
NEW YORK ARTS

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem's Christmas Concert, a Review and Interview with Music Director Greg Funfgeld—to Air on Christmas Day at 8pm on WVFM



by Michael Miller , December 24, 2014



2014 Christmas Concerts
My soul doth magnify the Lord

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem J.S. Bach – Cantata 147: *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*
(Heart and Mind and Works and Life)
Robert Parsons – *Ave Maria*
Charles Villiers Stanford – *Magnificat in G*
Daniel Gawthrop – *Mary Speaks*
C.P.E. Bach – *Magnificat in D*
Saturday, December 6, 2014 at 8 pm
First Presbyterian Church of Allentown
Sunday, December 7, 2014 at 4 pm
First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem

Greg Funfgeld conducting. Photo 2014 Theo Anderson.

Greg Funfgeld, Music Director of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, kindly met with me the afternoon before their two-concert series of Christmas Concerts, the first in Allentown, PA, the second in the First Presbyterian Church in Bethlehem. We repaired to what is actually a prayer room to chat, and you will hear little if anything of the lively activity that was going on around us. He spoke about the tradition of Bach in Bethlehem, performance practice, their annual Bach Festival, which will take place in May of this coming year for the 108th time and of the distinguished scholars he invites to speak there, along with the cantatas, the chamber and orchestral music, and of course, their traditional performance of the Mass in B Minor, which received its first complete performance in America there on March 27, 1900.

Audio Player Podcast: (Duration: 24:30 — 33.7MB) <http://newyorkarts.net/2014/12/bach-choir-bethlehem-christmas-concert-review-interview-greg-funfgeld/>

In early November New Yorkers had an opportunity to learn a striking lesson in Bach tradition from a pair of concerts, that of the Academy of Ancient Music and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra—authentic instruments, one player to a part, standing, and led from the harpsichord vs. a full, symphonic treatment on modern instruments under the baton of a conductor by an orchestra which was founded not only during Bach’s lifetime, but during his residency in Leipzig. The Gewandhaus Orchestra claims the authority of tradition—actually more than one tradition, one beginning with Bach himself and another with Bach’s renaissance under Mendelssohn’s leadership in the late 1820s, while the Academy of Ancient Music claims the authority of scholarship and “authenticity.” Riccardo Chailly, the Music Director of the Gewandhaus, is, I should mention, the most scholarly of mainstream conductors, and his directions from the podium tend to be founded on actual reasons he has found through research—not a common trait of music directors. In this he is conscious not only of how Bach and his musical associates may have played, but of how Mendelssohn, Karl Straube, Günther Ramin, and Fritz Lehmann conducted Bach with the orchestra. In sum, here is tradition, intelligently criticized and renewed.

Here in the United States we tend to consider musical tradition, especially one relating to an eighteenth-century composer, as an import, but in fact a native Bach tradition exists which antedates even Mendelssohn’s historic 1829 performance of the St. Matthew Passion. Where was the first documented performance of a Bach cantata in this country? Where were the St. John Passion, the Christmas Oratorio, the B Minor Mass, and the Art of Fugue first performed complete here? Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Moravian Protestants, scattered by persecution, found refuge and renewal in Saxony, under the protection of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf and settled on his estate. Herrenhut,



their settlement, which was roughly a day and a half’s journey from Leipzig in Bach’s time. The Count encouraged the Moravians to emigrate and spread their gospel around the world. Their first successful settlement in America was founded at Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, 1741, when J. S. Bach was still alive. The Moravians, exiles from a region where both Franz Schubert’s and Gustav Mahler’s families once lived, brought with them a rich heritage of music, treasured by them in church, home, tavern, and street alike.

During my weekend visit to Bethlehem for the annual Christmas Concert of Bach Choir of Bethlehem, I attended a Sunday service at the [Central Moravian Church](#), where a touching sermon by Pastor Janet Rice brought home to me just how much these people value their traditions. The Historic Hotel Bethlehem proved an equally robust environment for traditional activities of a thoroughly secular, family- and community-oriented sort.

