

Bach Choir glorious in Bach's Christmas Oratorio



Dave Howell

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In 1901, the Choir presented the American premiere of the Christmas Oratorio. The Bach Choir reprised J.S. Bach's Christmas Oratorio Saturday and Sunday in glorious form, led by Greg Funfgeld. At the second annual Bethlehem Bach Festival in 1901, the Choir presented the American premiere of the work, but has not done parts 1, 2, and 3 for over 10 years. There was a full house Sunday afternoon at First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem. The concert, which was recorded for national broadcast, followed Saturday night's performance at First Presbyterian Church of Allentown.

The Oratorio told the story of Christ's birth as written by Luke, using the choir and four guest solo vocalists. The Bach Festival Orchestra of nearly 30 players provided some instrumental passages. It was in German, but the dual language program made it fairly easy to follow along.

Part 1 opened with the choir of over 80 singers and the sound of strings, trumpet (soloist Gerald Serfass), and timpani, with rising notes proclaiming the glorious anticipation of the day. Throughout the hour-and-a-half work, loud affirmations to and from heaven contrasted with quieter parts that told of the humble circumstances of the birth and the fear of the shepherds, or recreated the quiet dark that was brightened by the star.

In addition to the 15 strings, the woodwinds, featuring solos by oboe players Mary Watt and Nobuo Kitagawa, reflected the quiet absorption in the unfolding nativity. In Part 2, Robin Kani's flute urged the shepherds onwards, and Elizabeth Field on violin underscored their joy and wonder at the discovery of the child.

Tenor Isaiah Bell most often took the role of Evangelist, singing the exact words of the New Testament. Bass-Baritone David Newman had time for gravitas with the more dramatic arias that included romantic passages such as "Great ruler, mighty king...must sleep in a humble crib." Soprano Ellen McAteer shared an aria with Newman in Part 3 that thanked the Lord for his mercy and compassion. Daniel Taylor stood out with his beautiful and powerful countertenor, which came as a surprise from someone who looked a bit like a thinner Russell Crowe.

After the Oratorio ended with a dramatic chorus praising the ruler of heaven, the audience participated in singing "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and "Silent Night." The performance concluded with rapturous applause, praising the fact that the Bach Choir resides in Bethlehem.