

OJAI AT BERKELEY 2018

**OPENING EARS
AND MINDS:
PATRICIA
KOPATCHINSKAJA
COMES TO
CALIFORNIA**

by Thomas May

PHOTO BY MARCO BORGGRAVE



Matters of technical proficiency are well accounted for in the arsenal of words that critics have at their disposal to describe what sets a musician apart. What is sorely lacking is a vocabulary that can do justice to the kind of holistic and visionary perspective that characterizes Patricia Kopatchinskaja.

In addition to her formidable gifts as a violinist, this is a virtuosa of emotional musical intelligence who refuses to get stuck in endless replays of familiar concert rituals—in using classics as comfort food. And that makes Kopatchinskaja an ideal match for the independent spirit that reigns at the Ojai Music Festival. As music director of this 72nd year of Ojai, she has planned a far-reaching and provocative series of programs that will serve as the basis for the festival’s Northern California edition, **Ojai at Berkeley**, which takes place between Thursday, June 14, and Saturday, June 16.

Passionately concerned about such issues as climate change, Kopatchinskaja is an artist convinced that music is no luxury but a necessity in a time of great need. A key to tapping into that function is her call to move beyond routine patterns of music-making and exchange between musicians and audiences. The Ojai ethos is therefore especially encouraging, in Kopatchinskaja’s view, for the open-minded concert experience she is intent on sharing. “I would be happy if audiences everywhere would be as open as in Ojai,” she says. “And I am thrilled to come to Berkeley, one of the bastions of thinking and science.”

Kopatchinskaja’s unique personality as a violinist will naturally take center stage. Her versatility ranges from the untrammelled excitement of folk music to the lyrical majesty of Beethoven and the dizzying complexities of György Ligeti (in their respective violin concertos). But that’s merely one side of Kopatchinskaja’s artistry. Ojai at Berkeley will additionally present her work as a musical thinker—in the semi-staged *Bye Bye Beethoven*, which she conceived as an examination of “the irrelevance of the classic concert routine for our present life”—and as a curator of and advocate for contemporary voices with a program devoted to music by the American composer Michael Hersch (who will also perform at the keyboard). Joining Kopatchinskaja for these programs presented by Cal Performances will be the Berlin-based Mahler Chamber Orchestra (founded by the late Claudio Abbado and making its Bay Area debut as part of its first extended residency in the United States), sopranos Ah Young Hong and Kiera Duffy, pianists Amy Yang and Michael Hersch, saxophonist Gary Louie, and her parents Viktor and Emilia Kopatchinsky, both of whom are well-known folk musicians in their own right.

Reimagining the Concert Routine

It was into this intensely musical family that Patricia Kopatchinskaja was born in 1977, in Chişinău, the capital of Moldova, a tiny, Eastern European country that was at the time part of the Soviet Union. At the age of six she began playing the violin, inspired by the fact that this was the instrument of her mother and sister. The family moved to Vienna in 1989, where she continued her studies until relocating to Bern at the age of 21; today, Switzerland is her home base. Kopatchinskaja’s love of spontaneity is reflected in the refreshingly unpredictable demeanor she projects onstage, typically playing barefoot and weaving wildly inventive and far-ranging cadenzas into the most familiar concertos of the repertoire. “Even a caricature is much more individual than a copy,” she has stated. “I appreciate it much more if a performer exceeds the limits and has taken a risk than when someone is trying to please everyone.”





Patricia Kopatchinskaja

MARC BECKMANN

“Patricia makes playing the violin appear as effortless as her breathing, as natural as a smile,” says Matias Tarnopolsky, executive and artistic director of Cal Performances. “That’s one aspect I tuned into immediately and find so inspiring about her. Her music-making is completely captivating and real; it removes any barrier between you and the music.” Kopatchinskaja’s residency might also be seen as an eloquent summation of the radically fresh outlook Tarnopolsky has made a signature during his nine years helming Cal Performances. It was only recently announced that Tarnopolsky will step down at the end of June to become president and CEO of the Philadelphia Orchestra Association. One of his major contributions, in fact, was to inaugurate the Berkeley edition of the Ojai Festival—an initiative that reflects Tarnopolsky’s commitment to new music and adventurous programming.

