

Appear and Inspire

MATTHEW HALLS MAY BE A "FRUSTRATED SINGER," BUT HE MAKES MUSICIANS SMILE by Suzi Steffen

When Matthew Halls arrived in Colorado in early June to begin rehearsals for the Central City Opera's *Amadigi di Gaula*, a North American premiere of one of Handel's operas, he got lightheaded from the altitude.

He should maybe get used to it.

His home base in London sits at sea level, of course, but this 37-year-old British conductor is now a high-flying Baroque specialist, founder and artistic director of the red-hot England-based Retrospect Ensemble, former artistic director of the King's Consort, accomplished opera conductor and, as his agent's website says, a specialist in all music Germanic.

Add to it that he's an Oxford-educated former cathedral organist, an expert harpsichord player and what he calls a somewhat frustrated singer ("I have a deep desire to still be singing," he says, noting that his instrument isn't quite as strong as he'd like it to be for performance-level singing), and Halls starts to look like what those circling the Bach Festival have said for a while now: He's one of the potential successors to the artistic director position when Helmuth Rilling retires.

Not that anyone wants to push founder and Artistic Director Rilling out, least of all Halls, he says. "The only thing I've heard about [the idea of me as a successor] is from what's been published in the press," he says. "In the short term, my job is to come to Oregon this year and make some exciting musical performances."

Those performances begin with a non-musical gig, a free "Let's Talk" program at noon July 5 at the Hult's Studio space down by the Jacobs Gallery. There, he's set to discuss his July 7 concert, titled "In Praise of St. Cecilia," with music by Henry Purcell, Benjamin Britten and Georg Friedrich Handel.

When he started talking with OBF Executive Director John Evans about conducting a concert at the festival, Halls says, they chatted about the 2011 season theme of In Praise of Women. Halls came up with the idea of combining three specific pieces in a program devoted to St. Cecilia. "They're so contrasted, but they're

dealing with the same subject matter," he says. Evans, originally from Wales, and Halls share a much more vast knowledge of Cecilia works than most U.S. musicians would imagine; it was long the custom in the U.K. for poets and composers to create odes to the third century martyr who became the patron saint of music.

Purcell's "Welcome to all the pleasures" is an ode to Cecilia written to a text by Christopher Fishburn in 1683, when British musicians and the royal court had recently begun public celebrations for her saint's day on Nov. 22 each year. That tradition had not ended when Britten wrote his "Hymn to St. Cecilia," from a poem by W.H. Auden, between 1940 and 1942. Despite the hardship of WWII and the challenge of having the first section of his work confiscated by customs inspectors in N.Y., Britten rewrote and finished the piece, and it premiered on his birthday, St. Cecilia's Day, 1942.

The Handel, possibly the most well known of the St. Cecilia works on this program, comes from 1697 texts by John Dryden. Handel wrote the piece for performance on St. Cecilia's Day, 1739.

That's quite a mix of years and composers (and texts), and Halls enjoys the challenge of the staging. "We'll begin with the Purcell, which uses quite reduced forces, and then move to Britten with a mix — and then to Handel, with everybody but the kitchen sink onstage," he says with a laugh.

The lyrical, musical response to poetry charms Halls as well. "Writing about St. Cecilia, poets have always been so colorful in their language," he says. He's thinking particularly of Britten's musical setting for Auden's words. "If you are a composer setting the text, you're going to have a field day with collages of choral sound worlds," he says.

Despite his experience playing Bach on the keyboard, Halls says that as a conductor, he thinks like a singer. "I love finding the right shapes for the music," he says. "As soon as you start thinking about music vocally, it's different because the keyboard has limited means to shape the dynamic, but things like bowed instruments, oboes

and singers have a massive range of dynamic possibilities."

The July 7 concert starts at 7:30 pm at the Hult. After his talk on July 5, however, Halls also guest conducts one day of the Discovery Series, focusing on Bach Cantata 80, one of Helmuth Rilling's favorites, better known to Protestants, especially Lutherans, in the U.S. as "A mighty Fortress is Our God."

Halls also gives the Portland-area OBF fans a chance to see him at work when he conducts the Handel St. Cecilia again on July 9, as the first part of the final Portland concert, 7:30 pm at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall (aka the Schnitz), which concludes with Rilling conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Despite his travels (the list of European and Asian opera and concert halls he's seen is frighteningly impressive), Halls has never been to Oregon before. He's happy to say good things about the Bach Festival, however. "The singers I've spoken to are unanimous in their praise for what happens at this festival," he says. "They describe it as a melting pot of creativity, academic ideas and performances."

Though he's in Colorado right up through the first half of the Bach Festival, he's looking forward to his arrival in Eugene. "This brings exciting possibilities," he says. "I've heard that it's absolutely wonderful. I can't wait to get there." ♦



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