

NEW YORK ARTS

The 2017 Bethlehem Bach Festival in Retrospect, with a Look Forward to 2018, Marking the 120th Anniversary of the Bethlehem Bach Choir

 by [Michael Miller](#) , March 26, 2018.



Hans Christian Andersen's "The Nightingale" performed by the Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre

I recently spent an afternoon at the 92nd Street Y, listening to Angela Hewitt play the Goldberg Variations, the second recital of a pair which began with the First Book of the Well-Tempered Clavier. The hall was packed for both concerts. The audience remained raptly silent

during both. This afternoon every single member of the audience who was capable of standing was on his feet, expressing sincere gratitude for the great music they had just heard. There was a kind of religion in this, and it brought Jews, Christians, agnostics, and atheists together to hear the greatest of all music, which people who know it regard with spiritual fervor. This is the third year of Ms. Hewitt's Bach cycle, which will continue next season, overlapping with Garrick Ohlsson's traversal of the complete piano music of Brahms. That is how J. S. Bach is cultivated in the neighborhood where I live.

This May, I am looking forward to attending the Bethlehem Bach Festival for the third time, to participate in another manifestation of the cult of Bach. (If one has to use words like "cult" or "idolatry," it is without any kind of negative connotation.) This, the 111th Bethlehem Bach Festival, will mark the 120th anniversary of the Bach Choir and the 35th of Greg Funfgeld's appointment as conductor. His current title is Artistic Director and Conductor. Bach arrived long before that, in fact before Mendelssohn's 1828 revival. The members of the Moravian Church who settled in Bethlehem in the 18th century, brought with them a Protestant tradition which antedates the reforms of Luther, but Luther figures prominently in it as well, above all, from the present point of view, in the importance he attached to music. Luther believed firmly that clergy should have a thorough training in music, even if a choirmaster, cantor, or organist might contribute a more specialized expertise to the musical part of the liturgy. People who understand Bach's methods of composition, especially their numerological symbolism, regard the composer as a theologian, and his religious music as a "fifth Gospel."

Breitkopf & Härtel published the first printed edition of a Bach Cantata in 1821. In 1823, six years before Mendelssohn's historic performance of the St. Matthew Passion in Leipzig, the organist of the Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem copied out this edition, obviously for a performance. The music of Bach would have been performed in the church, but there was a succession of choral societies, organized, I presume, on the secular—or in this case, semi-secular—German model. All eventually failed, but the line of descent was intact from one group to another, until the Bethlehem Bach Choir was finally established in 1898 by the organist of the Central Moravian Church, Fred Wolle. First came the Philharmonic Society, founded in 1827, and then, after its disbandment, the Bethlehem Choral Union (1858-1898). After successfully performing the American premieres of the St. John Passion in 1888 and the St. Matthew in 1892, the Union quailed at Wolle's next goal, the B Minor Mass. The basically amateur, community-based choir had to be reorganized as the Bethlehem Bach Choir, in order to forge a group equal to the successful American premiere of the B Minor Mass in 1900, followed by the Christmas Oratorio, a massive work in itself, in 1901. The Bethlehem Bach Choir has carried on without interruption since then, with a succession of worthy directors. Greg Funfgeld, who marks his thirty-fifth anniversary with the Choir this year, is the longest-tenured Conductor and Artistic Director in the Choir's history. He made changes when he arrived, and he continues to expand and improve the Bach Choir's outreach in the community, while keeping the traditional core, the spring festival, in strong shape.

I have just given a brief outline of the history of the Bethlehem Bach Choir. Rather than cobble my previous articles about the Choir and the B Minor Mass into yet another version of the same information, I will link to them here, since I believe you'll find them more interesting in the context for which they were originally written.

1. ["The Bach Choir of Bethlehem's Christmas Concert, a Review and Interview with Music Director Greg Funfgeld."](#) December 24, 2014.

