

NEW YORK ARTS

New York Arts

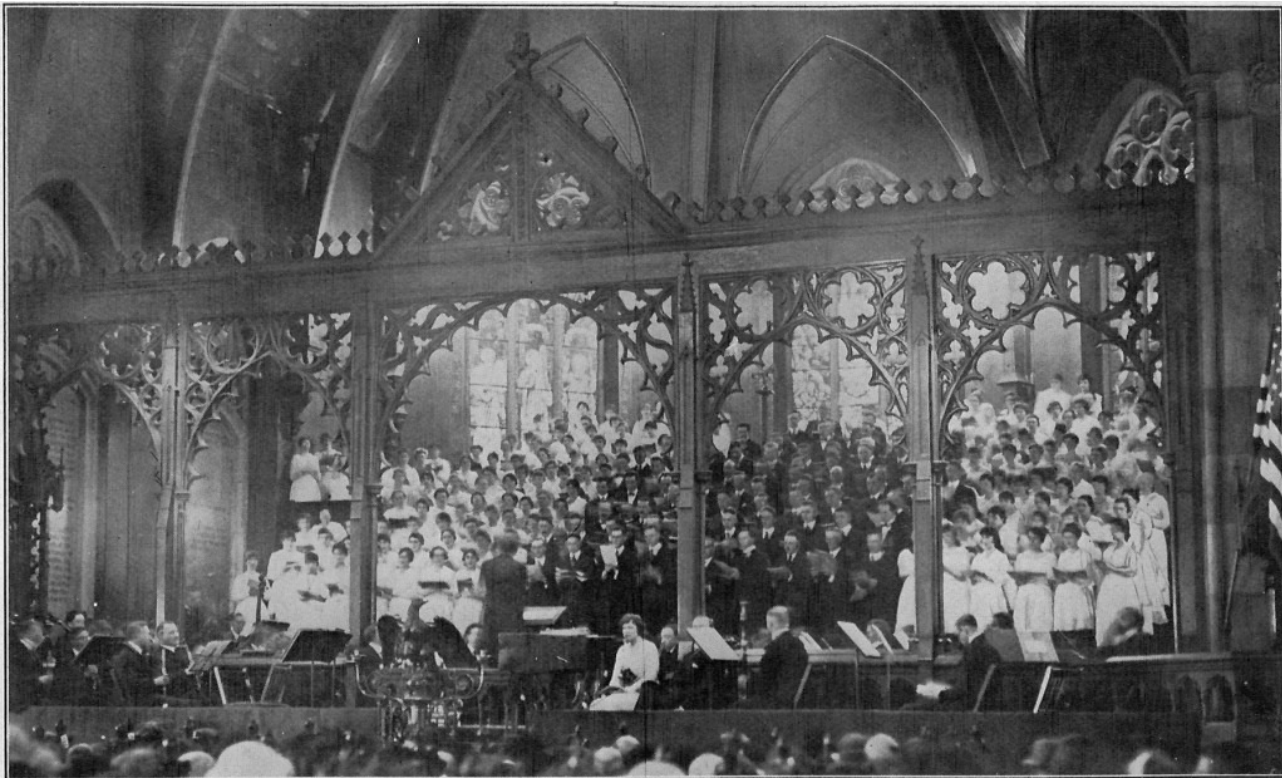


newyorkarts.net

<http://newyorkarts.net/2015/10/bach-choir-bethlehems-upcoming-season-bach-festival-2015/>

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem's Upcoming Season, with a Backward Look at the Bach Festival in May 2015

by [Michael Miller](#) , October 29, 2015.



The Bethlehem Bach Choir Performing the B Minor Mass in 1917.

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem surely must be one of the most extraordinary musical institutions in the world. Situated in a small city with an important industrial history, now entirely in the past, the Bach Choir has a tradition connecting it with a point in the performance history of Bach's music which antedates the Mendelssohnian Bach Revival by six years. Bethlehem can also be proud that this venerable institution did not emerge from the indulgences of the city's wealthiest families, but from the religious traditions of the Moravian Protestants who settled there in the 18th century. Following the precepts of Martin Luther, they held their musical traditions in high esteem. In the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem there is a copy of the first publication of a Bach cantata, *Ein feste Burg*, by Breitkopf & Härtel in 1821. It is dated 1823, six years before Mendelssohn's historic performance of the St. Matthew Passion.

