

# Looking Back to Bach

ANTICIPATED PERFORMANCES AND SUPERB ARTISTS MARK THE 74TH ANNUAL BACH FESTIVAL.

BY RUSS J. STACEY



Reflecting our frequently turbulent times, the themes of love and war dominate the 74th Annual Winter Park Bach Festival. Concepts such as taking stock of our losses and contemplating how music can help us find solace and peace resonate through this year's performances.

"The things that we're dealing with now, like loving and remembering those who are gone, have so much history because people have dealt with them before. Music has come out of those times and we can still be moved by that music today," says Margo Stedman, program coordinator of the Bach

Festival Society of Winter Park.

Running weekends from February 15 through March 1 in the Knowles Memorial Chapel on the Rollins College campus, the Bach Festival is the crown jewel of the 2008-2009 season of the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park, which continues to bring world-class talent to Central Florida. Under the direction of Rollins College music professor Dr. John V. Sinclair, the third-longest-running Bach festival in the nation was called "one of the outstanding choral events in the country" by *The New York Times*. The 160-voice Bach Festival Choir has reached

prominence as one of the finest oratorio choirs anywhere. The Bach Festival Society is also Central Florida's oldest operating performing arts organization.

"The opportunity to do masterworks like Brahms' *Requiem* is so life-enriching and life-altering that I feel blessed every time I get to do it," Sinclair says.

Kicking off the Bach Festival at 3 p.m. on February 15 will be Carol Williams, organist extraordinaire, artistic director of San Diego's Spreckels Organ Society and civic organist for the city of San Diego. As a city

employee, she performs outdoor organ concerts for the general public, and she is known for her creative programming and her background in jazz and theater. Williams is expected to present a rousing, vibrant recital.

Emotional and dramatic, Rossini's *Stabat Mater* tells the story of the Virgin Mary's grief for her son at his crucifixion. Known more for his opera compositions, Rossini wrote portions of the oratorio as a gift for an archdeacon. After the archdeacon died, his heirs sold the work. Upset, Rossini wrested the copyright back so he could publish it when he saw fit.

"It is a bit more operatic in nature, and in some of the arias you can hear that influence, more so than you would hear in the Bach piece or the Brahms piece that the choir is also doing," says Stedman. "It's a big, powerful work, especially with the 160 voices in the choir coming at you."

Baroque Classics with Sharon Isbin and J.S. Bach's *Easter Oratorio* on February 22 is the centerpiece concert of the Bach Festival. To call Isbin an accomplished guitarist is an understatement. A multiple-Grammy Award winner and nominee in classical and Latin categories, Isbin also created The Juilliard School's guitar department

in 1989. Her festival repertoire will include baroque music, as well as contemporary Spanish compositions.

The festival traditionally rotates Bach's four major works — *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. John Passion*, *Mass in B Minor*, and *Easter Oratorio* in cycles, featuring a different one each year. This year, *Easter Oratorio* is the star. Originated as a secular cantata, characters were replaced with Mary Magdalene; Mary, the mother of James; and the disciples Peter and John. The impassioned reflection of the Resurrection is sure to inspire.

Stedman describes Isbin's appearance on the same program as the Bach Festival Choir and Orchestra as "exciting" and "incredible."

Rounding out the Bach Festival is Brahms' *German*

*Requiem*, which fits perfectly into the overall theme of the dueling concepts of love and war. Brahms wrote the moving piece as a sign of hope for those mourning lost loved ones — still relevant today with current world events.

"Brahms' *German Requiem* is a fabulous piece and that's always fun. To me, the Bach Festival is the experience of new and of the old. There's the experience of



**FACING PAGE:** Randy Singer, Matt Smith, and Christina Carter belt out favorite songs. **THIS PAGE:** Rollins professor John V. Sinclair leads the Bach Festival Choir; **INSET:** Clover Batts and Erin Stillson.

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**CO-CONCERTMASTERS** Routa Kroumovitch Gomez and Alvaro Gomez.

doing music I haven't done before, such as *Easter Oratorio*, and working with Sharon Isbin for the first time. It's like meeting a new friend. And then there's some comfort, like being with an old friend: *German Requiem* and Rossini's *Stabat Mater*. Getting to repeat those masterworks gives you new insight that you didn't have before," Sinclair says.

