

theWholeNote

Excerpted from the article: **Bach in Bethlehem, Verdi in Jerusalem**

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According to Chaucer, April is the month that with its sweet showers “pierces March’s drought to the root,” causing all kinds of people, music lovers not excepted, to get a bit giddy and take themselves off on all manner of “sundry pilgrimages.” As a lifelong chronic agoraphobe who typically gets on airplanes only for trips revolving around grim duty of one kind or another, I was until last year, a steadfast exception to the Chaucerian rule. But 2016 was different. Not once but twice I noted my nearest exits, turned off all electronic devices and faithfully obeyed the fasten seatbelt sign as I took off into the wide blue yonder for the purpose of attending music festivals in other parts of the world.

I am, therefore, now an expert on the subject of music festivals. So pay attention.

Rule number one: Other than the ones that take place in your hometown and can therefore be ignored unless you have guests, there are only two types of festivals.

One is the kind of festival that is sufficiently compelling in its own right that it causes you to journey some place you never have thought of visiting, even if you had heard of it.

The other is a festival you never heard of but taking place somewhere so special in its own right that you feel compelled to go there at least once in your lifetime. And when you do, you discover that there’s a festival there that tickles your musical fancy, so you go to it because you are already there.

There’s one of each kind in this story: the 2016 first annual Jerusalem Summer Opera Festival falls into the second category; the 110th Annual Bethlehem Bach Festival falls into the first.



Greg Funfgeld and Dashon Burton

The Bethlehem Bach Festival takes place in Bethlehem, PA, nestled in the Lehigh Valley region of Southeastern Pennsylvania, this year on the weekends

of May 12-13 and May 19-20. Colonized in the first half of the 18th century by Moravian settlers, Bethlehem became also, in the 1860s (across the river from the old town), the site of Lehigh University, a private school established by businessman Asa Packer. (The church that bears his name, on the Lehigh campus, remains the venue for the performance of the Bach *Mass in B Minor* that is the climax of each year's festival.) And between the two halves of the town, along the riverbank is the looming rusting hulk of what was, from the 1880s till the 1990s, the steel mill from which Bethlehem Steel derived its name. Twelve years after the mill was built, in 1898, the Bethlehem Bach Choir came into being. Two years after that it gave the first ever complete North American performance of Bach's *B Minor Mass*. Through that whole galvanic century, the choir and the festival have endured through thick and thin, because they bring to the music not just a consistently high standard of musicianship, but a precious intangible – the fact that the music is a living expression of community.

I've written before about how my first awareness of the Bethlehem Bach Festival came about because of the non-stop procession of top-flight Canadian soloists to the festival, especially since Greg Funfgeld took on conductorship of the choir in 1983. Countertenor Daniel Taylor, for example, returns for the 19th consecutive year, joined again this year by soprano Agnes Zsigovics (a protégée of Taylor's at the University of Toronto, and surely a performer to watch) and by Benjamin Butterfield, also a frequent visitor but absent last year. The three US soloists are also regulars: soprano Rosa Lamoreaux, baritone William Sharp and Dashon Burton, bass. One of Funfgeld's gifts as a conductor is his sense of balance and blend; another is his loyalty to his performers. Talk to the soloists and they will tell you that as much as anything, the opportunity to renew beloved musical relationships in a consistent context is one of the things that keeps them coming back.

It's been said that North America (at least from a colonial perspective) has too much geography and not enough history, while the problem in the Middle East is just the reverse. But if one thinks local rather than global, the distinction starts to blur. Walk from the Hotel Bethlehem (built in the 1920s with Bethlehem steel!) through the old Moravian Quarter, across the bridge past the hulk of the steel mill, where signs of civic landscaping and urban renewal are visibly starting to happen on the river edge, up the opposite hill to the Packer Church, and take your place in the audience. There will always be more than one generation of the same family in the choir that looks back at you. And the music, when it starts, will have a healing sound that is only possible when it is as current as it is timeless.

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