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At the Ojai Festival, a Star Pianist Keeps the Focus on Young Artists

Mitsuko Uchida appeared every night at her edition of the Ojai Music Festival. The rest of the time was given to other performers.

June 11, 2024

By Joshua Barone

Mitsuko Uchida sat at the piano with her back to the audience.

It was an unusual look for a reigning pianist who can fill a concert hall, or sell a new album of 200-year-old sonatas, on the strength of just of her name and face. But over four evenings of performances at the [Ojai Music Festival](#) in California, that's how Uchida played.

It was especially strange, given that she was the festival's music director, an annual post given to an artist to organize programming and the roster of performers. Throughout the festival's outdoor campus, her name was on T-shirts and signs, not to mention Vogue-thick program books handed out at each concert.

Then again, we're talking about Ojai, where open-minded audiences take in music accompanied by nature and snack on freshly picked pixie tangerines. Uchida might have seemed like a headliner, but this festival is about sharing the wealth.

She invited friends and colleagues whom she has known for years, like the endlessly genial Brentano String Quartet. Most heavily featured, during the festival's run from June 6 through 9, was the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, with whom Uchida often tours in concerto programs that she leads from the piano.

Those tours, though, rarely showcase the shape-shifting resourcefulness the ensemble brought to Ojai. Its members played pop-up miniatures in Libbey Park, the festival's center, and even at a local bar as a Johnny Cash cover band. Onstage, they took on traditional fare, like heavenly Mozart concertos with Uchida, but also more contemporary works by Missy Mazzoli and John Adams.

At their most touching, they performed "Lichtbogen," by Kaija Saariaho, who [died just over a year ago](#) and was honored with tributes sprinkled throughout the festival. For that piece, her daughter, Aliisa Neige Barrière, led the Mahler players, with authority and grace, while her widower, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, operated live electronics. During the applause afterward, Aliisa held up her mother's score to the audience.



If the Mozart concerto that followed represented Uchida the performer, the rest of the festival showed her influence as a mentor. She has been a leader of Marlboro Music, a summer program for young artists, for more than two decades, and she handed much of the Ojai real estate to Marlboro alumni, like the cellist Jay Campbell and the violinist Alexi Kenney.

But they weren't alone among the younger musicians whom Uchida

supported. Here are some who appeared throughout the festival's dozen concerts over 72 hours.

Jay Campbell, cello

Campbell plays cello in the JACK Quartet, an ensemble that, in its adventurousness and communal spirit, would be an ideal group music director at Ojai. (And the quartet has already appeared at the festival.) As a soloist, though, Campbell is an ambassador of musical possibility.

His finest appearances were in 8 a.m. concerts at the idyllic Besant Hill School outside Ojai, and at the Chaparral Auditorium in town. On Saturday, at a performance billed as a morning meditation, he played a version of Catherine Lamb's "The Additive Arrow," one of the festival's high points.

For most of Lamb's 30-minute piece, Campbell played steady drones of pitches that, at frequencies in multiples of 10, harmonized naturally with one another. Outside, a microphone was placed on the lawn, facing the street and feeding any passing sound to a laptop inside; from there, speakers emitted sound that the microphone had gathered at a specific frequency, but with a range of amplitude that captured the difference in power between, say, a bird and a pickup truck. Often, this would pit control and chaos against each other, but Lamb instead engineers an alluring balance of the two.

The steadiness of Campbell's bow, and his clarity, required the kind of attentiveness that has long made Minimalism both difficult and rewarding for players; you could see, in his facial expression of meditative focus and flow, how intensely the music had affected him.

Elsewhere, he performed works by Helmut Lachenmann that explore the nature of sound production: "Toccatina," in which Campbell tapped the strings of his cello with the screw end of his bow, and caressingly bowed the instrument's scroll and tailpiece; and "Pression," an

A.S.M.R.-like piece of scraping strings and brushing the cello's wooden body with fingernails. A crow in a nearby tree seemed annoyed, but Campbell's human audience was visibly rapt, following his every gesture.

Ljubinka Kulisic, accordion

When Campbell played Sofia Gubaidulina's duet "In Croce," he was joined by the accordionist Ljubinka Kulisic, who throughout the festival brought virtuosic dazzle and depth to an instrument with a rich history in both folk and classical music.

"In Croce" opens with the accordion high-pitched and light in an analogue of a cello's arpeggiated harmonic slides. Kulisic repeatedly played the figure, as if in a trance, until Campbell cut into it with slices of downward phrases. Then he was pushed to extremes of passion and power while she unleashed a broad spectrum of color, until, at the end, he took up her theme from the start.

More playful was Kulisic's account of the John Zorn solo "Road Runner," a brief piece that unfolds like an anarchic playlist of familiar tunes on shuffle, with a lot of room for improvisation and directions to "make mistakes." She took it up with a comic spirit, smiling as the audience giggled at the recognition of melodies from the standard repertoire and pop culture, before abruptly switching to something new or slamming her hands down in tone clusters.

At Sunday's morning meditation concert, she performed, less hectically, works by John Cage: "Dream" and "Souvenir" breathed in long, spare phrases punctuated by dense but harmonious chords. "Cheap Imitation," a treatment of Satie using chance operations, was conversational and wandering, welcoming at the start and lulling by the end.

Sae Hashimoto, percussion

The morning program that included "In Croce" also featured the sensitive percussionist Sae Hashimoto, in Lachenmann's "Intérieur I." A kaleidoscopic tour of sound production, it was so athletic that, when Hashimoto dropped a mallet and picked it up to play the next note without missing a beat, she looked more like a dancer recovering from a flub than an instrumentalist.

At Libbey Park on Sunday, she performed Saariaho's "Six Japanese Gardens," gorgeous sound portraits of real places that seemed, in this performance, to also capture Hashimoto's technique: her shifting timbres amid unwaveringly steady beats; her balance of focus and fluid motion; the magical elegance with which she conjures simultaneous momentum and stasis.

Alexi Kenney, violin

Of the young Ojai artists this year, Kenney had the most mixed success. His reading of Gyorgy Kurtag's "Kafka Fragments" with the soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon (another Marlboro veteran) was by turns silly, shocking and mysteriously profound. But his multimedia recital "Shifting Ground," presented twice at the festival, was a confused attempt at theatrical performance.

In a black-box space at the Ojai Valley School, Kenney played in front of a white curtain used as a screen for projections by the artist Xuan. The program, he wrote in an artist statement, was built around Bach's Chaconne, the monumental finale to the Partita No. 2 in D minor. He had a similar idea for a brilliant performance at the 92nd Street Y, New York, several years ago; this concert, though, was more digressive, with departures like Angélica Negrón's "The Violinist," a piece for violin and electronics, as well as a voice-over of the comedian Ana Fabrega recounting a musical nightmare. It was charming, but it also relegated Kenney to a soundtrack performer.

Kenney is on the right path, though, in thinking critically about the format of a recital. That he's curious, and willing to experiment, reflects the promise already evident in his playing.

