

What you'll hear when Bach Choir makes its debut at the State Theatre in Easton



The Bach Choir debuts at the State Theatre in Easton on March 17. (BACH CHOIR/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Steve Siegel
Special to The Morning Call

Easton's historic State Theatre has hosted musical acts of all sorts — classic rock bands such as the Doobie Brothers and R.E.O. Speedwagon, Italian pop vocal group Il Volo and hot stars from Nashville.

The renowned Bach Choir of Bethlehem has performed everywhere from the [Kennedy Center](#) and Carnegie Hall to J.S. Bach's own church in Leipzig, as well as its home in Bethlehem and neighboring Allentown. But the two stalwart organizations have never joined forces until now.

In a milestone event in the Bach Choir's 120th season, this year's spring concert will be performed at the State Theatre.

The program features two vocal masterworks appropriately festive for such an important occasion: 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. Also on the

bill are Morten Lauridsen's earliest choral cycle, "Midwinter Songs," on poetry by Robert Graves, and J.S. Bach's Cantata 118, "O Jesu Christ, mein Lebens Licht."

State Theatre CEO Shelley Brown and Bach Choir Executive Director Bridget George talked for years about a collaboration. "We approached Shelley with the idea of a spring concert at the theater, this being our 120th birthday season, and she was very excited," George says. "Greg [conductor Funfgeld] thought the large size of the theater's stage would work especially well for a big choral program."

The Bach Choir has had a large presence in Easton; its Bach to School program has been presented in the city quite often.

Each year Bach to School presents eight assembly programs, each about one hour, in school districts in the Lehigh Valley and in the surrounding region. Versions of the program, presented by an ensemble of singers and instrumentalists, are targeted for elementary, middle and high schools.

"Recently, the Easton Area School District has built it into its curriculum, just like in Allentown. So we're now performing for all Easton third graders on an annual basis," George says.

The choir also will present its spring concert on March 18 at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. Since 2000, the choir has appeared five times in the spectacular Gothic-style stone edifice, culminating in a performance during the choir's 100th anniversary celebration in 2007.

"A large part of our audience for the Bach Festival comes up from that area, and we've had a good relationship with Bryn Mawr on a number of fronts," George says.

For the concerts by the choir and Bach Festival Orchestra, Funfgeld chose a program of choral masterpieces framed by two theatrical heavy-hitters.

"I think we've come up with a wonderful program with lots of brass and percussion that will really showcase the choir," he says. "We're calling it a celebration of the choral arts, and I'm very excited about this combination of pieces, their power and beauty, and the rich variety they represent."

The program opens with Walton's dramatic "Te Deum," written for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. From a letter to his friend Christopher Hassall, we can surmise he seemed mighty pleased with the work: "I've got cracking on the Te Deum. You will like it, I think. Lots of counter-tenors and little boys holy-holying, not to mention all the Queen's trumpeters and side drums."

With a text derived from the Book of Common Prayer, it's a magnificent work which not only captures the pomp and power of the ceremony, but also has an almost cinematic quality. It's full of antiphonal effects punctuated by dramatic brass choirs.

“Like Rutter’s ‘Gloria,’ it really sounds like movie music. Both works are written for large brass bands — four trumpets, four French horns, three trombones, tuba and a battery of percussion instruments. For me it evokes elements of film scores such as ‘Batman’ and ‘Star Wars,’” Funfgeld says.

Rutter’s “Gloria” is based on the second section of the Latin Mass, with a vocal setting derived from Gregorian chant. Like “Te Deum,” it is rich in its writing for brass instruments. “It’s a piece that brass players love to play, and it’s also a great thrill for the choir to sing,” Funfgeld says.

“Rutter writes these incredible sonorities for six- and eight-part choruses. At the end of the second movement there’s a section where the men’s voices are in four parts, with basses down to low D-flat and sopranos three octaves above — it almost sounds like a Renaissance choir where the voices volley back and forth.” At its close, Rutter pulls out all stops, with three percussionists performing on everything from glockenspiels and cymbals to snare drums and timpani.

In stark contrast is Lauridsen’s deeply introspective and soothing “Midwinter Songs” for choir and piano. Composed in 1980 and orchestrated three years later, the piece is a setting of poems by the British novelist and poet Robert Graves. Lauridsen chose verse inspired by the poet’s obsession with his colorful mistress and muse Laura Riding, as well as poetry that reflected the tranquility that Graves attained with his second wife, Beryl.

“Midwinter Songs” is in a five-movement choral symphony. Its English text, surprisingly, poses a challenge for the choir, which is so used to singing in German and Latin. “Those are kind of our native languages, but then when we get something in English it creates a whole new opportunity,” Funfgeld says. “We have to re-think our approach to the English language — the diction, the meter and all the beautiful colors.”

Bach’s BWV 118 — a single movement choral piece with no arias, soloists or recitative sections — is technically a motet, not a cantata. It was composed in 1736 for an outdoor funeral with chorus and brass instruments. Later on, Bach crafted an “indoor” arrangement for two trumpets, strings and chorus. This achingly beautiful motet is one of the last original choral works he composed. The chorale melody Bach used, “Ach Gott, wie manches Herzeleid,” must have been one of his favorites, as it appears in four cantatas: BWV 3, 44, 58 and 153.

“It is an absolutely gorgeous piece that breathes a tremendous spirit of peace. If you think of Brahms’ ‘Requiem,’ it evokes that same sense of tranquility and comfort,” Funfgeld says. The music and text, as is typical of Bach, portray death as a desired outcome, allowing the soul to enter in eternal bliss.

Framed by two lofty hymns of praise with a softer, contemplative core, the program is indeed a festival of rich vocal variety. The Rutter and Walton, in particular, are works one rarely gets to hear in concert, which is due to the enormous technical demands of staging them and the instrumental and vocal resources they require.

DETAILS

Bach Choir Spring Concert

When: 7:30 p.m. March 17

4:00 p.m. March 18

Where: State Theatre, 453 Northampton St., Easton

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

How much: \$39, \$42; \$15, students

\$39 / \$9

Info: 610-252-3132, statetheatre.org, bach.org

Tickets: bach.org 610-866-4382