

# ‘Great music belongs to all of us’

Venture behind the scenes at the 13th annual Astoria Music Festival, which kicks off three weekends of music starting June 13

Story by CATE GABLE

What could possibly bring internationally famous, world-class musicians, vocalists and conductors to the North Coast? Keith Clark, artistic director for the Astoria Musical Festival — which runs three weekends June 13 through the 28 — knows the answer, and it’s in three parts. Location, location, location? In a way, yes.

## A diamond in the rough

Clark can recall his first impressions driving into Astoria. “I had no idea even where Astoria was when Marge Bloomfield called me to visit her. But I still remember driving on Highway 30 and coming over the top of the hill — then the water was spread out in front of me, the bridge, the town — it was beautiful. A movie set.” Still, there are a lot of beautiful places on

the West Coast; that was only one element of Astoria’s draw.

“The real surprise was meeting Steve Forrester and walking into the Liberty Theater.” Clark continues, “The acoustics were amazing. The great advantage was that the Liberty Theater had never been restored. There was no mucking it up, even the seats were still original. It looked bad, and it smelled bad, but — I knew immediately — it was a diamond in the rough.”

Two down. “I knew at that time that we had the right elements because there were people like Steve and others who wanted to save the theater,” says Clark, “I thought right away, music festival!” Forrester and others were committed to a restoration of Astoria’s jewel and fought against an early movement to simply tear it down and start over. So the third element clicked into place: the people in the community.

## The Liberty Theater

Clark is a conductor who has played concert halls all over the world. He cites the Weiner Musikverien in Austria as one of the four or five best concert halls internationally, and he ranks the Liberty Theater with the best.

“The Liberty Theater shares many of the same characteristics as the Musikverien in Vienna. It’s a classic shoebox shape and was built of older materials — wood, plaster — it’s perfect. The Musikverein has what the Liberty Theater has: nooks and crannies and little filigrees, murals and statuary. Even the chandelier. These all have the tendency to give the sound little chances to hide for a millisecond so it doesn’t hit you right in the face. It bounces off various things.”

In the experts’ view, it’s these older concert halls of moderate size, built in an era before newer materials and computer modeling, that are the best in the world. And Astoria is graced with one of them. The

Liberty Theater is a gem. Clark recognized a beautiful place; committed, community-minded people; and an outstanding concert hall. “I think the people struggling to modify, for the fourth or fifth time, the acoustic properties of the Lincoln Center in New York should just come to Astoria, look at the Liberty Theater, then build one of these again,” he says.

## Music highlights

What a great hall needs it great music to bring it alive, and Clark and his band of extraordinary musicians are providing that. Each year the festival has built on itself, garnered a growing reputation and now includes three full weekends of exceptional music.

The program is a balance between more familiar pieces that folks just love hearing, like Beethoven’s symphonies — da-da-da-dum! — to important pieces of music that Clark and others feel are exceptional. “And frankly a few pieces that I am doing to get my juices going,” says Clark.

The program provides a surfeit of riches from intimate chamber music to a fully staged opera, costumes, set and all. When asked what he would spotlight, Clark talks about two performances that book-end the festival.

The opening concert at 4 p.m. Saturday, June 13, features not one but two concertmasters performing Dvorak, Brahms, Honegger and Sibelius. (There are several Sibelius pieces on the festival schedule, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the composer’s birth.)

Canadian violinist Martin Chalifour has been principal concertmaster of the Los Angeles Philharmonic since 1995. He is performing

with violinist Sarah Kwak, Oregon Symphony concertmaster since in 2012. It is extremely rare to snag even one musician of concertmaster status — a concertmaster is basically like the star quarterback of the orchestra team — so to have two opening the festival is a feat.

These two outstanding violinists join Tchaikovsky Competition Gold Medal cellist Sergey Antonov and Astoria Music Festival Director of Chamber Music and Lanier Trio pianist Cary Lewis for an evening of artistry.

## Musical rivalry

Clark also cites as one of his all-time favorites the opera that closes the festival, Donizetti’s “Maria Stuarda.” Donizetti’s opera is in a bel canto style, which is a musical technique that shows off the florid virtuosity of the voice. As Clark puts it, “Bel canto singing is like Jimi Hendrix really showing off on his guitar, wowing us with his outrageous technique.”

This opera, premiered in 1835, captures the fierce political rivalry between Mary Queen of Scots and Queen Elizabeth I during a time of lethal tensions between Catholics and Protestants. These two queens were cousins, each representing different religions, and in competition for the same man. The stakes were huge. Sparks flew, and, as we know, one of them eventually lost her head.

“Clear battle lines were drawn,” says Clark about the conflicts in this opera. “There is a love interest between the queens. And talk about strong women — the vile names they call each other! They hated each other. It has the perfect elements for an opera or a BBC series!”

Just as in other festival performances, the



Submitted photo

Oregon Symphony concert master Sarah Kwak, left, and Lanier Trio pianist Cary Lewis will perform in the 2015 festival’s opening Celebrity Chamber Music Matinee program at 4 p.m. Saturday, June 13, which includes the rarely performed Piano Quartet by Jean Sibelius. Lewis, who is also the director of chamber music for the festival, will also perform June 19 at the Festival All-Stars concert, and June 27 with the Enso String Quartet

leads are top-notch. Angela Meade, America’s reigning queen of bel canto and winner of the 2012 Beverly Sills Artists Award, stars as Mary Queen of Scots; and French-Canadian Metropolitan Opera soprano Alexandra Deshorties portrays Queen Elizabeth I. “To hear these two bel canto sopranos together is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Clark says.