From a seat at the sides of the theater, you could almost ignore the video art and focus on that purely technical side of his artistry, the side that was even more visible in Biber's Passacaglia on Sunday. Here was the style buried by "Shifting Ground": Kenney breathes melodies with his bow and body, often relaxing into a gesture, expressive not as an affect but as internalized feeling. Like his Bach, the Biber could be impatient, but only because it was intuitive, less studied than embodied.

The performance recalled one of Uchida's spare, but deeply communicative recitals. She may be traditional by comparison, but as his mentor she can offer this lesson: Sometimes all an audience needs is good music and a good musician.

[Mitsuko Uchida Keeps the Focus on Young Artists at Ojai - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/arts/music/mitsuko-uchida-keeps-the-focus-on-young-artists-at-ojai.html)

WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mozart and Modernism at the Ojai Music Festival

Story by David Mermelstein

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Mozart and Modernism at the Ojai Music Festival© Timothy Teague

What's so extraordinary about the Ojai Music Festival, now in its 78th year? Many things, actually, including its brevity (this year running June 6 through 9); challenging and often sharply contrasting programming; and a rich concentration of talent—the conductors Simon Rattle, Michael Tilson Thomas and Esa-Pekka Salonen, for instance, have all held the annually revolving music directorship; the latter two, several times.

But the best thing about this Brigadoon-like gathering is how it marries new and old in (generally) ideal measure, carefully balancing rigorous fare with music that is less intellectually demanding, if no less pleasurable. And for longstanding festivalgoers comes the added treat of revisiting, sometimes over the course of decades, particular works—often as not by Schoenberg, Bartók and Stravinsky (twice co-director of this festival).

This year's music director was the revered Japanese-born, Viennese-educated, British pianist Mitsuko Uchida, who served as co-music director (with the conductor David Zinman) in 1998 and last performed here in 2004. For many, the excitement of her return was palpable. Ms. Uchida, age 75, claims a rare distinction: Though a fierce advocate of thorny scores like Schoenberg's Piano Concerto, Harrison Birtwistle's "Antiphonies" and György Kurtág's "Játékok," she has earned international fame as a high priestess of canonical works by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann.

Still, it was surprising to find Ms. Uchida keeping modernism to a minimum on her programs here, where recondite fare is embraced voraciously. Beyond an exquisitely focused account of Schoenberg's "Six Little Piano Pieces," Op. 19—the musical embodiment of "less is more"—on Thursday night, she confined her performances to Mozart, all at the outdoor Libbey Bowl, the festival's primary venue. And at each subsequent evening concert, the only bills that featured her, she offered audiences jewel-like accounts of familiar Mozart Piano Concertos (K. 482, K. 595 and K. 453, respectively), directing from the keyboard members of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, an ensemble with whom she has enjoyed an "artistic partnership" since 2016.

The orchestra, a game band of considerable skill and equal pep who first appeared at Ojai in 2018, found further opportunities to charm in Haydn's rarely heard Symphony No. 46 on Sunday's closing program. They were even more impressive on Friday night in Anton Webern's Five Movements for Strings (Op. 5), a piece that surely influenced the film composer Bernard Herrmann, and Schoenberg's fiendishly difficult 20-minute Chamber Symphony (Op. 9), which though wholly original sounds like the willful musical love child of Wagner and Strauss.

Haydn and Schoenberg also figured prominently in performances by the Brentano String Quartet (last here in 2017), highlighting the beginning and end of the form's Austro-Hungarian tradition. Haydn's "Bird" Quartet (Op. 33, No. 3) on Thursday night and three movements from "The Seven Last Words of Christ" on Sunday morning evinced a beguiling warmth complementing technical prowess. Also on Thursday, Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2, with its unconventional addition of a soprano (Lucy Fitz Gibbon here) in the third and fourth movements, emerged no less technically accomplished while conjuring a disquieting, anguished atmosphere.

The California-born Alexi Kenney, a violinist of uncommon power and persuasion who made his Ojai debut in 2021, was central to two hour-long showcase programs, both indoors at the Ojai Valley School. The first, titled "Shifting Ground," was the only festival event presented twice (Friday and Saturday afternoons). It found Mr. Kenney more or less in darkness, performing new music interspersed with Bach as a series of projections, courtesy of Xuan, a visual artist, engaged in a not-always-successful dialogue with the scores. The second found Mr. Kenney sharing the spotlight with Ms. Fitz Gibbon, another rising young artist—and a former student of Dawn Upshaw, Ojai's music director in 2011. Together, they scaled the heights of Mr. Kurtág's "Kafka Fragments," a monumentally demanding work by one of music's supreme miniaturists.

Also deserving notice were the fearless, intellectually ambitious cellist Jay Campbell, who as part of the AMOC collective ran the festival two years ago; the Bosnian accordionist Ljubinka Kulisic, whose wry performance of John Zorn's cheeky "Road Runner" on Saturday morning proved the ultimate Ojai crowd-pleaser; and Sae Hashimoto, a percussionist whose protean

talents were shown to impressive advantage in Kaija Saariaho's kaleidoscopic "Six Japanese Gardens" on Sunday morning.

Special mention should be made of Saariaho, the great Finnish composer who died last year at age 70 and whose work has been heard regularly at Ojai in recent years. Her husband, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, and daughter, Aliisa Neige Barrière, each participated in programs that included her works, which could be heard at least once daily from Friday onward. Among the many other things Ojai does right, this festival knows how to honor its own.

[Mozart and Modernism at the Ojai Music Festival \(msn.com\)](#)

Los Angeles Times

Review: At this year's Ojai Festival, Mitsuko Uchida introduces Mozart to zen

By Mark Swed, Classical Music Critic

June 12, 2024



When Schoenberg wrote “Six Little Piano pieces,” his Opus 19, he was he was in his mid 30s, taking deep compositional breaths, smelling the roses scenting a new air that seemed to waft over Vienna in 1911. All around him, the world was exploding with new ideas for a new century — relativity, psychoanalysis, art bursting with color. The 19th century center didn’t hold, and in these tiny piano pieces there was no center at all.

The fourth is very fast and lasts less than a half a minute, gone before you know it. The sixth piece of the group is very, very slow and very, very, very soft. At 10 bars long, it contains little more than a handful of impressionist three-note chords held for irregular lengths and some noodling, with only three levels of dynamics: pianissimo, pianississimo and pianissississimo (pp,ppp and pppp).

Mitsuko Uchida, music director of this year's Ojai Festival, played "Six Little Piano Pieces" as the second work of the event's introductory opening concert of chamber music Thursday night. The notes evaporated into the outdoor void of Libbey Bowl. The little pieces came across less as what we might think of as music than as a passing flicker of imagination made momentarily aural. Uchida's playing was so uncompromisingly ethereal that its purpose seemed meant to open the listener's mind a crack.

"Who could ask for anything more?" I thought, once the last barely heard (or imagined) pppp bass notes evaporated into the ether. Still, a festival lay ahead the next three days with enough music to keep one occupied from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Each day proved a drama, beginning with an attempt to hold the meditative high ground against infuriating worldly odds and then be guided gracefully and gleefully back again to the otherworldly.

