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Concert Review: Stunning debut, milestones, and good vibrations at Bach Fest 2018

[Sunday, May 20, 2018](#) by [Paul Willistein pwillistein@tnonline.com](mailto:pwillistein@tnonline.com) in [Focus](#)

The 111th Bach Festival went from the somber to the celebratory, with a few stops along the way for humor, classical music camaraderie, a commemorative presentation of Bach's Bible, some good vibrations, and the most stunning guest vocalist debut in years.

The 2018 festival, May 11, 12, 18, 19, marked the 120th year of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem. The May 11 and 12 first weekend was attended for this review.

In recent years, the festival has added performances and events, for 2018 providing some 17 events over two days to immerse oneself in the baroque music world of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750).

For 2018, "Bach Outdoors!" was added at noon May 11 and 18. The program was Bach's "First Cello Suite in G Major," BWV 1007, "Second Cello Suite in D Minor," BWV 1008, transcribed for marimba and performed by She-E Wu, festival artist-in-residence, and "Third Violin Partita in E Major," BWV, 1006, transcribed for electric violin and performed by Paul Miller, all at Payrow Plaza, Bethlehem City Hall, Church Street, Bethlehem.

The Festival Brass Choir again played hymns and chorales prior to afternoon May 12 and 19 performances of Bach's "Mass in B Minor."

The distinguished scholar lecture returned, 2 p.m. May 11 and 18, Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University. The topic was "120 Years of Bach in Bethlehem" for Dr. Robin A. Leaver's last year, his 35th, as annotator of the Bach Festival program.

For "Chamber Music in the Saal," Charlotte Mattax Moersch, harpischord, performed "Aria with Thirty Variations, BWV 988: Goldberg Variations," 4 p.m. May 11 and 18, the Saal of the Moravian Museum, Church Street, Bethlehem.

"Zimmermann's Coffee House" was back, 7 p.m. May 12 and 19, Peter Hall, Moravian College, Bethlehem, which endeavors to recreate the ambiance of 18th century Zimmermannsche Kaffeehaus, Leipzig, where J.S. Bach and his cohorts played music and socialized.

The festival has added more audience participation, including “Bach Chorale Sing, Part 1,” 3:40 p.m., prior to “Bach at 4,” May 11 and 18, with Bach Choir members and Bach Choir artistic director-conductor Greg Funfgeld, in his 35th year.

“Bach at 4”

“Bach at 4,” Incarnation of Our Lord Church, Bethlehem, opened somberly, as in the title of “Cantata 156” and its opening verse, “I stand with one foot in the grave.” Fortunately, it was uplifting from there, especially the alto Aria by countertenor Daniel Taylor, with Nobuo Kitagawa, oboe, and Elizabeth Field, violin; the bass Recitative by baritone William Sharp, and the concluding Chorale by the Bach Choir.

Bach offered words to the wise in his or any time in “Cantata 120”: “Strength and blessing must and shall at every moment be laid upon our government in desired abundance, so that justice and allegiance shall join together in loving embrace,” with the words and music caressed by soprano Rosa Lamoreaux and violinist Field.

None other than Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld took to the harpsichord, accompanied by Mollie Glazer, viola da gamba, for “Sonata for Viola da Gamba in D Major,” BWV 1028. Glazer played with extraordinary alacrity. Funfgeld played with awe-inspiring skilled intensity.

Countertenor Taylor was back with Kitagawa, oboe; Glazer, viola da gamba; Charles Holdeman, bassoon, and Thomas Goeman, organ, for “Cantata 76,” rendered with a delightful nonchalance that occurs with practice of the highest order, and the cheerful admonition, “Show love, you Christians, in deeds!”

One of the chief joys of “Bach at 4,” as with the choir’s “Bach at Noon” series, are Funfgeld’s authoritative insights prior to performances. Funfgeld, saying “Cantata 106” is “possibly the first cantata Bach wrote,” described it as “a treasure trove of scriptures from the Bible,” adding, “All of Bach begins here.”

“Cantata 106” moves briskly from the opening Chorus, that posits: “In him we exist, act and have our being, as long as it is his will. In him we perish at the proper moment, as he wills.”

The opening Sonatina, with Tricia van Oers, recorder, principal, and Heloise Degrugillier, recorder, playing an angelic duet, set the stage for the compact work, as the opening Chorus posits (in translation from the German): “In him we exist, act and have our being, as long as it is his will. In him we perish at the proper moment, as he wills.”

Tenor Benjamin Butterfield advanced the tone of acceptance in the Arioso; “Ah, Lord, teach us to ponder our mortality,” followed by the advice in the Aria by baritone Sharp: “Set your house in order.”

A glimpse of what was to come was offered by soprano Cassandra Lemoine, in her festival debut, in the Arioso: “It is the ancient law, mortal one, you must die!” If it hadn’t been sung so

sweetly, one might have been tempted to bolt from the sanctuary to the nearest bar (shades of H.L. Mencken, 1880-1956, the scion of Baltimore, who wrote famously of his attending the Bethlehem Bach Festival during Prohibition).