This year Kopatchinskaja and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra won the Grammy Award for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance for their collaboration on *Death & the Maiden*, which juxtaposes Schubert’s pathos-driven quartet (in a version for string orchestra created by Kopatchinskaja) with other musical meditations on death, medieval to modern.

That effort underscores the larger scope of Kopatchinskaja’s self-understanding of her mission. “I never saw myself as a violinist,” she says. “I wanted to be a composer and ended as a musician or, more precisely, as a guardian of ideas, feelings, and emotions.” For example, Kopatchinskaja has developed her thinking about the restraints of the conventional canon into a dramatic concert format for the program that opens Ojai at Berkeley on June 14: *Bye Bye Beethoven*, which blends pieces by J.S. Bach, Haydn, Ives, John Cage, and György Kurtág with Beethoven’s Violin Concerto (along with some other surprises). *Bye Bye Beethoven* represents Kopatchinskaja’s first foray into scenically staging a layered concert experience that considers questions beyond those connected with the specific pieces on the program. It premiered in 2016 at the Hamburg International Music Festival and is being presented for the first time in the United States at Ojai and Berkeley.

According to Kopatchinskaja, “the concert routine around the world is so absurd,” continually replaying the same icons “with not very much imagination relevant to our time.” *Bye Bye Beethoven* dramatizes her concern “about petrified traditions. I don’t think Beethoven would be happy to know that in the future his music would take so much space.”

It's not iconoclasm—ultimately, a Puritan approach—but rather a wittily inventive transformation of perceptions that motivates *Bye Bye Beethoven*.

The mirage of “perfection,” in particular, is a *bête noire*: “To me one cannot play violin like being on an assembly belt, learning scales, arpeggios, legato, staccato, piano, forte, crescendo to perfection. In the end [musicians who do so] can turn on the ‘international high-class standard sound’ under any circumstance, as simply as turning a water tap.” It’s a short-sighted dead end that unfortunately sets the guidelines too often in the competitions that determine career paths: “[The] judges look at the performance with a microscope, and the most perfect wins. But in fact all are more or less perfect, like Cadillacs coming from the assembly line, one as unsurprising as the other. And being able to produce these perfect sounds says nothing about understanding. Amateurs often have more understanding than such highly polished professionals.”

Kopatchinskaja clarifies her understanding of the performer’s responsibility: “Once you have the technique, you have to delve into the meaning behind the notes.” As an example, she cites Haydn’s Double Concerto for Violin and Piano from 1766. “He wrote it when the love of his life took the veil. (He then had an unhappy marriage with her sister.) What touching love and what pain and despair is in this simple music. And who could be the lady, is it the violin? And is the piano Haydn himself? You understand that you do not have to play notes but emotions. The composer’s whole existence was involved in this music, and so should be the performer’s existence and the audience’s.”

Finding Light in the Darkness

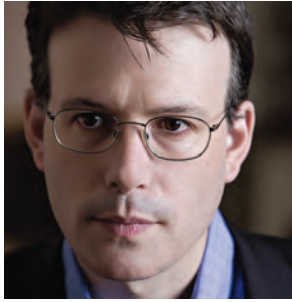
“What makes Patricia Kopatchinskaja such a perfect artist for Berkeley and its vision,” says Tarnopolsky, “is that her programmatic impetus is about work that makes us think differently about the world. You can see this in the ideas she explores and in the endless curiosity about genres and concert presentation, which she is inventing as she interacts

with the audience.” It’s no surprise that she has generated a fair amount of controversy along the way, but Kopatchinskaja expects that pushing her listeners to think outside the mainstream will be embraced by Ojai and Berkeley audiences.

Kopatchinskaja’s interaction with science led to another of her staged concerts, *Dies irae*—introduced during her residency at last summer’s Lucerne Festival—which contemplates the implications of climate change. “Years ago I played a benefit concert for climate projects in Berlin and got acquainted with some of the leading experts on global warming,” she says. “The consensus of these people on both sides of the Atlantic is that biosphere, plants, animals, humans, and civilization are doomed by drought and heat unless drastic action is taken soon... Sitting on such a time bomb, I just cannot go on playing Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms as usual and I have to put this feeling into *Dies irae*.”