Uchida is our most mysterious Mozartean, and the mysterious festival, which she grounded with three Mozart piano concertos, proved controversial. The Ojai Festival, historically, thrives on controversy in its challenging embrace of the new and unusual and, in a really good year, outrageous. This is also the festival of Shangri-La, as Ojai is known, a sanctuary for attaining spiritual refreshment, even if for some that is accomplished by racing un-muffled motorcycles through town on a quiet Sunday morning.

Programming the Mozart concertos is what caused some of the upset. Other than Uchida's performance of Mozart's D-Minor Fantasy, a staple of intermediate piano students also performed Thursday, the concertos were all Uchida played over the weekend. These concert-hall staples — whether good, bad or phoned-in — are a dime a dozen. Wonders they may be, but there are more recordings of them than anyone need bother to count. The whole point of Ojai is to ask for something else.

Maybe this is just the Ojai air talking, but the only way I can explain the Uchida effect this weekend — the livestreams of the concerts at Libbey Bowl are promised on the festival website next week — is to liken her to a zen master who both accepts and overcomes harsh reality to the point that they become the same thing.

The harsh reality could obviously be motorcycles slashing the religiosity of a pensive morning concert in the Bowl. But it could also be festival-made.

Uchida insisted upon the participation of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. Founded in 1997 by Claudio Abbado, the 45-member, Berlin-based ensemble of top musicians from 20 countries comes together to tour and is a favorite of conductors and soloists everywhere, including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Gustavo Dudamel and Yuja Wang (who has experimented with conducting the Mahlers). When they are great, they can take your breath away. When they are not, they can make you gasp for breath as they remove oxygen out of the atmosphere. They did both at Ojai.

Each evening concert began with the Mahlers performing without a conductor. The musicians played standing and were mostly led by their concertmaster, José Maria Blumenschein. The result was a group of virtuosos jockeying for attention. Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 1 on Friday, for instance,



was aggressively in-your-face, 180 interpretative degrees from Uchida's Opus 19. But after intermission, the orchestra was seated facing Uchida at the keyboard for Mozart's E-flat Major Concerto, No. 22.

Seen from the back, the elegant pianist appeared swan-like as she conducted with flowing arms, intimately expressive, a now seated ensemble. "Sit down and make music," she seemed to have commanded. On the spot, the Mahlers' devils became angels, as though overwhelmed by Uchida's generosity of spirit. Every note Uchida played sounded lovingly conjured.

The ensemble's instinct was a kind of worshipful response, but zen-master Uchida would not have that. She can be the most flowing of pianists, yet she can also be dramatic, theatrical and irreverent. You never know what she'll do (or say, as she did, in a contentious [New York Times interview](#) that offended some festival-goers). If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him, is one zen saying. That was her Mozart. He was not to be worshiped as a god but understood as a living being still somehow present and with the power to transform.

Uchida did it again Saturday night with Mozart's final piano concerto. Its accomplishment was the undoing of the evening's opening: a bull-in-a-china-shop performance of a chamber-music setting of Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun." She did it again Sunday, which began with Haydn Symphony No. 46 lacking amazement. This time it was the G-major Mozart concerto, No. 17 that brought joy and amazement and, in the slow movement, enchantment.

These concerto appearances and Thursday's Schoenberg and Mozart solos were all we heard or saw of Uchida. Unlike other festival directors she wasn't a presence, attending other concerts and personally interacting with audiences. She simply appeared at the keyboard and made magic.

Living up to that magic was the festival's biggest challenge. There was a small focus on Schoenberg and Kaija Saariaho, the Finnish composer who had, herself, been an earlier festival presence and died last year. Uchida invited old friends, the Brentano String Quartet (Uchida once made a recording of Mozart sonatas for keyboard and violin with its leader, Mark Steinberg). She invited new young friends.

Two of the young soloists debuting at the festival could be stars in the making. Sunday morning, Sae Hashimoto, kept Uchida's zen spirit alive in a luminous performance of Saariaho's solo percussion piece, "Six Japanese Gardens." Accordionist Ljubinka Kulisic also absorbed the zen calling in a stunning early Sunday morning solo John Cage concerto of Satie-inspired works played with meditative focus. She joined Jay Campbell, maybe the most zen-like of all cellists who plays the most exceptionally challenging new music without show, for Sofia Gubaidulina's wrenchingly spiritual "In Croce." Kulisic

could also fabulously play the clown in John Zorn's "Road Runner," a sassy collage of classical-music fragments.

Less successful was the young violinist, Alexi Kenney, who has technique to burn and who performed an indoor concert at the Ojai Valley School called "Shifting Ground." In the dark for over an hour he played in the dark a range of solo contemporary pieces with and without electronics, interspersed with Bach, all against banal graphic projections by Xuan of space and the like.

In fact, Kenney, standing erect and unflappable, made everything, old and new, sound much the same, as if conjuring a kind of musical talisman against ground that too easily shifts. That is not unwelcome reassurance. Ojai reportedly experienced more 400 earthquakes since last year's festival.

There wasn't much shifting going on with the Brentanos either. Whether with Haydn, Bartok or Schoenberg, the quartet's thin, wiry tone did not take well to amplification, a tone in great contrast to the gutsy Mahlers or beguiling Uchida. Then again, zen takes the world as it is, and possibly that was the pianist's idea all along, that music making is not one thing and not necessarily your taste.

The orchestra did have a few curiously non-Uchida moments of note to my preference. Saariaho's "Lichtbogen," full of strange colors inspired by Debussy and computer music, was given a moving performance led by the composer's daughter, Aliisa Neige Barrière. Clarinetist Vicente Alberola may have made a mess of a movement from Salonen's clarinet concerto, "kinema," conducting with his clarinet, soloist and ensemble showily bobbing away. But he conducted an arresting performance of John Adams' "Shaker Loops" in its original string sextet version.

The strings shimmering to the point that they created an unreal aural light, as though electronic. Although riveting, it was, if hardly what we expect from Adams' 1978 breakthrough minimalist score, inspired by the Shakers' music. Was this another zen moment, perhaps, where there is no place for right and wrong? Uchida couldn't have even known what would happen, Alberola stepped in at the last minute to conduct.

But somewhere off in the distance, she was surely pulling (and shaking?) the strings. Next year, the irrepressible flutist, Claire Chase, takes the music director reins.

[Review: Mitsuko Uchida's Ojai Festival revealed the zen of Mozart - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](http://www.latimes.com)

musicalamerica WORLDWIDE

By Richard S. Ginell
Musical America.com, June 13, 2024

OJAI, CA – Ojai Festivals used to have music directors serving consecutive residencies, but since the 1980s, it's been one festival and out for everyone. They like it that way, and sometimes there can be wild swings in mood and theme as a result. Such was the scenario that was anticipated for Mitsuko Uchida, who as Ojai's music director-du-jour would be following the freewheeling courses on arty and vernacular Americana that the festival had been offering over the past three editions with programs more grounded in European traditions.

Uchida had been the co-music director of the festival (along with David Zinman) before in 1998, and her agenda then was primarily filled with mementos of Vienna from the days of Mozart and Schubert to those of Berg and Webern, concluding in a most un-Ojai way with the Beethoven *Emperor* Concerto. Some worried then that the Ojai Festival – almost always a feisty champion of unusual programming – was veering uncomfortably close to the everyday concert mainstream (though that fear was dispelled by the 1999 festival in which Esa-Pekka Salonen put Ojai back on its quirky adventurous path).

