

Though the thrill of 2010's 40th anniversary celebration may have worn off, Eugeneans who enjoy the Oregon Bach Festival can't help but be excited about a variety of events at this year's program.

First off, it's CELLO MANIA! See our story on p. 5 but also note that anything that kicks off with Yo-Yo Ma and includes the Portland Cello Project is going to get lovers of the low strings happy — and that's before counting cello hottie Alban Gerhardt, with the Bach and Britten Cello Suites, in the mix.

And then, if you're interested in the women, the festival offers a bit of an olive branch to those often neglected by the classical side of things. Not that you'll see a lot of, or any, women composers, but both Marin Alsop and Monica Huggett, of the Portland Baroque Orchestra, conduct some big works that paint large canvases for famous women. When Alsop isn't covering Joan of Arc or Huggett conducting an opera about Dido, young British conductor Matthew Halls (see story, p. 3) puts together a concert

honoring St. Cecelia, the muse of music. Returning for more family-friendly fare is the Jamie Bernstein-narrated "We Are Women: A Bernstein Cabaret," which includes songs from *West Side Story*, *Candide*, *Peter Pan* and more.

Another former Eugene Symphony music director, Miguel Harth-Bedoya, returns to the town with the Caminos del Inka ensemble; like Yo-Yo Ma, that concert's also sold out. But if you don't mind sitting in the preschool chairs, tickets are still available for the Caminos del Inka children's concert at 11 am on June 25.

This year, the Bach Fest premieres a film series in partnership with the Bijou, and the calendar contains everything from lecture events to the marvelous Discovery Series to an organ concert of Harry Potter-inspired music (true!) and of course the well-known youth choruses, the free On the House performances and much more. This is a year with executive director John Evans' stamp all over it, and it ends with a bang on July 10 as the Bach Fest orchestra and choruses perform the monumental Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

— Suzi Steffen

Superhero, Saint, Believer

MARIN ALSOP CONDUCTS HONEGGER'S "JOAN OF ARC AT THE STAKE" by Suzi Steffen

That's pretty much all one need say in Eugene, where Eugene Symphony fans remember Alsop's tenure (1989-1996) with fondness and great pride. Brett Campbell even wrote (on Tom Manoff's site; read it here: <http://bit.ly/l50WJH>) that "Eugene was a major entrance ramp to a career that's made her the first woman appointed music director of a major American orchestra (Baltimore) and a regular guest conductor of the world's greatest orchestras."

Alsop is also a regular on NPR (<http://n.pr/mpmYKC>), where she sometimes fences adroitly and affectionately with Scott Simon, and the BBC's Radio 3.

But the beloved conductor hasn't made an appearance, ever, with the city's other most famous music-related experience, the Bach Festival. That was all about the timing of the symphony's schedule.

"The Bach Festival has an excellent reputation, and I admire Helmuth tremendously," she says, "but I was never in Eugene in the summer, so I have no preconceptions about the festival at all."

When OBF Executive Director John Evans announced that Alsop would be conducting a large-scale piece at this season's announcement, gasps went up from the faithful audience. That's despite the rarity of the work she picked — French composer Arthur Honegger's "Joan of Arc at the Stake," or "*Jeanne d'arc au bûcher*."

The 1938 part-spoken, semi-staged performance piece/oratorio (the Bach Fest has engaged actors from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival) includes several soloists representing young Joan and her favorite saints, the festival chorus, the festival orchestra, the Schola Cantorum de Venezuela, a children's choir and an electronic instrument called an *ondes Martenot*.

Alsop, who has a history of exploring new or rarely performed music, found her inspiration in a different place for what's now called "The Joan Project" — it premieres in Eugene, at the OBF, but moves to Baltimore, Carnegie Hall and the Barbican in London in 2012 to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the birth of Joan of Arc.

"I've always been curious about the piece," she says. When her son started reading about Joan of Arc for school, Alsop's curiosity increased. She began reading more about Joan while thinking about her plans for the 2011-2012 season at Baltimore, where she's music director (and the first woman to head a major U.S. orchestra). That settled it.

"I built my season in Baltimore around the theme of Joan of Arc and revolutionary women, women in leadership positions," Alsop says.

At the same time, the Bach Fest had long wanted to get Alsop on board for a performance. "They very graciously said, 'What would you like to do?' and I put this forward, and they said yes," she says.

"This" isn't just any work. Honegger's score calls for a variety of skills from musicians, choir and actors, not to mention the conductor. Alsop says that all of the different forces involved in the piece will keep her on her toes. "Every conductor has conductor's disease," she says. That's a condition in which experienced conductors start to want larger and larger challenges. "I'm not immune to that," she says somewhat wryly. "I enjoy working with large forces, and this piece has everything in it."

The composer wanted to put something of his time in the piece, not just hearken to the early 15th century. "Honegger was a composer who abhorred elitism," Alsop says. He included folk tunes that people of the time would know, and he added other then-contemporary instruments.

For instance, he replaced the French horns with saxophones to give the score a jazzier sound.

Then there's that *ondes Martenot*, an electronic instrument invented by Maurice Martenot in 1928, the same year as the theremin, also an earlier electronic instrument and with some of that more common instrument's cinematic sound. Alsop notes that Honegger composed a lot for the movies, which also influences his sound. *Ondes Martenot* player Cynthia Millar will come to Eugene for the performance, bringing her own instrument. Alsop says she's looking forward to dealing with the unusual instrument, which she likes a bit more than the theremin.

"With a theremin, you approximate where the pitches are, and it's quite complicated and hard to be accurate," she says. The *ondes Martenot* — which, Alsop says, Radiohead has used in a few songs — has a keyboard and three different speakers, and it's got more accuracy than the theremin. "It's an incredibly cool sound, sort of otherworldly," she says, adding that Honegger uses it for the first time in the score to imitate the howling of a dog.

Claudé's poetic libretto tells Joan's story in flashbacks. She's at the stake, condemned to death by smoke and fire, basically for refusing to wear what was then designated as women's clothing. "That's the most banal sense of threat from a woman, wearing men's clothes," Alsop says. Of course, Joan also said that she was getting her inspiration directly from God and from saints, and no teenage shepherd girl — whether she led an army that beat the English at the end of the Hundred Years War or not — was going to show up the Catholic Church hierarchy like that.

Alsop says that although some things in the work resonate with 21st-century life, that's not why she picked it. "War is a complicated issue, always, and the people who lead these wars are controversial figures," she says. "But ultimately, really, the piece stands on its own. We don't have to engage in a controversial discussion to enjoy the piece."

Though the libretto begins with Joan at the stake, it proceeds inventively and dramatically through the past. Alsop says that it's "almost like a cinematic flashback." Despite the grimness of the opening and final scenes, "Joan of Arc at the Stake" also contains what Alsop describes as "an incredible sense of humor," including jokes about the names of some of the cast.

"It's a wonderful piece that's got tremendous variety," Alsop says, though she also knows from experience (and perhaps from some of her own leadership) that Eugene audiences can go for experiments. "They're very educated, discerning, involved and curious audiences," she says. "I always love coming to Eugene." ♦

