

SEEKING HARMONY

Under new leadership, the **Oregon Bach Festival** tries to recover from the Halls fiasco **BY BOB KEEFER**

The Oregon Bach Festival is getting a reboot. In the wake of the sudden and controversial firing of popular Artistic Director Matthew Halls in 2017, the 49-year-old summer music fest at the University of Oregon was put under the control of the UO School of Music and Dance.

The new SOMD dean, Sabrina Madison-Cannon already appears to be exerting her authority. She began work here just last summer.

Contrary to previous statements by OBF Executive Director Janelle McCoy, Madison-Cannon announced in January that the festival would conduct an international search for a new artistic director. McCoy had announced after Halls' departure that OBF would no longer have a single artistic director in charge of its programming. McCoy appears to have been behind Halls' firing.

In an interview at her music school office last week, Madison-Cannon stressed that she wanted to see the festival put the past behind it. "My focus has been on keeping this festival healthy and moving it forward," she said when asked if she believed Halls' firing was justified. "I think that's enough to focus on."

But it's clear that moving the festival forward means changes.

The hiring of a new artistic director is just one. The search will be overseen by Eugene lawyer and arts patron Roger Saydack, who has run Eugene Symphony's intricate music-director selection process going back to the hiring of then-unknown, now-superstar Marin Alsop in 1989. Madison-Cannon says she expects to have a new artistic director on board by the 2020 festival. The artistic director will report directly to the dean.

Other, subtler changes are afoot. Josh Gren, the festival's public relations spokesman during the Halls debacle, resigned earlier this year. He is being replaced, temporarily, by a New York arts marketing consultant, Jonathan Eifert. The festival has also hired a full-time

accountant in addition to its full-time financial director. McCoy's future with the festival is unclear. Asked about the executive director's hold on her job, Madison-Cannon neither answered the question nor indicated support for McCoy.

"I'll put it this way. I don't think I want to answer any questions about any personnel decisions that we're going to make," the dean said. "I will say this, you know: The festival is doing well."

In the months she's been on the job, Madison-Cannon says she's discovered that OBF is many things to many people.

"When I was asking for information from people on what the artistic direction of the festival should be, there would be people that would say to me, 'Oh, this is, you know, a choral festival. We need someone in here who really gets choral music.' And then I'd be talking to someone else who would say, 'Boy, I miss the days of the big lush orchestra with Rilling.' And then I talked to someone else who would say, 'This is a historically informed performance kind of venue.' And what I realized in all of that is the Bach Festival is all of those things."

Madison-Cannon wants to reach out to broader audiences, both in number and demographics.

Finally, she says, the new artistic director needs to be "someone who's visionary in their thinking."

OBF, which exists as a project of the university rather than as a separate nonprofit, has stumbled repeatedly for two decades as it's tried to replace its two founders, UO music professor Royce Saltzman and German choral conductor Rilling. The two men started the festival as an informal choral gathering in 1970.

When Saltzman retired, for the first time, in the 1990s, he was replaced as executive director by the flamboyant Neill Archer Roan. Roan was the former programming director at the Hult Center whom *The Oregonian* once described as "the P.T. Barnum" of the Oregon arts world. Roan lasted just two seasons before leaving the festival with its staff and budget in chaos; he resigned in 1997, citing health problems.

Saltzman came out of retirement to run the festival once again.

At that point a consultant hired by the UO to examine festival operations wrote a scathing report that said

OBF had gone stale in its programming and flat in its marketing, racking up a deficit of \$800,000.

In the wake of the report, OBF hired former BBC producer John Evans as executive director. Smart and well connected in the classical music world, but sometimes abrasive, Evans drew major donations to put the festival back on its feet financially, but alienated a lot of staffers. He left his job suddenly with no public announcement in 2014 and died of a heart attack in 2016.

In late 2015 the festival hired McCoy, a singer with less administrative experience than her predecessors, as executive director, and soon named Halls as artistic director to succeed Rilling. At last OBF appeared to be on a stable track to success, as Halls seemed to bring the right combination of charm, wit and musical substance to the job.

But in August 2017 Halls was summarily fired. The UO has never publicly explained his termination, but has hinted that it involved sexual improprieties. Halls flatly denied any such charges and insisted — before he was silenced by a non-disparagement agreement with a \$90,000 payout — that he had no idea why his contract was ended.

Scrambling after *Eugene Weekly* broke the story of Halls' firing, McCoy and then-OBF spokesman Gren put out a hasty statement saying the festival was taking a different direction and would operate without a single artistic director.

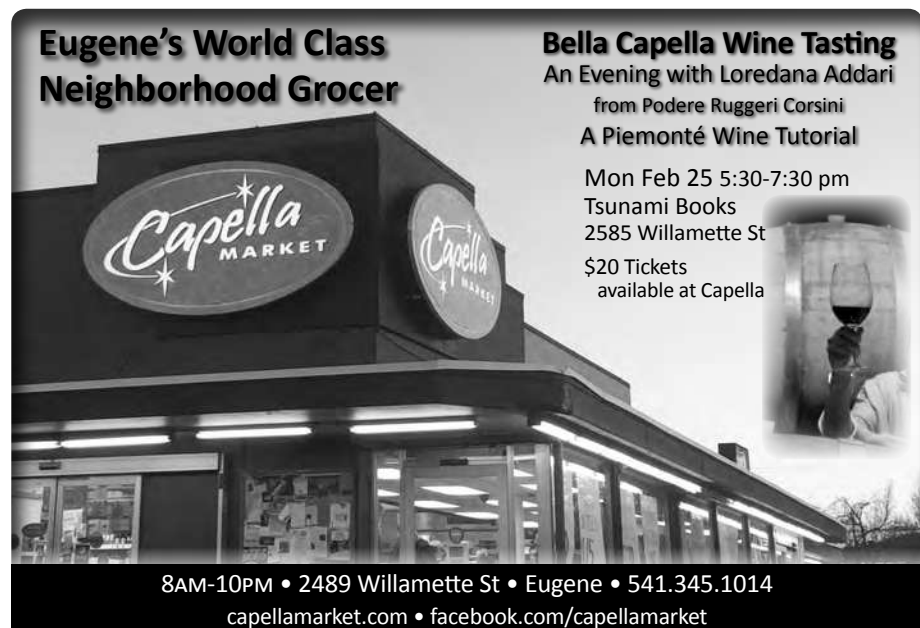
As board members, donors and fans of the festival expressed their outrage at both the firing and the new artistic plan, the university hunkered down in silence.

Ultimately, the festival, which had reported to the university provost's office, was put under control of the SOMD, and a committee was appointed to take on the job of artistic direction.

That committee remains active; it planned the 2018 festival and is working on the schedules for 2019 and 2020, Madison-Cannon said.

The 2019 festival lineup was announced in early February; it lists a stripped-down program that opens with Mozart and closes with Berlioz. The only Bach choral works on the program to be performed by the OBF Chorus are two cantatas to be performed in the Discovery series and C.P.E. Bach's *Magnificat*. ■

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