This sense of tradition is equally cherished by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, which, founded in 1898 by an organist at the Central Moravian Church, has roots in yet earlier choral groups, namely the Bethlehem Choral Union, 1858-1898, and the Philharmonic Society, 1827-1853. The music of J. S. Bach, however, appeared even earlier. The Moravian Archive holds a manuscript copy made by John Christian Till, organist of the Central Moravian Church, in 1823

of the Cantata BWV 80, *Ein feste Burg*. Breitkopf & Härtel of Leipzig published the cantata, the first of Bach's cantatas to be engraved, in 1821, and the Bach authority Christoph Wolff considers it likely that Till's manuscript is based upon it.

While the Christmas Concert itself is a long-standing tradition in Bethlehem, the Choir's central event is their annual [Bach Festival](#), which has taken place virtually every year since 1900, with its 108th session coming up in May 2015. In its present form this consists of a weekend of choral works and chamber music, held all over the city, along with lectures by distinguished scholars, social events, as well as classes and competitions for young Bachians. Today, the Choir's activity has expanded to a wealth of lunchtime concerts, children's concerts, and educational programs. The Bach Choir of Bethlehem has been blessed by a stable financial and administrative history, and well as a succession of Artistic Directors, three of whom have served over thirty years in the post: J. Fred Wolle, the Central Moravian Church organist who founded the group after working with its predecessor, 1898-1933, Ivor Jones, 1939-1969, and the current, sixth, incumbent, Greg Funfgeld, who has held the post since 1983.

A capacity crowd filled the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, where Greg Funfgeld has been Director of Music since 1976. The anticipatory chatter of the audience evaporated into complete silence as the music began, except for the occasional coo of an infant. I was aware that some Bach lovers had traveled considerable distances for the concert, but the sense of family and community was strong as well. For that matter, it was clear that Bethlehem is a node where Bach builds his own community. The learning and enthusiasm of the intermission conversation was impressive.

The program was designed around the Advent season and its significance, specifically the Blessed Virgin Mary. The exemplary, learned program notes by Dr. Robin A. Leaver, who has written for the Bach Choir for the past 30 years, stressed Martin Luther's teaching on the *Magnificat* (1521), while invoking the Roman Catholic and Orthodox veneration of the BVM. As Dr. Leaver observes, certain Protestant churches, Lutheranism and Anglicanism among them, retained the custom of Vespers and along with it, the Mother of God. In this passage in the Gospel of Luke (1:46-55), Mary rejoices in the Lord and the justice that He will bring to the world. Luther's loving translation and exegesis of her words made the text a favorite among Lutheran composers. They have in turn left their mark on the Moravian Church. In any case, these notes and Mr. Funfgeld's occasional comments made it clear that the Bach Choir's Christmas Concert was in fact an act of ministry—of an embracing, ecumenical sort. To this end, J. S. Bach's Cantata No. 147, "Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben," and his son, C. P. E. Bach's *Magnificat* opened and closed the concert, framing three brief Marian works from Elizabethan, Edwardian, and modern times.

Only one version of J. S. Bach's "Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben" has survived complete, the version he prepared for Leipzig, which was performed on the Feast of the Visitation (July 2) 1723 and twice again sometime in the periods 1728-31 and 1736-40, but we know that Bach originally wrote a shorter treatment at Weimar for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 20, 1716, but it was never performed there, first because his superior, the Court Kapellmeister, Johann Samuel Drese, died at the beginning of Advent, and second because Bach, passed over as Drese's successor, sought employment elsewhere—for which he served time, briefly, in jail for breach of contract. We know the structure of this earlier version from a printed collection of cantata texts, but the music, which was revised for Leipzig, has not survived. In order to adapt the earlier work for the Feast of the Visitation, Bach added three recitatives and the pastoral chorale setting ("Jesu joy of man's desiring"), which end each of the cantata's two parts, one to be performed before the sermon and the other after it. A new