Certainly the highlight of this season's Visiting Artist Series is the appearance of Midori, arguably the best-known and most accomplished violinist in the world. The Japanese-born former child prodigy made her first recording at the age of 14, tours widely today and is the Jascha Heifetz Chair in Violin at the University of Southern California. Reviewing one of her performances at the Kennedy Center, *The Washington Post* described her as "now more musician than youthful spectacle, a well-rounded artist capable of saying something about music's underlying emotion." The violin virtuoso will no doubt charm and enchant the audience at Tiedtke Concert Hall with her performance.

The Bach Festival Society also presents



**LOWELL NEWMAN** with Alex Tiedtke.

programs such as the Choral Masterworks Series, Young Artists Competition, High School Invitational Choral Festival, Visiting Artists Series, Choral Workshops, Young at Heart Chorale, FreshStARTS, Fred Rogers Family Series, and the City of Winter Park community concerts.

Delighting audiences with the music of a diverse assortment of composers, Artistic Director and Conductor Sinclair has led the Bach Festival Choir and Orchestra since 1990. But creating unforgettable musical experiences for appreciative audiences is only half the

story. He also selects all choral and orchestral works to be performed for the Choral Masterworks Concert Series and the Bach Festival, as well as contracting visiting artists. He conducts all performances of the Bach Festival Choir, as well as the auditions and their weekly rehearsals (see sidebar). His leadership has earned critical acclaim for the Winter Park Bach Festival.

"I think John Sinclair is so successful because he loves what he does so much, but he also allows the players and musicians to come in and be musicians.

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**– Dr. John V. Sinclair, Rollins College music professor**

He's demanding but allows everyone to contribute to the interpretation rather than being militaristic at the podium," Stedman says.

The Bach Festival Society celebrates the life and works of Johann Sebastian Bach, as well as others. Bach is considered one of the most accomplished composers of baroque music, a spirited genre marked by improvisation and contrasting elements and often featuring harpsichord accompaniment. Ironically, Bach, who lived from 1685 to 1750, was better known as an organist than a composer in his own day. Devoted to music as a child, he was taught by his father and his brother Johann Christoph.

Three-quarters of a century is quite the milestone, and the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park is already gearing up for next year's big 75th anniversary, though it is still early in the planning stages. The only component finalized thus far is the performance of Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, which some argue is his best composition.

"How great is it to make it to 75 years for an arts organization? It is an impressive longevity that Central Florida ought to be proud of. We show that culture has been a part of our existence here for a long time, and it continues to thrive," Sinclair says. "We are going to pull out all the stops next year, so it will be bigger and more grand than usual."

The season's full schedule can be found at the Society's website: [www.bachfestivalflorida.org/pages/calendar.html](http://www.bachfestivalflorida.org/pages/calendar.html). **oam**

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**BACH FESTIVAL CHOIR and Orchestra are quite a presence. BELOW: Eric Larmer and Carrell Myers.**

## Angelic Voices

**T**he all-volunteer Bach Festival Choir's roots date back to the formation of the Bach Festival Society in 1935 by Isabelle Sprague-Smith to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's birth. The choir's size and reputation quickly matured from there.

The Bach Festival Society Choir and Orchestra have performed all over the world, including St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, Royal Albert Hall in London, cathedrals throughout Europe, and even in Leipzig churches in Germany that Bach himself performed in.

Auditions are held every summer by Sinclair and include singing a prepared piece, sight-reading, pitch recognition, and memory exercises. Prospects have to read and hear well. The choir necessitates a serious commitment. Each member spends more than 300 hours annually in rehearsal time and performances and will sing more than 500 pages of music.

Ranging in age from 18 to 80, the 160 members of the Bach Festival Choir include persons from nearly every walk of life, from homemakers, engineers, bankers, and doctors to masons, accountants,

attorneys and teachers.

"What's gratifying is to see all these wonderful people, all accomplished in their own fields, come together for a common purpose of just making great music," Sinclair says.

Tenor Zack Hayhurst, in his first season with the choir, is a full-time state worker. "I am impressed every time I go to rehearsal with the talent and depth of knowledge displayed by Dr. Sinclair."

Romania-born Cezarina Vintilla, who sings soprano and plays the piano, is a business manager. "My favorite part about participating in the Bach Choir is that it enables me to unleash my passion and love for music."

