

Back

by Melinda Bargreen

Bach to

With deep roots in their host communities, Bach festivals are a source of pride and inspiration and education all at once—serving not just devoted fans and musicians but also curious newcomers.

From Winter Park, Florida, to Lake Chelan, Washington; from Peoria and Kalamazoo to the otherworldly serenity of Mount Angel Abbey in St. Benedict, Oregon, the sounds of Johann Sebastian Bach rise each year to eager audiences. In small towns, cities, and college communities from New England to the Wild West, more than 60 Bach festivals of every variety draw in patrons and performers to experience the music of the immortal master. Even the perennially popular Mozart takes a back seat to Bach when it comes to American festivals, although there's a respectable representation of the great Amadeus in festivals from New York to Vermont, Oklahoma, and California.

Some of the festivals are relatively new: the CONCORA Bach Festival in Connecticut debuted this year, and the Arizona Bach Festival, held in Phoenix, had its second season this January. Some have long,

illustrious histories, most notable of which are Pennsylvania's 112-year-old Bethlehem Bach Festival and the collegiate festival it inspired, the Baldwin-Wallace Bach Festival in Ohio. Some festivals offer a vast array of Bach and non-Bach programming featuring major masses and oratorios over several weeks. Others present a weekend of smaller-scale concerts. There are festivals in all four seasons: festivals in tiny venues, ones performed in vast cathedrals and major concert halls. Some present pick-up orchestras of local musicians; others feature dedicated "festival orchestras" whose members are drawn from the local professional orchestras, augmented by guest players. At the Oregon Bach Festival, the orchestra is made up of professionals from American and European orchestras and from academia.

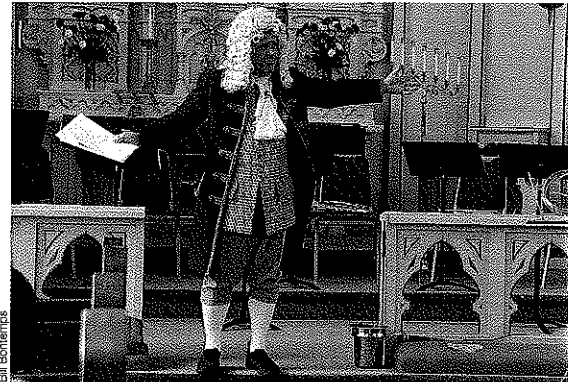
Despite all this diversity, there are many common threads. Bach festivals are deeply rooted in their host communities, a source



Lobby of the Hult Center for the Performing Arts in Eugene, Oregon, home to Oregon Bach Festival concerts



of pride and inspiration and education all at once. Visitors overwhelmingly return year after year, sometimes evolving from performers into donors and administrators. Performers and attendees alike point to the tremendous variety of works Bach composed in almost every genre as a reason to focus on Bach. Scott Hagler, director of Colorado's weeklong Durango Bach Festival, contends that "we're better able to really 'hear' and understand the music



Bill Bontemps

Attired as J.S. Bach, Co-director Martin Dicke gives a talk at the Peoria Bach Festival in Illinois.

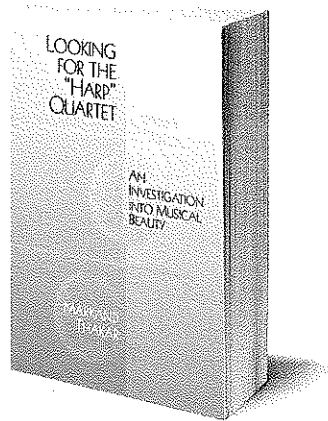
when we listen to many pieces at a time rather than a smattering here and there." The same argument could be made about other themed festivals, but with Bach there is something deeper and more spiritual at work as well—something that guitarist and Bach specialist Eliot Fisk once observed. "Bach is not just music to those of us who love him," said Fisk. "He is the quintessential expression of the meaning and sense of our existence on this planet." Perhaps it is this indefinable quality that continues to inspire the performers and listeners who flock to Bach festivals.

