

Review: Bach Choir truly regal and joyous in first performance at State Theatre



The Bach Choir performed March 17 at the State Theatre, Easton. (HUB WILLSON / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Steve Siegel Special to The Morning Call

At a recent flamenco/world music concert at the State Theatre in Easton, the group was so enamored by the acoustics of the hall that they turned off their mikes and amplifiers, and did their final number unplugged. When the Bach Choir of Bethlehem gave its first-ever performance at the historic theater Saturday evening, those marvelous acoustics rose to that momentous occasion once again.

The choir's performance, repeated on Sunday at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Bryn Mawr, featured two vocal masterworks: William Walton's ebullient Coronation Te Deum, composed for the coronation of [Queen Elizabeth](#) in 1953, and John Rutter's joyful Gloria, composed 20 years later. Sandwiched in the middle was Morten Lauridsen's earliest choral cycle, "Midwinter Songs," on poetry by Robert Graves, and J.S. Bach's motet BWV 118, "O Jesu Christ, mein's Lebens Licht."

Nearly 90 singers and a battalion of brass instruments, organ, piano, and percussion were under the direction of Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld. Walton's "Te Deum" and Rutter's "Gloria" are large-scale works full of antiphonal effects punctuated by dramatic

brass choirs. Both are written for large brass bands — four trumpets, four French horns, three trombones, tuba and a battery of percussion instruments.

Those brass musicians were stationed front-line, with the singers behind them. You'd think this would make for a muddy sound with blurred vocal lines, but the effect was quite the opposite. One could hear the singers with remarkable clarity and crispness in a performance that was truly regal in the "Te Deum" and joyous in the "Gloria."

Of course, one might miss the visual splendor of a church's stained glass windows and imposing arches. But for me, at least, the rather short reverberation time of a dry-sounding hall was worth the tradeoff. And anyway, the State Theatre has some mighty impressive visuals of its own, with its lofty proscenium and grandly carved moldings.

One might argue that "Te Deum," in particular, might have benefited from a bit more resonant "oomph" — it was, after all, composed for an acoustically live space. Yet the thundering amplified organ, so splendidly played by Thomas Goeman, provided its own acoustic drama with a satisfying rumble that shook the floor.

Lauridsen's deeply introspective "Midwinter Songs," with piano accompaniment by Goeman, was performed with true tenderness and warmth. The clarity of the hall played a large role in the work's emotional impact, with the singers beautifully conveying its soaring lyricism. Every individual singer I focused on could be heard as an individual voice — an experience I never had in, say Bethlehem's Moravian Church.

Goeman's piano interludes were simply charming, especially considering the threadbare sound of the lousy instrument he had to deal with.

A smattering of brass instruments came back on stage for Bach's soothing motet, BWV 118. There was plenty of tranquility and comfort here, and although I'm sure its relaxed demands gave the choir something of a respite, it would have been great to hear a piece with solo voices and recitatives in that wonderful space.

The oft-quoted phrase "a drumroll, please" aptly applies to the opening of Rutter's exultant "Gloria," which provided a dramatic finale to the program. What a thrill to hear those punchy, syncopated brass lines accompanying some really polished and vibrant singing. The "Domine Deus" section sported some lovely soprano voices in addition to many demanding, multi-part choruses — some with up to eight parts. There was a miraculous blend of tone and balance throughout.

Adding to the fun were no less than three percussionists performing on everything from glockenspiels and cymbals to snare drums and timpani. Sprinkled throughout were some mighty intricate organ passages, again with Goeman at the keyboard. A lively, effervescent finale brought this deeply satisfying performance to a close.

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