

A FOGGY FUTURE FOR THE BACH FESTIVAL

As 2017 comes to a close, there's still no explanation of Matthew Halls' firing

Driving to work on these foggy winter days, I like to listen to Bach. His clean, cerebral music helps keep the cold fog at bay, and it always reminds me of pleasant summer nights at the Oregon Bach Festival.

Now I wonder how much longer the 47-year-old festival will continue.

Four months after the University of Oregon fired OBF artistic director Matthew Halls, the festival feels like it's teetering on the edge of extinction — or irrelevance.

Canadian baritone Tyler Duncan has sung at the Oregon Bach Festival since 2011, drawing reviews like this one in *The Oregonian* in 2014: "Duncan sang Jesus with consistent beauty and gravity beneath a 'halo' of strings."

Duncan was invited to perform in the 2018 festival.

But he won't be coming to Eugene this summer. "I just did not have a good feeling about accepting a job from OBF this summer," he said in an interview. "I want the festival to survive. But I am quite close friends with Matthew Halls, and seeing what all this has done to him — and he still has no concrete evidence about why."

That's the problem. No one yet seems to have any idea why Halls, who was chosen to succeed founding artistic director Helmuth Rilling and take OBF into a new future, was fired in August.

The UO still refuses to explain, falling back on official secrecy while releasing documents at an unprecedented rate that hint at minor transgressions.

Unofficially, a whisper campaign has tried to sully Halls' reputation at every turn. "Yes, there's a reason," a member of the patron class confided to me one day. "Think Harvey Weinstein."

That wasn't the only version of the story I've heard. Problem is, not a single person who has told me about this supposed Weinstein-level transgression has admitted any direct knowledge of what it was about. They always heard the tale from somewhere else.

I don't buy it. Halls may not be a saint — he has a temper and doesn't cotton to fools — but despite months of searching and interviewing people here and around the country, I have yet to find a single person with firsthand knowledge of anything Halls might have done that's even close to deserving dismissal.

A careful reading of hundreds of pages of OBF documents released since August by the university in response to public records requests by *Eugene Weekly* and *The Register-Guard* paints a sadder picture.

OBF executive director Janelle McCoy apparently kept a laundry list of Halls' sins, small and smaller, nearly from the moment she began work at the festival on Jan. 28, 2016. Item No. 1: Halls used the word "puffer," apparently a British term of derision for gays, in a Skype conversation on Feb. 15 — less than three weeks after McCoy started work. Was she writing things down even then?

No transgression seems too petty for McCoy's list, which contains

a photo of excessive lint in the clothes dryer at the house where Halls stayed during the 2015 festival.

Perhaps the biggest item on the laundry list was that Halls was "abusive" toward McCoy at an OBF Friends of the Festival board retreat on Oct. 30, 2016.

Whatever abuse Halls may have committed, though, doesn't appear anywhere in the official minutes of that retreat, which *EW* obtained from the university.

Instead, the minutes detail what appears to have been a frank discussion of budget pressures caused by the UO's decision to cut festival funding.

At the end of the day, the minutes say, participants were asked what was best about the retreat.

Board member Tom Wuest (who has since left the board) highlighted the "open and frank discussion we were privileged to witness. Thanks to Matthew and Janelle. These conversations are rare to occur, but priceless."

Board member Julie Gemmell mentioned "the afternoon conversation with Matthew and Janelle" as a highlight.

Board member and OBF co-founder Royce Saltzman said, "OBF is in great hands. Openness has given each of us an insight into what has to happen to make OBF successful." He's also quoted saying, "The openness Janelle and Matthew demonstrated to the board of their working relationship is important."

And Doug Blandy, the UO's senior vice provost for academic affairs, says in the minutes that "such honest discussion leads to a stellar festival."

No one, according to the minutes, felt the need to comment on or even hint at Halls' supposed abusiveness.

In early December, though, more than a month after the retreat, Blandy — who would later sign off on Halls' firing — wrote to Halls that his "treatment of Ms. McCoy [during the retreat] was unacceptable" and threatened to terminate his contract.

Isn't frank discussion what board meetings are all about?

Two days after the firing became public, Colleen Stangeland — wife of OBF board chairman Brad Stangeland — wrote to UO President Michael Schill to complain about Halls' "egregious" firing by McCoy. "The executive director has undermined his position with endless falsehoods," she wrote. "She has singlehandedly orchestrated his demise."

There was a time this fall when I actually thought that the UO and Halls could kiss and make up. Surely, I told myself, grownups in the university administration — and I assume there must be some, somewhere — would realize the gravity of their mistake.

Couldn't there be apologies all around and a shaking of hands?

Whether that was ever possible, we're clearly past that moment now. Halls is gone, along with any clear future for OBF. Musicians are wrestling with whether to perform in Eugene next summer.

And Janelle McCoy continues in her job, a ghost skipper piloting a ghost ship blindly through the fog.

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