

Published January 29th, 2014

## History of the Symphony Comes to LLLC Instructor shares his unique musical perspective

Submitted by Franette Armstrong



John Prescott Photo provided

A six-week course that is guaranteed to open the ears of even the most seasoned concert-goer begins at Lafayette Library Jan. 30. That's because it will be taught by John Prescott, Ph.D., a musician who comes at the world of music solely from the listener's perspective.

Prescott was born blind. He can't see a score or even the instruments he plays. But when his mom discovered he had perfect pitch she set him down in front of a piano. You might wonder how parents can tell if their child has a gift like that. Well, Prescott told them.

"My grandmother went to Europe, bought two sets of door chimes and gave one to my parents," he recalls. Later the two sets got switched. "I was emphatic that my folks had the wrong chimes. One was a G chord and the other an F, although I didn't know the names of the chords then." He was 2-and-a-half.

From identifying notes by ear on the piano, to playing and performing the violin, and later the harpsichord and harp, Prescott's life has been the sound of music ever since. He went to Carlton College in Minnesota, spent his junior year at Oxford, England, and returned to graduate magna cum laude. He then

received a scholarship to study for two years at Cambridge, England and returned to the United States and UC Berkeley for his master's and doctoral degrees in musicology.

How does a blind musician learn and remember complex symphonic scores? "Everyone thinks you need to be able to read a score to play it, but I don't even use braille notation; I learn everything by ear and I remember it as sound. I hear the harmonies in my head but I feel the notes under my fingers, almost as if I'm playing them on the piano."

Prescott received his first companion dog at age 19 and now has his fourth, Joelle, a beautiful black Labrador. Part of her training was to attend concerts to make sure she wouldn't howl at the music.

"Joelle now knows more about music history than any dog has the right to know," he says.

In addition to performing, Prescott lectures and teaches music history and appreciation to students of all ages.

He will come to Lafayette Library Jan. 30 to teach his third course for UC Berkeley's Osher Lifelong Learning Program. Each week he'll take participants on a musical visit with one of the six major composers who have shaped symphonic music. He'll play the piano to illustrate concepts.

New OLLI Classes in Lafayette

Three new six-week courses from UC Berkeley's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute begin this week at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center:

War, Peace and the Media, taught by the famed journalist and author, Reese Erlich, analyzes U.S. military involvements in Syria, Iran and Cuba and how media shapes our knowledge and opinions of them from 1 to 3 p.m. Tuesdays.

History of the Symphony takes participants on an auditory journey to visit six major composers who have shaped concert music over the last 250 years. John Prescott, noted music historian, teaches the course from 10 a.m. to noon Thursdays.

German Literature and Film of the Weimar Republic explores the creative renaissance in Germany after WWI through works such as "Threepenny Opera," "Siddhartha" and more. Instructor Marion Gerlind is German and has taught in this field for over 20 years from 1 to 3 p.m. Thursdays.

For more information, visit [olli.berkeley.edu](http://olli.berkeley.edu) or call (510) 642-9934.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

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