

Review: Youth choirs mesmerize at annual Bach Choir Family Concert



Lehigh Valley Charter Arts Touring Choir is one of four youth choirs that joined the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra in its Family Concert Feb. 28 (Bach Choir / CONTRIBUTED BY)

Jennifer Marangos Special to The Morning Call

Sunday's Bach Choir Family Concert began with nearly 200 vocalists silently filing into Baker Hall at Lehigh University's Zoellner Arts Center. They encircled the audience in orchestra seats and filled in the side aisles and the center walkway between the front section of the theater and the grand tier.

Not a pin drop could be heard as the The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, along with four local youth choirs – Bel Canto Children's Chorus of The Bach Choir, the Touring Choir of the Lehigh Valley Charter School for the Arts, the Berks Youth Choir MasterSingers and the Nazareth High School Chorale – performed Randall Thompson's "Ye Shall have a Song," washing over the audience in a vocal wave.

"How's that for a beginning?" quipped Greg Funfgeld, Bach Choir artistic director and conductor, who perhaps should have said, "you ain't seen nothing yet."

Proving that point, The Bel Canto Children's Chorus took the stage. The chorus, directed by Joy Hirokawa, captivated the nearly sold-out audience with all of the power of the 200

singers that preceded them, performing the a capella piece “It Takes a Village,” arranged by Joan Szymko.

The song is based on a Nigerian proverb, and the vocalists, dressed in black and standing in a semi-circle at the front of the stage, began by simultaneously placing a hand across the heart and tapping out on their chests a rhythmic pattern reminiscent of an African drum beat.

Next, the Charter Arts Touring Choir performed Eriks Esenvalds’ “Only in Sleep,” an emotional piece in which a soprano soloist expresses the thoughts of an adult looking back on childhood. Repeated throughout the refrain is the haunting line from Sara Teesdale’s text: “Yet we played last night as long ago.” The Charter Arts Touring Choir is directed by David Macbeth.

Equal parts conductor and music educator, Funfgeld introduced the fourth selection, George Frederic Handel’s “Zadok the Priest” from Four Coronation Anthems, with a brief musical history lesson that began with a brief comparison of Johann Sebastian Bach and Handel – both were born in 1685 in Germany.

From there Funfgeld segued into Handel’s relocation to England in 1710, noting that the composer became a British citizen under the reign of King George I in 1727. When King George II and Queen Caroline were due to be coronated some years later, Handel created a series of works known as the Four Coronation Anthems.

“In selecting the works for this concert we wanted to choose music that would stay with (the young singers) for the rest of their lives. That would become a part of their brain trust,” Funfgeld said. He told audience members that they might recognize “Zadok” as it has been used in popular culture in a variety of ways, including a DirectTV commercial and a movie in which it was ironically used to accompany the crowning of the Roman Emperor some 1000 years before Handel was born.

The Bach Choir, along with The Bach Festival Orchestra and the four youth choirs, joined in performing “Zadok.”

From Handel, Funfgeld brought the audience back to Bach, and provided a brief musical lesson about Bach’s motets, which take texts from scripture and set them to music. “I have a friend who describes the motets as ‘not for the faint of heart,’” Funfgeld said, adding that the older he gets the more correct he believes his friend’s assertion to be.

For Sunday’s performance, seven or eight singers were selected from each of the four youth choirs and The Bach Choir to perform the motet “Lobet Den Herrn.” The vocal ensemble was accompanied by musicians from The Bach Festival Orchestra including Loretta O’Sullivan, cello; Charles Holdeman, bassoon; Stephen Groat, double bass, and Thomas Goeman, organ.

Again serving as a musical guide, Funfgeld prepped the audience regarding what to listen for in the motet they were about to hear and complimented the youth singers for their

willingness to take on the complex piece, pointing out that it combined demanding vocal techniques and text written in German.

He also explained that Bach was known for using music to paint a picture and how in the motet he tries to get the listeners to “feel” the concept of eternity by having the singers vocalize the word “eternity” for nine beats.

Following the motet, the Berks Youth Chorus MasterSingers took center stage, with the females wearing full-length red gowns and the males sporting red vests and red neck ties. Directed by William Snelling, the group enthralled with a spirited performance of Sten Kallman’s “Peze Kafe,” a traditional Haitian a capella number sung in French. Their rendition included percussion instruments and rhythmic dance moves by the singers.

The final student group to perform was the Nazareth High School Chorale, led by Kelly Rocchi, a former member of The Bach Choir. The girls wore black, the boys electric blue neckties. Rocchi complemented the color scheme, dressed in an electric blue blouse and black skirt.

The 30-member ensemble performed “Magnificent Horses,” a fantasy on a Mongolian folktale arranged by Jin-ling Tam. They were accompanied by Madeline Myers on flute and Jack Doyle on sleigh bells

Funfgeld introduced the final selection by again weaving a bit of history into the program. The Bach Choir, he said, was founded 116 years ago, and the song the audience was about to hear – Bach’s Mass in B Minor, “Gloria”— was “heard for the first time in America on March 27, 1900 at the Central Moravian Church.”

All performers were back on stage for an incredible rendition of the historic piece, followed by a lengthy curtain call that brought all of the youth directors back and the audience to its feet for a lengthy and much-deserved standing ovation.