

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // GARCHIK

Understanding Wittgenstein not necessary for pleasure of art

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“Wittgenstein’s Garden,” a Doug Hall work at the Oliver Ranch.

Photo: Leah Garchik / The Chronicle

Knowing little about **Wittgenstein** other than to pronounce its “w” as a “v,” and that his loose job description was “philosopher,” we studied up while driving to Geyserville the other day. The destination was the Oliver Ranch, a 100-acre former sheep ranch that’s an outdoor museum for 19 site-specific works commissioned by **Steve** and **Nancy Oliver**. The occasion was a first viewing of/listening to “Wittgenstein’s Garden,” a new work by **Doug Hall** “and his collaborators,” said the invitation (because Hall is the kind of guy who’d insist on sharing credit).

En route research revealed that Wittgenstein was Austrian-born, taught at Cambridge University, and was focused on logic and philosophies of mathematics, thinking and language.

Also that, as a young teacher, he hit his students for making math mistakes. (You can't trust Wikipedia; this entry may have been written by a jealous rival.)

Anyway, thus (hardly) prepared, we — in a party of 50 or so art lovers — were welcomed by Steve Oliver and the artist, who explained how the still-unseen and unheard work came about. He'd been moved by Wittgenstein's one book, "Tractatus," said Hall, since reading it in high school. "I didn't understand it," he said. "I still don't." I think I wasn't the only one who breathed a sigh of relief.

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We were to be bused up the hillside to the garden, a site we would reach by climbing a short set of stairs carved into the slope. On those stairs, we might be able to hear soft voices. At the top, we'd be in a flat area, where we could hear members of the San Francisco Girls Chorus, 36 girls in unison and four soloists, rhythmically whispering and reciting portions of the book.

As had been described, a soft-voiced chorus — "wow, wow, wow" — seemed to be wafting around us on the steps. To our left, fern fronds quivered. (I wondered whether that was from sound vibrations, but project producer **Starr Sutherland** said afterward it was probably the breeze).

We arrayed ourselves on benches around a plateau encircled by oaks, and the piece began, words flitting by and bouncing off the stones and trees:

"The world is the totality of facts ... The facts are in a logical space. ... Language disguises thought. ... What can be shown cannot be said." The drone of a plane flying overhead melted into the performance. "The limits of language are the limits of the world. Logic pervades the world." The sound of one bird chirping, and then another's tweet, seasoned the phrases. "It's not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists." The piece was over when the word "Silence" was intoned.

"Yay! It worked!" yelled Hall.

The bedazzled art lovers paused, then clapped. Finally, reluctant to leave, we were herded back onto the bus to return to reality. What that is is a question best left to Wittgenstein.

P.S. Credit where credit is due goes to some of those collaborators (in addition to Sutherland): sound designer **Jim McKee** with **Jeremiah Moore**; the San Francisco Girls Chorus led by **Lisa Bielawa** and **Valerie Sainte-Agathe**; landscape architect **Andrea Cochran** with **Hope Hardesty**; sound by **Perrin Meyer** of Meyer Sound.

Later that night, in a different but equally amazing universe, **Nicola Miner** and **Robert Mailer Anderson** opened their house to SFJazz fans and music lovers, for a goodbye party for **Miguel Zenón**, who is leaving the SFJazz Collective.

There were cocktails and music, dancing and more dancing — the honoree's 6-year-old daughter fluttering her gold-sequined skirt, her parents intertwined to the beat — and food of Zenón's native Puerto Rico. Jazz lover/countryman **Orlando Cepeda** chatted with guests, seemingly well recovered from his medical issues.

Zenón, an approachable nice guy, is not only a MacArthur Fellowship winner and jazz superstar but also the leader of the MIT Jazz Ensemble. During a forthcoming gig as artist in residence at the Conservatory of Music in Puerto Rico, he's bringing a group of MIT students to work with the young music students on math and science.

That's a serious project, mentioned only to a reporter on a night that was about having a good time. Infected with the sound of **Hector Lugo** and his band, La Mixta Criolla, we left the party sashaying to the beat. "Take it with you," said someone, as we headed to the sidewalk. Zenón seems to do that wherever he goes.

PUBLIC EAVESDROPPING

"OK, I've been a really good sport about seeing all the art. Now, we're going to the cafe."

Mother to son of 10 or so, overheard at the Metropolitan Museum in New York by Rob Hurwitt

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