

ARTS IN REVIEW

MUSIC

Melody Deeply Rooted in Human Faith

Bethlehem Bach Festival
Various locations, Bethlehem, Pa.
May 8-9

By BARRYMORE LAURENCE SCHERER

Nestled in the Pennsylvania countryside, on and around the bucolic campus of Lehigh University, the Bethlehem Bach Festival, under the artistic direction of conductor Greg Funfgeld, is in its 108th season and going strong. If it has flaws, they are like those that distinguish a fine emerald from the perfect clarity of a fake. The Bach Choir of Bethlehem's 100 volunteer singers perform the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and that of his sons and contemporaries with exceptional devotion. When they lift their voices in the 19th-century sanctuary of Lehigh's Packer Memorial Church, their choral sonority is so rich you can feel it in your bones.

Flanked by concerts of related vocal and instrumental works, Bach's Mass in B-minor has been the centerpiece of the annual festival since 1900, when the complete work was presented here, for the first time in the U.S. The festival is a compact affair spread over Friday and Saturday, the programs repeated on the second successive weekend.

Because Bach divided the text of the B-minor Mass into brief passages, each set as a separate movement, his score is remarkable for its architectural scope. For instance, Bach sets the opening statement—"Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison" (Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy)—as three distinct movements whose successive keys constitute a B-minor triad: The grave "Kyrie" fugue in B-minor is followed by the lighter texture and brighter D-major key of the "Christe eleison" duet for two sopranos. In-



Singers in the Bach Choir of Bethlehem in Packer Memorial Church.

stead of repeating the opening "Kyrie" fugue, Bach writes an entirely new one, in the moving key of F-sharp minor, charging it with a further sense of pleading through wrenching chromatic motion in the fugue subject. Such music flows from the deepest wellsprings of human faith.

This musical triptych is followed by the joyous "Gloria in excelsis Deo" (Glory to God in the highest)—bright D-major music again, with the festive addition of trumpets. Closely following the mood of the text, Bach sets the middle section of this movement with contrasting music marked "tranquillo" to the words "Et in terra, pax" (And peace on earth).

Bach deploys his instrumental forces with an impeccable sense of color and contrast—for example, the aria "Laudamus te" for alto with violin solo is followed by the chorus "Gratias agimus tibi" for full orchestra with trumpets and drums, and then with the gentle transparency of the duet "Domine Deus" for soprano and tenor with violin, flute and organ. Throughout the Mass, every combination is at the service of the most sincere, vivid expression of the text.

At Saturday afternoon's performance there were admittedly a few moments of contrapuntal complexity where chorus and the excellent Bach Festival Orchestra

parted company, but these were brief and probably unnoticed by most of the audience. Certainly, when the last note of "Dona nobis pacem"—its broad, consoling melody reprising that of the "Gratias agimus tibi"—had faded into the evening glow of the stained-glass windows, the listeners rose en masse in vociferous thanks. Among the soloists were the distinguished counter-tenor Daniel Taylor, veteran baritone William Sharp (whose voice seems to grow brighter and sweeter with age) and soprano Rosa Lamoreaux, whose silvery vibrance recalls that of such exponents of the Austro-German school as Gundula Janowitz and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf.

There were other pleasures. Friday opened with a choice of two afternoon concerts. I plumped for "Bach and the French Influence" at the 18th-century Moravian Museum, a splendid house venue. The vocal and chamber music program was particularly well chosen to illustrate its theme and included Bach's French Suite No. 5 in G-major, its seven movements each characteristically cast in a French dance of the time. Soprano Sherezade Panthaki was outstanding, singing solo cantatas by Bach and his contemporaries Nicolas Clérambault and Jean-Philippe Rameau. Rameau's music is especially well matched

to Bach's because of his similar exploitation of rich chromatic harmony and frequent gravitation to minor keys. Both attributes impart an emotive gravity to his music similar to Bach's. Ms. Panthaki displayed a voice well focused and wonderfully agile, riding her rapid vibrato up and down passagework and trills with admirable fluency, and combining brilliance with a dark, plumlike tone.

The Saturday morning Bach Festival Orchestra concert included the Bach Chaconne Project, conceived by Moravian College composer-in-residence Larry Lipkis, who engaged talented young musicians from area high schools and mentored them as each composed an original melodic variation on the chord progression of Bach's celebrated Chaconne in D-minor from the Partita for solo violin. Played by the students (flutists, guitarists, trumpeters, etc.), the variations were arranged as a continuous work with an accompaniment orchestrated by Mr. Lipkis—and the resulting joint composition is worth repeating at a future concert. Afterward, the excellent young violinist and festival artist-in-residence Caroline Goulding gave a superb account of the Chaconne as Bach wrote it. This coming weekend it will be played by Elizabeth Field.

Student musicians were spotlighted again on Saturday evening at the informal Zimmermann's Coffee House concert in the elegant Terrace Room of the Historic Hotel Bethlehem. Seated at tables with a menu of beverages and German edibles that Bach himself might have enjoyed at Leipzig's original Zimmermann establishment, patrons dined while young people played Bach and his contemporaries. It proved a delightful finale to a rich musical weekend.

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