text was substituted for the bass aria (no. 9), as well as other small textual alterations and a reordering of the numbers: the soprano aria, "Bereite dir, Jesu, noch itzo den Bahn," (no. 5) originally came after the tenor aria, "Hilf, Jesu, hilf," (no. 7). Especially interesting is the relationship between the new recitatives and the old arias, with a tenor recitative introducing an alto aria, a bass recitative preceding a soprano aria; a tenor aria introduces the second part, followed by an alto recitative, which introduces the bass aria with its new text. This ordering of the solo voices creates exceptional variety and contrast and a sense of the multiplicity of Christians contemplating their faith in Jesus Christ.

In this way Bach adapted his Advent cantata for the Feast of the Visitation, for which the Lutheran Church prescribed the same selection from Luke which contains the Magnificat. The Gospel text for the



Sunday before Christmas is John 1: 19-28, concerning the testimony of John the Baptist. Both Sundays are anticipatory, but in quite different ways, but the figure of Mary is important in both.

The cantata, with its trumpet parts, is bright in timbre and high in placement. The warm acoustic of the Presbyterian Church complimented this most attractively, not to mention the generous American sound of

the choir, larger than many that sing Bach today, with mature women singing the treble and alto lines. The orchestra, which played modern instruments, produced a sound very much in the style of the Leipzig Gewandhaus (rich, but less luxurious), the Munich Bach Orchestra, or what David Hoose produces from the orchestra of the Cantata Singers in Boston. The soloists, Mary Watt, oboe d'amore and English horn, Nobuo Kitagawa, English horn, Elizabeth Field, violin, and Lawrence Wright, trumpet, and Charlotte Mattax Moersch, organ, played with rich, colorful tone, virtuosic agility, and robust phrasing. Greg Funfgeld seemed especially sensitive to sonority and overall color in the tutti. There was a particularly pleasing variety of color coming from the continuo even, supported by two double basses.

The opening chorus, rich in fugal writing, came across with a fine balance between resonance and detail. I could hear most of the counterpoint, but wrapped in a glowing cloud of subtle reverberation. Funfgeld and his splendid choir compromised nowhere in articulation, clarity, or diction, while maintaining weight, a steady pulse, and energy.

Following this introduction we were indulged with the luxuriant voice, centered rhythm, and intelligent phrasing of the Canadian-American tenor, Isaiah Bell in the first recitative. His voice was perfectly focused from the beginning, and I could have become totally absorbed in the golden sheen of its upper register and smooth transition to a darker, but still glowing, lower range, if it were not for his full awareness of the meaning of the text and his compelling use of phrasing to express it. Another Canadian, the prominent counter-tenor Daniel Taylor, followed in the alto aria—rather less happily. He seemed tired, perhaps, and struggled with the high passages. His delivery was emotive, and quite effective for that. Mary Watt's oboe d'amore solo was glorious, resplendent in tone, passionate, and

phrased with a strong sense of the music's rhetoric. The Tennessean bass, Joshua Copeland, showed poise, intelligence, and smooth integration across the long range demanded by his recitative. Yet another Canadian, Ellen McAteer, sang the soprano aria, with admirable control of phrasing across a long range, but a certain thinness and harshness at the top, aggravated by her almost total eschewal of vibrato. One doesn't hear this degree of purism even at BEMF. Her careful preparation was evident, however, and her phrasing and expression admirable. The high tessitura of her aria was clearly difficult for her. Elizabeth Field's playing of the violin obbligato was magnificent. Tenor Isaiah Bell returned to close off the first half of the cantata with his aria, an intense prayer for increase of faith and love of Jesus Christ. I can't praise his vocal and interpretive qualities enough. Mr. Bell left me with a keen desire to hear him in an operatic role. Charlotte Mattax Moersch contributed an energetic and expressive obbligato on the chamber organ brought in for the purpose. Daniel Taylor's expressiveness interacted most effectively with the English horn duet in the final recitative, and Joshua Copeland fulfilled the promise of his recitative in the final, affirmative aria, brilliantly partnered by Lawrence Wright, trumpet.