2. ["The Bach Choir of Bethlehem's Upcoming Season, with a Backward Look at the Bach Festival in May 2015."](#) October 29, 2015.

3. ["The Bethlehem Bach Choir: Christmas Concerts in Advent; Bach Festival, with a Performance of the Mass in B Minor in May."](#) May 12, 2017.

Two things struck me particularly at last year's Festival, apart from the superb Friday night cantata concert, which included a rare curiosity in Cantata BWV 97, "In allen meinen Taten" (1734). There is no indication of a link to a particular feast in the liturgical calendar, and it is thought that it may have first been written as a wedding cantata. The text is the unadapted, uncut text of a poem by the great Saxon poet, Paul Fleming (October 5, 1609 – April 2, 1640), who was educated at the Thomasschule. At the age of 24, Fleming, who had studied medicine, was taken into the court of Frederick III, Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, as a physician and courtier. A few years later the Duke sent him on a diplomatic mission to Moscow, a difficult and dangerous trip. He wrote "In allen meinen Taten" as he was about to embark. The cantata's orchestral introduction takes the form of an overture in the French style, leading to chorus which includes the famous tune, "Innsbruck ich muß dich lassen." Not only does the unusual French overture give the cantata a secular feel, other sections almost sound as if they were not by Bach. Its authorship has not been questioned, however. It is well to bear in mind that 1734, when it was written, is quite late in his cantata production. He wrote most of them early in his tenure at Leipzig and before.



Artist-in-Residence Tricia van Oers at the 2017 Bethlehem Bach Festival

This was my second hearing of the Mass in B Minor at the 2017 Festival. Given the solidity of Greg Funfgeld's musicianship, and the experience of the mostly stable membership of the choir, soloists, and orchestra, I was not surprised by the basic consistency of the performance. However, I was struck by subtle differences in the texture of Bach's counterpoint, which may not have been intentional and could well have been simply a matter of details I was noticing for the first time. The sound of the orchestra and chorus is robust, but clear, making it possible to penetrate Bach's counterpoint almost as well as in a Rifkinesque performance. I felt closer to Bach's composition than ever. One doesn't get this experience at the Beethoven Ninth, which the BSO plays at the Tanglewood season closer year after year, since the conductors are different, or at the New York Philharmonic's annual *Messiah*, not only because the conductors are deliberately scheduled for the contrasts in their approach, but because *Messiah* is a less complex work. Handel could write brilliant fugues, but they don't reward deep penetration as richly as Bach's.

Over the past year or two, the Bach Choir has expanded its concert schedule, as well as its programs for children. Part of the Choir's mission to include everyone in the community, above all young people. For example Bach to School is a comprehensive, I daresay ambitious, program of thoroughly considered in-school presentations for children at all levels: elementary, middle, and high school, with the purposes not only of making Bach a part of education, but of developing future audiences and artists. Festival-goers experience this in performances by alumni of the program at the closing evening, Zimmermann's Coffee House, where they are joined by professional soloists from the festival. There is also The Bach Chaconne Project, which, unlike Bach to School, does not recur every year. In this high school students create

their own variations for Bach's great chaconne theme from the Violin Partita in D Minor. The results range from the solid to the brilliant. When I heard the students, there were some interesting choices of modern instruments, as well as jazz.



Hans Christian Andersen's "The Nightingale" performed by the Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre

Last year the ingenious way in which the Bach Festival reaches out to children as well as introducing the music of Bach into new contexts manifested itself in an unforgettable performance of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Nightingale" with the Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre, a Bethlehem-based initiative of singular distinction, directed by Doug Roysdon, who designs the marionettes and writes the scripts, with a fine literary sense and scholarly curiosity. He told me he was considering the question of whether Andersen knew Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." The style of the performance was specifically intended for children, but the artistic level of all aspects of the work was so high, that adults were easily drawn in. I found it absorbing and moving. The design and execution of the marionettes were sharply characterized, often to the point of grotesquerie, but still colorful, elegant and beautiful, and executed with flair and sophistication. The work of the puppeteers and their voices was polished to the highest level. I can't stress too much how impressive an achievement this was, or how much I enjoyed its beauty and intelligence. Behind the stage were musicians and singers from the Bach Choir, to accompany the narrations, which was transposed to 17th century Germany. The music they played went far beyond the scope of background music and included some of Bach's greatest, for example choruses from the cantatas, movements from *The Art of Fugue*, the "Lacrimosa" from Mozart's Requiem, and William Bolcom's Graceful Ghost Rag, played by Greg Funfgeld, keyboard, and Elizabeth Field, violin. Virtuoso recorder

