



Bach Choir Festival program, repeated at 4 p.m. May 19, Incarnation of Our Lord Church, Thomas and Buchanan streets, Bethlehem

Concerts Review: Bethlehem Bach Festival gives ‘To God Alone The Honor’

[Thursday, May 18, 2017](#) by [Paul Willistein pwillistein@tnonline.com](mailto:pwillistein@tnonline.com) in **Focus**

What’s best about the Bach Festival of Bethlehem is its surety of purpose, its certainty of artistry, its expectation and fulfillment of inspiration.

The 110th Bethlehem Bach Festival, continuing May 19 and 20 with the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, Festival Orchestra and world-renowned soloists, is billed as a celebration of the human voice.

On the first weekend, May 12 and 13, the festival lived up to and exceeded that promise with the B Minor Mass, but also in the many fine events that Greg Funfgeld, Bach Choir of Bethlehem Artistic Director, and Bridget George, celebrating her 20th year as Executive Director, have inculcated in recent years.

If you can take the time off from work or your busy schedule, the lecture, “Why Bach Matters,” by Dr. George Stauffer, repeated at 2 p.m. May 19, Zoellner Arts Center, is as fine a place as any to begin as a Festival-goer. Stauffer’s talk is the basis for his latest book, “Why Bach Matters,” to be published by Yale University Press.

“We find his music everywhere,” Stauffer said, listing several Bach festivals, including the “First Full Production” poster for the United States premiere by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem of the B Minor Mass in Bethlehem in 1900.

From Oregon, to the New York City Ballet, from Hong Kong to Seoul to Singapore, to a 182 CD Bach works collection, to Bach’s image in a coffee advertisement, to a Bach reference in a Batman comic book, to YouTube videos of Bach’s “Tocatta and Fugue in D minor” danced on “The Big Piano” at FAO Schwarz, New York City, and a Japanese Gravity Marimba in the forest “playing” Bach’s “Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben,” BWV 147, Stauffer left no doubt that Bach is everywhere. “We’re obsessed with Bach,” said Stauffer.

Unlike in his day (Bach, 1685 - 1750) and in subsequent decades, “Bach is no longer the music of the select few,” Stauffer said. Stauffer eloquently and entertainingly detailed four tenants in his approximately 50-minute PowerPoint presentation, accompanied by recorded music: Bach established a new technical standard of performance, Bach created an international style, Bach legitimized music-recycling, and Bach set a standard for having supreme confidence as a musician and composer.

That confidence, Stauffer said, was born of belief, of faith, evidenced in Bach’s music manuscript tributes, “To God Alone The Honor.”

The concert, repeated 4 p.m. May 19, seemed to put the sacred sculptures in motion inside the Incarnation of Our Lord Church, Thomas and Buchanan streets, Bethlehem, especially for the pre-concert “Bach Choral Sing” with choir members positioned around the perimeter of the interior. The effect, as many in the audience sang along, was that of a cinema Sensurround sound.

Funfgeld introduced a Bach Festival premiere, Bach’s Cantata 49, “Ich geh und such emit Verlangen,” by mentioning that the Bach Choir has performed some 150 of 200 known Bach cantatas. Cantata was written 291 years ago. With Funfgeld at the organ, soloists Rosa Lamoreaux, Daniel Taylor, Stephen Ng and William Sharp, and festival orchestra musicians, the sprightly, insistent rhythm seemed as bright and contemporary as today, not unlike a jazz improvisation.

Telemann’s Canonic Sonata No. 1 in G Major for cello and bass evidenced a modern, even dissonant, sound.

Cantata 103, “Ihr werdet weinen und heute,” highlighted by Tricia van Oers, recorder, concluded the approximate one-hour program.

Preceded by the traditional “World Farewell” chorale, the evening concert, repeated 8 p.m. May 19 in Packer Memorial Church, Lehigh University, Bach’s Cantata BWV 97, “In allen meinen Taten,” provides a soothing, peaceful opening. William Sharp, baritone, renders a wonderful aria, then combines with Rosa Lamoreaux, soprano; for a stunning duet, with Lamoreaux delivering a superb concluding aria with the work all wrapped up by the Choir in the concluding chorale with the audience encouraged to stand and join in the singing.

Telemann’s Concerto for recorder and gamba in A Minor, presented Tricia van Oers, recorder, and Mollie Glazer, gamba, in a small ensemble work

To connote the 110th festival, the approximate one and one-half hour concert concluded with Bach’s Cantata BWV 110, “Unser Mund sei voll Lachens.” Agnes Zsigovics, soprano, and Benjamin Butterfield, tenor, are especially memorable in their sparkling duet. Daniel Taylor, countertenor, is again astounding in the alto aria. But it’s Dashon Burton, bass, in the recitative and aria that makes a resounding impression.

With Parts One and Parts Two, repeated at 2:30 and 4:30 p.m. May 20, Packer Church, the Mass in B Minor remains the centerpiece of the Festival, as attested to by the near-capacity audience of an estimated 1,000.

The Choir’s opening “Kyrie” is so exquisitely mournful and yet brings exquisite joy to the listener. The bass line, the strings, the wonderful persistence of it all, is encapsulated by the dreamlike singing of the Choir’s women’s voices, as if bringing to life the two angels (restored and painted by Aniko Lestyán) hovering over the church portico, and lifted to heavenly realms by the men’s voices, before joining in supreme exultation, and fading to a silence and stillness so profound it can be heard.

Lamoreaux and Zsigovics are a wonderful combination in the Gloria sopranos duet, coaxed by Funfgeld’s gentle direction.

One can’t help but get swept up by the choir’s “Gloria,” as even the soloists listen and sway ever so slightly to the rhapsodic sound. The soprano aria by Lamoreaux, with Elizabeth Field, violin, is pure joy. Zsigovics and Butterfield, with Robin Kani, flute, are a total delight in their soprano and tenor duet.

Taylor’s alto aria, with Mary Watt, oboe d’amore, is simply extraordinary. Burton, with a volume not to be denied, is peerless in his bass aria, punctuated by Anthony Cecere, French horn.

The Choir’s voices glow on the concluding chorus.

Part Two’s opening “Credo” has a delicious bass line that not only walks but sprints. The Choir, in particular, soars prior to the soprano and alto duet of Zsigovics and Taylor, displaying that one of the chief satisfactions of the Mass is the pairing of the various soloists.

Anchoring it all at the podium is Funfgeld, his baton in his right hand strictly pacing choir and orchestra while his left hand gives more poetic and subtle cues to soloists and sections, whether musicians or singers.

Part Two, moving inexorably to the triumphant “Sanctus” and the sublime “Agnus Dei,” is really the Choir’s show, from the tenderest of vocals to quite literally a shout.

Indeed, the Bach Choir let there be no doubt that the Bethlehem Festival is a celebration of the human voice. And, thereby, the Bethlehem Bach Festival brings forth soothing and exhilarating musical waters that lift the spirit and restore hope in the broken-hearted. Bach seems to have been onto something when he annotated his works, “To God Alone The Honor.”

Tickets: bach.org; 610-866-4382, 888-743-3100