This time, over the weekend of June 6 - 9 in the little town that could – one that has been fearlessly hosting world-class music festivals since 1947 – Uchida brought back some features from her first crack at the job. Mozart would be prominently featured on the menu again, no surprise there since Uchida is indelibly identified with the composer. She and the Mahler Chamber Orchestra have been exploring Mozart's piano concertos together in depth since 2019, so it was an inevitable idea to bring the MCO along for the ride. She brought back the Brentano String Quartet, who played with and without her at Ojai in 1998 as they broke in their new cellist Nina Lee who has remained with the group since.

Take a closer look at the programs in Libbey Bowl, though, and the spirit of adventure that has usually guided this festival was definitely present in ways that weren't so apparent in 1998. Uchida tapped into her Marlboro experiences to bring in composers whom she had worked with there, and that brought some healthy contemporary balance to the agenda, if no news-making premieres.

There were two commemorative themes that ran through the festival. One was the observance of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Arnold Schoenberg who, despite having made his breakthroughs over a hundred years ago, remains somewhat of a far-out figure, the dreaded apostle of dissonance, to many in the general public. This was important, for few concert organizations have bothered to recognize Schoenberg's legacy this season (one that bravely did, Santa Monica's Jacaranda Music, sadly folded for good in February). The other theme was a memorial to Kaija Saariaho, who passed away a year ago this month while the festival was being planned.

Schoenberg figured prominently in the opening program June 6 (as viewed on Ojai's video livestream), with Uchida delicately yet firmly making her way through the Six Little Piano Pieces Op. 19 and the Brentanos essaying the landmark piece during which tonality went over the cliff in real time, the Quartet No. 2, with soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon in prime form. The following evening (June 7), the MCO delivered a wild and wooly performance of the Chamber Symphony No. 1 in the original 15-piece format, with careful miking revealing a tangle of detail and irrepressible vitality.

Saariaho's music would pop up in miniature shards and patches in various programs, eventually blooming with the MCO on Saturday night (June 8) with *Lichtbogen*, which slowly emerges from a single note with trills, sparkles from the mallet percussion, abrasive crunches from the strings, and ever so slowly comes to a halt. However, the Saariaho piece that provided the biggest thrills was the gorgeous *Six Japanese Gardens* the following morning (June 9), in which the agile percussionist Sae Hashimoto had a wonderful time playing her cymbals, crotales, timpani, triangles and other instruments off layers of ghostly, heavily reverberating electronics.

As for Mozart, whereas Uchida limited herself to one concerto in 1998 (No. 12, K. 414), this time she programmed three of them – the Nos. 17 (K. 453), 22 (K. 482) and 27 (K. 595). Each concerto closed one of the three evenings with the MCO, starting with No. 22 June 7, moving on to the valedictory No. 27 on June 8, and backtracking to No. 17 to close the festival June 9. Whether Uchida intentionally chose the concertos in intervals of five is not for me to say, but I thought it made for a fun, symmetrical numbers game.

The biggest revelation was the performance of the Concerto No. 22. I've never heard a Mozart piano concerto played in quite this way before, each note so clearly struck and beautifully characterized without a hit of preciousness, Uchida's two hands seemingly talking to each other. She could shape the flute and bassoon solos in the slow movement with infinite grace as she led the MCO from the lidless Steinway. All of which made her somnolent performance of the Concerto No. 27 the following night all the more puzzling. Whatever spark that inspired the No. 22 performance was gone, and the music seemed to lay there limp despite the continued clarity of touch. She sounded more involved in the Concerto No. 17 late Sunday afternoon, though, with a gentle feeling of happiness in the finale and even injecting some humor into the mix.

Now and then, the Ojai Festival becomes a breakout platform for performers of an oddball nature – and this year, the big surprise for many of us was the young woman from Bosnia-Herzegovina who plays a mean avant-garde accordion, Ljubinka Kulisic. She opened the June 8 morning concert with John Zorn's madcap mashup *Road Runner*, turning her *bayan* (a massive Russian button accordion) loose on a merry run through squiggles of cartoon music, a Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody, Francis Lai's "A Man And A Woman," "The Irish Washerwoman", the "Dragnet" theme, "Beer Barrel Polka," "Für Elise," and too many other stolen quotes to list. It was wonderful. The following morning, she and cellist Jay Campbell were into an entirely different bag, slowly groaning, crunching and yearning their ways through Sofia Gubaidulina's *In Croce*.

The award for sheer stamina should go to the dazzlingly physical violin playing of Alexi Kenney, who twice presented his hour-long, multi-media solo violin show, *Shifting Ground*, in the smallish Greenberg Center of the nearby Ojai Valley School. It's an homage to J.S. Bach's Chaconne, hopscotching from Bach to modern times in ten complete, if short, installments before playing the Chaconne in its entirety in front of interstellar space images and other abstract projections from visual artist Xuan. You guessed it; it was really just a variation on a 1960s light show. On Sunday afternoon, Kenney and Fitz Gibbon offered up the similarly hour-long collection of György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, which Peter Sellars once colorfully described as picking through the shattered scraps of Western music after World War II and trying to fit them together again. Give another award for stamina to the audiences who sat through these two concerts; it wasn't easy at times with so much music to absorb at Ojai.

Back in 1998, the Brentano Quartet had to cancel their planned Ojai performance of the Bartók Quartet No 3 – a tough piece to rehearse with a new cellist onboard (that loss led to a memorable confrontation between a Bartók fan in the audience and a very testy Ernest Fleischmann, Ojai's artistic director at the time). Well, the Brentano was able to play some Bartók after all on June 7, a vigorous, if a bit scrappy, grapple with the Quartet No. 5.

The Mahler Chamber Orchestra was clearly thrilled to be back in Ojai – to the point where a few of their members, aware that Johnny Cash once lived a few miles down Highway 33 in Casitas Springs, cooked up a few Cash tunes to play in gathering places downtown and at the after-festival party Sunday night. They even rocked out on a number by Iggy Pop, "The Passenger." They weren't bad at all.

In June 2025, flutist-entrepreneur Claire Chase is set to be the next Ojai music director – and I'll bet we'll be in for some crazy avant-garde antics and revelations. Just as in 1999.

In Return To Music Fest, Uchida Brought Mix Of Vision And Sublime Art

By Rick Schultz - June 13, 2024



OJAI, Calif. — For 78 years, the Ojai Music Festival has mixed new and old, the familiar with the challenging. The festival, which this year ran June 6-9, selects a different music director annually. Its principal venue, Libbey Bowl, boasts a rich and prestigious tradition. Stravinsky and Copland, for example, twice directed the outdoor festival.

This season, the Japanese-born British pianist-conductor Mitsuko Uchida returned as director. The Vienna-trained musician first appeared at Ojai in 1996 under Pierre Boulez's leadership, returning two years later as co-director (with David Zinman). She last performed here with Kent Nagano in 2004.