player Tricia van Oers played the voice of the nightingale, through music including “Le Rossignol en Amour” by Francois Couperin and “Engels Nachtigaltje” by Jacob van Eyck as well as the recorder duet accompanying Bach’s “Sheep may safely graze.”

Purists might cringe at the thought of Bach’s music put into service in the background of a fairy tale, even and artful one like Hans Christian Andersen, but Maestro Funfgeld made sure the music was treated with all the dignity due it, while the selection, timing, and dynamics matched it to the story most effectively. They should also remember that Bach was no purist himself, rearranging religious works for secular contexts and vice versa. Everyone—of all ages—gave the show a rousing ovation. I warmly hope I get to see Mock Turtle’s work again before too long.

Another way young people participate in the work of the Bach Choir is in the Bel Canto Children’s Chorus. The relationship has existed for a long time, but now the Chorus is fully a part of the Bach Choir, adding “of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem” to their title. All the music-lovers of the Lehigh Valley will benefit from this closer artistic and administrative association.



She-e Wu, Marimba Player, Artist-in Residence 2018

The Bach Festival, in the exuberance of the celebration of the Choir’s 120th anniversary, will expand as well. An open-air concert will set this year’s festival in motion at noon on Friday. The festival will close on Sunday with the return of the Biennial Young American Singer Competition Finals, sponsored by The Bach Choir of Bethlehem conjointly with the American Bach Society.

Special musical events will include Bach's Fifth Brandenburg concerto with Greg Funfgeld playing the virtuosic harpsichord part, a work he hasn't played in many years. The artist-in-residence, She-e Wu, a much-admired marimba player, is quite an adventurous choice, but typical of Mr. Funfgeld's curiosity and openness to the new. She will play her transcription for marimba of the Third Cello Suite, BWV 1009 in C Major, as well as Eric Ewazen's Concerto for Marimba and Strings. Charlotte Mattax Moersch will play Bach's Goldberg Variations (which I mentioned at the beginning of this article in connection with Angela Hewitt's performance on a Fazioli grand) on the harpsichord, of course. There will be cantatas, "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis" (BWV 21), "Gottes Zeit ist die Allerbeste Zeit" (BWV 106), and the old favorite, "Ich stehe mit einem Fuß im Grabe" (BWV 156). And of course the Mass in B Minor.



About Michael Miller

Michael Miller, Editor and Publisher of New York Arts and The Berkshire Review, an International Journal for the Arts, was trained as a classicist and art historian at Harvard and Oxford, worked in the art world for many years as a curator and dealer, and contributed reviews and articles to *Bostonia*, *Master Drawings*, *Drawing*, *Threshold*, and *North American Opera Journal*, as well as numerous articles for scholarly and popular periodicals. He has taught courses in classics, the English language, and art history at Oberlin, Rutgers, New York University, the New School, and Williams. Currently, when he is not at work on *The Berkshire Review* and *New York Arts*, he writes fiction, pursues photography, and publishes scholarly work. In 2011 he contributed an introductory essay to *Leonard Freed: The Italians / exh. cat. Io Amo L'Italia*, exhibition at Le Stellite, Milan, and wrote the revised section on American opera houses in *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*. He is currently at work on a libretto for a new opera by Lewis Spratlan, *Midi*, an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* set in the French West Indies, ca. 1930.