## Bethlehem's Bach Choir presents St. John Passion



Thomas Cooley plays the Evangelist in the Bach Choir performance of the Saint John Passion March 20 at First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem. (PAUL FOSTER-WILLIAMS / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Steve Siegel Special to The Morning Call

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week for many Christian churches. This year it has additional significance as it's the date the Bach Choir of Bethlehem presents Bach's Passion According to St. John for its 2016 Spring Concert at First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem.

The St. John Passion also is a significant work for the city of Bethlehem, since the forerunner of the Bach Choir, the Bethlehem Choral Union, gave its first complete United States performance of the work there on June 5, 1888, with J. Fred Wolle conducting from the organ. Wolle soon would disband the group and start the Bach Choir of Bethlehem in 1898.

The Bach Choir's 2011 recording of the work on the Analekta label has received critical acclaim.

For Sunday's performance, the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra will be joined by soloists Thomas Cooley, tenor (Evangelist); William Sharp, baritone (Jesus); Laura Heimes, soprano; Laura Atkinson, mezzo soprano; Isaiah Bell, tenor; Dashon Burton, bass-baritone; and David Newman, bass (Pilate). All are under the direction of Bach Choir Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld.

Most audiences of Bach's choral works probably come to the St. John Passion by way of the bigger and more elaborate St. Matthew Passion. We can probably thank Mendelssohn for some of that. His 1829 performance of the St. Matthew Passion, as crucial as it was in marking the beginning of the public's rediscovery of Bach's works, seems to have cast an unfair shadow on the smaller-scale Passion.

"So many people think of St. John as the lesser of the two works. It really isn't, it's just a different piece. St. Matthew is more retrospective and reflective; St. John is more dramatic, and moves the story in a very compelling way," Funfgeld says.

All four Gospels tell of the last days of the life of Jesus that differ in tone, emphasis and detail. Much of what gives Bach's St. John Passion its special character can be traced to the Gospel of John itself, specifically chapters 18 and 19. But the words and music come from many sources. Bach added his own elaborate commentary of the biblical text to help tell the story and to better integrate the recitative of the Evangelist with the music.

The combination of arias, recitatives and choruses together with the hymns create a rich fabric of storytelling. A dramatic sequence of chorales portrays the tragic frenzy of the characters in the eyewitness account of the action. "The chorales are what are called 'turba' choruses, from the Greek word for crowd," Funfgeld says. "At various points the choir sings those choruses as the crowd calling for the crucifixion, or as the high priests trying to manipulate Pilate, or as the soldiers at the foot of the cross casting lots for Christ's garment."

The tone of the narrative reads almost like a film noir drama, with stark details, urgent pacing, threads dropped and quickly picked up. "The choruses in particular take an important role in the unfolding drama. I tell the choir it should be performed almost as if staged. This is not meant to be beautiful music — it's meant to be dramatic and tell a story," Funfgeld says.

The Evangelist is sung by Thomas Cooley in his first performance in Bethlehem with the Bach Choir. He's renowned nationwide for the role, which in Bach's settings is composed as "secco" recitative, a speech-like narrative style, accompanied only by a single cello and organ.

A final lullaby-like chorus, "Ruht wohl" (Rest well), attempts closure of the dramatic narrative, with its cascading bass lines and return to a major key. Funfgeld says, "It's based on the Baroque dance called a Sarabande. It's mournful, but at the same time you get this sense of hope the way the music is written. You get this feeling that even if there is no resolution, there certainly is the hope of one that's very real and palpable."

•Bach Choir presents Bach's St. John Passion, 4 p.m. Sunday, First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, 2344 Center St. Tickets: \$37, \$9 students up to age 22. 610-866-4382, ext. 110 or 115, www.bach.org.