



y 1829, nearly 80 years after his death, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach had fallen out of fashion. Think of what we were listening to 80 years ago: Bing Crosby, Count Basie and Benny Goodman. (And yes, someday your music will feel tired to your children's children. Deal with it. It's entropy. You're programmed for irrelevance.)

Europe of the early 19th century was an emotive time: a Romantic age in literature and in music. In America, Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson looked beyond past masters like Bach, believing in self-reliance above all else. It sounded passé to the younger generation, standing on the cusp of the Victorian era, the cusp of Empire, Manifest Destiny, industrialization and the kind of *more-means-more* capitalism that made Karl Marx a Marxist.

In 1829, conductor and composer Felix Mendelssohn was just 20 years old and, as often described by scholars, a “hot-headed” kid. The brash youngster was committed to reviving Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Mendelssohn was told it would never work, he was crazy, people would never sit through so much Bach.

It's cold comfort to know that, even then, concert promoters were concerned about the attention span of audiences.

However, Mendelssohn's *St. Matthew Passion* was wildly successful. He performed it again in 1841, and scholars see this as the beginning of the Baroque revival we know today: a direct line to Oregon Bach Festival in Eugene, Oregon, nearly two centuries later.

I'm a 40-something rock music writer in Eugene, not a Bach expert. That's why *Eugene Weekly* asked me to go to three concerts at this year's Oregon Bach Festival and write about what I heard. Does J.S. Bach still have a pulse for non-specialists in 2017?

Back to Basics

I'm thinking of Mendelssohn as I prepare to take in OBF's *St. Matthew Passion* at University of Oregon's Beall Hall, the opening performance of the 2017 season. To me, Mendelssohn is a Bob Dylan figure, one who in his time made “older music” — country blues and folk — relevant to younger generations: incendiary for its traditionalism and goosed-up with an edge of brash and youthful irreverence.

The story of Mendelssohn's *St. Matthew Passion* seemed not entirely unlike Dylan plugging in at Newport. This parallel piqued my brain, raised on rock 'n' roll.

OBF, like many other classical festivals and ensembles around the world, has a renewed interest in what Baroque music sounded like before Mendelssohn's generation got its hands on it.

The new Bach fest wants to perform Bach and other Baroque composers' works on authentic instruments: wooden flutes, for example, and harpsichords instead of pianos, gut-string violins as opposed to steel or nylon strings — instruments meant for churches and other smaller spaces.

Just as Mendelssohn hoped to make Bach relevant to his generation, OBF hopes to make the Baroque relevant to audiences now.

But unlike how some current productions of Shakespeare — another artist whose vision is shaded for us by the values of the Victorians — aim to broaden Shakespeare by bringing forward modern themes of gender, race and sexual orientation, OBF hopes to revitalize Bach in reverse, stripping back time to get at the heart of Bach's music and the age in which he wrote.

In other words, at OBF '17 you won't hear a rapper or sampled beats. (That's been tried before here, with mixed results.)

I asked OBF Executive Director Janelle McCoy: “What exactly about traditional music of the early 18th century resonates with now?” The answer, she says, begins with rock shows ... sort of.

“You'll hear the instruments that would've been used around that time,” McCoy explains, adding that they produce a sound closer to what Bach heard in his head at

the time of the writing. “A little more mellow,” she says. “The modern instruments, they're brighter. You'll find when you're hearing it in period you'll hear inner voicings that you've never heard before.”

Most modern music fans, like me, are used to an immediacy in what they hear — the closeness between audience and performer at a club. This was also true in Bach's time, before the age of the grand concert hall, and it's this connection OBF hopes to recreate.

I'm a Bach beginner. My father has credits toward a Ph.D. in classical music from UO. He told me when I was a teen that there wasn't much music outside of Bach worth listening to: Bach wrote it all first. Naturally I rejected that notion.

I was raised with a baseline familiarity with classical, but felt most at home at record stores and at rock shows with all their attendant misfits and reprobates. I was glad to hear McCoy say OBF hoped to reinject some of this heat back into the Baroque equation.

Here's McCoy: “Classical music started in people's living rooms and salons. That's why they call it chamber music; the word ‘chamber,’ from the French ‘*chambre*,’ means bedroom. There is this spirit in classical music that is much more populist. This is a way of paying homage to that chamber experience.”

St. Matthew Passion

The *St. Matthew Passion* tells the story of events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is thought to have been first performed on Good Friday sometime between 1727 and 1729 at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, where Bach served as musical director of the resident boys' choir.

Besides what we know about the instruments it was performed on, what do we know about how *St. Matthew Passion* sounded? The answer is: not much. But we can speculate that it was solemn. *St. Matthew Passion* is, after all, a timeless ode to suffering — visceral suffering, blood, nails, persecution — as means of salvation. Fun stuff.

Bach's audiences were poor and faithful, so hungry for a sermon it's thought they sometimes attended several services in one day. OBF's real masterstroke in recreating this atmosphere was staging *St. Matthew Passion* at Beall Hall, built in 1921 and itself a church-like venue, with a towering pipe organ.

But there was an elephant in the room, and that elephant was an empty Hult Center in downtown Eugene, a facility built in part to house the Oregon Bach Festival. OBF hasn't completely abandoned the Hult, but premiering the season at the smaller Beall Hall (520 seats, compared to 2,450 in the Hult's Silva Hall) brought to mind news reports of declining ticket sales and eroding audiences, whether period-style calls for a smaller venue or not.

OBF's performance also featured a last-minute conductor change, as artistic director Matthew Halls was called away for his first child's birth in Toronto. I understand some audience members were ruffled by this, but I'm not sure I'm versed enough to know the effect a conductor change can have on a classical performance.

Overall, the audience, like most audiences at classical music these days, was, shall we say — *seasoned* — with a median age well above that of the performers. This, of course, doesn't matter, except as a sign that classical music fans are aging at a rate incongruous with the age range of those interested in mastering its performance — a conundrum that will need to be solved to keep such performances financially viable.

As mentioned earlier, the period instruments are softer, woody, their tones more rounded, folksy — and I wondered if there was a different direction for performers to move than one might expect from classical ensembles. From their chairs and in standing positions, they flowed as if the music was a tide and they were reeds underwater.

Our holy music stomps like gospel, and while *St. Matthew* is far from fevered, this physicality added a sense that faith, at best, should be a full-body experience. You could see Peter Harvey (baritone, Jesus) and Charles Daniels (tenor, Evangelist) prep like boxers in their corners, and the wind instrumentalists occasionally lick their lips, eyebrows raised after a particularly difficult phrase in a “whew, that was a close one” expression.