It is not hard to sense the tremendous admiration and enthusiasm the festival artists and audiences feel for this composer and his music. You see it in the well-dressed cyclists zooming toward the concert hall in bike-friendly Eugene, Oregon, on their way to an Oregon Bach Festival cantata program. You see it in the intense faces of the aspiring conductors in conductor Helmuth Rilling's master classes at the Oregon Bach Festival; in the heartfelt choral singing of the "Kyrie" of the B Minor Mass, and in the audience members who lean forward to catch every note. Everyone has a different way to explain the undying appeal of this music. Ken Nafziger, the

Jon Meyers

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Baldwin-Wallace College

The performers of Ohio's Baldwin-Wallace Bach Festival at the festival's 75th anniversary in 2007

founding director nineteen years ago of the Shenandoah Valley Bach Festival in Harrisonburg, Virginia, understands Bach as a sort of "perfect circle" uniting aesthetics, workmanship, and spirituality. This, he believes, is music everyone can appreciate on one level or another.

"Even if you are not classically trained, you have probably performed or at least heard Bach pieces," says Diane Wright, executive director of California's Sonora Bach Festival. Sandra Gerster Lisicky, Shenandoah's principal oboist, agrees: "Many people remember a Bach piece from church or childhood piano lessons," she says. "And from an oboe player's point of view, there is *nothing* that beats playing Bach!"

Each Bach festival seems to have its own special charm and brings something a little different to the community. Gertrude Harvey, executive director of Spokane, Washington's Northwest Bach Festival, notes that her performers "offer the community the only opportunity to hear the large Bach masterworks in live performances." Theater and culture critic Terry Teachout, an annual visitor at Florida's Bach Festival Society of Winter Park, cites the "wonderfully unpretentious" vibe there. "I've spent a lot of time in my life going to high-priced big-city concerts, and I'll be the first to tell you that they're more obviously finished and virtuosic than a Bach Festival concert in Winter Park. If I want to hear slick, note-perfect performances of the classics, all I have to do is fire up my iPod. What I hear at Winter Park, on the other hand, are homegrown performances that are deeply rooted in the life of the surrounding community. There's something uniquely and inexpressibly moving about that kind of

music-making." Winter Park's auditioned all-volunteer chorus of 160 sang with the London Philharmonic Orchestra during two Florida residencies (2007, 2009); the orchestra members, drawn from all over central Florida, are professional musicians and teachers who return annually for their dose of the Baroque master.

Close Connections

Most festivals bring in musicians from far afield—the musicians of the Bethlehem Bach Festival congregate from eleven states. For most such orchestras, the start of the rehearsal period is often "a wonderful reunion of friends," notes Shenandoah's executive director and flutist Mary Kay Adams. Several festival presenters compare the experience they offer to a pilgrimage, with typical return rates of 95 percent among musicians and upwards of 70 percent among audiences. Audience members often inquire after players' spouses and children; Shenandoah's Lisicky cites "an incredible connection between the audience and the musicians."

"Not only are people proud of this festival," says Shenandoah's Nafziger, "they feel they *own* it." That sentiment is precisely echoed in tiny Chelan, Washington (pop. 4,105), where Ruth Rogers, director of the Lake Chelan Bach Fest, says the town's intensely involved network of volunteers, donors, and Bach fanatics all feel deeply invested in, and proud of, the festival: "The town of Chelan 'owns' the annual Bach Fest." For the Chelan festival, the board members secure permits, venues, sound equipment, and provide meals and snacks for the performers. Local churches provide some venues at no cost, and they borrow

chairs and musical equipment from the local high school, which is also used as a rehearsal venue; the local print shop provides banners, posters, and festival programs at no cost.

The issue of intimacy comes up again and again when concertgoers discuss their favorite festivals. At the Peoria Bach Festival in Illinois, musicians invite children and adults onto the stage after concerts to peer into the inner workings of the harpsichord. Everyone mingles with the players. A volunteer corps sells tickets, welcomes guests, prepares food, and helps give the festival a family feel.

