

# Annual Bach Choir Family Concert showcases youth choirs



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

**Jennifer Marangos** Special to The Morning Call

Conductor aims to prove you're never too young to enjoy Bach.

Parents who think that their kids aren't old enough or well-behaved enough to attend a performance of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem don't know Bach the way Greg Funfgeld knows Bach.

Funfgeld, Bach Choir artistic director and conductor, will present The Choir's annual Family Concert — this year, a Youth Choirs Festival — at 3 p.m. Feb. 28. in Baker Hall at Lehigh University's Zoellner Arts Center. The show, he says, is appropriate for children of all ages.

"Bach had 20 kids of his own so he was quite used to little ones running around," Funfgeld says. "This is not a real fussy, buttoned-up performance, so if the kids get a little rutchy, that's OK."

Driven by a desire to expose young people to what Funfgeld calls the "blessing of music," The Bach Choir has performed a family concert every winter for nearly two decades. "Music is such an uplifting thing in a life and we have a real passion for reaching out to younger audiences. Music is a gift in our lives. It's precious," says Funfgeld.

Through the years, the choir has worked with a variety of Lehigh Valley organizations representing theater, dance and music to create its Family Concert program. This year, The Bach Choir decided to invite four local youth vocal ensembles to join the choir and the Bach Festival Orchestra. There will be more than 200 singers.

The youth choirs are the Bel Canto Children's Chorus, which recently became a part of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem organization, directed by Joy Hirokawa; the Berks Youth Chorus MasterSingers, directed by William Snelling; the Touring Choir of the Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts, directed by David Macbeth; and the Nazareth Area High School Chorale, directed by Kelly Rocchi.

The program includes three favorite choruses the massed youth choirs will perform with The Bach Choir: Randall Thompson's "Ye shall have a song" from "The Peaceable Kingdom," G.F. Handel's "Zadok the Priest" from "Four Coronation Anthems" and J.S. Bach's the "Gloria" from the Mass in B Minor.

The pieces were selected, Funfgeld explains, because they are the kind of music that "kids should know" — particularly young singers. This selection process actually began last summer when Funfgeld and Bach Choir Executive Director Bridget George met with the youth choir directors.

The Handel piece, Funfgeld says, begins with the orchestra playing very quietly and slowing getting louder and combining with the vocalists, coming together into what he describes as a "hair-raising moment in music." The Randall Thompson composition, he says, ultimately has the singers surrounding the audience in a unique version of 360-degree surround sound.

"The music we picked will be incredibly valuable art in the lives of people for the next 200 years. The kids that sing these pieces will carry it in their hearts and minds forever," Funfgeld says.

Each youth choir will also be featured in an a capella selection of its own and the directors have chosen a tapestry of world music.

Bel Canto will sing the compelling "It Takes a Village" by Joan Szymko, based on the Nigerian proverb "It takes a village to raise a child." Charter Arts will present the evocative "Only in Sleep" by Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds with text by Sara Teasdale. Berks Youth Chorus will sing the jazzy Haitian "Peze Kafé," arranged by Sten Kallman. And Nazareth High School Chorale will sing "Magnificent Horses," a fantasy on a Mongolian folktale arranged by Jin-ling Tam.

Macbeth, of the Charter School Touring Choir, says that he chose the Esenvalds piece both because of its musical appeal and its subject matter.

"This is a purely an a capella choir-only piece and it is truly beautiful," he says. "There is a solo soprano that soars on top of the choir. It's also about an adult looking backward at the childhood years, which is a different take on the loose theme that we have for the rest of the music of children and how they look at the world.

"It makes me incredibly excited to share with an audience the level of music that we are going to be performing considering how young these singers are," Macbeth says. "Most high school programs are not singing Bach and this is all going to be at an exceedingly high level.

"It is exciting to share with an audience. To say look at the talent that is here in the Valley and the opportunities that are here in the Valley for young people to work with music and conductors at this level," he says.

At the heart of the program is a performance of Bach's intricate motet "Lobet den Herrn" (Praise the Lord) performed by eight singers from each youth choir and eight mentor singers from The Bach Choir. The youth choir singers have been prepared in a series of master classes by Greg Funfgeld.

Says Funfgeld, "Great art is one of our precious things to give our young people. To be able to work on this music, to share it with these kids and see their excitement and how they rise up to the challenge is very gratifying."

Dail Richie, executive director of the Berks Youth Chorus, cites many reasons for her group's interest in being a part of this concert, with the chance to work with Funfgeld clearly at the top of the list.

"This opportunity to work with the Bach Choir and Greg again, plus three other fabulous choruses for youth was one that we were just thrilled to accept," she says. "Working with Greg is like playing in the World Series. It doesn't get any better than that."

"Greg's generosity of spirit is an inspiration and I feel that anyone who works with him whether it be a singer, or donors to his chorus, feels it and I am sure that anyone who comes to the concert will feel it there also," she says.

The interactive performance was designed with a young audience in mind, Funfgeld says, with special touches like an activity-driven concert book created by the Bach Choir's educational committee and a concert duration of just over an hour.

"If the kids need to get up and walk around during the performance, that's OK," Funfgeld says. "I will talk about some things during the show. I will ask the audience to listen for some things. I would not hesitate to bring anyone. Music enriches life from the cradle to the grave."

"Parents who want their kids to grow up with art in their lives shouldn't miss this opportunity," he adds.

*Jennifer Marangos is a freelance writer.*