Lemoine's sustaining of the verse's final words and notes, "Herr Jesu!," made the succeeding silence all the more startling.

The passage of the person from soul to the spirit continued with the Aria by countertenor Taylor, and the succumbing words: "Into your hands I commit my spirit." The journey went on with bass Sharp, soprano Lemoine, countertenor Taylor: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" and "With Peace and joy I journey there ... consoled are my heart and mind, calm and peaceful ... death has become my sleep."

The choir's concluding Chorus returned the dual recorders of van Oers and Degrugillier to the fore, with a propulsive conclusion to a seamless work rendered seamlessly by the ensemble with a chamber recital quality somehow simultaneously intimate and grand.

Lipkis lecture

Dr. Larry Lipkis, professor of music and composer-in-residence, Moravian College, again presented a witty, informative and entertaining lecture at the dinner, May 11 and 18, Butz Lobby, Zoellner Arts Center.

Referring to Bach's cello pieces performed on a marimba, Lipkis said, "That raises a few eyebrows. Is that OK? Yes, it's more than OK." Bach composed for a variety of instruments available in his era. Had there been a marimba in Bach's time, he may have written music for it.

Turning to the "Bach at 8" May 11 and 18 concerts, Lipkis described the "serene sense of sadness" of "Cantata 21." Lipkis performed melodies on a keyboard, his daughter played violin, and recorded portions were played to illustrate many of his points.

A pre-concert performance was presented by the Suzuki Violin Program of the Lehigh Valley at 7:15 p.m. May 11 and 18 outside Packer Memorial Church.

"Bach at 8"

Inside Packer Church, true to Lipkis's words, "Cantata 21," after the elegiac opening Sinfonia, with Mary Watt, oboe, playing a delicate fillip, began with the choir singing (in the English translation by H. Ellis Finger from the German), "I had much anguish in my heart."

The Aria by soprano Lemoine, rendered with astounding clarity and rapturous gentleness, backed by Watt, oboe, and Loretta O'Sullivan, cello, exquisitely expressed the emotions ("fear and death gnaw at my oppressed heart").

The 2018 festival was the Bach Festival debut of Lemoine, a student of tenor Benjamin Butterfield. The festival debut of Lemoine is one of, if not the, most auspicious, exciting and

memorable debuts I can recall in the some 45 years that I've been attending the Bethlehem Bach Festival.

Ironically or not, Butterfield followed his former student with the Recitative and Aria, which were sincere, fluid and deep with emotion ("Torrents of salty tears.").

Lemoine returned with a splendid Recitative with baritone William Sharp, a dialogue, really, between the Soul, and Jesus, and a Duet, also with Sharp. In this, Lemoine was expressively joyful. And then, Butterfield and Lemoine, the teacher and his student, as well as the choir, sang the concluding Chorus that was, by turns, steadfast (Butterfield), gleeful (Lemoine) and breathtaking (the choir).

Bach's "Third Cello Suite, BWV 1009 in C Major," transcribed for marimba by George Stauffer and played by She-e We, was soft and sublime. At times, her mallets seemed to float in mid-air. She moved fluidly and in silver spiked heels, percussively stomping her right foot three times during the seven movements. This was the music of the spheres. The effect was mesmerizing: good vibrations, Bach-style. The piece was one of the most unusual works ever performed at the Bethlehem Bach Festival.

The program segued nicely from the sound of the music of the spheres, to the philosophy of the origin of music, symbolized by the patroness of musicians, with "Ode for Saint Cecilia's Day" by George Frideric Handel. Tenor Butterfield summoned convincingly the English lyrics based on a poem by John Dryden in the Recitative: "From harmony, from heav'nly harmony, This universal frame began."

Soprano Lemoine invoked the clarion call in the Air: "What passion cannot music raise and quell!," undergirded by O'Sullivan, cello. "And wond'ring, on their faces fell, To worship that celestial sound."

An instrumental, a March, shifted the tone toward mirth and merriment, in the Aria, led by a coquettish and mischievous Lemoine, soprano, raising an eyebrow here, casting a glance there, backed by Robin Kani, flute: "The woes of hopeless lovers, Whose dirge is whisper'd by the warbling lute." The notes of Kani's flute-playing blended wonderfully with Lemoine's voice.

The Aria by tenor Butterfield continued the bemusement, with exacting, if tongue-in-cheek, precision, as if presaging a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta: "Depths of pain, and height of passion, For the fair disdainful dame."

The melodrama continued, as if in a silent movie with music, with soprano Lemoine, backed by Moersch, organ, after a particularly sensitive instrumental introductory passage: "What human voice can reach The sacred organ's praise?" With the choir, on the final Chorus, Lemoine concluded: "The spheres began to move, And sung the great Creator's praise."

