

Bach Choir Celebrates 120 Years

An interview with Executive Director Bridget George

Photos contributed by Bach Choir

Stephen Libby: Who founded The Bach Choir 120 years ago? Where were some of their first performances?

Bridget George: J. Fred Wolle, the first conductor of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, founded The choir in 1898. The choir gave the first complete performances in America of Bach's *Mass in B Minor* (1900) and *Christmas Oratorio* (1901). Both performances were in Central Moravian Church.

SL: What was going on in the community at the time that led to the creation of The Bach Choir?



BG: The community of Moravians that settled in Bethlehem in 1742 brought with it a musical heritage as rich as its spiritual heritage. Music was part of the fabric of life in Bethlehem and it was fertile ground for the reception of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. It is now well documented by Bach scholars that Bethlehem was the first place in America where the music of Bach was heard. A score and parts of Bach's Cantata 80 *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* ("A

Mighty Fortress Is Our God"), hand transcribed by Moravian organist Ernst Till in 1823, were discovered in the Moravian Archives. This predates by several years the revival of Bach's music in Germany by Felix Mendelssohn. J. Fred Wolle, also a Moravian organist, was inspired by his study of Bach in Munich and returned home to Bethlehem determined to found a choir that would sing the music of Bach including the monumental *Mass in B Minor*.

SL: What have been some of the highlights over the years?

BG: Since we are celebrating Greg Funfgeld's 35th anniversary as artistic director and conductor as well as the 120th birthday

of the choir, I'll focus on the highlights of Greg Funfgeld's tenure. The annual Bethlehem Bach Festival that falls over two weekends in May continues to attract thousands of visitors from across the United States and beyond.



Also, during Funfgeld's tenure, programs have expanded beyond the Festival to a year-round season of more than 32 concerts and educational programs for an audience of more than 22,000. Prestigious performance venues have included the Thomaskirche, Bach's Church in Leipzig and Munich's Hekulesaal (1995); Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center as part of the Centennial Celebration (1998–2000); the BBC Proms in London's Royal Albert Hall (2003); Severance Hall, Cleveland (2007); and Strathmore-Washington DC area (2013). In 2011, The Bach Choir represented the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in a 10th anniversary musical observance of 9/11 in New York City, giving concerts in Saint Paul's Chapel and Trinity Church, Wall Street. In 2014, The choir gave the world premiere of *Young Meister Bach*, an opera by Chuck Holdeman and Bill Bly in Philadelphia for the 250th anniversary of the German Society of Pennsylvania. Other commissions include works by Larry Lipkis, Libby Larsen, and Stephen Paulus. The choir has released eight recordings on the Dorian and Analekta labels including most recently *Saint John Passion* (2012) and *A Child's Christmas in Bethlehem* (2013). The Choir has been featured on National Public Radio's *Performance Today* and



Prairie Home Companion, Deutsche Radio, the BBC World Service, *CBS Sunday Morning*, and in the Emmy award-winning PBS documentary on the choir, *Make a Joyful Noise*. The Choir has been recognized for its outstanding educational outreach programs by Chorus America, the National Endowment for the Arts (grant awards 2011–2017) and the J.S. Bach Foundation in Switzerland, which named The Bach Choir of Bethlehem as the first American recipient of its annual award to a single Bach organization (2012).

Bach to School is presented for more than 5,000 students a year, including every 5th grade student in the City of Allentown and every 3rd grade student in the Cities of Bethlehem and Easton.

Free *Bach at Noon* concerts, a gift to the community, are presented on Second Tuesdays ten times a year in Bethlehem and Allentown.

An annual *Family Concert* gives young musicians, actors, visual artists, dancers, and composers, an opportunity to collaborate with The Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra.

Mr. Bach Comes to Call, a film based on the acclaimed *Classical Kids* CD, was co-produced by The Bach Choir of Bethlehem and is distributed internationally by The Children's Group.

Educational Outreach at the annual Bethlehem Bach Festival includes the popular Zimmermann's Coffeehouse, featuring German fare and baroque music played by talented young musicians chosen by audition.

In 2016, The Bach Choir launched a long-term affiliation with the Bel Canto Children's Chorus, founded in 1983 by Dr. Joy Hirokawa. Bel Canto relocated from Red Hill, PA., to the Lehigh Valley and moved its operations to the Bach Choir offices with administrative and artistic support provided by The Bach Choir. Together, the diverse programs of Bel Canto and the Bach Choir's impressive educational outreach help to cultivate a lifelong passion for the choral art.

SL: What can people do to support The Bach Choir?

BG: *Come to our concerts:* For information and tickets visit bach.org.

Make a gift to The Choir: You can donate online at bach.org

and read about different giving opportunities including how to become a guarantor or a corporate sponsor.

Audition for The Bach Choir or for Zimmermann's Coffee House: Call Matthew Angelo 610-866-4382 Ext. 110.

Audition for the Bel Canto Children's Chorus or enroll in Bel Canto's Choral Village Summer Camp: Call Silagh White 610-866-4382 Ext. 116.

Volunteer at concerts (hospitality and house staff) or in the office: Call Renee James 610-866-4382 Ext. 115.

SL: What else would you like our readers to know about The Bach Choir?

BG: The Bach Choir is locally loved and nationally known not only for the profound beauty and spirituality of its music but for its welcoming, joyful community engagement. Like thousands of others, if you come for the first time, you will want to return.



Upcoming concerts include:

Bach at Noon—March 13 and April 10, 12:10–1pm at Central Moravian Church, Bethlehem; no reservations needed

Spring Concert, A Celebration of the Choral Art—March 17, 7:30pm at Easton's State Theatre and March 18, 4pm at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

111th Bethlehem Bach Festival—May 11–12 and May 18–19; see full schedule of concerts and events on the website

