

Meet a Donor: Greg Funfgeld, Bach Choir of Bethlehem

By: [Mike Rowan](#)

Each month, Chorus America has been profiling one of our members in our new *Meet A Member* series. For December, to mark the season of giving, we changed things up a little bit and interviewed one of Chorus America's long-time donors: **Greg Funfgeld**, artistic director of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

Why do you give?

GF: Part of what I think is important in life is what you give back. I care a great deal about people who sing. I work with middle and high school kids at church, and the Bach Choir works with a lot of high school and college students. We see these sparks of creative energy and excitement, the thrill of singing and making music in community.

As the saying about the church goes, you're always one generation away from extinction. You've got to create the next generation of singers. I look at some of my kids and they're so serious about their singing and they're so excited. And you think "What better thing can I give a kid than that kind of connection and sense of purpose?" It really elevates and uplifts them.

You try to give back to your students and your singers, but also to give back to an organization like Chorus America is terribly important. In a world that becomes more and more fragile and vulnerable, where perhaps people are feeling more insular or the need to withdraw, the kinds of connections and the kind of community that you experience in a chorus is wonderful.

What convinced you to donate to Chorus America?

GF: I'd say a couple things. One was Ann Meier Baker. She is one of the finest people in an administrative role that I've ever met. And so to be inspired by her was a great impetus for me. And, I know and have worked with so many people in the organization – I studied as an undergraduate at Westminster Choir College with Alice Parker – and running into Alice at the Conference, I just adore that woman. I could go on and on, but these are all people that I admire and respect so much. You're in such a wonderful company of people.

The work that Chorus America does in opening doors to the choral world and to singing together in community is a precious gift. So I would encourage all Chorus America constituents to support the organization, not only by being great choral ambassadors and wonderful colleagues, but also by writing a check. Whatever it takes to keep making that happen and supporting Chorus America, we should all be doing it.

What is one major challenge in the choral field that you see Chorus America helping choruses face?

GF: One thing that concerns me with young people is less emphasis in so many of our schools on the choral variety of singing. I'm not against musical theater certainly, but here in the Lehigh Valley, it has become the tail that wags the dog. Kids are consumed by this, and I think kids lose the particular skill that's part of choral singing, and the joy that comes with it. It's different than being a star on Broadway and having everything amplified—the heart of choral music is not enhanced by that experience.

Can you tell us about a time when you felt especially proud to be a Chorus America donor?

GF: At the Conferences, when you see young professionals who are just getting started mingling with folks who have been around for a long time—and everyone in between—you think, this is such a healthy environment for people to be a part of. It's not just the young bucks taking off on their own, or a stuffy atmosphere simply to puff up the old guard. There's a tremendous reciprocity and mutual dynamic to what goes on there. It's a very enriching thing for a donor to see an organization supporting young people on their way up and continuing to honor and celebrate those who have been doing it for a long time.

What got you hooked on choral music?

GF: I remember growing up singing as a young person in a Lutheran Church on Long Island. My church had a very good program, and that was a place where I wanted to immerse myself. There were five choirs and I grew up with people who loved to sing—those people were my closest friends in school.

Later, the music director of my church would take me to commencement at Westminster Choir College every year. When you go in there and you hear all those students singing, that is a thrilling thing that gets your blood pumping. And then, the joy of starting to work with singers. Singing has been part of my life for so long.

What interesting experiences are part of your choral background?

GF: At Westminster I was the first male student that Helen Kemp took. She was the first voice teacher I had. She took only sopranos in her voice studio at Westminster. But I said, "I have to take voice lessons and I only want to take them from you," and she said ok. She and [her husband,] John were very dear friends of mine. I can't say enough about her, and I know she's been an inspiration to so many people.

Every once in a while, I used to do the summer session at Westminster with Robert Shaw. The first time I learned the Bach *Mass in B Minor* was with Robert. As a senior I accompanied the symphonic choir and I played the piano rehearsals for the *Missa Solemnis* for Shaw – which on the one hand was terrifying because he could be really unkind to accompanists, but it was exhilarating because I worked my butt off. I was filled with fear and trepidation, and a healthy sense of respect.



*The Bach Choir of Bethlehem has an extraordinarily rich historical connection with J.S. Bach.
Photo by Ryan Hulvat.*

What excites you about working with the Bach Choir of Bethlehem today?

GF: This is a wonderful tradition that started in 1898. There's an amazing connection with Bach and Bethlehem. The earliest known Bach reception in America was in 1823 – a performance of *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A Mighty Fortress is our God), and the manuscript still exists in the Central Moravian Church archives. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* [which the chorus is preparing to sing this weekend] had its first American performance in Bethlehem, done by the Bach Choir back in 1901. It's a particular joy to come back to that.

We're very devoted to the music and we've had a very good expansion and enrichment of what we're doing. We have a very ambitious educational outreach program. Last year we led a project where a dozen high school kids worked with their own instruments to create their own variations based on the great Chaconne from Bach's *Partita for Violin No. 2*. We've been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and a Bach foundation in Switzerland for the education work that we're doing, and giving this music to young people and getting them excited about it.

When you take off your choral hat, what else is an important part of your life?

GF: Well, my family. I have two wonderful daughters and a fabulous wife. And I'm the oldest of seven children, and there are 14 grandchildren in the family. We try to stay connected and we like to travel. I'm also a very enthusiastic wine collector. We're always thinking about a great meal and a great bottle of wine, and sharing that. I love the biblical image of the fellowship of the meal—being with friends or family, the conversation, and that kind of relaxation.