This was a prominent role for Lemoine in her Bethlehem Bach Festival debut and she was up to the challenge. With the "Ode," Lemoine connected with, captivated and endeared herself with the festival audience. Here's hoping she can and will be back.

In selecting “Ode for Saint Cecilia’s Day,” Funfgeld continues to put the “fun” in the Bach Festival. Between the two weekends of the festival, the choir and orchestra recorded the “Ode” and other works for a forthcoming CD, the choir’s fifth for the Analekta label.

In tribute to Funfgeld’s 35th anniversary, Harold G. Black, Bach Choir board president, delivered remarks, and noted that as of July 1, the Bel Canto Youth Chorus, in its 25th anniversary, will merge with the Bach Choir.

Bridget George, Bach Choir executive director, presented a three-volume reproduction of Bach’s Calov Bible, the original of which, with Bach’s margin notes, was discovered in 1934 in Michigan. At one point in the Bible, Bach cites 1 Chronicles 25 thusly: “This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing church music.”

Said Funfgeld in accepting the gift, “I’m completely stunned and very overwhelmed and feeling very humbled and grateful.”

After the May 11 and 18 concerts, the Bach Choir’s 120th birthday (1898-2018) was celebrated with champagne and strawberries outside Packer where 120 luminaria were placed.

Ifor Jones Concert

The “Fifth Brandenburg Concerto,” BWV 1050 opened the Ifor Jones Memorial Chamber Music Concerts, 10:30 a.m. May 12 and 19, Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts Center. Field, violin; Funfgeld, harpsichord; Kani, flute, played with particular merriment, and a satisfying build, leading to a solo by Funfgeld that buzzed with intensity and speed.

She-e Wu, marimba, blazed through “Concert for Marimba and Strings” by Eric Ewazen with amazing alacrity, this time in gold spiked heels that didn’t slow her down as she moved her double mallets with impressive reach, crossovers, and control along the wooden bars. The resonators were particularly suited to amplify the sound in Baker Hall. The epic sweep, adventurousness and sonority of her sound was captivating.

Bach’s “Third Suite in D Major,” BWV 1068 was textbook chamber music, with a soothing Air and toe-tapping Gavotte.

Festival Lunch

Tenor Benjamin Butterfield was featured speaker at the Festival Lunch, May 12 and 19, Butz Lobby, Zoellner Arts Center.

In his opening remarks, Harold G. Black, Bach Choir board president, said, “We try to live up to our legacy and leave a legacy for the next generation.”

Referring to “Ode for Saint Cecilia’s Day,” Butterfield said he was told, “You look like you’re having so much fun.” Pausing, he added, “I am having fun.”

Noting the festival debut of soprano Cassandra Lemoine, a former student of his, Butterfield said, "Part of the development of this festival is to not only bring in the tried and the true, but also the new."

Butterfield emphasized the salutary effect of music "because in a complicated world, this is a good time to sing."

The Mass in B Minor

The Brass Choir preceded Parts 1 and 2 of the Mass with hymns and chorales at 1:45 p.m. and 3:45 p.m. May 12 and 19. The Bach Chorale Sing, Part 2, was at 2 p.m. May 12 and 19.

The centerpiece of the Bethlehem Bach Festival, as with the works of J.S. Bach, is the "Mass in B Minor," BWV 232, 2:30 p.m. 4:30 p.m. May 12 and 19, Packer Memorial Church, Lehigh University. The Bach Choir opened with a dreamlike "Kyrie," rapturous and in a restrained but sensitive tempo under Funfgeld's baton, leading to a beautiful and memorable duet by sopranos Rosa Lamoreaux and Cassandra Lemoine.

The choir's "Gloria" sounded like thunder, presaging the Aria by Lamoreaux, accompanied by Field, violin.

Student and teacher, soprano Lemoine and tenor Butterfield, dueted again, with the delightful Kani, on flute, making music and lyrics, "Lamb of God," skip like a lamb in the field.

The alto Aria by countertenor Daniel Taylor and the bass Aria by David Newman were superb, the latter paced by Anthony Cecere, French horn.

The choir's "Qui tollis" was perfection with the choir's "Cum Sancto" a spirited and satisfying conclusion to the first session.

Funfgeld makes the Mass a real page-turner for the choir, no more so than in the "Credo" that opened the second session. The Duet by soprano Lemoine and countertenor Taylor blended in thrilling harmony.

The choir's "Et incarnatus," "Crucifixus" and "Et resurrexit" were astounding, with Funfgeld keeping steady tempo with his right baton while gently guiding all with delicate wave of his left hand.

A bass Aria by William Sharp, tenor Aria by Butterfield, and alto Aria by Taylor led magnificently and inevitably to the choir's "Dona nobis," concluding the 111th edition of the Bethlehem Bach Festival in a season of milestones with soaring solemnity.