Diane Wright describes Sonora, California, as "very rural, more of a cowboy town with a lot of farming and ranchers.

But people like the salon concerts, where the artists talk about the music. The vibe is very comfortable." Out in Carmel, on the California coastline, "There is particular synergy between the stunning natural and architectural beauty of the area, the intimate, small-town feel, and inspired, joyful musical expression," says Carmel Bach Festival Executive Director Camille Kolles.

The Bethlehem Bach Festival, inaugurated in 1900, is the country's longest-running Bach fest, and it thrives by meeting many needs: spiritual, musical, social. Executive Director Bridget George explains: "The [performers'] sense of family, investment in a great tradition, and devotion to musical excellence has transferred itself to our audience. So when you come to the Bethlehem Bach Festival, you are surrounded by people who are transported by the music, and it becomes a joy to listen to the music with them even if it is your very first time listening to Bach."

And Winter Park's festival, which Principal String Bass Tye Van Buren terms "low on the uptightness meter," involves many sectors of its Floridian host community. As Terry Teachout puts it, "Even if you're not performing in a Bach Festival concert, you probably know some of the people who are, from the conductor all the way down to the second alto in the back row of the chorus. Because of this, Winter Park is 'vested' in the Bach Festival—the townspeople feel that they have a *personal* stake in it, and that makes all the difference in the world." Van Buren notes further that Winter Park has "a strong conservative, spiritual base for which Bach provides an expressive outlet."

In Texas, Victoria Bach Festival Executive Director Nina Di Leo smiles when she sees longtime audience members showing up with their 1982 festival T-shirts. "Musicians and visitors like that Texas hospitality," she observes, and the atmosphere of "warmth and humanity." Di Leo enjoys reading the comments ("I didn't know choral music could be like this!") in kids' letters she receives after distributing free student tickets.

Programming Perspectives

Helmuth Rilling, artistic director of the Oregon Bach Festival since its inception in the 1970s, is virtually the patron saint of this three-week festival, his quiet but

penetrating wisdom infusing every rehearsal and each performance.

"It is important for someone like me, with so much experience, to pass this on to the next generation. It is a goal for me," explains Rilling, who delights in finding "gifted young people" as far afield as Taipei, and inviting them to Eugene for the festival's conducting master class. Not surprisingly, many younger Bach-festival conductors have worked with Rilling (including Greg Funfgeld, artistic director since 1983 of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, which presents the venerable Bethlehem Bach Festival). John Jost, co-founder (in 2003) of the Peoria Bach Festival, cites a Rilling master class fifteen years ago as "the impetus for our festival."

At the 33-year-old Northwest Bach Festival in Spokane, it is Gunther Schuller—a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant—whose artistic vision has shaped the festival for the past eighteen years, changing its tone by bringing in high-profile visiting artists to work alongside local musicians. "Gunther's very good at putting in programming that's not exactly garden-variety," observes Travis Rivers, a correspondent for *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane.

Over time, most festivals evolve by widening their vision; in fact, much of the "Bach festival" repertoire around the country isn't Bach. Paul Goodwin, music director and conductor of the Carmel Bach Festival in California, has kept Bach as its cornerstone but has incorporated what he calls "pepper and spice" as a way to "give the festival a wider appeal that will interest people from all walks of life." One new feature for 2011: a "Carmel Commission" for new compositions inspired by Bach. First up is composer John Corigliano's new orchestral arrangement of his own *Fancy on a Bach Air*, originally written for solo cello and inspired by the Bach cello suites.

