

Bel Canto Children's Chorus joins Bethlehem's Bach Choir in new alliance



The Bel Canto Children's Chorus has moved to the Lehigh Valley to form an alliance with the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, renaming itself the Bel Canto Children's Chorus of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem. (BEL CANTO CHILDREN'S CHORUS / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Steve Siegel

Special to The Morning Call

BETHLEHEM — For nearly 120 years, the Lehigh Valley has been home to America's oldest Bach choir — the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

Now the choir is welcoming some new kids to the block. The Montgomery County-based Bel Canto Children's Chorus has moved its operational center to the Lehigh Valley and formed an alliance with the Bach Choir, renaming itself the Bel Canto Children's Chorus of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

That's quite a mouthful. The alliance is the choral equivalent of a marriage made in heaven.

"It was really amazing, sheer serendipity," says Bach Choir Executive Director Bridget George. "In our strategic planning meetings, the choir had been talking about doing something to give us a longer-term relationship with a group of younger people. There are many aspects to our educational outreach, such as Bach at Noon, Bach to School, and our Family Concert collaborations. But we wanted to do more for training future choral singers in a longer-term way."

For years the choir had looked into the possibility of starting its own children's choir, or finding an existing one it could have a more permanent relationship with. So imagine George's surprise when she got a call last summer from Joy Hirokawa, founder and director of the Bel Canto Children's Chorus in Red Hill.

"Joy wanted to arrange a meeting — I had no idea what it was about," George says. "She told me the chorus was planning a move to the Lehigh Valley, and wondered if we were interested in having them come under the Bach Choir umbrella. It was such an amazing synchronicity."

Hirokawa, who has been teaching music education courses at Moravian College since 2008, founded Bel Canto in 1993. Children's choirs had been growing rapidly in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. In the early 1990s, Hirokawa, a teacher in the Upper Perkiomen School District, had an opportunity to help set up a U.S. tour of the Jitro Children's Choir of Czechoslovakia. Inspired by the amazing beauty of their voices, she decided to create an auditioned ensemble of her own.

"Even though a true children's chorus employs unchanged voices, maybe going up to the eighth grade, Bel Canto still retains the name children's chorus, even though we go through high school, right up to the 12th grade," Hirokawa says. "I don't ask the boys to leave when their voices change. My feeling is if they can continue to sing in their upper register comfortably, they can still sing with us."

Bel Canto currently includes 50 singers in grades 2 to 12, and is structured to accommodate different levels of ability. Its highest level is the concert choir, and within it is a smaller chamber choir of about a dozen singers who visit area schools. An intermediate-level training choir is composed of children in grades 2 to 6.

Bach Choir Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld had admired the Bel Canto group for years, and has been collaborating with it since 2012. That's when the Bach Choir presented Benjamin Britten's cantata "St. Nicolas" at its annual Christmas concert with the group singing. The following year the Bel Canto Children's Chorus joined the Bach Choir in recording "A Child's Christmas in Bethlehem," released on the Analekta label. At this year's Bethlehem Bach Festival, the Bel Canto singers participated in expanded pre-concert performances that also featured the Young People's Philharmonic Brass Ensemble and members of the Lehigh Valley Suzuki Violin Program.

"It was like the planets had aligned," says Hirokawa. "We have had these wonderful experiences with the Bach Choir over the last several years. It was so serendipitous that when we were talking to Bridget last summer about a possible move to the Lehigh Valley, she said, you know, this is just what we've been thinking about. So it all evolved from there."

Before its first collaboration with Bel Canto in 2012, when the Bach Choir needed a children's chorus it had to either form its own ad hoc group, or find an existing choir that met its high standards. "When we performed a Bach work that required a children's chorus, the greatest of all being the St. Matthew Passion, we'd have to create a choir of our own," says Funfgeld. "In 1984 we auditioned 200 children from all around the Lehigh Valley for that work. More recently, we were using the Berks Classical Children's Chorus in our performances."

Since its founding, the Bel Canto Children's Chorus has been a model of diversity. Hirokawa doesn't just teach the music, but the young people learn about the music, the people who wrote it, the people it was written about, and their culture. The philosophy of stressing the meaning of the text as much as the quality of the singing is something Hirokawa shares with Funfgeld.

"We really try to cultivate a communal sense of music making within the ensemble. I believe if the kids are committed to each other and have a sense of community and belonging, they sing better," Hirokawa says. "We try to build inclusivity and diversity within our music, but we have not been able to be diverse in our actual choir membership representation because of where we are presently located."

Moving to the Lehigh Valley, Hirokawa says, will give the chorus access to a larger, more diversified population. "It will also provide an opportunity for kids whose parents might not be able to drive them down to Red Hill for rehearsals," she says. Not only will the chorus have access to a larger group of young people here, it will have greater visibility, benefiting from the Bach Choir's strong administrative and marketing experience.

"So if you want to make such changes, you have to move. Change is always hard — this was not a quick decision on our part. We had been mulling it over for several years. But there is so much more opportunity to do

collaborative projects up here, and work with other organizations that we just don't have where we are now," says Hirokawa.

"As excited as we are, the hardest part of the move has been the fact we have so many committed families who live to the south, some with kids who have sung with the chorus for literally 10 years."

Bel Canto is looking forward to an exciting and busy season. Its first official appearance under the Bach Choir umbrella will be the Bach Choir's 2016 Family Concert Feb. 28 at Zoellner Arts Center. The Bel Canto Chorus will be one of four choirs from across the Lehigh Valley participating in a program that features works by Bach, Handel and Thompson. A select group of young singers chosen from each of the choirs will sing Bach's motet "Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden" (Praise the Lord all ye nations).

On April 9 and 10 at Miller Symphony Hall, Bel Canto will join the Allentown Symphony Orchestra in Carl Orff's monumental "Carmina Burana." Then on April 12, Bel Canto and the Allentown Band travel to Carnegie Hall in New York City to perform at the New York International Music Festival. The chorus also will perform on its own programs.

Special this year will be the Lehigh Valley area premiere of Linda Tutas Haugen's "Anne Frank: A Living Voice," on May 4 at Tiferet Bet Israel Synagogue in Blue Bell, in recognition of [Holocaust Remembrance Day](#).

"It's an amazing piece in seven movements that uses text from Anne Frank's diary. What's so interesting is that Haugen uses the text in sort of a timeline, so you can see the evolution of her thinking over the course of her two years of hiding. It's very powerful music with heavy emotional content," Hirokawa says. The group is planning a tour of the Netherlands in June, and will perform the work in several cities, including Amsterdam, where the Frank family took refuge from the Nazis during World War II.

Will having the name of Bach in Bel Canto's new moniker change its programming in any way? "Bridget stressed the importance of putting the music of Bach somewhere in our repertoire," Hirokawa says. "I told her that's a no-brainer for me, since every year we've done at least one Bach piece. The kids learn so much about music when they sing Bach."

Funfgeld describes the way Bel Canto and the Bach Choir have come together as a "confluence of happy circumstances."

"There's a Bach cantata with the words 'Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit,' which means 'God's time is the very best time,'" he says. "I think we've just had to wait for the right time for this to happen. It's the right time, the right thing, and the right people. I expect wonderful and exciting things to come of it."