Uchida, 75, made a name for herself in the 1980s as a Mozart specialist. She's a cool character whose public persona can appear guarded and humorless. But as Michiel Commandeur, a violinist in the Mahler Chamber Orchestra — this year's festival house band, and one of Uchida's main artistic collaborators since 2013 — told me, Uchida is unfailingly loyal to them and to fellow musicians in general.

At least for me, Uchida's Schubert — and especially her later Schumann — engage her deep artistry and breathtakingly poetic vision more naturally and consistently than her Mozart. The pianist's Schoenberg playing is equally illuminating, but it's likely people came to hear her in at least one of the three major concertos by Mozart performed on consecutive nights: No. 22 (K. 482) on Friday, No. 27 (K. 595) on Saturday, and the more youthful No. 17 (K. 453) for Sunday's finale.

Violinist Alexi Kenney and soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon performed György Kurtág's 'Kafka Fragments.'

The three readings proved vintage Uchida: on the slow and careful side, deeply considered to a fault. The pianist conducted the Mahler players from the keyboard, her back to the audience. The orchestra seemed restrained by her meticulous approach, making for fitfully involving Mozart. Livelier tempos, more freedom for rhythmic articulation, along with more color and contrast, would have helped provide charm and energy.

Still, it's always a privilege to hear Uchida perform, and she gave a fine encore after each night's concluding concerto: "Aveu" (Confession) from Schumann's Carnival; a searching account of the Andante from Mozart's Sonata in C major, K. 330, stretching the piece almost to the lyrical breaking point; and a Romantic, meditative rendition of the Sarabande from Bach's French Suite No. 5.



As a proponent of György Kurtág’s *Jatekok*, or *Games*, Uchida obviously enjoys cerebral musical humor, so it was perhaps no surprise to find Kurtág’s demanding, hour-long *Kafka Fragments* on the Sunday-afternoon concert at the Ojai Valley School.

Violinist Alexi Kenney and soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon brought Kafka’s neurotic, darkly mordant humor brilliantly to the fore. The fragmentary texts, drawn from Kafka’s diaries, notebooks, and journals, were projected in German and English on a big screen behind the performers. There were some laughs from the audience, including for the fragment “Coitus as punishment” (*Canticulum Mariæ Magdalanæ*): “Coitus as punishment of the happiness of being together.” And, “Offensively Jewish,” which advises that “In the struggle between yourself and the world, side with the world.”

If Kafka were alive today, he’d likely be a cross between Philip Roth and Larry David.

Fitz Gibbon, a student of Dawn Upshaw, displayed a robust voice, intense concentration, and alert acting, effectively sparring with Kenney’s alternately grouchy, lyrical, slashing, meditative, and gritty playing. Incidentally, Upshaw performed a gussied-up staged version of *Fragments* at Disney Hall in 2008. This outing was pure, unadorned Kurtág. Ojai audiences need no coddling.

Kenney, 30, who has seemed on the verge of stardom for some time, certainly became one of the highlights of this festival (he made his Ojai debut in 2021). Along with *Kafka Fragments*, he gave a brilliant solo performance, with innocuous abstract projections by visual artist Xuan, of another hour-long work called *Shifting Ground*, consisting of 11 pieces by various composers, also at the Ojai Valley School. I saw the second performance on Saturday afternoon.

People talk to each other at Ojai, and the social aspect is often as contentious and profound as the music making. I’d been told to beware of *Shifting Ground* because it was “relentless” and “unfocused.” But this theatrical miscellany — the title refers to the ground bass of Baroque music — held interest throughout. Angélica Negrón’s *The Violinist*, for violin and electronics with a story narrated by comedian Ana Fabrega, unfolded as a hilarious, mesmerizing nightmare about a violinist’s stage fright. More serious was Matthew Burtner’s *Elegy* (Muir Glacier 1889-2009), in which the violin is placed over a field recording of the glacier slowly melting due to climate change.

Throughout, Kenney showed remarkable stamina and emotive energy — his precision of attack never faltered, and his lyrical thrust remained secure, especially in his staggering rendition of Bach’s foundational *Chaconne* from *Violin Partita No. 2*, which concluded the program.

The next morning, Kenney opened the concert with a thrillingly nuanced account of Biber’s *Passacaglia* for solo violin, in which he conveyed palpable emotional tension without getting physically tense.

On Friday night, there was Webern’s *Five Movements for Strings*, Op. 5, which seemed protractedly lugubrious as performed by the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. They were better in Schoenberg’s *Chamber Symphony No. 1*, Op. 9, a tonal piece that sounded like two Strauss tone poems smooshed together.

One of the most effective pieces of the festival was also its silliest: accordionist Ljubinka Kulisic’s virtuosic account of John Zorn’s *Road Runner* on Saturday morning. Barely lasting seven minutes, the score includes numerous bits of tunes. Ljubinka slapped the side of her instrument as if it were an old malfunctioning radio, and we heard snatches of themes from *Dragnet*, *The Green Hornet*, *The Godfather*, *Piazzolla*, *Für Elise*, you name it. *Road Runner* grabbed the audience.

Was it real music? As the late Oliver “Olly” Knussen (Ojai music director, 2005) observed, “Real music is real music when you’re not sitting around thinking it’s music — it actually takes you over.” On a more elevated level, Kaija Saariaho’s wonderful *Lichtbogen* passed the “Olly” test on Saturday night.

Saariaho, who died in June 2023, took inspiration from the Northern lights for her early (1986) *Lichtbogen*, which she wrote with the aid of a computer. It’s a riveting if largely static piece beautifully conveyed by nine Mahler players, along with electronics tastefully guided by the composer’s widower, Jean-Baptiste Barrière. Most touching of all, the piece was conducted by her daughter, Aliisa Neige Barrière, who was acutely sensitive to *Lichtbogen*’s glimmering sonorities and shimmering colors.

Many in the audience appeared quite moved when Aliisa afterward held the score up to her heart several times. Indeed, Ojai can make such moments feel personal: Many of us met the composer at the festival in 2016.

There was more Saariaho on Sunday morning — *Six Japanese Gardens*, imaginatively performed by percussionist Sae Hashimoto. The Brentano Quartet offered three selections from Haydn’s *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, and Sofia Gubaidulina’s *In Croce* featured JACK Quartet cellist Jay Campbell, with Kulisic on accordion. So many composers, so little time.

At Sunday’s closing concert, the Mahler players gave a nimble reading of Jörg Widmann’s *Chorale Quartet*, but the standout performance was the orchestra’s witty, exuberant rendition of Haydn’s *Symphony No. 46*. Here, the musicians delighted in Haydn’s wry manipulation of phrase lengths and conventional expectations with reliably precise attacks and dynamic control. The players, led by concertmaster José Maria Blumenschein, were having fun, and so were we.

As Uchida played the Presto finale of Mozart’s *Concerto in G major (K. 453)*, the concluding piece in this mostly cool, overcast festival, wouldn’t you know it, the sun came out.

In 2025, the experimental flutist Claire Chase will serve as Ojai’s music director.

