

Biking to Bach (at Noon); Allentown children make pilgrimage to hear classical concert



The Community Bike Works program rode from their headquarters on Madison Street to the St. John's Lutheran Church on Fifth Street in downtown Allentown on Tuesday, July, 11, 2016.

(CAMERON HART / THE MORNING CALL)

Steve Siegel Special to The Morning Call

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A bike ride of a few city blocks to hear a performance of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem is considerably shorter than the 250 miles young J.S. Bach supposedly walked in 1705 to hear his hero Dieterich Buxtehude play the organ. But as with any pilgrimage for the love of music, distance really isn't the point.

The story of Bach trekking from his home church in Arnstadt, Germany, to Lubeck to hear Buxtehude probably is gleaned from the same book as your grandfather's tale of walking 30 miles to school every day in a snowstorm, uphill both ways.

On Tuesday, a group of 13 kids aged 9 to 17 really did grab their bikes and go the mile and a half or so from Community Bike Works on North Madison Street in Allentown to St. John's Lutheran Church on Fifth Street for the three free Bach at Noon summertime concerts in Allentown, presented by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

The outing was the result of a collaboration between the Bach Choir, St. John's Church and Community Bike Works, an organization that uses bicycles, peer role models and adult mentors to provide inner-city kids meaningful work-ethic alternatives to gangs, drugs and the streets. Started in 1995 at Sixth and Turner streets, the organization moved to its present location in 2000. Last year it expanded to Allentown's East Side at the Mosser Village Family Center.

Community Bike Works serves nearly 360 students each year with youth development programs, the flagship of which is the “Earn a Bike” program, in which students learn bike mechanics and safety while practicing reading, writing, teamwork and work-ethic skills. The organization accepts donated bicycles in any condition, which the kids work on and repair. At the end of the 12-week course, they earn their refurbished bicycle, complete with a new helmet.

“The kids must commit to 24 hours of work with mentors fixing bikes,” says program manager James Williams. “What we like to say is, ‘life lessons through bike mechanics.’ The evening classes are largely volunteer, with instructors from throughout the Lehigh Valley. Some are bike enthusiasts, some just like working with kids to make a difference.”

While the group organizes multiple bike rides each week, including mountain biking, trips to the [Lehigh Valley Velodrome](#), and outings on local bike trails, Tuesday’s ride to hear a classical concert was a first. Bike Works volunteer Bob Boehret, who also happens to be Bach Choir director Greg Funfgeld’s brother-in-law, discussed the possibility of arranging such a jaunt with Funfgeld for a couple of years.



“It’s a great experience for these kids to get exposure to music and the arts,” says Boehret, who, along with Williams, was one of the leaders on the ride. “They really seemed to love it, even though it’s a strange setting for these inner-city kids to sit through for nearly an hour.”

The group was seated in the front row, just a few feet from the orchestra. “Sure, some might have gotten a little fidgety toward the end, but they were really blown away by a number of things,” Boehret says. “Some noticed the stained glass windows of the church and the organ pipes going up to the ceiling. There was one kid sitting next to me enthusiastically waving his arms as if conducting the orchestra — he just loved the faster pace of the pieces.”

One of the kids who really loved the experience was 14-year-old Nashira Brown, a Bike Works student leader. “I really liked everything that went on, and how they introduced us. It was also really cool to be able to park our bikes up front, right against the altar,” says Nashira, who attends Raub Middle School in Allentown.

The concert the kids attended followed the familiar Bach at Noon format of a 50-minute program that included one choral and one instrumental work. As requested by St. John's, the concert celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, with a festive performance of Bach's famous Cantata 80, "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott" (A Mighty Fortress is Our God). Vocal soloists were Rosa Lamoreaux, soprano; Barbara Hollinshead, alto; Robert Petillo, tenor, and Steven Combs, bass.

The instrumental work was the Concerto in A Major, BWV 1055, with teenage pianist Kristina Moditch, a frequent Bach at Noon performer. Born in Allentown in 2000, Moditch lives with her parents in Moscow, where she studies at the Moscow Conservatory.

The church was packed, with the usual Bach at Noon audience bolstered not only by the Bike Works contingent, but also a group of K-12 teachers from across the United States participating in a program exploring the music of Bach and the Reformation churches, presented by Moravian College. Funfgeld gave his usual introductory talk before the concert, with a special effort to speak to the bikers.

"I felt personally that the lady closest to the conductor could really sing, and I thought that I'd love to be in her position someday," says Nashira, referring to soprano Lamoreaux. "I also thought they really carried themselves well, especially when they all sang together. And that 17-year-old girl from Moscow was great. I really loved her dress."

While classical music was something new to most of the kids, Nashira is a real classical fan, rattling off the names of Mozart and Beethoven, as well as Bach, as her favorite composers. "I'm really into music myself, and I love classical music. Before a big test, like before I go to sleep, I'll put on Mozart or Beethoven and like just fall asleep to it. It helps me relax," she says.

Nashira has been a youth volunteer with Bike Works for almost four years. In addition to working with kids in the evening "Earn a Bike" program, she helps younger kids develop their reading and writing skills in the summer daytime classes. She also participates in Bike Work's group rides.

"You'd think one wouldn't be able to make much of a difference in a 12-week program, but it's amazing what can happen," says Boehret, who's been volunteering in the "Earn a Bike" program for nearly six years. "One of our activities is a 'bike rodeo,' where the kids practice riding skills and bicycle safety. I had a fifth-grade girl in one group who had never ridden a bike before, and the kids were making fun of her. I insisted she would be able to learn, but she kept saying no, I can't do it. After 45 seconds with me holding one side of her bike and another instructor the other, she was riding as well as any of the others. When her mother picked her up, this girl was just ecstatic. To see the smile on that kid's face was a thrill I'll never forget."

Says Funfgeld, "I thought the whole thing went just great, and all those bikes placed around the altar with the helmets hanging from the handlebars was a wonderful way of consecrating the whole experience for the kids. It was a beautiful image, and gave the event a sense of pilgrimage."

Funfgeld hopes biking for Bach will become an annual event. “Now I’ll have to figure out a way that I can finish the rehearsals soon enough to ride over there on my own bike,” he says.

DETAILS

‘Bach at Noon’

When: Final concert is at 12:10 p.m. Aug. 8

Where: St. John’s Lutheran Church, 37 S. Fifth St., Allentown

How much: Free

What else: information on Community Bike Works, see www.communitybikeworks.org or call 610-434-1140.

Info: bach.org, 610-866-4382

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