

REVIEW: Remarkable young voices of world famous Thomanerchor fill Central Moravian Church at Bach Choir gala concert



By Steve Siegel
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On Saturday afternoon, the Bach Choir of Bethlehem welcomed 50 singers from the world-famous Thomanerchor of Leipzig to Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem for its 2017 Gala Concert. Hardly had the boys started singing at the sold-out performance when it became obvious how perfectly the transparency and crispness of their remarkable young voices complemented the clear, bracing air outside.

Led by Gotthold Schwarz, the 17th Saint Thomas Cantor after Bach, the program featured motets by Bach in addition to works by Heinrich Schütz, Felix Mendelssohn, and Johann Hermann Schein. Accompanying the choir was a simple basso continuo of organ and cello.

Surely this must have been what it was like to hear a cantata or motet in Bach's own time, sung with such purity and minimalistic accompaniment. The boys, aged 9 to 18, presented an impressive visual spectacle, with the sopranos and altos dressed in natty dark blue blazers embellished with white stripes on the lapels, while the older tenors, baritones, and basses wore suits and ties.

The distinct sound of this choir, with its history of more than 800 years of sacred music, was evident from the first work on the program, a setting of Psalm 100 by Schütz. Totally unlike the more ethereal sound of a British boy choir, here was unsentimental directness without a trace of vibrato. The voices of the younger singers seemed to be projected forward, launched from a solid platform established by the older tenors and basses.

Despite their musical confidence and those natty uniforms, there was just enough barely-suppressed fidgeting and eye-shifting going on to remind one that these are basically typical boys, probably aching for a game of soccer or to text their girlfriends after the performance.

The program cleverly interwove the full-bodied sound of works sung by the entire ensemble with pieces for two voices, or even a solo. Schein's take on the famous Lutheran hymn, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," sung by two tenors, was a real standout. Of a pair of delightful works for solo soprano, Bach's "Gott lebet noch," BWV 461, was especially charming, as Schwarz enthusiastically prompted the young singer, mouthing the text along with him.

Many of the works involved complex musical lines with multiple parts. The rich, overlapping harmonies thus produced were mesmerizing, especially in such pieces as the five-voice choir motet "Ich bin jung gewesen" by Schein. Mendelssohn's "Heilig," a motet for two four-voice choirs, was delivered with disarming conviction.

The program's only hitch came not from the singers themselves, but from an overly-enthusiastic audience, which broke into premature applause between the chorus and solemn aria in Bach's "Komm, Jesu, komm," BWV 229, blurring the choir's attack of the aria. Yet all was forgiven by the two vibrant encores the choir generously gave to the highly appreciative crowd.