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## Cabrillo Music Festival, Santa Cruz, California

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In California, summer music festivals come in several sizes and with varied artistic aspirations. For populist grandeur, the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles offers crowd-pleasing, electronically enhanced, anything-goes entertainment from Beethoven to the Beastie Boys, while, up in the wine country, the Festival del Sole lays out star-studded banquets of digestible popular classics along with gourmet fare. But to absorb the essence of the state's musical culture, one must seek out the smaller, more focused festivals, in which the new (or newish) command attention. In the south, Ojai's revolving artistic direction makes every June a month of al fresco discoveries. And in the surf mecca of Santa Cruz, 75 miles south of San Francisco, the **Cabrillo Festival** has made the contemporary repertoire sound urgent, indispensable and even sexy.

So it has gone for 47 years. Rarely has any big festival been launched with less *réclame* than Cabrillo, founded in a coffee house a few miles down the coast. The looming personality of those early years was the composer Lou Harrison, a local resident whose individualistic journey through contemporary music, his embracing of Asian modes and sonorities, has proved startlingly prophetic. The festival's music directors have been few and all have pursued adventurous paths. Gerhard Samuel was succeeded by the esteemed Mexican composer Carlos Chávez. The peripatetic Dennis Russell Davies made Cabrillo his western outpost until Marin Alsop arrived in 1992.



Rhapsodic: Alisa Weilerstein

Cabrillo wisely tapped the conductor long before her affiliations with orchestras in Bournemouth and Baltimore. She perennially conjures miracles from a 77-member orchestra, which assembles from all over the land for a few weeks every summer. Alsop has adhered to the festival's contemporary regimen (more than 300 premieres since its inception), while promoting her own repertory predilections. More important, she has fostered the participation of the composers through panels, pre- and post-concert talks and a remarkable series of conductor/composer workshops.

In spite of its international orientation, Cabrillo has always seemed attuned to the local community and Alsop has brought to the task a personable, witty quality that suggests a lifetime appointment if she so desires. But some observers have noted that her populist inclination can lead to such dubious prospects as a Grateful Dead Symphony (No 6, no less), surely programmed not so much for the delectation of visiting critics as for the ageing Deadheads who, reportedly, have found refuge in the hills and on the beaches of Santa Cruz County.



Pounding: Galen Lemmon

Meatier fare awaited patrons of the festival's opening concerts. Osvaldo Golijov's uncategorisable *Azul*, in its revised version, simply beguiled. The Argentine-born composer mines Indian ragas, finds inspiration in baroque forms and the poetry of Neruda and conjures sonorities that seem both to hover in the air and pierce the heart. Cellist Alisa Weilerstein has succeeded Yo-Yo Ma as this work's prime interpreter; her collaboration with hyper-accordionist

Michael Ward-Bergeman and percussionists Jamey Haddad and Cyro Baptista, both rhapsodic and visceral, set the standard for the festival.

Brett Dean came from Australia to introduce his *Amphitheatre*, a short, brooding essay for massive orchestra that generates terrific energy from an oscillating chord change and trumpet fanfares. The work commands attention for its textures and suggestion of great amplitude within a confined space. Dean's *Moments of Bliss*, heard on the second programme, is a more ambitious prospect, a suite of material that will be incorporated into the composer's forthcoming, Peter Carey-inspired opera. Electronics spice the huge orchestral palette; we hear dogs barking and snatches of game show repartee; the instrumental scoring, especially for a Fainer-like contrabassoon, is striking. The mood contrasts thrill, but the score is conspicuously lacking in any suggestion of the singing line that defines the operatic form.

The finale of Avner Dorfman's *Spices, Perfumes, Toxins!* emerged as the festival's great applause machine, as the two superb percussionists Steve Hearn and Galen Lemmon pounded on their huge arsenal and the orchestra struggled to match their virtuosity. The best

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part of this multicultural mash-up is the evocative middle movement, where a jazz-influenced bass line complements a sinuous flute trio, while the percussionists burble along in imitation of Bachian counterpoint.

For a programme opener, Enrico Chapela's *inguesu*, a musical evocation of a historic Mexican-Brazilian football game, in which the musicians are assigned positions on the teams, proved an ideal opener for a free-wheeling festival. But the world premiere of Dave Heath's interminable 1985 *Rise from the Dark*, which cites Miles Davis and John Coltrane as influences without incorporating their obsessive genius, seemed a case of too much, too late. ★★★★★☆

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