

THE HIGHS

A GUIDE TO THE BEST OF THE FEST

The Great Passion

Friday June 25, 7 pm

Festival chorus and orchestra. Bach *St. Matthew Passion* with Gächinger Kantorei-Stuttgart; Kirsten Blase, soprano; Ingeborg Danz, alto; Lothar Odinius, tenor/Evangelist; Sebastian Noack, bass/Christus; Sanford Sylvan, bass; Helmuth Rilling conductor (Silva Concert Hall, Hult).

The Bach Festival's bread and butter is the master's mighty choral-orchestral works, and the *St. Matthew Passion* is perhaps the most moving of all. Because they require such massive forces, chances to see them around here are rare — especially performed with such deep understanding and aplomb. Helmuth Rilling has been studying and conducting these works for more than three decades with his own choirs on two continents, and this will be the first time his two groups have ever performed together, so this is a great opportunity to see a masterwork performed by the masters. Although Rilling tends to take a devotional view of this music, its dramatic power shouldn't be ignored; the score teems with subtle, brilliant effects that represent the actions of the characters in the Christian myth of Jesus's crucifixion. (No, Mel Gibson's version doesn't come close.) The arias contain some of the most passionately moving music ever composed, and the massive choral orchestral forces allied with Bach's compositional genius make this one of music's most powerful creations.

Bach to the Baroque

Sunday June 27, 4 pm

Festival chamber orchestra. A Baroque Suite and Concertos: Bach *Orchestral Suite III*, *Concerto for Two Violins* (Kathleen Lenski and Elizabeth Baker); *Albinoni Oboe Concerto* (Ingo Goritzki); *Neruda Concerto for Corno da Caccia* (Guy Few). (Silva)

Though Bach never left Germany, he drew on musical influences from throughout Europe. Everyone knows the poignant "Air" from his third orchestral suite, but the peppier movements, also based on French dances, are just as powerful. Bach's brilliant double violin concerto bears the influence of his admired colleague, Vivaldi, and other Italian violin virtuosos of the period, but reaches new depths of expression, particularly in the interweaving lines of the slow movement. Vivaldi's influence is also manifest in little known composer Johann Neruda's concerto, whose solos will be played by the fine trumpeter Guy Few on a specially reconstructed Baroque instrument. The concert also features music by an actual Italian, Tomaso Albinoni. His under-appreciated concerti are some of the most tuneful and buoyant in Baroque music. Nice to see the festival going beyond Bach in the Baroque.

A Musical Garden

Monday June 28, 8 pm

Intimate Evenings "A Tai Ji Musical Offering." Works by Bach and Takemitsu; Chungliang Al Huang; Lorna McGhee, flute; Heidi Krutzen, harp; David Harding, viola (Soreng).

For the past few years, dancer and teacher Al Huang has created a surprisingly apropos synthesis of tai ji movement and Bach's music that has been one of the Festival's most popular (read: sold out) offerings. As in dance, he gives a physical expression to music that some regard as essentially intellectual. This concert opens with three elegant chamber works by Bach, but this installment looks even more attractive than its predeces-



sors, as it presents flute music of one of the greatest 20th century composers, Toru Takemitsu, whose own melding of Western and Japanese classical traditions produced some of the most original and atmospheric music ever written. Although he was self taught, Takemitsu's influences included Debussy and Duke Ellington, Indonesian gamelan and Japanese gardens, and his admirers ranged from Stravinsky to Cage to Richard Stoltzman. His debt to Debussy, and French music, is evident in "And then I knew was wind," for the combination of flute, viola, and harp for which Debussy wrote so ravishingly, in a famous sonata performed at the festival last year by McGhee and company. Here, as he did so often, Takemitsu uses Western instruments to evoke the textures of traditional Japanese instruments, in this case the shakuhachi bamboo flute.

The concert also includes Takemitsu's gorgeous arrangement of Debussy's friend Erik Satie's "Children of the Stars" for flute and harp, and Takemitsu's final work, a spellbinding "Air" for solo flute extracted from a never-completed flute and harp concerto based on the sculpture of Miro. Takemitsu thought music was a form of prayer, and the floating quality of much of his music, reminiscent of a

breeze rustling a garden's leaves, should provide an evocative backdrop for Huang's flowing movements.

