



Julia Bullock, *soprano*



Ojai Music Festival impressive on opening night

Rita Moran | *Ventura County News* | June 10, 2016



JOSEPH A. GARCIA/THE STAR An audience takes in an afternoon performance at the Ojai Music Festival at Libbey Bowl on Friday.

Ojai Music Festival audiences gather each June with an unspoken expectation: Impress me.

The festival, now in its 70th year, never fails to respond to that anticipation, as it demonstrated once again Thursday night at the opening concert of a weekend of fascinating music planned by this year's music director Peter Sellars.

In an afternoon, on-stage discussion with the evening's featured composer, Finland's Kaija Saariaho, Sellars emphasized that in a "culture of permanent distraction" it was bracing to open the festival with "something that is so tremendously serious."

It is not only Saariaho's work that is gripping, but the entire array of composers on "the front edge" of the next generation that Sellars celebrates. As it happens, most of those brought together for the festival are women, a disparate group with distinctive ideas for the future of music. They, and many of the performers, also represent many countries and multiple continents, brought together to illuminate musical possibilities for the 21st century.

Saariaho's "La Passion de Simone," based on the short life of Simone Weil, an activist Sellars described as the "modern equivalent of Jeremiah," revolves through a "Musical Journey in Fifteen Stations" and is the U.S. premier of the chamber version of Saariaho's densely haunting music.



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The libretto by Amin Maalouf allowed soprano soloist Julia Bullock to draw the audience into Weil's riveting world of protest and despair culminating in her death in 1943 as she refused to eat while others were being starved. She was 34.

The forces gathered to deliver "La Passion" along with Bullock, and Sellars as director, were formidable: ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble), returning to Ojai with its strong and diverse talents; four voices from Roomful of Teeth; and conductor Joana Carneiro, music director of the Berkeley Symphony since 2009, succeeding Kent Nagano, music director at the festival in previous years.

Saariaho's music has an elemental quality of rising organically from its textured base while able to respond to the searing text as Simone's tortured path is passionately portrayed by Bullock as a "sister" of Simone trying to follow, and fathom, her chiaroscuro path. Supporting and accentuating the struggle was an array of lighting effects keyed to the emotional moments. But it was Bullock's exceptional voice and vivid portrayal of the forces Simone battled, in the world and within herself, that held the audience's fascination.

ICE's ensemble, slightly compressed toward one side of the stage but performing with stellar commitment to the emerging waves of sound, and the quartet of Roomful of Teeth singers merged impressively with Bullock's remarkable performance.

Lucky for the rest of the festival audiences, Bullock, ICE and Roomful of Teeth will be seen and heard again, along with more works by Saariaho and others including Caroline Shaw, Carla Kihlstedt, Dina el Wedidi, Leila Adu, Christine Southworth, Du Yun, Aruna Sairam, Tyshawn Sorey and Claude Vivier, among others.

If most of those names sound like women to you, and of diverse origins, you'll understand the musical world that Sellars plans to introduce to audiences during the rest of the concerts and events. This is the Ojai Musical Festival: Fasten your seat belts.