

IN THE GROTTO, LOOKING OUTWARD
TOWARD THE COLORADO RIVER



by Edward Reichel

Desert, Rock, River— and Music

Summer festivals typically situate themselves in beautiful surroundings. But Michael Barrett and Leslie Tomkins—founders of the Moab Music Festival in Utah—have taken the music-and-nature connection quite a bit further than most.

The landscape is familiar to anyone who's ever watched a western: miles of desert tinted a dark red by rich mineral deposits and dotted with weird rock formations that seem to rise out of nowhere from the predominantly flat landscape.

The red rock country around Moab in southeastern Utah is one of the most arid and desolate spots in the world, yet also one of the most yet fascinating. Home to several national parks, the region attracts visitors by the thousands.

Hollywood first realized the potential of Moab as a backdrop for its westerns back in the silent era. Later on, many of John Wayne's movies were filmed there. (Even today guests can book the room in the now old but well-kept-up motel in downtown Moab where Wayne used to stay when he was in town.)

Edward Abbey loved this part of Utah. The late renowned writer and environmentalist first arrived in the area in the 1950s to work as a seasonal park ranger. Drawn by its natural beauty he kept returning, eventually buying a house and settling down in Moab. His most famous work, *Desert Solitaire*, paints an irresistible, if somewhat idealistic, portrait of Moab and the outlying area:

This is the most beautiful place on earth. ...Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary. ...For myself, I'll take Moab, Utah. I don't mean the town itself, of course,

VIOLINIST JESSE MILLS
PERFORMS AT MULESHOE
CANYON MUSICAL WALK
BENEFIT.



but the country which surrounds it—the canyonlands. The slickrock desert. The red dust and the burnt cliffs and the lonely sky—all that which lies beyond the end of the roads.

Moab is an out-of-the-way place, where U.S Highway 191 becomes Main Street for a few blocks. The town has a checkered history. A major center for uranium mining, it was a boom town in the first half of the 20th century but ended up being forgotten by the outside world after the uranium deposits petered out and the miners left. But the community slowly began transitioning to a tourist-based economy when offroaders and other adventure seekers discovered it and started coming in droves.

For all its beauty, Moab is not exactly a place where one would expect to find live classical music. Yet, for someone like Abbey, the landscape was teeming with musical associations. Although not a classically trained musician, Abbey felt there was a connection between the desert and the music of certain composers and commented on it in *Desert Solitaire*:

I think of music, and of a musical analogy to what seems to me the unique spirit of desert places... In the desert I am reminded of...men like Berg, Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek, Webern and the American, Elliott Carter. Quite by accident, no doubt, although both Schoenberg and Krenek lived part of their lives in the Southwest, their music comes closest than any

other I know to representing the apartness, the otherness, the strangeness of the desert.

Pianist Michael Barrett and his violist wife, Leslie Tomkins, understood what Abbey was trying to say. They're the ones who finally brought music to Moab in a big way. Every September their Moab Music Festival transforms this town of some five thousand residents into a mecca of chamber music, drawing draws hundreds upon hundreds of visitors from the surrounding states and around the country.

Back in 1990, Barrett's New York Festival of Song was already well established, and he was ready to start a new venture. "It had been our idea to start a festival in the West, and one of the places we were considering was northern Utah," he says. That summer, Barrett had to go to Santa Fe to visit family, and he "decided to do the great tour of the Southwest by car." That was his first time in the southern part of Utah, and he was blown away by what he saw. "The first spot you get to where the real red rock country begins is just outside Moab," he says. "And while I kept driving, I came across a sign for Arches National Monument. I thought to myself, 'Okay, I've got to see this.'" Once past the ranger station, Barrett couldn't believe his eyes. "I said, 'Oh, my gosh! Look at this park!'"

Barrett wanted to see more of the region, so he brought Leslie back with him the following year for a vacation. That decided

things. "When she saw it, she said, 'Let's make our music festival here.'" Serious exploration of the feasibility of establishing a chamber music festival began. "We talked to a lot of different people and reiterated our plans about the festival," Barrett says. "We came up with a budget and set up a core group of board members." The Moab Music Festival kicked off the next summer, 1993, with five events. "The total cost was \$55,000 and we had a balanced budget," Barrett recalls.

Now in its 18th season, the festival has grown steadily. Normally it is held over three weekends, starting with Labor Day weekend; but in 2009 Barrett tried out a two-weekend concept. "It was an interesting experiment running the festival over two long weekends," Barrett said. "We did the same number of events, and everyone was enthusiastic about it, especially the hard-core music junkies."

Almost from the start, the Moab community embraced the festival wholeheartedly. "I'm very proud of how it's turned out," Barrett says. "It started with nothing, just an idea. It's grown organically, its growth has been careful and sensible—and the town has taken ownership of it. They feel like it's theirs."