The audience was thrilled by this outstanding performance of a Bach cantata by seasoned experts immersed in the composer and informed by Greg Funfgeld's wisdom and enthusiasm. His consciousness of the liturgical function and theological intent of Bach cantata writing brought this up to a spiritual level attainable only by the most committed of church musicians.



For the three short works, the choir rose and disposed themselves at the side walls around the audience. This created a magical effect in Robert Parsons' five-part *Ave Maria*. The surround effect suggested a rich Gothic acoustic, while allowing more clarity, as well as the natural warmth of the First Presbyterian Church. One had a sense of vastness, of the grandeur of Tallis' *Spem in alium*, as well as an appreciation of Bach Choir's incisive phrasing and precise intonation in this a capella work. Even spread out around the walls they remained constant in pitch to the end.

Parsons' *Ave Maria* is thought to have been composed in the late 1560's, that is, after the accession of the Protestant Elizabeth, who was not so extreme as to forbid Latin settings in her own chapel. Parsons (ca. 1535 – 1571/72) began as a Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal and later a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal and is thought to have remained loyal to the Roman Church after the death of Mary Tudor in 1558, like his successor in the Chapel Royal, William Byrd.

Charles Villiers Stanford's *Magnificat in G* is a solid Edwardian work in the Anglican tradition. Stanford, who came from a distinguished Protestant family in Dublin, was especially known for his choral works. His teaching at Cambridge and at the then nascent Royal College of Music played a significant role in shaping the British music renaissance of the early twentieth century. His music and that of his contemporary, Hubert Parry, was eclipsed by Sir Edward Elgar's, which later suffered the same fate to some degree, as the waves of British musical fashion succeeded one another over the decades. Now that Elgar is given his due once again, it is time to appreciate the older generation. Once again, the

Choir gave the work a committed, strong performance with a resplendent golden timbre. This was followed by an attractive contemporary work. Daniel Gawthrop's setting of a poem by Madeleine L'Engle, *Mary Speaks*.

The second half of the program was devoted to a single work, C. P. E. Bach's *Magnificat in D Major*. Written in 1749, when Carl was still at the court of Frederick the Great in a secular capacity. It is thought that he composed this ambitious work with a view to advancing into higher posts, including replacing his father in Leipzig. Eventually he succeeded his godfather Georg Philipp Telemann as director of sacred music for the city of Hamburg in 1768. After he assumed this post, he performed this *Magnificat* often. His pride in this work is amply justified by its variety and imagination, looking back specifically to his father's famous setting and mixing it up with the more galant style of mid-century Prussia. The orchestra, chorus, and soloists brought all the best qualities of their cantata performance to Carl Philipp Emmanuel's splendid work. The lower range of the soprano part sat better in Ellen McAteer's range, and the jumps between her high and alluring, dark low register showed the best qualities of her voice. This, her intelligent phrasing, and enthusiasm made for an outstanding performance. Daniel Taylor's voice seemed more comfortable as well. Greg Funfgeld set a pace which allowed contrast between the movements, an ebb and flow for the soloists, and a cohesive sense of forward movement and structure. A great double fugue brought the *Magnificat* to an exciting conclusion, and the audience responded with long, loud applause.

The Bachs could not have been better served, not to mention two English Renaissances, as well as our own time. It went beyond mere intelligent programming and committed performance, enriched by a deep sense of the mutual nourishment of music and faith. The evening didn't end there, however. The audience were invited to join the chorus in a series of Christmas carols, and helpful release after this feast of a concert—more than enough to convince me to keep the first or second weekend of May free for the [108th Bethlehem Bach Festival](#) for more cantatas, secular music on period instruments, the traditional B Minor Mass, and more.

The concert will be broadcast Christmas Day at 8 pm, EST on [WWFM](#).



The Headquarters of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem in the house of the Rev. John Heckewelder, 1810. Photo 2014 Michael Miller.