The tradition continued mainly through the Central Moravian Church and the music that was played at home. A series of choirs was formed through the nineteenth century. 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, who had worked with its predecessor, the Bethlehem Choral Union (1858-1898), which was itself preceded by the Philharmonic Society, founded in 1827. This is a culture entirely different from the major cities of today, where classical music has largely been cut off from its roots.

Hence, it is quite a different experience to hear Bach in Bethlehem, where his music is integrated into the festival year, rather as it was in Bach's lifetime, although not bound to the liturgical year. To attend a performance in Bethlehem is to participate in a ritual—not primarily a religious one—which honors God, the traditions of the community, and Johann Sebastian Bach. But in a way, the word “ritual” fails to describe it, since both locals and the many people who travel significant distances to get there, expect to hear good music-making, no, excellent music-making, and this is never predictable. In any case, ritual does not mean routine any more than it lives by repetition. The performances of the choir are about Bach primarily, and the concerts are secular events, although the obvious practical place to perform them is a church. Still, above all for many of the artists, the act of worship is not absent, and, I believe, different members of the audience in their own different ways honor God through Bach as an intermediary. For more about the history of the Bach Choir, see [my review](#) of their 2014 Christmas Concert. See also the [excellent blog by David Ruhl](#), a member of the choir.

This hardly does justice to what the Bach Choir actually does. To understand it you have to go to the concerts—and more than once.

The major events of the Bach Choir's season are close at hand. They are a regular presence in Bethlehem through their Bach at Noon Concerts, but the Christmas Concerts early in Advent and the Bach Festival in May are the foundations of their season. To give you an idea of the extent of the tradition, I should mention that 2016 will be the 109th Bach Festival. However, there will be another, special event this year a gala fundraiser concert by the Bach Collegium Japan under the direction of Masaaki Suzuki. This will take place on November 7 at 4pm in the warm acoustics of the Central Moravian Church, with festivities at the nearby Bethlehem Hotel. Knowing a little bit about local ways, I can guarantee that no one who makes the trip will be disappointed with the high spirits or the quality of the food and drink. In Bethlehem people know how to celebrate.

The May Festival is the centerpoint of the year, however. With a weekend full of concerts and lectures, always culminating in a performance of the B Minor Mass, this immersion is the best way I know to remind ourselves just how much Johann Sebastian Bach and his music means to us today. He has not been called the Fifth Evangelist for nothing.

The Bach Choir is open to diverse ways of playing, although the main concerts are performed on modern instruments and with their full choir. Last year's festival included a concert played on period instruments, and of course the Bach Collegium Japan will play them as well. The basic sound of the excellent orchestra, which, I believe, has traditionally included some members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, resembles other first-rate modern instrument Bach ensembles, from Karl Richter's Munich Bach Orchestra to David Hoose's Cantata Singers and Emmanuel Music. The strings are warm, rich, and glowing, the soloists supremely sensitive and musical, and all play with total dedication, as they support the chorus, the heart of the enterprise, just over 100 gifted, disciplined, and devoted amateur singers. If Greg Funfgeld, who has been Music Director since 1983, is the brain of the enterprise, with his deep experience of Bach over the years, he shares a good piece of the heart as well, so warm is his rapport with musicians, singers, and audiences, and so radiant is his love for Johann Sebastian Bach and his music. [Click here](#) for a podcast interview with him.

[The Bach Choir](#) offers aforementioned Bach at Noon concerts around Bethlehem and neighboring Allentown,

children's concerts, and educational programs in schools, as well as the traditional Christmas Concert and Springtime Concert, but the [Bach Festival](#), performed twice on consecutive weekends in May, is the high point of the annual cycle, with its annual performance of the B Minor Mass, which they have been performing annually, with few if any interruptions, since 1900. This is said to have been the first complete performance of the B Minor Mass in the United States. The universe of the Bethlehem Bach Choir revolves around the B Minor Mass.