There is no one answer to the question of why festivals catering to devoted followers of Bach do not limit themselves to just



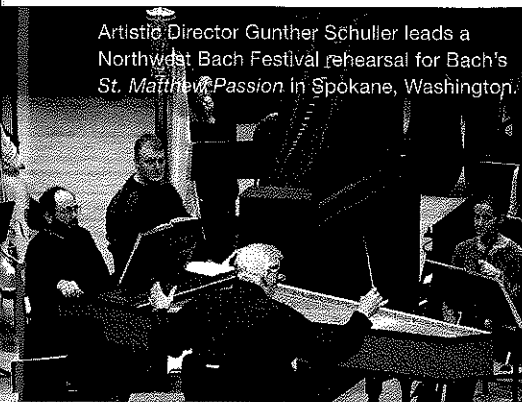
Marguerite Cross

"From an oboe player's point of view, there is *nothing* that beats playing Bach!" says Shenandoah Valley Bach Festival Principal Oboist Sandra Gerster Lisicky.



Rebecca Bowers performs at the Durango Bach Festival's annual student recital in Colorado.

Paul Boyer



Artistic Director Gunther Schuller leads a Northwest Bach Festival rehearsal for Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Spokane, Washington.

S. Harvey



Junior Bach Festival students rehearse in Kensington, California, March 2010.

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Bach. Ken Nafziger says the Shenandoah festival has paired Bach with other composers and themes "from the beginning year" of the festival, including "Bach with Handel, Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schubert, turn of the millennium, Cuba, Latin America, the U.S., Russia, 2010 anniversaries.... It's an idea that always ensures that next year's festival will differ from preceding ones." Winter Park's Tye Van Buren says his festival has branched out to everything from Bernstein's Mass ("that stirred some controversy!") to Verdi and Beethoven's Ninth. Many festivals include non-Bach works as a way to show "influence of Bach," but often it's the performers themselves who suggest these pieces, and feel they'll be well received by audiences who like Bach.

At the Oregon Bach Festival this summer, you're just as likely to encounter Yo-Yo Ma as soloist in Osvaldo Golijov's *Azul*, or Marin Alsop conducting a staged concert of Honegger's oratorio *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher*. At Shenandoah, they're pairing Bach with jazz, Cuban music, American folk, and music of several other cultures.

Michigan's Kalamazoo Bach Festival started in 1946 with a week of sacred music for the Lenten season. Inspired by the Carmel Bach Festival, Kalamazoo Music Director James Turner says the focus now is "Bach and Beyond." History lectures and German-language coaching link "town and gown" (the festival has rehearsal and performance space at Kalamazoo College, where Turner teaches). Even at the venerable Bethlehem, Artistic Director and Conductor Funfgeld notes that the repertoire is "no longer exclusively Bach, but a vast array of music from the Renaissance to world premieres."

Leaps of Faith—Artistic and Financial

Starting a Bach festival takes a visionary or two—or several. It takes people who are hard to say "no" to, like Dene Denny and Hazel Watrous, the two art-gallery owners who founded Carmel Bach Festival in 1935. It takes a passion for Bach, like that of Bill and Barbara Meissner, choral singers who helped organize the Peoria Bach Festival in 2003. In this era of bank failures and galloping debt, creating a festival might seem an impossible task. But the Connecticut Choral Artists—known by the acronym CONCORA—are undaunted. After a his-

tory of successful summer choral festivals with other foci, they presented the first-ever eight-day CONCORA Winter Bach Festival with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in February of this year. They were deluged by requests to participate.

Richard Coffey, CONCORA'S founder and artistic director, explains the new format: "Our participants"—singers from the local community and colleges—"will be trained to become a Lutheran 'congregation' as in the time of Bach himself, and, during the concert, when the beautiful and beloved chorales (German hymns) appear within the cantatas, our festival participants, having been rigorously trained during the festival, will stand and sing these chorales with CONCORA and the orchestra. The impact will be monumental."

Coffey points out that there is financial risk in every event undertaken by a non-profit performing arts organization. But one practical factor that may help Bach festivals survive in financially tough times is that there seem to be a fair number of singers willing to pay to perform Bach. "The participants will be paying a stipend or 'tuition'—not uncommon in such festivals," says Coffey. "That income will help us pay the bills for the event. The real 'pay-off,' of course, comes at the concert itself. And when all of these performers begin to offer their musical gifts, thoughts of a balance sheet will vanish."

