

# Review: 'Nightingale' at Bethlehem Bach Festival elaborate, colorful and unique in its use of puppets



Mock Turtle Marionette director Doug Roysdon with a puppet from the Bethlehem Bach Festival production of 'The Nightingale.'

(HUB WILLSON / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

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Special to The Morning Call

It's a curious quirk of Nature that a dull, mud-brown bird is responsible for one of the loveliest sounds in the forest. The colorful voice of the nightingale makes us overlook the drab tinge of its feathers. Such was the case on Saturday morning at Zoellner Arts Center in Bethlehem, when the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra, in collaboration with Bethlehem's Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre, presented its own colorful "Nightingale," and made one forget the cold, grey day outside.

"The Nightingale," a production in song, puppets and costumes, is a unique adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's timeless fairy tale of 1843. The first collaboration of the Bach Choir with the Mock Turtle, it received its premiere at the choir's Family Concert in February.

In Andersen's original story, an ancient emperor of China prefers the tinkling of a bejeweled mechanical bird to the song of a real nightingale. When the emperor is near death, it is the real nightingale's song that restores his health when the mechanical bird breaks down.

The tale was told through dialogue, action, and music, with a musical interlude between each of the seven scenes, and excellent narration by Grace Spruiell Hochella providing continuity. Mock Turtle director Doug Roysdon altered the setting to J.S. Bach's 18th century Germany, a fact not especially obvious from the set or dialogue. Yet this, I think, is a plus, for it gave the production more of a universal, it-can-happen-anywhere kind of appeal.

The elaborate production featured 10 beautifully carved and colorfully costumed marionettes, each nearly four feet tall, and each requiring two puppeteers to animate – one to provide the voice, another the movement. The marvelously garish and fanciful mechanical nightingale that briefly captures the Emperor's favor took three puppeteers to operate.

The voice of the nightingale was lovingly provided by recorder virtuoso Tricia van Oers, who switched among soprano, sopranino, and alto recorders during the show. Dressed in the suitably earthen colors of a real nightingale, she interacted with the marionettes in a truly virtuoso performance of trills, flutters, and double tonguing. Her reading of François Couperin's "Le Rossignol en Amour" (The Nightingale in Love) was as sweet and melancholy as it gets, and "Engels Nachtigaltje" by Jacob van Eyck was an amazing tour de force of subtle variations and intricate ornamentation.

Roysdon, who was marvelous as the character of the Emperor, provided many humorous twists. The four comically scary witches who constantly torment the Emperor seem to have come right out of the cauldron scene in "Macbeth." An evil Music Master, one of a number of roles delightfully played by Touchstone's Anna Russell, threatens the nightingale with an "I'll get you, my pretty" as chillingly as any wicked witch from Oz ever could.

The music was just as colorful as the nightingale's song. The Bach Choir, along with the Bach Festival Orchestra, beautifully delivered selections from Bach's Cantatas 201 and 208, as well as gallant choruses from the Christmas Oratorio. Funfgeld gave a lovely solo harpsichord performance of Canon IV from "Art of the Fugue," and Bach Festival Orchestra concertmaster Elizabeth Field was frightfully superb in William Bolcom's swinging "Graceful Ghost Rag."

The program opened with a performance by the Bel Canto Children's Chorus in their first solo appearance on the Bach Festival stage. Bach Choir director Greg Funfgeld conducted the chorus, since Bel Canto director Joy Hirokawa, a faculty member at Moravian College, was taking part in Moravian's commencement program that morning.

The program, with works by Bach, Bernstein, Chilcott, Daley, and Wise, really showed off the chorus' remarkable ensemble skills. Three movements from Bach's Motet "Jesus, meine Freude," BWV 227, were accompanied by a continuo comprised of cellist Loretta O'Sullivan and pianist Andrea Bernsten, who also served as a capable accompanist in the rest of the program. The young singers admirably defined the four-part harmonization in the two chorales and the three parts in the trio, making it all sound simpler than it was.

Bel Canto's wonderful performance of "A Simple Song" from Bernstein's "Mass" showed that what sounds on the surface like a simple pop song has many levels to it. "Simple Song" alternates unexpectedly between major and minor keys, with occasional disarming complex dissonance. The sweet innocence with which the chorus dispatched with it all was a real treat.

The chorus delivered Raymond Wise's spirited, three-part setting of "Lord Send Your Spirit" with real gospel choir enthusiasm, and proved equally adept at the multi-part harmonization and canon-like texture of Canadian composer Eleanor Daley's delightful "Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle."

The production will be repeated at 10:30 a.m. Saturday as part of the second weekend of the Bethlehem Bach Festival, which continues Friday and Saturday. Tickets are \$25. Info: [bach.org](http://bach.org).

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