Huang will present an interactive tai ji demonstration the next day at noon at the Hult's Studio One.

Mozart's Mighty Winds

Tuesday June 29, 8 pm

Intimate Evenings Mozart Quintet and Serenade; Robert Levin and Festival Wind Ensemble (Beall).

The eminent scholar and performer Robert Levin has become a regular contributor to the Bach Festival. His traversals of Mozart's piano concertos are among the finest on period instruments, and demonstrate a deep understanding of Mozart's world and style. In this concert in the ideally intimate setting of Beall Hall, Levin will lead a performance of a work that's smaller in scale than the concertos, but no less powerful: Mozart's brilliant quintet for piano and winds, which the composer regarded as one of his own finest achievements. Bursting

with Mozart's high spirits and memorable tunes, this is one of the great chamber music works.

Mozart's colorful *Serenade*, one of several large works he composed for wind ensemble, reaches almost orchestral proportions in its clever combinations of various wind instruments. The original performance involved the famous clarinetist for whom Mozart wrote his great clarinet concerto, and this tune-drenched serenade is much more ambitious than some of the other party music for winds common in 18th century Vienna. Both works should sound splendid in Beall Hall.

Don't Call it Crossover

Wednesday June 30, 8 pm

Thomas Quasthoff's American Songbook. Swing, bebop, and standards with Rick Todd, Gabriel Kahane, Alan Tarpinian, and Forrest Moyer (Silva).

Surely one of the greatest revelations of the Bach Festival was Thomas Quasthoff's surprise performance a few years ago of jazz standards. While most classical crossover efforts — especially any that include "Danny Boy" — are cause for acute indigestion, Quasthoff

revealed that he's as sensitive to Sinatra as to Schubert. What many of his classical fans didn't know was that Quasthoff used to be a jazz radio announcer and knew American popular styles inside out. You never got the sense that he was slumping or condescending or stiff; instead, Quasthoff put his magnificent instrument in the service of some great pop songs, and revealed an appropriate rhythmic flexibility that's alien to so many classically trained performers. And of course his enormously expressive singing brought out the pathos of these great lyrics without ever descending into Romantic bathos or bombast. This should be one of the highlights of the festival.

A Requiem for Amadeus

Friday, July 2, 8 pm

Festival chorus and orchestra Mozart Requiem and Mendelssohn *Psalm 42*; Soloists Elizabeth Keusch, soprano; Ingeborg Danz, alto; Lothar Odinius, tenor; Sanford Sylvan, bass; Helmuth Rilling conductor. (Silva).

The Bach-Mendelssohn connection runs strong and deep; the younger man found great inspiration in the music of his fellow Leipziger. Mozart's unfinished Requiem is one of music's most powerful choral statements, and Rilling early on recognized the superiority of Robert Levin's completion of it to all other versions, debuting it at the Bach Festival in 1991. The fact that Mozart probably realized that he was penning his own elegy lends even greater emotional punch to an already exquisitely moving masterpiece. Levin, probably the world's expert in this great work, will be here to help us understand its mysteries and mastery; he's presenting the Discovery Series explication-performance earlier this week. And the soloists are some of the world's finest. The bass Sanford Sylvan — best known for his contemporary works, including *Nixon in China* — has proved eminently suitable to older masterworks as well, while Danz and Odinius have impressed festival audiences in the past.

Romantic Vienna

Saturday, July 3, 8 pm

Intimate Evenings. Thomas Quasthoff, Schubert *Die Schöne Müllerin*; Justus Zeyen, piano (Beall; repeat performance July 7).

This concert puts Quasthoff in more familiar territory, surveying one of Schubert's great achievements, a setting of poems about a beautiful miller maid. While, personally, I'd rather hear Brian Wilson sing *Pet Sounds* (or even "Don't Worry Baby" a dozen times) than listen to most Romantic song cycles, more erudite listeners consider this and Schubert's other great "concept album," *The Winter's Journey*, to be the zenith of the Romantic song, and it teems with beguiling melodies. Of course, anything Quasthoff sings is worth hearing, even for Philistines like me. And hearing him in Beall Hall is a memorable experience, which is why they're presenting it twice — tonight and July 7.