Bach for New Generations

The Baldwin-Wallace Bach Festival in Berea, Ohio boasts a remarkable record of community involvement by a single family: the descendants of founder Albert Riemenschneider, an organist who served as head of the music department at Baldwin-Wallace College. Fifteen family members are now active in the festival. Inspired by a Bethlehem Bach Festival performance, Riemenschneider and his wife raised \$300 to fund the first festival in 1932 at Baldwin-Wallace College. Riemenschneider's 33,000-item personal collection of Bach-related manuscripts and first editions later formed the backbone of the Bach Institute that bears the founder's name at Baldwin-Wallace College. The college's quarterly journal, *Bach*, goes out to 671 scholars in 29 countries.

After Albert Riemenschneider's death, in 1950, subsequent generations got in-



Marguerite Case

Executive Director Diane Wright says Sonora Bach Festival's salon concerts have a "very comfortable vibe" in her community, "a cowboy town with a lot of farming and ranchers."

involved in the festival, and four years ago 84 family members came to Cleveland's Severance Hall (about twelve miles from Berea) to attend the festival's 75th-anniversary festivities. Outside the family, the commitment also runs deep: in addition to endowments and major gifts, more than 220 individuals have served as festival guarantors, many for more than 20 years—and one for 78 years. "It is very fulfilling," says grandson Thomas Riemenschneider, "to see the generations of kids and parents coming to the festival. It's a celebration of excellence. People are looking for this."

The teaching mission is central to nearly every Bach festival, and another way to forge links to the community. The Kalamazoo Bach Festival is particularly serious about education, holding a statewide high-school choral festival, a middle-school community-engagement program, and an annual Young Vocalists' Competition whose winners are featured during the Bach Festival Week held each spring. From Sonora to Peoria, educational programs are a major focus of this country's festivals. And education is the *raison d'être* for the junior Bach festivals, the longest running of which is Berkeley, California's Junior Bach Festival, founded in 1953 for instrumentalists 21 and under.

John Mark, the JBF's secretary and long-time volunteer, reports that 223 young people aged four to twenty auditioned this year, with about one-third advancing to perform in the annual Bach marathon festival each March. Mark's pianist son Steven, now a journalist in Hawaii, performed in the JBF in the 1970s and has often returned as a listener, hearing such artists as cellist Matt Haimovitz and pianists Adam Neiman and Jon Nakamatsu.

"I think having Bach as the one and only focus helps kids develop a 'vocabulary' in Bach, which obviously is a great fundamental building block of musicianship," says Steven Mark. "They hear Bach at their

level, at levels above, and levels below. They get inspired to learn the more challenging repertoire."

One measure of the resilience of the nation's Bach festivals is their ability to thrive even in a recessionary era. Although economic times are tough, at Oregon Bach's 40th festival last summer ticket sales were up 18 percent over the previous year. "I think it proves that if you are ambitious in programming classical music, the community will come along with you," says President and Executive Director John Evans.

Beyond the necessity for any modern-day music festival to stay rooted in its community, there is the reality that now one must offer something extraordinary that today's iPad-sated, BlackBerryed consumers can't get anywhere else. And that is indeed what Bach gives them. When *The New York Times's* Anthony Tommasini recently named Bach the top classical composer of all time, he wrote that late-career Bach was surely aware that his music was by then considered old-fashioned, but that he "reacted by digging deeper into his way of doing things. In his austere beautiful 'Art of Fugue,' left incomplete at his death, Bach reduced complex counterpoint to its bare essentials, not even indicating the instrument (or instruments) for which these works were composed." Is it possible that Bach's defiance—his refusal to adapt, to follow the trends of his day—is itself something that speaks to us today? Whether this great and endlessly adaptable music is performed on period instruments, a modern piano, a quartet of guitars, or jazz artists inspired by the Baroque master, Bach continues to offer something that speaks to us strongly while simultaneously connecting audiences with the past. **S**

MELINDA BARGREEN writes about classical music and the arts for several publications in print and online, and was for 31 years the music critic of *The Seattle Times*. She is a published composer and has a doctorate from the University of California at Irvine.

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