

## **What to expect when renowned Thomanerchor — once led by J.S. Bach himself — performs in Bethlehem**



By Steve Siegel  
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The singers of the Saint Thomas Boys Choir in Leipzig are pretty much like any other group of 9 to 18 year olds. In between rehearsals, the sopranos and altos might work on their skateboard technique or kick around a soccer ball, while the tenors and basses, in their Levis and Nikes, text their girlfriends. But when they start to sing, something special happens — they become transformed by a history of more than 800 years of sacred music.

It's hard to believe, but when J. S. Bach became director of the Saint Thomas Boys Choir, or Thomanerchor, in 1723, the institution had already been around for 511 years —since 1212. The choir now consists of about 100 boys, called Thomaner, who live, learn, and rehearse in a building near Leipzig's historic St. Thomas Church, their main workplace. They attend the St. Thomas Secondary School just across the street, with its focus on liberal arts and musical education.

On Nov. 11, the Bach Choir of Bethlehem will welcome a group of 50 from the world famous Thomanerchor for its 2017 Gala Concert and Fundraiser at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem. The program will include three motets by Bach in addition to works by Heinrich Schütz, Felix Mendelssohn and Johann Hermann Schein. The group will be lead by Gotthold Schwarz, the 17<sup>th</sup> Saint Thomas Cantor after Bach. The choir will be accompanied by an organist and cellist traveling with the group.

This will be the group's first visit to Bethlehem and one of only three northeastern U. S. appearances on its American tour this year.

“I think this is a singular opportunity in the life of our community,” says Bach Choir Director Greg Funfgeld. “It’s incredibly appropriate for the Thomanerchor to come to Bethlehem on this tour. Bethlehem has been the most significant home for the music of Bach in the United States since it was first sung, played, and studied here in 1823.”

Odds are that those Thomaner, when they arrive here and enjoy lunch at the historic Sun Inn prior to their performance, will be surprised at how rich Bethlehem’s own history is. After all, the Sun Inn dates to 1758, the year Michael Haydn wrote his first symphony, and many homes and buildings existed when Bach was still alive. Bethlehem is the kind of place that can easily put anyone into a proper Bachian mood.

Most surprising of all to the choir might be Bethlehem’s shared history with Bach’s music. Historic performances of Bach in Bethlehem by the Bach Choir include Cantata 80, “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,” in 1823, and the first U. S. performances of St. John’s Passion (1888), the B Minor Mass (1900), and Christmas Oratorio (1901). The Bach Choir has sung in Leipzig twice, and has hosted many visitors from that historic city, including Johannes Richter, pastor of the St. Thomas Church, who was the distinguished scholar lecturer at the 1995 Bethlehem Bach Festival, and Peter Wollny, director of the Bach-Archive in Leipzig, who attended the July 11 Bach at Noon concert at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Allentown.

The Thomanerchor is one of the world’s most revered vocal institutions. “The Thomascantor is probably the most prestigious position for a church musician in Germany,” says Wollny, a close friend of Schwarz, who was unavailable for an interview. “Except for a few cantors in the 16th century - the most prominent case being Georg Rhaw, who left his position in Leipzig in order to become a music publisher in Wittenberg — all cantors of later times considered the position a lifetime commitment.”

There’s good reason for that fame. If your vision of a boy choir sound is ethereal weightlessness, it’s not the Thomanerchor you’re thinking of. These voices are heftier, almost visceral, with essentially no vibrato. It’s much different than the light, floating style the English have cultivated in the voices one might hear at the boy choirs of Kings College Cambridge, or Westminster Abbey.

Boys compete in auditions throughout Germany for admission, and while being a chorister might not rank as highly as becoming a professional soccer player or cyclist, they seem to realize they are part of something special.

“My impression is that the boys over the years gradually become aware of their remarkable tradition,” says Wollny. “Since many of them come from musically interested families, they probably have some idea when they enter the choir and the boarding school. The constant exposure to the great music of Bach, his cantatas, which they perform every week, oratorios, and passions, are the best education they can get.”

Achieving that special sound has been tricky for as long as the choir has existed, with the soprano voices always the most challenging. Enrollment in the choir typically runs between 90 to

just over 100 boys, with only about 10 percent of the msopranos. At one point during Bach's 27-year terms as director, he presided over 55 choristers, about a quarter of who were sopranos.

Maintaining Bach's legacy has become even more difficult in recent years. The problem is, boys have been maturing more quickly now than in the past. Studies have suggested that during Bach's tenure, most boys' voices started to change between the ages of 17 and 18. Now boys' voices are changing much earlier, perhaps even before 15, so instructors have less time in which to nurture them. As in all boys' choirs, the oldest of the singers with unbroken voices are the most prized.

One can't speak of the Thomanerchor without speaking of history, a history that naturally will be reflected in the program. After all, Bach himself is entombed in St. Thomas Church. We'll be hearing music by Bach, before Bach, and after Bach. "Herr Gott, du unser Zuflucht bist," a motet for four-voice choir and continuo, and the madrigal "Ich bin jung gewesen" were composed by Johann Hermann Schein, who was a Thomaskantor a century before Bach.

The early Baroque composer Heinrich Schütz is generally regarded as the most important German composer before Bach. His best-known works are in the field of sacred music, such as "Der 100 Psalm" from 1619, for two 4-voice choirs and continuo, based on one of the Psalms of David.

Of all Western choral genres, there is probably none as enduring as the motet, a form which has existed and was used continuously for eight centuries, from the Middle Ages until today. Each of the three of the Bach motets on the program reveals some different facet of Bach's technique. In "Komm, Jesu, komm," BWV 229, for example, Bach sets the first verse as a conventional double four-part chorus, but the melody of the final stanza is a very rare example of Bach employing a chorale tune of his own composition within the context of a larger work.

How apt that the program also includes a selection of sacred works by Felix Mendelssohn, since no one did more to awaken the world to Bach's genius than he did. Even as a child, Mendelssohn played Bach's fugues on the piano, and for a while was in charge of Berlin's church music. So it is scarcely surprising that Bach's influence is most clearly revealed in Mendelssohn's shorter church works, including the motet "Kyrie eleison," composed in 1846 for two four-voice choirs, and "Mitten wir im Leben sind" for eight-voice choir.

Both Funfgeld and Schwarz recognize the music of Bach as a primary link not only between Bethlehem and Leipzig, but the Thomanerchor and the Bach Choir. "We thank the Bach Choir of Bethlehem very much for the invitation to the Thomanerchor to perform in the Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem," Schwarz states in an email message. Both the Church and the Bach Choir are closely connected with the music of Bach, whose cultural ambassador is the Thomanerchor from Leipzig."

The two choir directors share something else of importance. Schwarz is only the 17th director of the Thomanerchor after Bach, and Funfgeld is only the sixth director of the Bach Choir since 1898. "I think it must be that Bach truly does inspire a lifetime commitment," Funfgeld says.

## DETAILS

### **Thomanerchor**

**What:** The Leipzig, Germany, boys choir, one of the most revered in the world, performs at the Bach Choir of Bethlehem's 2017 Gala Concert.

**When:** 4 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 11

**Where:** Central Moravian Church, 73 W. Church St., Bethlehem

**How much:** \$40; \$9 students

**What else:** Gala dinner and auction, 6 p.m. Nov. 11, Saucon Valley Country Club. \$275, includes premium concert seating and contribution.

**Info:** 610-866-4382, [www.bach.org](http://www.bach.org)