

The Halls Effect

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR **MATTHEW HALLS**
SOUNDS OFF ON THE FUTURE OF OBF

When Matthew Halls steps to the podium to conduct the Oregon Bach Festival's June 26 opening performance, it will mark the first time since its founding in 1970 that anyone other than founder Helmuth Rilling has directed the annual summer festival. That opening work, Monteverdi's *Vespers* of 1610, commonly regarded as the first Baroque masterpiece, makes an appropriate accession because the 38-year-old British conductor's assumption of the artistic director post signals a generational change.

On the other hand, Halls wants to preserve the best of Rilling's legacy that's still relevant for today's audiences. "I suppose at the centre of my vision lies a very fine balance between preservation on the one hand and growth on the other," he tells me via email.

While much of this year's festival will seem familiar, some of Hall's changes are apparent in the very first week. Whereas Rilling was notorious for his retrograde refusal (almost alone among the most respected contemporary Baroque interpreters) to use instruments and tunings and other touchstones of the historically informed performance movement that's dominated Baroque performance for decades, "this year we have pretty much a bipartite festival," Halls says. "The first week focuses on Baroque (with period instruments) and the second explores the later repertoire." That includes July 1's world premiere of Halls and Dominik Sackmann's reconstruction of Bach's *St. Mark Passion*, which uses a chamber choir and chamber-sized Baroque chorus, rather than the anachronistic megachoirs and orchestras his predecessor preferred.

The June 26 opening performance also signals another Halls initiative: presenting music from before Johann Sebastian Bach's time as well as during and after it. "This year we begin the festival with Monteverdi's great masterpiece the *Vespers*," Halls says, "and this is very much a sign of my commitment to introducing our festival audience to pre-Bach repertoire over the coming years."

Halls also promises to redress another of the festival's major failings. With a few major exceptions (and the biennial Composers Symposium dedicated to music by composers in training), OBF has neglected contemporary music, particularly by American composers, devoting only a tiny percentage of each year's programming to music from here and now.

"I'm not able to go into too much detail at this time, but we are very much aware at the OBF of our responsibility to support living composers," Halls writes. "I've always suggested that Bach is rather like a custodial figure, a fixed point of reference to which we constantly return. His music lies at the heart of everything that we do, but we also have a formidable reputation for exploring and performing choral and symphonic repertoire from later centuries — right through to newly commissioned works. We have the resources to explore Bach AND all that came after — [music that] was influenced and shaped by his music. Personally, I am very keen to support and promote American composers over the coming seasons. This would be an exciting avenue for the festival to explore further."

While listeners naturally focus on the concert programming, Halls, like Rilling, knows that performances are only half of the Bach Festival's mission. "I'm looking to nurture and develop the educational programs that benefit so many people each year and help to introduce new educational initiatives that will ensure that the outreach of the festival is as wide as it possibly can be," he explains. "We have already announced exciting new developments in this sphere — with the introduction this summer of [a new] organ academy, and the pioneering Berwick Orchestral Academy in 2015."

The former, to be led by one of today's great organists, Paul Jacobs, looks back to the festival's origins as a summer school for young organists and conductors, while the latter, a training orchestra for the next generation of historically informed performers — made possible by a \$7.25 million gift from UO alumni Phyllis and Andrew Berwick this spring — both builds on Rilling's educational legacy and updates it for the new era.

In his first year as artistic director, Halls has indeed struck a balance between preservation and growth, past and future. ■

The Oregon Bach Festival runs June 26 to July 13. For more information and a full OBF schedule, visit oregonbachfestival.com.





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