

Review: Splendid musicianship, rousing choruses and sublime soloists at 'Bach at 8' concert at Bethlehem Bach Festival



Marimba player She-e Wu performed Bach's Suite in C Major at the Bethlehem Bach Festival. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

By Steve Siegel
Special to The Morning Call

From anguish to elation, and just about everything in between, pretty much describes the vast emotional landscape covered in Friday evening's concert at Packer Memorial Church presented by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem. Splendid musicianship, rousing choruses, and the sublime voices of the soloists turned grief into joy and sorrow into triumph.

One can't get more solemn than Bach's passionate Cantata 21, "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis" (I had much grief) or feel more elated after Handel's exuberant "Ode to St. Cecilia," the two works that opened and closed the program. In between, Bach's Third Cello Suite in C Major, in a transcription for marimba performed by soloist She-e Wu, provided a lively intermezzo.

Performing the cantata and Handel's "Ode" were the 85 voices of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, the Bach Festival Orchestra and vocal soloists Cassandra Lemoine, soprano; Benjamin Butterfield, tenor, and William Sharp, baritone. All were under the direction of Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld.

As with many dark clouds, Bach's cantata had a silver lining. Brightest of all was the angelic voice of Lemoine, in her Bach fest debut. Rarely will one hear a voice of such exquisite purity. A few years ago the Welsh soprano Charlotte Church, early in her career, showed great promise in the classical genre before succumbing to the riches of pop stardom. We can only hope that Lemoine finds sufficient rewards in the classical world to keep her firmly in its fold. Hers is a voice to be cherished.

Preceded by a lovely, solemn oboe solo by Mary Watt, Lemoine cast her spell early in Cantata 21 with a sublimely tearful "Seufer, Tranen, Kummer, Not," affectionately accompanied by Watt and cellist Loretta O'Sullivan. Butterfield followed in a stormy aria rocked by waves of anguish. Passionately delivered, his voice actually quivered with grief.

In "Komm, mein Jesu," Lemoine was joined by Sharp, providing a wonderful melding of contrasting vocal colors — hers light sparkling with optimism, his rich and dark with gloom. That dichotomy of opposites was cleverly carried over into the subsequent chorus, a delightful dialogue between the sopranos and tenors.

Butterfield returned in "Erfreue dich, Seele," this time with an opportunity to express sheer joy with the same conviction that he had previously expressed sorrow. The work closed on a resounding note of affirmation, the buoyant voices of the choir accompanied by lofty brass and timpani.

One could almost believe that the acoustics of Packer Church were designed with the marimba in mind, so resonant and rich did its voice ring out. The Suite in C Major, arguably the most popular of the six suites for solo cello, achieved a new, percussive dimension in Wu's exuberant performance. Wu gave the piece a pronounced improvisatory flavor, performing with a wide variety of mallets to provide a wealth of complex voicing.

It was fascinating to see how one deals with sustained notes on an instrument that essentially has no sustain. The Prelude, for instance, makes use of a single sustained note held in the bass register, while progressively complex figures build tension around it. Wu accomplished this by repetitively striking of one of the lowest bars of her instrument, evoking the sound of a throbbing heartbeat, to great effect.

Whatever pathos remained in the Prelude was resolved in the bright, bouncy set of Baroque dances that followed. Wu's mallets — two in each hand — danced over the bars, at times striking forcefully, at other times merely tapping them. The Sarabande was the work's virtuosic showpiece, with its series of triple and quadruple stops providing plenty of opportunity for Wu's expressiveness.

The sense of buoyant optimism evoked by Wu's performance was effectively echoed in Handel's uplifting "Ode for Saint Cecilia." Butterfield's expressive tenor could even make a recitative sing, as he did in "When nature underneath." Lemoine brought us back into the clouds with "What passion cannot music raise," backed again by O'Sullivan's lovely cello. Her delicately rolled r's and impressive coloratura were simply captivating.

How can anyone resist such charming musical alliterations as the "double, double, double beat of the thund'ring drum," sung with gusto by Butterfield, and accompanied — or rather I should say shared — by the clarion sound of Lawrence Wright's trumpet and the mighty timpani of Christopher Hanning, both of who were at the top of their game throughout the entire work.

Lemoine sang softly of the "soft complaining flute," and there were certainly no complaints either with the tenderness of her voice or with Robin Kani's soft, uncomplaining flute work. The power of the massed choir voices combined with trumpets and timpani in a truly resounding, lofty finale

Steve Siegel is a freelance writer.

jodi.duckett@mcalls.com