

Lucid Culture JAZZ, CLASSICAL MUSIC AND THE ARTS IN NEW YORK CITY

Christmas in Bethlehem by Alan Young - December 14, 2015

If there's any community in the United States that can claim the vast legacy of Johann Sebastian Bach, it's in Pennsylvania Dutch country. The city of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, with its rustic Moravian stone architecture and vestiges of decades as a rust belt mainstay, sits about two hours outside of New York. Comparable in size to Cleveland, it's home to one of this country's most popular annual Bach festivals. Last night in the comfortably lit confines of the city's First Presbyterian Church, its good burghers had come out to hear the Bach Choir and Festival Orchestra of Bethlehem (<http://www.bach.org>) perform the first three parts of Bach's Christmas Oratorio for the first time in ten years.

An unselfconscious joy and optimism radiated from the stage to the crowd: neither ensemble nor audience were the least bit blasé. Nor should they have been. The Christmas Oratorio doesn't have the stormy gusts and restless intensity of, say, Bach's St. John Passion; this late-career epic is a sleekly detailed, confidently interwoven celebration of the triumph of the human spirit, Teutonic 18th century style. That's exactly how this group delivered it, letting their enthusiasm shine through its endless series of interchanges without getting carried away. It was calm excitement, an eye-opening time capsule, not just to the era when this music was created, but to a less virtual time in American history when performances like these were just as much about the fabric of a region as about spectacle. "Try to imagine being in Leipzig in 1734 and hearing this music for the very first time," conductor Greg Funfgeld entreated the sold-out house, although he might just as well have been talking about 1901, when an earlier version of this same group – America's oldest Bach choir – performed this suite in its entirety for the first time.

Soloists were strong and distinctly individual. Soprano Ellen McAteer (<http://www.ellenmcateer.ca>) got the most out of her brief time in the spotlight with a calmly steely precision. Countertenor Daniel Taylor (<http://www.danieltaylor.ca>) got the most of anyone and made his challenging flights up into the clouds look easy. Tenor Isaiah Bel (<http://isaiahbell.com>) confidently channeled the music's optimism, as did bass-baritone David Newman (<http://davidnewman.info>), whose unassuming smile and irrepressible good cheer were contagious.

The orchestra displayed a calm cohesion amid the swirl, bringing Bach's breathtakingly inventive voicings and textures into crystalline focus: the old organist just couldn't resist pairing, say, cello and bassoon for a spot-on facsimile of a krummhorn organ stop. Ingenious echo effects, fusillades of call-and-response pinballing through the choir, elegant pairings of voices and solo instruments, pensively waltzing interludes and a couple of mighty swells just short of bursting with contentment combined to evoke shepherds and angels and an anxious mother-to-be all awaiting one expectant moment, the mystical as vividly personal. To reinforce that, after the Bach was finally done, there was a singalong of three carols – in German, for authenticity's sake, many of the concertgoers joining in. For New Yorkers and other residents in the northeast who didn't have the good fortune to catch a ride out for this performance, the concert was recorded and will be broadcast in its entirety on WWFM (<http://www.wwfm.org>) on Christmas day.

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem's next concert (<http://www.bach.org/season.php>) is February 28 at 3 PM as part of a festival of youth choirs at the arts center at Lehigh University in Bethlehem. They're also performing the St. John Passion on March 20 at 4 PM at First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem at 2344 Center St.

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