While this program is not part of the Berkeley lineup, it reflects a desire to take on very dark themes that also finds expression in the program Kopatchinskaja has curated of music by Michael Hersch (June 15). Born in 1971 in Washington, DC, Hersch is a highly regarded—and highly self-critical—composer who, according to Kopatchinskaja, “completely fits my imagination of the depth and power of music.” She describes his work as “so dark that I’m even a bit afraid of it! This darkness is sometimes something where I can see so much more than in the light.” Hersch has written a Violin Concerto for her and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and at Ojai and Berkeley he will unveil his most recent work: the “dramatic narrative” *I hope we get a chance to visit soon*, a co-commission by Cal Performances, the Ojai Music Festival, the Aldeburgh Festival (a new Ojai partner, beginning this year), and PNReview. Written for two sopranos and chamber ensemble and lasting about 70 minutes, it sets texts by Mary Harris O’Reilly (a close friend of the composer whose early death from cancer he also commemorated in his

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Clockwise from top left: Michael Hersch, Amy Yang, Philipp von Steinaecker, Kiera Duffy, Ah Young Hong

opera *On the Threshold of Winter*), the astronomer and writer Rebecca Elson, and the poet Christopher Middleton. “Michael’s music,” which addresses the most painful aspects of human mortality head-on, “is brutal and vulnerable at the same time,” according to Kopatchinskaja, “and very necessary for our time”—an intimate counterpart to the cosmic/global issues faced in *Dies irae*.

Meanwhile, a modernist classic that also delves into dark themes—written in the aftermath of the First World War—is on the final program: Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du soldat* (*The Soldier’s Tale*), which gives the devil and his details their due. Kopatchinskaja will be the soloist in the Ligeti Concerto on the same program, while Mahler Chamber Orchestra violinist Meesun Hong Coleman will take on the fiendishly prominent solo violin role in the Stravinsky; Philipp von Steinaecker, a founding member of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, conducts.

Doing the Best

At the same time, music of joyful vitality is the engine driving an afternoon program (June 16) focused on the energy of folk music, including in the Moldovan style she grew up learning from her parents. Behind the Iron Curtain, Viktor Kopatchinsky became a star cimbalom player (a hammered dulcimer widespread in Eastern European folk music), despite getting into trouble with Communist authorities. Kopatchinskaja will stress the threads shared by this folk music and imaginative pieces by the Hungarian György Kurtág and the Romanian George Enescu.

“While the *Titanic* is sinking, you still can and should do music as well as you can,” Kopatchinskaja asserts. “Time being limited, one should only do the best. And the Ligeti concerto certainly is one of the best pieces of one of the best composers of all times.” Thus her choice—for the festival’s closing concert on June 16—of the extraordinary violin concerto György Ligeti composed in the early 1990s, one of her signature pieces, on the

concluding program. Kopatchinskaja describes it as “a combination of everything he was searching for. It reminds me of a scientist making different experiments with very old structures and making us hear things that happen at the same time at different speeds.” The critic Arnold Whittall praised her recording of the Ligeti, which won the *Gramophone* Award for Recording of the Year in 2013, as “an account [that] goes for the jugular, projecting the music’s macabre and scintillating mixture of styles and moods with maximum precision as well as maximum virtuosity.”

But it’s that other dimension of virtuosity—her virtuosity of emotion and curiosity—that is bound to make the most lasting impressions this June at Ojai at Berkeley. “From the traditional orchestral canon for the violin—with masterpieces of the 19th and 20th centuries—to folk music to an important compositional voice in America with Michael Hersch,” says Tarnopolsky, “Patricia Kopatchinskaja shows an all-enveloping vision that I am convinced will be greatly meaningful to audiences.”

Thomas May is a writer, critic, educator, and translator. Along with essays regularly commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, the Juilliard School, and other leading institutions, he contributes to the New York Times and Musical America and blogs about the arts at www.memeteria.com.

Patricia Kopatchinskaja



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