may not really exist.

The staging uses minimal props— a lamp to suggest a living room, a woodblock as a cell phone, a cardboard box of files. Blurry, evocative images are projected on screens: a dog running, trees, a woman's indistinct face. Mackey was the occasional narrator, accompanying his lines with guitar noodling. His music, brilliantly played by the blackbird, mostly comprises short, jabbing phrases that underscore Eckert/Renard's description of the experiment in his clear, strong tenor that sometimes swoops into falsetto range. The electric guitar felt better integrated into the whole than some previous Mackey works for guitar and orchestral instruments. At one point, Mackey kicked into sludgy power chords, with Duvall pounding away, rock-drummer style.

The blackbirds moved around the stage often, each getting a moment downstage, sometimes interacting with Eckert, and each once donning a scarf and shades to participate in a one-sided phone conversation. Dressed in nondescript blazer, khakis and tie, Eckert's lonely character signaled breakdown by twisting into a spasmodic dance.

Still, such artificial injections never jolted this 11-song multimedia event to life. Nothing really happens, and we're given little reason to care about Renard either as character or archetype; he's just a passive, forlorn observer recounting action and back-story and never participating in real time. And despite some potent music, lovely shadowy imagery and Eckert's typically riveting physical performance style, his story never quite leaves his own retelling of it and finds its way to the audience. "Slide" feels like a work in progress.

The premiere of Chicago composer David M. Gordon's abrasive four-movement "Quasi Sinfonia" revealed considerable ingenuity and varied influences (including Javanese and other Asian music), but ultimately simply ground on and on with the grace of a leaf blower setting off a car alarm.

A late night bonus concert by the distaff German recorder quartet QNG was the surprise hit of the festival. In one piece by Paul Moravec (probably the most familiar name among the half dozen composers — all still living — on their program), the virtuosas deployed 20 instruments, some of them taller than the women playing them.

Sunday's closing concert was a showcase for a wide variety of performer friends, musical styles, composers and instruments. While virtuosity occasionally trumped musical quality, the five-hour, two-intermission marathon offered a generous slice of contemporary American postclassical music. Highlights included Shelton and Denk performing Stravinsky songs; John Cage's pioneering 1941

percussion party, “Third Construction”; a clutch of David Rakowski’s always charming etudes (including “Schnozzage,” which prescribed a substantial part for pianist Amy Briggs’s nose); a chirpy piece titled “Breathtaking” by QNG, which elicited responses from the local avians; Kihlstedt’s bracing performance of Lisa Bielawa’s “Kafka” Songs; and Trimpin’s offstage instruments —tubes, cymbals and even Dutch wooden clogs hanging from the trees – being triggered by onstage percussionists. After Mackey’s progressive rock-style electric guitar solo, “Heavy Light,” I felt like I should hold up a cigarette lighter, rock-concert style.

The pulsating rhythms of Reich’s 2008 Pulitzer winner “Double Sextet” and Stephen Hartke’s colorful “Meanwhile” featured 8bb at its best, with tunes ricocheting among the players and into the audience.

For the closing “Worker’s Union,” Dutch composer Louis Andriessen’s pummeling piece of 1975 dark minimalism, the six blackbirds were gradually joined by the other musicians onstage, eventually numbering 30, including Tom Morris, Ojai’s genial artistic director whose extensive connections and deep commitment to new music have served to broaden and deepen this festival over time. The sheer accumulated power of all these musicians, and the metaphorical aptness of so many different kinds of players joining forces, mirroring the festival’s embracing vibe, made it an appropriate ending to an event that reminds us every year how invigorating new music can be in the right setting. For all its ups and downs, Ojai 09 showed us that the future of American postclassical music looks brighter than ever.