

THE MORNING CALL

Bach Family concert: Spend an afternoon with Mr. Bach



Mark McKenna stars in 'Mr. Bach Comes to Call,' presented by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem Sunday for its annual family concert (HUB WILLSON/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

[Jodi Duckett](#) The Morning Call

Twelve-year-old Elizabeth from Bethlehem is taking a piano lesson, struggling to play Bach's Minuet in G, when Mr. Bach pops in — and, oh, what an education she gets.

He stuns her with his mastery of the piano. The topics they discuss range from his wig (“a nuisance!”), to the reaction his composition “St. Matthew Passion” received in his lifetime (less than passionate), to his wish that he had been able to finish all the music he felt in his soul during his lifetime.

He talks not only about his music, but also about discipline and commitment and working hard to achieve goals.

All the while the timeless music of Johann Sebastian Bach soars — sung by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem and played by the Bach Festival Orchestra.



That's the core of "Mr. Bach Comes to Call," a theatrical production turned film that is being restaged Sunday by the Bach Choir at Zoellner Arts Center in Bethlehem in a 10th anniversary production.

The production, which offers families an introduction to the 18th century composer and to classical composition, is being presented as the choir's annual family concert.

The story originally was written by Susan Hammond of the Classical Kids music series, which had a CD of the same name. It was then turned into a stage production in a collaboration between the Bach Choir and Touchstone Theatre. After being presented in 2005 and 2006, it was turned into a film, produced in collaboration with Green Treks Network. It premiered locally in 2007 during the Bach Choir's 100th Bach Festival and was broadcast nationally on PBS. It has become a favorite of educators around the country.

Bach Choir conductor and artistic director Greg Funfgeld says the work is a milestone, so the choir wanted to bring it back as part of its "season of milestones" celebrating his 35th anniversary with the choir and the choir's 120th anniversary.

This is a fully staged event, with costumes, wigs, props, lighting and makeup.

"For parents and grandparents who want their children to grow up knowing and loving art, music and literature, this is the kind of thing we want to take our children to," Funfgeld says.

Bach says in the production: “I want to make sure that my music is never again forgotten. That’s why I visit the children. Children all over the world. As long as somebody is playing or listening to my music, my music is alive. And every single time my music is being played on a piano, in a grand concert hall. Every single time my music is heard and enjoyed, I am there, too.”

Mark McKenna, former Touchstone producing artistic director, is back as Mr. Bach.

Touchstone’s Bill George, the director, says, “Mark is such a bighearted performer and has a wonderful playful humorous element, but at the same time is compassionate and generous on stage. He plays with the children, the chemistry is terrific. His emotional palette is really broad and he can deliver on a dime. He’s also got an extraordinary fresh presence. It feels like he is improvising all the time.”

The children, obviously, are new, and also shake things up a little bit, George says.

Elizabeth is played by Abriana Ferrari, a homeschooler who at age 13 is a little older than the previous Elizabeth. The three choir boys who time travel with Mr. Bach include Silas Taylor (age 12, Arts Academy Charter School) and Ethan Silver (age 11, Springhouse Middle School, Parkland).

The third boy is played by a girl, Matilda Snyder (age 9, Southern Lehigh Intermediate School). Abriana, Silas and Matilda are all members of the Bel Canto Children’s Chorus of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

“As a result of those choices, the boys aren’t so uniform; there’s real differences in size and look,” George says.

Another change, George says, is that he has freshened up the production by eliminating projections of things like spaceships and the Earth and Bach’s family. He originally thought they were needed to keep the children in the audience engaged, but decided they were distracting.

“By taking the pictures out, the focus comes down more to the music and actors on stage,” he says.

George says it has been “a gift” to work with the Bach Choir.

“It’s a remarkable collaboration — creatively and institutionally,” he says. “It’s amazing the combination of strengths that the Bach Choir delivers of both enduring beauty and experimentation.”

As for that music, the show contains more than 20 pieces by Bach, performed by the choir and orchestra, which are on stage behind the action.

Funfgeld says there’s music from the Brandenburg concertos, orchestral suites and cantatas, two chorales from the St. Matthew Passion and several pieces of chamber music.

Shannon Aloise, a member of the Bach Choir, portrays Bach's second wife Anna Magdalena Bach as she sings Bach's beautiful aria, "Bist du bei Mir" (If You are With Me).

Funfgeld says he even gets into the adventure.

When there's a discussion about how Bach could take the same notes and turn them upside down, he picks up Matilda and turns her upside down.

"Susan Hammond's 'Classical Kids' series is a work of genius — childlike, never childish — filled with the innocence, exuberance, joy and wonder that is the particular provenance of children everywhere," Funfgeld says.

"For those of us who have known and loved Bach's music for a long time, it's a welcome refresher and a reminder of what it is we love and admire about Bach and his musical world. For life-long learners, it's an inspiration to know more about this extraordinary man and the beauty he gave us. For children of all ages, and those new to the world of Bach, it's a chance to make an amazing and wonderful new friend."

DETAILS

'Mr. Bach Comes to Call'

What: Bach Choir of Bethlehem Family Concert features a 10th anniversary restaging of theatrical production and film created in collaboration with Touchstone Theatre and Classical Kids.

When: 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: Zoellner Arts Center, 420 E. Packer Ave., Bethlehem

How much: \$18; \$9, students.

What else: The concert will be followed by a reception with autograph activities, child-focused merchandise, and punch and cookies.

Info: 610-866-4382, bach.org

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