## Music for all

“What we’re doing in Astoria is important,” Clark continues. “I grew up in a small town in Illinois, 90 miles from Chicago. I came to L.A. to study, then lived and performed in Europe. My thought has always been that people in a small town deserve to hear this kind of music.

“Great music belongs to all of us, whether it’s the fishermen in Astoria or the farmers I grew up around. With the help of hundreds of people in Astoria, we are making world-class music accessible to all.”



Submitted photo by Michael Mathers

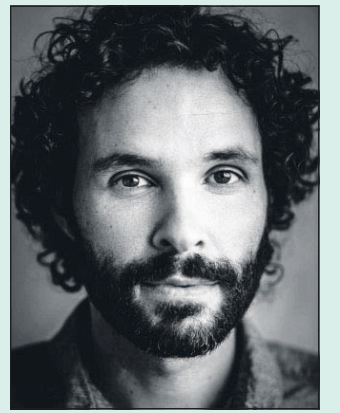
Award-winning cellist Sergey Antonov practices onstage at the Liberty Theater, which, according to festival artistic director Keith Clark, is among the best concert halls in the world.

## Hideki Yamaya



Submitted photo

## Israel Nebeker



Submitted photo by Ben Moon

## Hector Olivera



Submitted photo

## Angela Meade



Photo by Dwight Caswell

## Keith Clark



Submitted photo by Michael Mathers

## The Hermitage Trio



Submitted photo

**From left to right:** Lutenist and guitarist Hideki Yamaya will perform at the Elizabethan Garland program set for 7:30 p.m. June 17 at the CCC Performing Arts Center. The concert will include madrigals, lute songs, and joyful instrumental dances performed by a Renaissance band of performers, plus a rare showing of Thomas Edison’s 18-second film, “The Execution of Mary Stuart” from 1895.

Israel Nebeker, of indie folk-rock band Blind Pilot, has reimagined classical night music through a contemporary lens with a festival-commissioned string quartet. Nebeker will perform at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, June

16 at the CCC Performing Arts Center.

Internationally acclaimed organist Hector Olivera will perform in concert at the Liberty Theater June 27.

Soprano Angela Meade, pictured here performing at last year’s music festival, will star as Mary Stuart in the Astoria Music Festival’s finale opera in concert of Donizetti’s “Maria Stuarda” on June 28.

Astoria Music Festival Artistic Director Keith Clark will conduct the Astoria Music Festival Orchestra at the

gala opening All-Beethoven concert June 13, the Finlandia concert June 14, Bach’s “St. John Passion” concert June 20, Beethoven’s “Fidelio” concert June 21, and the finale opera in concert of Donizetti’s “Maria Stuarda” June 28.

The Hermitage Trio, featuring, from left, cellist Sergey Antonov, violinist Micha Keylin and pianist Ilya Kazantsev, will perform Beethoven’s Triple Concerto in C Major June 21 and works by Mendelssohn with Festival Apprentice Artists June 22. Antonov and Kazantsev will perform in multiple concerts at this year’s festival.

# Astoria Music Festival Highlights

## Saturday, June 13

4 p.m. Celebrity Chamber Music Matinee: Acclaimed concertmasters Martin Chalifour and Sarah Kwak, prizewinning cellist Sergey Antonov and pianist Cary Lewis open the festival.

7:30 p.m. The Gala Opening All-Beethoven concert features concertmaster Martin Chalifour performing Beethoven’s Violin Concerto in D Major and the Astoria Festival Orchestra doing the iconic Symphony No. 5.

## Sunday, June 14

5 p.m. Finlandia celebrates the Sibelius 150 Jubilee.

## Monday, June 15

Noon OPB will do a free taping of its arts and culture radio show “State of Wonder” before a live audience in the Liberty Theater.

## Saturday, June 20

4 p.m. Sergy’s Annual Happy Hour with the Hermitage Piano Trio.

7:30 p.m. Bach’s powerful “St. John Passion” featuring tenor Oliver Mercer and baritone Richard Zeller, joined by chorus and orchestra.

## Sunday, June 21

5 p.m. Resident ensemble, the Hermitage Trio, stars in Beethoven’s Triple Concerto. Then Metropolitan Opera soloists, chorus and orchestra perform the triumphal final act of Beethoven’s opera “Fidelio.”

## Thursday and Friday, June 25 and 26

7:30 p.m. Vocal and Instrumental Apprentice Artists join for two fully staged performances of Mozart’s “Die Zauberflöte” — set in Astoria, complete with Columbia River bar pilots, Lewis and Clark, and even a pirate.

## Saturday, June 27

7:30 p.m. The Grammy-nominated Enso String Quartet performs Sibelius and Dvorak, with pianist Cary Lewis.

## Sunday, June 28

5 p.m. Metropolitan Opera sopranos Angela Meade and Alexandra Deshorties star in the Northwest premiere of Donizetti’s opera in concert “Maria Stuarda.”

For a complete schedule or to purchase tickets, visit [www.astoriamusicfestival.org](http://www.astoriamusicfestival.org) or visit the festival office at 1271 Commercial St., Astoria