

HIP TO HISTORY

OBF's new Berwick Academy proves historically informed performances are far from old-fashioned

More than a decade ago, in a speech at the Oregon Bach Festival, former *New York Times* classical music critic John Rockwell suggested that OBF bring in historically informed ensembles so audiences could hear how contemporary authentic-practice Baroque performances differed from then-OBF music director Helmuth Rilling's "1950s and '60s interpretations."

Rockwell merely pointed out what most Baroque music aficionados already knew: The Oregon Bach Festival had fallen woefully behind the times. After two generations of exciting discoveries by scholar-performers that radically changed our notion of how the music originally sounded, OBF still clung to anachronistic modern instruments, over-large orchestral and choral forces and compromised modern tunings that made originally lithe, transparent music sound bland and bloated.

Times have changed. This year, the Oregon Bach Festival leaps from the rearward to the vanguard of historically informed performance (HIP) with the advent of its Berwick Academy for Historical Performance, a new educational program for advanced students and young professional musicians from all over North America.

"The musicians who are selected to join the academy every year all specialize in the performance of music from the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods on old instruments, utilizing playing techniques and performance styles inspired by what we know of past traditions," OBF

MATTHEW HALLS



Artistic Director Matthew Halls writes.

After a three-day intensive course led by a faculty of renowned period-practice performers (including Masaaki Suzuki, founder and director of the Bach Collegium Japan, and Monica Huggett, who ran the Juilliard historical performance program and leads Portland Baroque Orchestra), Berwick students perform 18th- and 19th-century music alongside the faculty (in Haydn's Classical-era oratorio *The Creation*) and on their own, in a concert of early Romantic music by Beethoven and Baroque music by Bach.

UO alums Andy and Phyzx Berwick funded the new academy (including free tuition) as well as the festival's (and the academy's) new headquarters building, which

should be built in time for next year's festival.

The new program differs from those at a few other colleges scattered across the country, Halls says, in that it strives to "bring together musicians from all those centers who might not otherwise meet, centralize the study of music from Baroque and later periods and cultivate a sense of networking," he explains. "If you put like-minded, highly talented musicians in a room together long enough, their entrepreneurial spirit kicks in. They start making plans, generating new projects, forming groups."

Halls notes that "a lot of the European ensembles were formed under the European Union Baroque Orchestra," which transformed Halls' own career as a historically informed musician and provided him a model for the Berwick Academy.

By cultivating an appreciation for historical styles and instruments in the upcoming generations of classical musicians, Halls hopes the academy can ultimately help propagate in this country the wonderful profusion of early music ensembles that exist throughout Europe — and to influence even modern instrument performances.

"What you find now if you walk in as guest conductor in Europe, at least half your orchestra have a sense of historical style," Halls says, particularly younger players who grew up performing in those styles. "How do you replicate that on modern instruments? It's a much broader thing — it's not just about the hardware," he adds.

"When historical performance becomes more respected and valued that has broader effects on the whole classical music scene," Halls says. It's the reverse of the festival's pre-Halls approach: historical styles positively informing modern performance, instead of the latter anachronistically deforming the former.

If Halls can do that in what used to be a bastion of musical conservatism in Eugene, who knows? He may succeed in making all of American classical music HIP. — Brett Campbell

FAB FIVE

The must-see events at 2015's Oregon Bach Festival



MASAAKI SUZUKI

PHOTO BY MARCO BORGREVE

It's no easy task picking the top events of OBF, but here's a working list. For a full lineup of events, times, locations and tickets, visit oregonbachfestival.com

***The Seven Deadly Sins*, June 26, Hult Center**

Portland rocker-turned-theater singer Storm Large joins the OBF orchestra to reprise her 2013 star turn (with the Oregon Symphony) in Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's searing 1933 satire, with help from the superb vocal quartet Hudson Shad. Don't worry, you can atone yourself, courtesy of Aaron Copland's ballet score, *Appalachian Spring*, whose 1944 premiere featured Merce Cunningham in that role. Happily, the mostly 20th-century show starts with an overture by one of today's hottest young composers, San Francisco's Mason Bates.

***Passio*, June 28, Beall Concert Hall**

Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's magnificent *Passio* sets the story of Jesus' crucifixion in a more contemplative way than we're used to hearing at the fest, which regularly features J.S. Bach's immortal *Passion* settings. One of the world's greatest living composers, Pärt has had a long and fruitful relationship with the OBF, which commissioned one of his major works two decades ago. Craig Hella Johnson, who leads Austin's superb Conspirare chorus, conducts.

***The Beauty of Baroque*, June 30, Beall Concert Hall**

The festival's new Berwick Academy players and their teachers (some of the world's top historically informed Baroque performers) play some of the Baroque's loveliest chamber music, by J.S. Bach, Zelenka, Vivaldi, Telemann, Geminiani and more. This is Baroque music performed as close as we can come today to the way its composers intended.

Berwick Academy: Suzuki Conducts Bach, July 3, Beall Concert Hall

This concert stars two of the most esteemed leaders of the historically informed performance practice movement: Masaaki Suzuki, founder and director of the Bach Collegium Japan (which made a legendary series of recordings of Bach's cantatas on period instruments) and Monica Huggett, who ran the Juilliard historical performance program and leads Portland Baroque Orchestra and other major ensembles. They'll join members of the festival's new Berwick Academy in some of the most celebrated music of the era: one of J.S. Bach's orchestral suites (with a very famous air), one of his Brandenburg Concertos and one of the concertos from Handel's finest set, his *Op. 6*.

Chamber Music Northwest: Mozart and Ralph's Old Records, July 5, Beall Concert Hall

The festival's recent partnership with Portland Baroque Orchestra has enriched its offerings, and this year, it's hooking up again with a Portland partner: the venerable Chamber Music Northwest presenting organization, founded the same year as OBF, which regularly brings some of New York's top classical music performers to its summer series. This show features some of those players in Mozart's *Flute Quartet in D Major* and his magnificent *String Quintet in D Major*, plus a most welcome (and unfortunately too rare) dose of music from here and now: the premiere of a new piece by Portland composer Kenji Bunch, recently returned home after earning a deserved reputation after two decades in New York as one of the finest and most listener-friendly composers of his generation. — Brett Campbell