Review | Return to Ojai Festival Form, Mozart Riding Sidesaddle

The 78th Annual Ojai Music Festival Impresses with New/Old-School Agenda, Directed by Mozartean Specialist Mitsuko Uchida

By Josef Woodard

Thu Jun 13, 2024 | 04:55pm

The formidable Ojai Music Festival has returned to the Ojai Music Festival (OMF) business at hand. Birds, unpaid and uncharted freelancers, chirp along in the idyllic venue of the Libbey Bowl, along with the extra-musical sounds of welcome church bells and unwelcome car alarms and motorcycles. Festival-goers lounge into a weekend in a dreamy hamlet, catching concerts at 8 a.m. and throughout the day and evening. All is — and was — well.

But beneath the peaceful escapist element of the OMF, there are high stakes for this revered festival's legacy and in consideration of its role in the evolution of music of the now, informed by music of the then.

Last year, this internationally important festival — mostly about classical music, and, within that umbrella, mostly about contemporary or recent-ish music — took a fascinating side trip courtesy of the immensely gifted and versatile Rhiannon Giddens as music director. She folded her musical voice and vision, from Americana (and African-Americana) to her new status as Pulitzer Prize-winning opera composer (for *Omar*) and shook up the old Ojai guard, while luring in new audience factions.



Last weekend, the OMF felt more aligned with the agenda laid out over its now 78-year history, with the eminent pianist Mitsuko Uchida in the director's seat, and a solid program of music spanning a Baroque-to-contemporary perspective. Uchida, whose musical reach includes working with Vermont's Marlboro Festival, brought along the bold Mahler Chamber Orchestra as resident ensemble, along with the sharp Brentano Quartet and such bedazzling young artists as violinist Alexi Kenney, lateral-thinking cellist Jay Campbell (the "C" of the JACK Quartet) and accordionist Ljubinka Kulisic.



As for the detailing in the program's texture and range, the composer focus ranged from the fundamental loam of Bach, Haydn and Mozart to composers she has worked with—the late Finnish Kaija Saariaho, the Russian Sophia Gubaidulina, the German Helmut Lachenmann, Arnold Schoenberg and a powerful “newcomer,” German Jörg Widmann, whose “Chorale Quartet” on closing

night was this listener's pick for best of fest, in terms of a new discovery.

For her part, Uchida dove deep into her famed poetic prowess as a Mozartean, performing three Mozart Concertos in primetime evening concerts. It could be argued that this may have been one or two too many major Mozart works, for a festival which has built its reputation and global standing by championing music of our time (and times). But the argument leaned in Uchida's favor, given the sublime experience of hearing her grace these scores with her uncommon depth of understanding — while leading the MCO between her keyboard flights.

Uchida was the ideal choice as music director at this moment, contrasting the Giddens year with a more Ojai-centric grounding. She first appeared here in 1996, with Pierre Boulez at the helm, and then returned as co-director with David Zinman, and then later as performer.

In programming cahoots with artistic director Ara Guzelimian, Uchida managed to tap many important and lesser-heard musical touchpoints over the weekend, including paying respects to Saariaho, who died just more than a year ago. Her *Lichtbogen*, conducted here by her daughter Aliisa Neige Barriere, has a shimmering, evanescent atmosphere, mixing acoustic and electronic elements with abiding sensitivity (this 1986 piece was her first in collaboration with the Boulez-run IRCAM lab in Paris).

Schoenberg had a special slot in the festival programming, given his status as a game-changing 12-tone architect revolutionary. But the emphasis here was on key works — the String Quartet No. 2 (with soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon joining the Brentano) and his Chamber Symphony — which led up to his internal metamorphosis from late romantic to systematic atonality guru. In these works, we hear a composer rattling the cage, still trying to burst free into his own new language.

To my ears, the weekend's most powerful Schoenberg came in the compact form of his solo piano work “Six Little Pieces,” the first piece we heard from Uchida on Thursday night's opening concert, and eight minutes of modernist bliss. The finest example of emotionally expressive serialism this weekend came

from Schoenberg student Anton Webern's classic "Five Movements for Strings." Row music rarely sounded so sweet. Well, bittersweet, with an objective air.

In more general local terms, the festival furthered the recent question: Is it the dawning of the age of accordions in the 805? The presence of superlative Bosnian Kulisic at this festival marks the third notable classical accordion siding this season. She had appeared in these parts, after last fall's appearance by the Chinese Hanzhi Wang at the Lobero Theatre and last month's premiere of Clarice Assad's new work for accordionist Julien Labro, at Hahn Hall.

In Ojai, we first got acquainted with Kulisic at a striking Friday 8 a.m. concert in Zipper Hall (on the campus of the Besant Hill School in Upper Ojai), as the partner of cellist Campbell on Gubaidulina's *In Croce* — repeated at the Libbey Bowl, the only work played twice here. She later impressed in both contemplative and maverick party modes, with a delectable early morning program of John Cage works at 8 a.m. in the Chaparral Auditorium and, at the Libbey Bowl, navigated the tricky road map of John Zorn's wildly impish postmodern mash-up *Road Runner*.

As has happened in recent years, some of the more intriguing and off-radar music of the Ojai weekend takes place in the early morning slot, says one who is decidedly not a morning person but will rise to a good musical occasion. Friday's program featured Campbell's experimental eloquence on Saariaho's deconstructive *Dreaming Chaconne* and Lachenmann's delicate percussive extended techniques on Toccata. Lachenmann also supplied the tour de force percussion piece *Interieur I*, which festival newcomer Sae Hashimoto performed with a wizardly choreographic — and highly musical — grace.

On Saturday morning, Campbell took charge of transforming the inviting old-school Chaparral Auditorium into a meditation zone with intellectual overtones (a bounty of overtones, actually), in the form of American-in-Berlin composer Catherine Lamb's solo cello piece "The Additive Arrow." Via elaborate computer sound-chasing programming and additive processes, the half hour work built up a hypnotic swirl of sounds and overtones, with a palette of 32 notes to the octave. The sum effect was mind-bending, and mind-mending. It is also one of those pieces you have to experience live in a room to fully appreciate.

Aptly enough, the main Sunday morning Libbey Bowl concert came equipped with religious resonances of varying types and idioms. Kenney played the "church music" of baroque composer Heinrich Biber's *Passacaglia* for solo violin, circa 1676, followed by the gentle percussion poetry of Saariaho's *Six Japanese Gardens*, vaguely tinged by Buddhist qualities and radiantly delivered by Hashimoto. The centerpieces came next, with a section from Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ* (played by the Brentano, with its usual aplomb), and Russian Orthodox-linked Gubaidulina's *In Croce* ("On the Cross"), closing with ascending cello motives versus descending accordion chords, landing in a redemptive resolution.

Special "off campus" afternoon concerts featured the refined and adventurous young Kenney (who, incidentally, will appear in Santa Barbara with his group Owls next year), in the Greenberg Center of Ojai Valley School. His elaborate "Shifting Ground" program, with visuals by Xuan — sometimes symbiotic with the music, sometimes not — blends the grounding force of Bach with more modern material, including Saariaho, his Owls comrade Paul Wiancko (also in the Kronos Quartet) and the angular and taut, soloist-with-electronics maze of Mario Davidovsky's *Synchronisms No. 9*, from 1988.