There is much else to hear and see over the weekend. The period instrument concert I mentioned was a highly focused program about French influence on Bach (coincidentally the theme of an entirely different harpsichord program by Kristian Bezuidenhout at Carnegie Hall a week before). The B Minor Mass forces convened the night before to perform cantatas, in a program which showed the range of Bach instrumentation and treatment. BWV 152, "Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn," called for a small chamber group accompanying soloists without chorus, and the others the full orchestra and chorus. That Friday evening concert included a remarkable performance of Bach's E Major Violin Concerto, with the brilliant young violinist Caroline Goulding, a pupil of Christian Teztlaff. She used her entire body in communicating with her instrument, making her performance virtually a dance—entirely for the good, because what one heard was superb, and the orchestra and Mr. Funfgeld were entirely in sympathy with her. Saturday morning brought the Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 and the Orchestral Suite No. 4 in Baker Hall in the Zoellner Arts Center of Lehigh University, a hall with really very pleasant acoustics. An important and very enjoyable part of the concert was The Bach Chaconne Project, directed by Larry Lipkin, composer-in-residence at Moravian College. In this, young composers from area high schools created their own variations from Bach's great Chaconne in D Minor. Everyone enjoyed this tremendously—few allowances for youth necessary. There was of course a straight performance of the Chaconne. Caroline Goulding performed it on the first weekend, and Elizabeth Field on the second (the performance I heard), and she was superb, giving an intensely physical, musical, and flowing performance. She actually changed clothes for this to give herself more flexibility.

The Festival closed Saturday night with a celebration at the Bethlehem Hotel, "Zimmermann's Coffee House." Back in June I reviewed a splendid, entirely different concert by Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra, with the same title. At Bethlehem it was a more social affair, with a series of excellent vocal and instrumental performances by local high school students, with the guitarists standing out, as well as performances by professional participants in the Festival. I can't express how much I admire this practice of including very young musicians in the performances. The love of music and of Bach is being passed on to a new generation, and those high school students can be justifiably proud of their work for the rest of their lives, whether they become professional musicians or not. This will all recur in a different, equally lively form in the coming season.

The cantata concerts at the Mass were performed at the Packer Memorial Church on the Lehigh University campus. This is about a 20 to 30 minute walk from the Bethlehem Hotel, where you should stay, when attending the festival. There is a shuttle bus, but the walk through 18th, 19th, and early 20th century Bethlehem, is fascinating, and you would get more of the feeling of a pilgrimage, which is entirely appropriate. Packer Memorial Church, is rather large, quite reverberant with a very pleasing warm sound. I was glad to be sitting up close for clarity's sake. Everything was reasonably clear and handsomely balanced amidst the bloom of the church's acoustics. Greg Funfgeld, with due respect for this space, which he knows well, avoided pushing the tempi. Their general breadth only enhanced the dignity and grandeur of the music. The sincere devotion to the music and everyone concerned made itself felt throughout the performance.

I should add that the performance fell into two parts, divided by an hour's intermission. Besides giving the musicians and singers a good rest, it provided some separation between the Kyrie and Gloria, which were written in 1733 for the Dresden Court, and the rest of the monumental work. Bach wrote the Credo, which of course immediately followed the break, at the end of his life, while the Sanctus, written in 1724, is the earliest

part of the work. Late in life, Bach wanted to assemble these parts of the Mass he had written, together with newly composed sections, some derived from earlier cantatas, but extensively revised. Most consistently he removed the original ritornello beginnings, played by the orchestra, to put the words of the Mass first. It may well be that Bach never intended the Mass to be performed as a whole, but the score is profoundly unified through key relationships and other structural elements, and I have not yet heard a performance bad enough to persuade me that it is a fool's errand to perform it as a whole in concert.

