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Ojai Festival, Not for the Faint of Heart

By Rick Schultz, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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OJAI, CA--The Ojai Music Festival, which this year ran from June 10 through 14, isn't for sissies. Artistic Director Thomas W. Morris sets a high bar for audiences, and they're usually up to the challenge: People arrived before dawn on Sunday to hear Morton Feldman's *For Philip Guston*, a nearly five-hour trio for flute, piano, and percussion that began at 5 a.m. Some brought their sleeping bags to the venue, the Ojai Art Center, near the Festival's famed pastoral amphitheater, the Libbey Bowl.

Morris called this year's five-day festival an "immersive experience," but new- music boot camp might be more accurate. Of the 49 composers represented, 28 were new to

Ojai, including Arab-American composer Mohammed Fairouz and Julia Wolfe, who in April won the Pulitzer Prize for her oratorio, *Anthracite Fields*. That's a lot of ground to cover. Perhaps too much, but the extraordinary Steven Schick, the first percussionist music director in the festival's 69-year history, made all the requisite rushing from one event to the next worthwhile.

Schick, 61, teaches at the University of California, San Diego, where he founded the expert percussion ensemble "red fish blue fish." That group, along with the New York-based International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), performed together and separately at the festival, with Schick on the podium.

In *The Percussionist's Art*, Schick's remarkable memoir, history, and analysis of the solo percussion repertoire, he demonstrated a Bernstein-level ability to articulate even complex musical ideas. That was particularly evident on Thursday night, when he presented a tribute to Edgard Varèse in the program's first half. Performed by "red fish blue fish," *Ionisation* (1931) for assorted percussion—91 measures of organized noise—sounded fresh and riveting. At the conclusion, the sound of chimes and bass drum faded eloquently into the night air.

Schick explained how *Ionisation*'s use of instruments from all over the planet paralleled the festival's de facto theme of cultural diversity, saying the score represents an inspiring model for human coexistence. The ensemble then performed it a second time.

Three other seminal works by Varèse—*Integrales*, *Density 21.5* (Claire Chase was the solo flutist), and *Déserts*—received authoritative readings from ICE, conducted by Schick.

But the heart of the festival came on the Libbey Bowl stage Friday night with Schick's brave one-man percussion show. Opening and closing with two major solo works by Iannis Xenakis, *Rebonds* (1988) and *Psappha* (1975), Schick maintained a firm musical line through sheer physicality and gesture as he pummeled and caressed an array of woods, skins, and metal instruments.

He stripped to the waist for Vinko Globokar's *?Corporel*, a small, but fully realized performance-art piece where even Schick's teeth became part of the arsenal. Sitting cross-legged center

stage on a platform, he turned his own body into a percussion instrument, with elements of mood lighting and amplified sound adding to the theatrical spectacle.

During intermission, audience members grabbed stones from buckets so they could participate later in Lei Lang's *Trans*, a charming, imaginative piece for which Schick gave a tutorial from the stage. After a quick run-through with his impromptu collaborators, Schick quipped, "You may not want to quit your day jobs yet." Occasionally, Schick turned to conduct the audience, and toward the end, he cued our tapping noises to diminuendo. Accompanied by Schick's light touch on cymbals, the effect conjured a magical moment of the sound of rain tapering off.

Later that night, Schick gave the American premiere of Roland Auzet's *La Cathédrale de misère*, a staged version of Dadaist collage artist Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*. In a tour de force performance, Schick delivered a madman's nonsensical but rhythmical ranting for over a half hour, expressing puzzlement, deep sadness, protest, and sheer sound and fury. Complemented by large mirrors on rollers, abstract lighting, and creepy sound design, the work had a striking impact.

Pierre Boulez turned 90 in March and was Ojai's music director seven times between 1967 and 2003. The festival honored him with a multimedia tribute on Wednesday night and performances of the busy Sonatine for Flute and Piano, Op. 1 (1946), on Saturday (with Chase, flute; Jacob Greenberg, piano). On Sunday's closing program, Schick conducted ICE in the 2009 revision of the 48-minute *Dérive 2* (1988-2006), a somewhat less chilly work than the Sonatine that indulges in complexity for its own sake, but a charming (for Boulez) deconstruction of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* can be heard in the rhythmically restless final pages.

All six of Bartók's string quartets were performed over three programs, a first in the festival's history. The superb Calder Quartet, in a memorable Ojai debut, captured the composer's developing "night music" style in the Fourth, the Bulgarian folk-rhythms in the Fifth's scherzo and trio, and the slight bitterness in the melancholy Sixth's "Marcia" and "Burletta."

Inevitably there were several misconceived, self-indulgent scores. On the Sunday morning program, for example, Gabriela Lena Frank's *The Giant's Drum*, which featured Wu Man on pipa and Maya Beiser on cello, began well, then proved in need of ideas and editing. The same has to be said of Tan Dun's *Elegy: Snow in June*, which became music, to paraphrase Stravinsky, that was over before it finished.

In the concert's first half, however, Bright Sheng's Three Songs for Violoncello and Pipa, once again with cellist Beiser, proved a joyful vehicle for Wu Man's stunning virtuosity. And Fairouz's *Kol Nidrei*, composed for Beiser, brought out her best in a performance featuring her singing the ancient Aramaic prayer.

The five-day festival ended appropriately Sunday evening with the last few sounds of Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion tapped out by Schick on a snare drum. The composer's late masterpiece featured him and LA Philharmonic principal percussionist Joseph Pereira, with pianists Gloria Cheng and Vicki Ray.

As all the "Schick Happens" t-shirts for sale gave way to buttons promoting next year's 70th-anniversary event, it occurred to me that in its entire history, the Ojai Music Festival has appointed only one woman as solo music director: Dawn Upshaw, in 2011. Mitsuko Uchida shared the post with David Zinman in 1998; Diane Wittry co-directed with Nicholas McGegan and Peter Maxwell Davies in 1988.

And with the previously announced next three music directors—Peter Sellars, Vijay Iyer, and Esa-Pekka Salonen—that brings the total to three women in 72 years.

Maybe Morris will rethink this situation by 2019, the next open date for a festival music director.

Pictured: Steven Schick

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