Sunday afternoon found Kenney impressing in a different, more internally programmatic direction, joining soprano Fitz Gibbons on the great Hungarian composer Gyorgy Kurtag's engaging, angst-filled and humor-sprinkled *Kafka Fragments*.

As for other high points of OMF 78, we couldn't help but love the rumbling minimalist charm of John Adams's *Shaker Loops*, a still-vital seminal work from the composer who directed the 75th anniversary festival and whose music resonates deeply in this place, on this stage.

And then there was the thrill of Widmann's Sunday evening triumph, with MCO's masterful reading of his *Chorale Quartet*. In a sense, here we had the ultimate expression of the weekend's over-arching theme, connecting early music — which arrives in ghostly patches in the score — alongside thoroughly modern approaches to experimentation with instrumental color and ensemble writing. We hear a similar searching synthesis effect in Widmann's 2017 epic *Arche*, a two-hour piece honoring the opening of Hamburg's great new orchestra hall the Elbphilharmonie (take a listen [here](#)).

In this music, new meets and wrestles with old, coming to agreeable understandings and paving the way for future discussion. So went the OMF, circa 2024. Next up in the discussion, 2025 music director Claire Chase, an iconoclast with a sense of play and depth. We're all ears.

[Review | Return to Ojai Festival Form, Mozart Riding Sidesaddle - The Santa Barbara Independent](#)



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Ojai 2024 Combines Classic and Contemporary Like Never Before

Jim Farber on June 16, 2024



Longtime attendees of the **Ojai Music Festival** refer to them as “Ojai moments” — singular experiences that define what makes Ojai so special. And during this year’s festival, just such a moment presented itself on Saturday night, June 8.

Mitsuko Uchida, this year’s music director, was performing Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 27 in B-flat Major, K. 595, with members of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra (MCO). The concerto, the composer’s last, was first performed in 1791, the same year that saw the premiere of *The Magic Flute*, whose spirit wafts in and out of the concerto.

The Ojai moment came during the cadenza of the second movement, Larghetto, when the piano, in its highest register, evokes the entrancing power of Papageno’s magic bells. A silence descended over Libbey Bowl that was so complete that the only sounds were the piano, the croaking of frogs, the rustling of crickets, and the songs of night birds. It was as if Uchida’s playing had somehow entranced us all. Over the course of its four days, June 6–9, the 78th Ojai Music Festival presented a dozen concerts that focused on three principal themes: the keyboard artistry of Uchida (highlighted by three consecutive nights devoted to

Mozart's piano concertos), the 150th anniversary of Arnold Schoenberg's birth, and an homage to the late Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, who played a major role at several past Ojai Festivals.

Uchida's choice of ensembles and soloists included the MCO, the Brentano String Quartet, soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon, violinist Alexi Kenney, and cellist Jay Campbell, reflecting collaborations that Uchida has forged over many years at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont.

Ever since its founding in 1947, the Ojai Festival has combined the old with the new — in this year's case, the stylistic development of the First Viennese School of Haydn and Mozart with the Second Viennese



School of Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, and those who followed in their footsteps, particularly the Hungarian composer György Kurtág.

With several generations of the Schoenberg family in attendance, Thursday's opening concert began by connecting the innovative contrasting movements of Haydn's String Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, No. 3 ("The Bird"), performed by the Brentanos, with the minute intricacies of Schoenberg's *Six Little Piano Pieces*, Op. 19, performed by

Uchida. Her account of the Schoenberg was subtle in the extreme and unfortunately under-amplified for the outdoor setting of Libbey Bowl. It's quite possible that the only person who could truly appreciate those disappearing pianissimos was Uchida (or those who chose to tune in to the festival's livestream).

The second half of the program proved much more effective, with Uchida offering a rhapsodic rendering of Mozart's *Fantasia No. 3 in D Minor*, K. 397, followed by the Brentanos giving a powerful, energetic rendition of Schoenberg's groundbreaking *String Quartet No. 2 in F-sharp Minor*, Op. 10. The performance also featured Fitz Gibbon in the critically important soprano part in the quartet's third and fourth movements, which introduce atonality to poems by Stefan George.

The performances by the MCO the next night did not fare so well. The dark, somber mood and miniature detailing of Webern's *Five Movements for Strings*, Op. 5, proved a dour piece to include on the festival's first orchestral concert. Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony No. 1* followed, with the musicians all standing and playing without a conductor. The work, finished in 1906, represents a crossover point between the effusiveness of late Romanticism and the new frontier of atonal composition. But this performance, while bursting with energy, felt shapeless and stylistically chaotic.

Everything changed after intermission, when Uchida performed Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-flat Major*, K. 482, conducting from the keyboard. The result was vintage Uchida — crystalline and with an

abundance of personal flair, lyricism, and detail. The only questionable decision (throughout the festival) was the orchestra's decision to use natural horns, which proved tricky to control in the outdoor conditions.

Friday was a marathon that began with a dawn concert at 8 a.m. in the intimate Zalk Theater at Besant Hill School, nestled in the bucolic rolling hills of Upper Ojai. These early morning concerts have often turned out to be festival highlights, and this year was no exception.

With its amphitheater seating and bright acoustics, Zalk Theater was an ideal venue for the program of works by Saariaho, Giuseppe Colombi, Helmut Lachenmann, and Sofia Gubaidulina. The musicians included Campbell, percussionist Sae Hashimoto, and the darling of Ojai 2024, accordionist extraordinaire Ljubinka Kulisic.

The recital began with Campbell contrasting the earliest known piece for solo cello, Columbi's *Ciaccona* (dating from the 17th century), with the flutters, slides, and hovering harmonics of Saariaho's *Dreaming Chaconne* (2010).

Then, like a whirling dervish surrounded on all sides by gongs, bells, and marimbas, Hashimoto delivered an octopus-like rendition of Lachenmann's sonic menagerie *Intérieur 1*. Campbell followed with an arrangement of the composer's *Toccatina* that required the cello to be played in every way imaginable, including by bowing the pegbox.

The climax came when Campbell and Kulisic performed Gubaidulina's *In Croce*, composed in 1979 for cello and organ but reconfigured by Elsbeth Moser in 1991 for bayan (Russian button accordion), Kulisic's instrument. The performance was mesmerizing, the two instruments creating a blend of mysterious religiosity with the widest possible range of colors.

The celebration of Saariaho's work continued with Friday's 10 a.m. concert, which featured the five-minute *Fall*, a delicate work for harp and electronics performed by Julie Smith Phillips — accompanied by an unscheduled chorus of ravens.

The two works at the festival that best expressed Saariaho's unique ability to expand time and space were *Six Japanese Gardens*, with Hashimoto executing the complex percussion during Sunday's 10 a.m. concert, and *Lichtbogen* (Rainbow), a shimmering orchestral evocation of fractal reflections and reverberations, conducted on Saturday by the composer's daughter, Aliisa Neige Barrière. When the last notes faded away, Barrière held the score high in the air to multiple ovations.