While the form of the later movements had been fundamentally changed, they brought us into a more Italianate—or Latinate—version of the vocal and instrumental style of the cantatas, which, as is customary at Bethlehem, were lovingly and expertly handled by an international group of singers, interacting closely with the orchestra and the instrumental soloists. The soprano Rosa Lamoreaux sang her part with a brilliant voice, rich in its variations from register to register. She gave her lines much energy, feeling, and style, with strongly shaped phrasing reminiscent of Schwarzkopf and Seefried. Agnes Zsigovics sang “second” soprano in more relaxed manner and a softer, darker voice, spinning out long, elegant phrases. Stephen Ng, tenor, was perhaps a little variable, struggling at times, but singing with an attractive light voice. William Sharp, baritone, was outstanding with his seasoned musicianship, taste, and handsome voice. Dashon Burton is endowed with a very big, colorful bass voice. He sang with an almost wild energy. Not everyone appreciated this, but for my part I enjoyed its edge of wildness. The renowned countertenor Daniel Taylor was a special case, as a regular at the Festival and other Bethlehem performances. He was especially deeply immersed in the spirit of the performance, and considerable passion was in his veins as he applied his expertise in Baroque performance and his richly colored voice to his parts. All of these outstanding singers will be back in May 2016, with the exception of Mr. Burton, who will be replaced by Daniel Lichti, and Mr. Ng, who will be replaced by Benjamin Butterfield.

This performance ultimately came from the joy of Christian faith, and it was deeply moving. By the final *Dona nobis pacem*, there were many welling eyes, not least Daniel Taylor, who, for this final chorus, turned his back to the audience and simply listened, facing the altar.

I have been to many festivals, most of which offer profound insights and experiences, but I have encountered nothing as deep as the weekend in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, sharing in this old German-American tradition. Whether the Judeo-Christian divinity is your God, Johann Sebastian Bach, or a Unitarian or agnostic generality, you will be deeply moved by the pilgrimage to Bethlehem. At the very least, especially if you explore the old Moravian area and the Moravian Central Church, you will learn things you never expected.

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem Season Schedule 2015-16

109th Bethlehem Bach Festival (*at a glance*)

THE HEART OF OUR SEASON

[Click here](#) for a detailed 109th Bach Festival schedule

Festival Soloists

Agnes Zsigovics, soprano

Rosa Lamoreaux, soprano

Daniel Taylor, countertenor

Benjamin Butterfield, tenor

William Sharp, baritone

Daniel Lichti, bass

Fridays, May 13 & 20, 2016

2PM – Distinguished Scholar Lecture

Dr. Christoph Wolff

Room 145, Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University

Admission FREE, no tickets required

4PM – Bach performed in intimate and historic settings

Choice A – Bach at 4 – HOW BRIGHTLY SHINES

Incarnation of Our Lord Church, Bethlehem

Thomas & Buchanan Streets (close to Zoellner Arts Center)

General Admission: \$24, Students \$9

Bach Chorale Sing Part 1

Prior to the start of Bach at 4, Incarnation of Our Lord Church

Choice B – Chamber Music in the Saal – TREACHEROUS LOVE

Saal of the Moravian Museum, Church Street, Bethlehem

General Admission: \$28, Students \$9

6PM – Buffet Dinner with Informal Talk

Dr. Larry Lipkis

Asa Packer Room, University Center, Lehigh University

Admission: \$40 per person

**Seating is limited, prior registration required*

8PM – Easter Oratorio – SONGS OF JOY

featuring guest trumpet soloist, Terry Everson

Packer Memorial Church, Lehigh University

Admission: \$32, \$26; Students \$9

Saturdays, May 14 & 21, 2016

10:30AM – Taylor 2 Dance and the Bach Festival Orchestra

BRIMMING OVER

Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University

General Admission: \$25, Students \$9

12:30PM – Festival Lunch

Butz Lobby, Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University

Admission: \$27 general public, \$22 Bach Choir Guarantors (\$750+ receive complimentary lunch)

**Seating is limited, prior registration required*

2PM – Bach Chorale Sing Part 2

Near the Brass Choir tent, outside of Packer Church

2:30PM – The Mass in B Minor (Part 1) & 4:30PM (Part 2)

Packer Memorial Church, Lehigh University

Admission: \$58, \$46; Students \$20

8:30PM to 10:30PM – Zimmermann's Coffee House

CHAMBER MUSIC, FOOD AND DRINK

Peter Hall, Moravian College

Cover Charge: \$15

**Seating is limited, prior registration required*

Sunday Mornings at Festival

May 15 & 22, 2016

Bach in the Context of Worship

Please check back to this page for links to information about the services and participating churches.

Sunday, May 22, 2016

1PM – Young American Singer Competition Finals

Peter Hall, Moravian College

Admission FREE, no tickets required

Sponsored by the American Bach Society and The Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

You might like:

[Recommended by](#)

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 the 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.

Share the knowledge!

