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UHY Advisors has become a corporate supporter of Mercury Baroque and Meril Markley, International Tax Principal, has recently joined the organization's Board. NLS Express sat down with Meril to find out more about the ensemble and UHY Advisors' desire to support it.

### **Tell us a bit about Mercury Baroque.**

It is a Houston-based orchestra dedicated to the performance of music of the Baroque Period as it sounded when that music was new, from the end of the 16th century to the mid-18th century. By playing instruments dating from the Baroque Period, or faithful reproductions, Mercury Baroque has developed programs committed to blending the familiar with the unknown – a winning combination for attracting and retaining a dedicated base of



subscribers and an audience whose enthusiasm for this music is rivaled only by that of the musicians themselves. Performances in smaller halls, such as the Wortham Center's Cullen Theater and the Performing Arts Center at the John Cooper School in the Woodlands, recreate the intimacy between audience and performers similar to that of the court theaters and the royal salons for which the music was composed. There is also the ability to hear the unique sounds of instruments, such as the viola da gamba or harpsichord, whose dynamic range is limited compared to modern orchestral instruments. You don't have to be a professional musician or a long-time devotee of classical music to embrace what Mercury Baroque offers. The music is approachable and enjoyable on many levels, with ticket prices at a point that is affordable for people to sample a performance or two and become subscribers. This year Mercury Baroque celebrates its 10th anniversary and its development into one of the nation's leading period instrument ensembles.

### **What makes this music and Mercury Baroque important to you as a UHY professional?**

Being a tax person was not my first choice of careers. I started out as a musician, a coloratura soprano based in Vienna, Austria. Back then, few Baroque Period works were performed, and if they were, it was more in the guise of an academic exercise. Musicians worked hard at getting the notes right, in the context of performance practice of the period, in what were often bloodless renditions of music intended by its creators to be passionate and exciting. Since then, Baroque Music has become mainstream, with that passion and excitement embodied in Mercury Baroque's performances.

While I am no longer a regular performer, classical music will always be an indispensable part of my life, especially Baroque Music, whose rich textures and intriguing harmonies I adore. There is so much music yet to be discovered and I love that Mercury Baroque has been bringing it to Texas audiences – especially two of my favorite composers, Jean-Philippe Rameau and Georg Philipp Telemann, less well-known than the perennial favorites, Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi.

I should add that Baroque Music and Tax Consulting are not as irreconcilable as you might think. The music can be highly complex and ornamented, not unlike our Internal Revenue Code. In fact, when I have a particularly tough issue to solve, I find that putting on a recording of Johann Sebastian Bach's Suites for Solo Cello helps me to sort it out. Something in the music propels my brain into more logical and focused reasoning!

### **With so many arts organizations in Houston, why were you drawn to get more involved with Mercury Baroque?**

*Board members of Mercury Baroque pictured (l-r) are Dr. Robert Sanborn, Immediate Past President; Susan Carlyle, M.D., President (standing); Deborah Lugo, Executive Director; and Antoine Plante, Artistic Director.*

My participation resulted from encountering Antoine Plante, Mercury Baroque's Conductor and Artistic Director, at a luncheon hosted by the French American Chamber of Commerce. Hearing him speak, I was intrigued by how the ensemble had grown from a core group of Shepherd School graduates to an orchestra playing subscription concert series and with a commitment to community outreach programs, especially geared to young musicians. His passion for this music, along with his commitment to performing it in the Greater Houston area, was infectious. At the same time and as a business person, I was attracted by Mercury Baroque's dedication to growth through responsible budgeting; the organization having remained in the black since its inception, despite the economic downturn. The more I got to know Antoine and the executive staff, including Deborah Lugo, Tom Richards, and Jordan Witherspoon, the more I wanted to be part of helping them to reach a wider audience, especially in the Woodlands where Mercury Baroque gave its first subscription concert in December of 2009. With their urging, I ventured out of the comfort zone of my office and into the community while helping with new marketing efforts, such as orchestra members playing on a Saturday afternoon at a gourmet food emporium, spurring ticket sales amid the clementines and the sushi!



My involvement also stems from concern about the future of classical music in America. Audiences have been shrinking, leading opera companies and symphonies all over the U.S. to cut back or shut down, even before the recent economic downturn. Mercury Baroque, playing to halls filled with enthusiastic supporters of all ages, banished my despair. Young people seem fascinated by the instruments and flock to chat with the musicians after performances to learn more about how the instruments were made and how challenging they are to play. With education as a core value, as reflected in its School Outreach Program, Mercury Baroque is bucking the trend and leading a resurgence of interest in classical music while nurturing the performers of tomorrow and the audiences who will support them. My husband and I decided that we wanted to be a part of these efforts and support Mercury Baroque in ways beyond sitting in the audience and enjoying the performances.

### **What can folks look forward to this season?**

Right now, Mercury Baroque is in France for five performances of Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera "Armide" at a theater on the outskirts of Paris. It is exceptional for an American ensemble to be performing the music of one of the Baroque period's most innovative composers only a few miles from where the work was premiered in 1686 at the Palais Royal.

The subscription season commences in Houston on October 9 with "Exotique," featuring works by Lully and that other giant of the French Baroque, Jean-Philippe Rameau. This season offers favorites such as Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," along with less familiar works reflecting a compulsion to discover, perform, and record music that has been silent for centuries. A prime example of that is Vivaldi's opera "Montezuma" about the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. The score was re-discovered less than a decade ago and Mercury Baroque's concert version of the opera, to be performed November 20, marks the Texas premiere of this long-forgotten work.

Mercury Baroque's performances of George Frideric Handel's "Messiah" – whether the full score or the highlights associated with Christmas – have become staples of Houston's music offerings for the holiday season.

Next spring brings "A Night in Madrid" featuring music of Luigi Boccherini, an Italian composer who spent much of his career in Spain. A transitional figure between the Baroque and Classical Periods, Boccherini is the ideal prelude to the final concert of the season, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, a composer at the pinnacle of the Classical Period. It is not as if a switch was thrown and composers who had grown up on Baroque Music suddenly decided to compose in a Classical Period style using instruments of a more modern orchestra. So hearing Mozart's works on period instruments should provide audiences with a fresh appreciation for this genius who packed so many great compositions into his short lifespan.

Such innovative programming is a hallmark of Mercury Baroque, but I won't give away all that's in store for audiences this season. I encourage NLS Express readers to visit the website <http://www>.

[mercurybaroque.org](http://mercurybaroque.org) and discover more about what is coming.

### **How does Mercury Baroque fit in with UHY Advisors' commitment to our community?**

UHY Advisors, through the time and efforts of the people who work here, has always been involved in supporting community organizations, volunteering and providing financial support as well. With Mercury Baroque, we can devote ourselves to two areas of interest – the Fine Arts and Education – fundamental not only for enriching the cultural offerings in our community, but also for shaping the young people who may someday choose a career with UHY Advisors.

As to why UHY Advisors and Mercury Baroque should team up, I think Antoine Plante said it best. "We are delighted to welcome UHY Advisors as a supporter of Mercury Baroque. There is much in common between an orchestra and a professional services firm – we both need to do an outstanding job of interpreting difficult material, providing practical guidance on challenging projects, staying in tune with our audience, and hoping that audiences stay with us from year to year! With that in mind, we look forward to a long and fruitful relationship with UHY Advisors."

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