Some experimental creations just don't work. This year it was "Shifting Ground," Kenney's solo violin project, which was performed against an unrelenting and watery background light show by video artist Xuan. The recital takes the *Allemande* and *Chaconne* from J.S. Bach's *Partita No. 2 in D Minor* as bookends, with a rapid-fire succession of virtuosic contemporary compositions sandwiched in between. Besides Saariaho, Rafiq Bhatia, Matthew Burtner, Mario Davidovsky, Salina Fisher, Angélica Negrón, and Paul Wiancko were represented. The performance proved most impressive as a feat of athletic endurance. The contemporary compositions, aside from Negrón's inventive nightmare piece *The Violinist* (to a story by Ana Fabrega), were not different enough from each other. Listening to the recital was exhausting, and playing it was a challenge. Kenney's performance of the famously difficult *Chaconne* felt like a last gasp at reaching the finish line, the freshness long gone from his bow arm.

Kenney's artistry (and stamina) proved much more robust on Sunday afternoon, when he and Fitz Gibbon embarked on the complexities of Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, an hourlong modernist theatrical masterwork. The effect was spellbinding as they navigated these 40 intricately linked ruminations on the nature of time, space, and existence. Performed in a totally darkened auditorium, the piece was simultaneously challenging and magnetic.

It's amazing how a festival's momentum can hinge on one performance. But just such a pivot occurred during Saturday's 10 a.m. concert. Up to that point, the musical repertory had not so much as cracked a grin. That all changed when Kulisic strode onstage with her accordion and delivered every wisecrack, goofball reference, and knowing wink contained within John Zorn's 1985 "beep-beep" looney tune, *Road Runner*. It was a performance that hit like a sledgehammer to the head of Wile E. Coyote, creating another Ojai moment.

With the floodgates open, the performance of Missy Mazzoli's *Dark With Excessive Bright* that followed offered an intriguing fusion of Baroque and contemporary vocabularies, expertly performed by double bassist Rick Stotijn and members of the MCO conducted by principal clarinet Vicente Alberola. The concert ended with a reeling performance of John Adams's *Shaker Loops* that made a clarion statement as to why minimalism's counterrevolution to atonality was so embraced by audiences.

The quirkiest Ojai moment occurred Saturday night, after the scheduled concert. A group of musicians from the orchestra and two Ojai staffers got together at Sam's Place for a pop-up jamboree of music by Johnny Cash, Tom Waits, and Iggy Pop. Word got out, and soon 200 people packed the bar, more dancing outside in the arcade as the musicians rocked through their impromptu set, accompanied by screams and sing-alongs.

Ojai 2024 set out to explore multiple musical paths and to draw connections between them. In this respect, the festival was remarkably successful. It showcased Uchida's artistry by drawing parallels between Mozart and Schoenberg and Kenney's virtuosity in connecting Bach with contemporary composers. And it even added an element of postmodern pastiche, in the process introducing us all to Kulisic.

Next year, the Ojai Festival will feature flutist Claire Chase as music director, along with contributions from composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir and conductor and percussionist Steven Schick. Expect something completely different.

[Ojai 2024 Combines Classic and Contemporary Like Never Before | San Francisco Classical Voice \(sfcv.org\)](https://www.sfcv.org)

Sequenza 21/

Ojai Music Festival – Saturday, June 8, 2024

By Paul Muller JUN 23, 2024

Saturday June 8, 2024 in Ojai began with an overcast sky and cool breezes, but this did not prevent a good size crowd from filling the Libbey bowl for the 10:00 AM concert. Works by three contemporary composers were featured: John Zorn, Missy Mazzoli and John Adams.

Accordianist Ljubinka Kulisic opened the concert with *Road Runner*, by John Zorn. Ms. Kulisic is from Bosnia-Hertzevina and received her DMA from the University of Toronto in Canada. I admit to harboring a certain skepticism about this piece; music for solo accordion would seem to belong in a different cultural orbit. Using a sort of musical jiu-jitsu, however, John Zorn, together with the talented Ms. Kulisic, have leveraged accordion cliches, snatches of familiar tunes and an impressive array of extended techniques to conjure an entertaining and dazzling tour de force from this unlikely instrument.

Road Runner opens with a rapid series short quotes from popular music, cartoons and other sources quickly followed by the crashing of great cluster chords, insanely rapid scales and all sorts of physical effects that leave the listener breathless. The recognizably musical phrases lull the brain into complacency and then a booming outburst thoroughly scrambles the context. The cycle then repeats and this process results – counter intuitively – in listening more closely. The listener is trying to make sense of all the sounds together and not just the familiar ones. This required virtuosic playing by Ms. Kulisic who delivered an amazing performance and received enthusiastic applause for her efforts.

Dark with Excessive Bright, by Missy Mazzoli followed, performed by musicians of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. Rick Stotijn was the double bass soloist with Vincente Alberola conducting. Inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the program notes state that: "While loosely based in Baroque idioms, this piece slips between string techniques from several centuries all while twisting a pattern of repeated chords beyond recognition."

Dark with Excessive Bright opens with a strong tutti statement accompanied by a solemn bass solo. There is a slightly sad feeling to this as the strings crescendo then give way to another stretch of bass solo. The deep, rich sounds add a powerfully expressive dimension to what is essentially a double bass concerto. The string orchestra weaves in and out of the foreground as the solo bass makes its mournful journey, and this alternating pattern continues throughout the piece. There are occasional stretches of rapid rhythms in the solos that never drag; a credit to Stotijn and his agile handling of the double bass. Long, slow sustained tones, bring this piece to a satisfying conclusion. *Dark with Excessive Bright* meets *Paradise Lost* on its own weighty terms with artful musical success.

The final work on the program was the minimalist classic *Shaker Loops*, by John Adams. This was scored for three violins, a viola, two cellos and a double bass, played by the musicians of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. This began with a soft but clean opening in the violins with the other strings entering in turn. The tempo was precise and each of the shimmering layers of the first movement were clearly articulated. The texture gradually

built into a lovely trembling swirl that perfectly evokes the spiritual ecstasy of the Shaker sect. The second movement, “Hymning SLEWS” was a complete contrast, with long sustained tones and just a slight undercurrent of excitement. This was nicely balanced and very expressive with skillful control of the quiet dynamics. The high, accented tones in this movement by the violin were especially effective. After a short transition, movement 3 “Loops and Verses” edged back into the lively groove of the opening. Low growling tones from the bass added an impressive element of power. The upper strings floated long sustained tones above the active counterpoint in the lower parts and this gathered into a driving pulse with an increased tempo and beautiful harmonies. The final movement, “A Final Shaking”, was faster still with blizzards of notes coming from all the parts, save the elegant pedal tone heard in the bass. The piece simply stopped at its ending, leaving the audience in a state of silent reflection before bursting into a long standing ovation.

It was good to hear *Shaker Loops* again to appreciate the delicate clarity and subtle dynamics present in this music, as well as the masterful playing of the Mahler Chamber orchestra musicians.

Musicians of the Mahler Chamber orchestra were:

Alexandra Preucil, May Kunstovny, Naomi Peters, violins

Yannick Dondelinger, viola

Stefan Faludi, Christoph Richter, cellos

Naomi Shaham, double bass

[Ojai Music Festival – Saturday, June 8, 2024 \(sequenza21.com\)](https://sequenza21.com)