With so many summer music festivals now sprinkled across the country, it's easy for any one presenter to get lost in the crowd. But what attracts audiences to Moab each September is also what makes this series stand out from many of its competitors. Only one or two concerts take place in Star

Continued on pg 74

BELOW, L TO R: THE WHITE TENT, PITCHED AT RED CLIFFS LODGE; VIOLINISTS EMILY BRUSKIN AND JESSE MILLS, VIOLIST LESLIE TOMKINS AND CELLIST TANYA TOMKINS; OPENING NIGHT 2008; MICHAEL BARRETT AND LESLIE TOMKINS; THE GROTTO.



American Composer

continued from page 15

Sounding like wild oxen is difficult in this medium, but in several places the music ascends to an unearthly calm where the angels undoubtedly abide. A little calmer and more lyrical are Vigeland's Five Nocturnes, for violin, clarinet, and piano of 2000, the first subtitled "Ives and Gershwin Meeting at Westminster Bridge." The final movement opens with a rhythmic strumming of piano strings, over which the other instruments play a jaunty melody in parallel intervals.

Given the lack of recognition of this neo-Feldmanian world and the absence of terminology for it, Vigeland's music is difficult to locate within it, and difficult to describe. It meanders, finds moments of stasis, moves on, sometimes letting complex figurations sink in through repetition, sometimes skipping quickly through motives to complete some transformation. But Vigeland is not mono-stylistic. A choral piece for young singers, *Miracles*, is ecstatic in its racing diatonicism, and he has a more vocally conventional opera on *Jane Eyre*. All of it is thoughtful, detailed, intricate, carefully poised music, pleasurable to follow as it leads you on voyages along horizons whose directions won't be known until it's over.

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College. His latest book is Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice. His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.

Desert, Rock, River—and Music

continued from page 36

Hall, Moab's recently renovated theater that is on the National Register of Historic Places. The rest of the concerts, which usually number around 15, are out in nature, under a big white tent that's a short drive from Moab. "We have many, many different venues around Moab," Barrett says, "and we keep finding new places that we want to use."

September can still be hot in southeastern Utah, with daytime temperatures frequently well above 90 degrees. But once the Sun sets behind the not-too-distant La Sal Mountains and the breeze coming off the Colorado River begins to cool things down, it's hard to imagine being in a more peaceful and inspiring place for chamber music.

Unique to the Moab Music Festival are the grotto concerts. The grotto is about thirty miles downriver from town; and concertgoers, musicians and instruments are transported there on large jet boats on the Colorado River. "It's our magical grotto," Barrett says. They've done some fifty of these concerts so far, and they've never had a casualty or lost a piano. "It's a very safe trip with experienced jet boat operators. There are no white water rapids on that stretch of the river."

These concerts are benefits for the festival and they offer the audience a novel musical experience. Just an easy walk from the river, the grotto boasts exceptional acoustics, according to Barrett. "There is no extraneous noise and the silence in there is amazing. You think to yourself, 'So this is what silence is really like.'"

But performing in there can be difficult, Tomkins says. "On more than one occasion I've called it 'extreme chamber music.'" Not only can the sand and constant breeze create problems, but the extremely dry conditions can wreak havoc on the instruments. "And of course there's no green room where we can warm up. We just stand up and go on and perform. But it's all worthwhile because you can't beat the natural beauty of the setting. It influences all of us, performers and audience, in a profound way."

Unconventional venues for concerts are part and parcel of the Moab experience. Popular events are the so called "Musical

Walks," which combine a concert with an easy hike. A small group of participants is bused to a spot a few miles from town; from there, they hike along marked trails, stopping at several places along the way for short performances. "This has been a really popular event," Barrett said.

And for those who want to mix their classical music with a more rugged outdoor experience, Barrett and Tomkins have something more adventurous: a four-day raft trip down the Colorado River with a concert at each overnight stop. The return trip to Moab is by plane. "This is absolutely spectacular," says Barrett. The outing is limited to 15 participants, along with a crew and a small group of musicians. "We go through the rapids in Cataract Canyon and end up at Lake Powell. There is a concert every night and also while we're floating. It's really a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

As Edward Abbey did almost sixty years ago, Barrett and Tomkins came to see the area as the perfect place to marry music and nature. "It was just one of those things," Barrett said. "The idea of having a festival in a place like that just puts everything in harmony and alignment." And with most of the performances taking place out of doors, the festival stays true to its mission statement: "In concert with the landscape."

For people who have never been to southeastern Utah, "once-in-a-lifetime" is a good way to describe it. And for everyone who loves chamber music, the description is even more apropos. There really isn't a better place where music and nature can come together so congenially. It's as if this was always meant to be. Abbey really did get it right. The desert around Moab begs for music. It demands it. And with the Moab Music Festival, music has at long last become a permanent fixture in the desert. Abbey would be pleased.

Edward Reichel, who holds a doctorate in composition from the University of California at Santa Barbara, is the music critic of the Deseret News in Salt Lake City, Utah.