

Classical: Bach Choir Christmas concerts feature 'A Child's Christmas in Bethlehem'



The Bach Choir will present its first live music and spoken word performance of 'A Child's Christmas in Bethlehem' for its annual Christmas concerts Dec. 9 and 10 in Allentown and Bethlehem.

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Nothing quite captures the wonder of life as it is viewed through the eyes of a child. A child's world is filled with excitement and awe, colored by innocence and curiosity. That's especially so with the magical holiday of Christmas, glittering with multicolored lights, music and mystery.

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem hopes to capture that spirit of childlike wonder in its Christmas concerts Dec. 9 at the First Presbyterian Church of Allentown and Dec. 10 at the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem. The concerts will be the first live performances of the choir's festive CD, "A Child's Christmas in Bethlehem," released in 2013 on the Analekta label.

It's an unusual program, and a departure from the choir's Christmas programs of the past two years, when it presented J.S. Bach's entire Christmas Oratorio in two installments.

For one thing, instead of the presence of the mighty Bach Festival Orchestra, the instrumental accompaniment is drawn from a more intimate array that includes organ, piano, guitar, violins, handbells and percussion. Joining the singers of the Bach Choir and the young voices of the Bel Canto Children's Chorus, under the direction of Joy Hirokawa, will be bass-baritone soloist David Newman.

The program also will feature spoken word, just like the “A Child’s Christmas in Bethlehem” CD does. Poems and stories recited by children and adults will be interspersed among the carols and instrumental selections. Narrators include students from local elementary and middle schools as well as Bach Choir director Greg Funfgeld, executive director Bridget George, and newly elected Bethlehem City councilwoman Olga Negron. It’s a festive holiday package, with carols spanning five centuries and five languages.

“We had previously done a series of recordings of ‘Christmas in Bethlehem,’ and just after we had started working with Bel Canto, decided to do ‘A Child’s Christmas in Bethlehem’ for something different,” Funfgeld says. “As we thought about it, we decided to combine carols and poetry with all these stories from the Hispanic and Moravian communities to tell a very beautiful kind of story.”

The stories and poems form a bridge that not only connects Christmas in Bethlehem with Christmas in the Holy Land, but also gives a sense of Christmas shared among all cultures.

A poem about the founding of Bethlehem by the Moravians, for example, is followed by the Moravian carol “Long Ago in Bethlehem.” The charming poem “Puerto Rico’s Christmas in Bethlehem,” by Freemansburg Elementary School student Carla Victoria Lugo, will be followed by the traditional Spanish carol “A La Nanita Nana.” For something even more exotic, the choir takes us to Nigeria for “Betelehemu,” sung in Nigerian with virtuosic percussion accompaniment.

“Hearing the poetry delivered by children’s voices just touches you. It gives us a rebirth of a sense of wonder, that childlike sense of awe that helps us experience this age-old story in a new way, a tender way,” Funfgeld says. Those children’s voices might even take us back to our own childhood. Much of the inspiration in compiling the narration for “A Child’s Christmas” came from Bridget George’s own childhood memories.

“My large extended family used to gather at Claydon House on Boxing Day (as the day after Christmas is known in England), and rehearse for our own version of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, which we offered in Claydon Church,” says George, who grew up just outside Oxford, England.

“Adding poems and stories to the familiar Biblical readings was one of the features my Uncle Ralph contributed. I learned how poetry as well as music can break open our hearts, and give the mystery of Christmas such immediacy in our lives.”

It is a sad fact of life that many cherished memories also are bittersweet. The Christmas concerts this year are dedicated to the memory of George’s mother, Catherine Verney Hare, who passed away last month. “‘A Child’s Christmas’ is very close to my heart and to everything my mother taught me in her beautiful life,” George says.

Certainly the children's voices, both spoken and sung, will help evoke the sweetest of those memories. The Bel Canto Children's Chorus will be featured in several traditional carols, including the Italian carol "Dormi, Dormi" and "Shepherd's Song at Christmas." Each features Thomas Goeman's exquisite piano accompaniment, evocative of tinkling handbells in the former, and snowflakes sparkling in streetlamps in the latter.

Those festive handbells will ring again in the 14th century "Of the Father's Love Begotten," featuring the combined voices of Bel Canto and the Bach Choir. Of special note is "Sleep Well Thou Child of God" by longtime Bach Choir baritone David Umla, dedicated to Funfgeld and the Chancel Choir of The First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem.

Such an intriguing variety of music combined with such heartfelt words should prove a truly memorable and unique holiday experience. "I think it will really touch people's hearts and minds, and give them a glimpse of the Christmas story in a new way," Funfgeld says.

Bach Choir Christmas Concerts, 8 p.m. Saturday, First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, 3231 Tilghman St.; 4 p.m. Sunday, First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, 2344 Center St. Tickets: \$38; \$9 students up to age 22. 610-866-4382, Bach.org,

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