

Listening to the landscape

As Artistic Director of the Carmel Bach Festival, **Grete Pedersen** is shaping a programme where sound, place and perspective intersect, placing Bach alongside contemporary voices.

Juliette Barber speaks to her about curiosity, collaboration and creating a festival that extends beyond the concert hall

You've described Carmel as your "July home". Having spent a few seasons in the role, what has that come to mean to you, not just professionally, but personally?

When I arrived, there was a real sense of openness. With the people, with the musicians – this feeling that many things can happen here. There is a balance between being innovative and being relaxed, which suits me very well.

The orchestra itself reflects that. It's a kind of hybrid ensemble – we play on gut strings all the time, no matter the repertoire. For Baroque music, we use historical instruments, but for later repertoire we bring in modern winds and brass. It's quite an eccentric orchestra, in the best sense, and that makes it fascinating.

So the question becomes: what can we create together within that? And that is not only professional, but also personal as well. It's about that openness.

And then there is Carmel itself. The nature here is extraordinary. I sometimes say that if I feel my soul has been left somewhere at the airport, I go to the beach and I find it there. There is this microclimate – a kind of eternal spring – and something about the place that gives you space to think and feel.

What I also value is the community. The audience, the volunteers – they are all very engaged, and they feel a real sense of ownership of the festival. At the same time, I feel a sense of freedom as an artistic director. I want to challenge people. To ask: what happens if we do this? Not everyone will be happy all the time, that's not the goal, but for me, it comes back to that connection – between people, and between people and nature.

You're only the sixth artistic director in the festival's history, and the first woman to hold the post. Has that shaped how you think about leadership in Carmel, or the kind of space you want to create there?

The festival was actually founded by two women, Dene Denny and Hazel Watrous, so in that sense I'm not the first. But of course, being a female conductor still has many layers.

I try to focus on what I can do. I cannot be anything other than myself, and I put my energy into the music and the people. At the same time, I'm very aware that previous generations of women did not have the same opportunities. That is something we still have to recognise.

Sometimes you do have to speak up, whether it's in a rehearsal setting or on a jury, but most of the time I prefer to work through what I can build and shape.

In Carmel, I have always felt very welcome. So it has not been something I think about every day. But yes, of course, it is still important.

This year's theme, "the nature of sound", is remarkably expansive, taking in everything from Bach to field recordings and the ambient sounds of Carmel itself. What drew you to that idea, and how do you translate something so intangible into a live musical experience?

I am very curious about sound, about the different sounds that exist and how we react to them. If I lift a coffee cup, there is a sound. If something happens suddenly, it can surprise or even scare us. Other sounds relax us. And then, of course, there are the sounds of nature. The sea, for example – the rhythm of the waves – is something people all over the world find calming. It's something very basic, very human.

But for me, "the nature of sound" is not only about beauty. It is also about going inside the sound and discovering what is happening when a sound is made. What are its smallest elements? How can we understand it, almost in a physical or even graphical way?

So the theme works on different levels: how we hear, how we feel, and how sound is constructed. And in a festival, you can explore that in many different ways, through different kinds of music and different kinds of listening.

The 2026 season places Bach alongside composers such as Kaija Saariaho, Nils Henrik Asheim, Einojuhani Rautavaara and Featured Composer Angélica Negrón, whose work incorporates electronics, found sound and natural environments. How do those juxtapositions change the way we might hear Bach today?

For me, it's very important that Bach is not treated as something fixed, as if the festival is a museum. Bach was a contemporary composer in his time. We have to meet him from our own time.

When we place Bach next to composers like Saariaho or Negrón, we hear different aspects of his music. We hear structure differently and colour differently, and perhaps we also listen more openly. With Angélica Negrón, we had been thinking about working with her for some time. She fits very well with this theme, but the choice was not only about that. She is simply a very interesting composer – she works across different forms, she performs, she creates, and she has this curiosity about sound. She will also curate her own concert



Photo by Michelle Magdalena

— Carmel Bach Festival —

within the festival, which is important to me. I want composers to be a part of the process, not just represented.

You've worked within historically informed performance for much of your career, but you're also a strong advocate for new music. How does that shape the way you approach a programme that brings the two together?

I see them as completely connected. If we really believe in historically informed performance, then we have to understand that music was once new. It was once contemporary.

So for me, it is natural to include new music. It keeps us in contact with our own time, and it also changes how we understand older music. We cannot approach Bach in exactly the same way as people did over 250 years ago – we have to bring our own perspective. At the same time, there are practical questions. In a festival, rehearsal time is limited, and new commissions can be demanding. So you have to find the right balance. But artistically, I don't see a contradiction. I think they need each other.

You're often described as a deeply collaborative conductor. How does that philosophy shape the way you build a festival, where time is short but the sense of community is everything?

It's very important that the musicians feel they are part of creating the festival, not just playing in it. Of course, I make the final decisions as artistic director, but I want the process to be shared.

Many of the musicians return year after year. They are specialists, but they are also flexible and curious, able to move between different styles of music. That creates a special atmosphere. We explore things together. And I think that creates something you don't always find in a more fixed orchestral setting.

Several of this season's programmes, for example Haydn's *The Seasons*, Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, even Negrón's *Marejada*, are rooted in ideas of nature and environment. When you conduct music like this in a place like Carmel, does the landscape change the way you hear it?

Yes, I think it does. When you are in Carmel, you are constantly aware of nature – the ocean, the light, the air. It becomes part of how you experience the music. It invites you to hear each piece as rooted in its own landscape. In *The Seasons*, for example, we are also bringing in a contemporary piece by Nils Henrik Asheim, *Muhta – Language of Snow*, which explores the many words for snow in Sami culture. It brings another kind of

landscape into the programme, a northern one, and creates a dialogue with Haydn.

In the final programme, with Negrón's *Marejada*, Copland and Beethoven, we also move through different ways of experiencing nature, from the very immediate to something more symbolic. So yes, the place influences how you hear. It's not something separate; it's part of the whole experience.

Thinking about the impact of your first five years, what would you like the Carmel Bach Festival to feel like, both for the musicians who return each summer and for the audiences who experience it?

I feel that the festival is in a very good place at the moment. There is a sense of energy. More people are coming, and there is a kind of enthusiasm around it. For me, it's about continuing to build on that. To keep the openness, the curiosity and the sense that this is something we create together. What I would like is that both musicians and audiences feel that this is a place where something meaningful happens. Not only beautiful performances, but something that can also challenge, or comfort, or give energy.

We are living in uncertain times, and for me, music and art are more important than ever. They help us to process things, to find joy, but also to mourn, to reflect. And to experience that together, in a live space, is very special. To be in the same room, breathing the same air – it doesn't matter if you are on stage or in the audience. You are part of the same thing. That, for me, is what the festival should be.

Carmel Bach Festival 2026

Dates: 11–25 July 2026

Theme: The nature of sound

Highlights include:

- Haydn's *The Seasons* paired with Nils Henrik Asheim's *Muhta – Language of Snow*
- Bach Cantata No. 214 alongside works by Purcell, Rebel and Kaija Saariaho
- Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* and Handel's *Water Music*
- Bach at Sunset featuring Cantatas Nos. 39 and 105
- *Nature's Poet* at Carmel Mission Basilica
- Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony with Copland's *Appalachian Spring* and Angélica Negrón's *Marejada*
- Special event: Counterpoint with Conrad Tao and Caleb Teicher

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