

# Banner year for Bach: Annual festival celebrates choir's 120th year

This has been a banner year for the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, the country's oldest Bach Choir. It is celebrating its 120th anniversary, it presented its first-ever concert at the State Theatre in Easton, ushered in artistic director Greg Funfgeld's 35th season and saw him presented with an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Moravian College.

The celebration continues with the 111th Bethlehem Bach Festival, which takes place Fridays, May 11 and 18 and Saturdays, May 12 and 19 in venues in north and south Bethlehem.

The fest gets off to a grand start when the choir takes the music of Bach into the streets with its new "Bach Outdoors," a free concert presented on Fridays at noon on Payrow Plaza at Church and New Streets, adjacent to the Bethlehem Public Library.

"We thought it would be nice to do something new in this 120th anniversary of the choir, to open up the festival to a wider community," Funfgeld says. "It's just another way that Bach's music speaks to such a wide diversity of musicians and listeners."

The concerts will feature the Bach Festival Orchestra's principal violist Paul Miller, renowned marimba soloist She-e Wu, and cellist Dale Henderson, founder of "Bach in the Subways."

Wu, a soloist and clinician at venues and festivals around the world, is this year's festival artist-in-residence, and will be performing not only works by Bach, but also the numerous works for marimba she has composed, commissioned and premiered.

Recent festival innovations continue, including a choice of two Bach at Noon-style programs, pre-concert performances and the wildly popular Zimmermann's Coffee House concerts featuring young performers. Remaining true to its 100-plus-year-old tradition, Bach's B Minor Mass at Packer Memorial Church continues as the festival's centerpiece (Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Part 1, 4:30 p.m. Part 2).

The Distinguished Scholar Lecture will be given by Bach Choir program annotator Robin Leaver. Leaver, visiting professor at [Yale University](#) and Queen's University, Belfast, and emeritus professor at Westminster Choir College, will speak on "120 Years of Bach in Bethlehem" (2 p.m. Fridays, Room 145, Zoellner Arts Center).

On Fridays at 4 p.m. Chamber Music in the Saal concerts will be presented in the Saal of the Moravian Museum (Church Street, Bethlehem). They will feature harpsichordist Charlotte Mattax Moersch performing Bach's Goldberg Variations, the piece with which she inaugurated the fest's chamber music concerts in 1997.

Also at 4 p.m. Fridays, "Bach at 4" concerts in the intimate environment of the Incarnation of Our Lord Church (Thomas and Buchanan Streets, Bethlehem) features members of the Bach

Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra performing Cantata 156, “Ich steh mit einen Fuss im Grabe” (I am standing with one foot in the grave), a pair of Bach arias sung by soprano Rosa Lamoreaux and countertenor Daniel Taylor, along with Cantata 106, “Gottes Zeit is die allerbeste Zeit” (God's time is the very best time).

Cantata 106, written for two gambas and two recorders, is possibly Bach’s first cantata. “It is one of Bach’s most sublime creations in the cantata genre,” Funfgeld says. “It’s a very intimate piece, with a choir of only 16 singers.” Also on the program is Cantata 156, with its beautiful *sinfonia* for oboe d’amore and strings — certainly one of Bach’s greatest hits.

The arias were chosen in collaboration with Lamoreux and Taylor.

“We’ll be recording Cantata 21 and Handel’s ‘Ode to St. Cecilia,’ but neither had any solo assignments for either Rosa or Daniel. I wanted them to be a part of those recordings, since in many ways, they’ve been at the heart of everything I’ve done in the past 35 years with the choir,” Funfgeld says. “So I asked them for ideas. Rosa wanted to collaborate with Liz Field, so they’re doing an aria from Cantata 120 — a beautiful violin obbligato for strings and soprano. Daniel’s aria is from Cantata 76, along with gamba, oboe d’amore and bassoon continuo.”

Come early to the “Bach at 4” concerts and sing Bach chorales with Bach Choir director Funfgeld for 20 minutes before the program.

On 2 p.m. Saturdays prior to the performance of the first part of the B Minor Mass, festival-goers will have another opportunity to sing Bach chorales, this time accompanied by the Festival Brass Choir with members of the Bach Choir.

What better way to celebrate the choir’s 120th anniversary than with an ode to honor St. Cecelia, the patron saint of music? This year’s “Bach at 8” concerts, at 8 p.m. Fridays in Packer Memorial Church, feature Handel’s colorful “Ode to St. Cecilia,” in addition to Bach’s Cantata 21, “Ich hatte viel Bekummernis” and a transcription for marimba of the Third Cello Suite, BWV 1009, performed by Wu.

“Ode to St. Cecelia” is properly an ode and not an oratorio — there is no plot, but rather a series of recitatives, arias, choruses and instrumental pieces that extol the praises of the third century martyr St. Cecilia.

Handel’s score is for soprano and tenor soloists, chorus and a colorful orchestra of strings, continuo, flute, double reeds, trumpets and timpani. The choir and Bach Festival Orchestra should have lots of fun with this one, especially the grand finale, in which the composer displays his contrapuntal wizardry in a stunning double fugue.

Appearing at the fest for the first time will be soprano Cassandra Lemoine. “We have so many familiar singers return each year that the festival always feels like a homecoming, but it’s always great to bring in someone new. Cassandra is a wonderful emerging young artist, and a former student of Benjamin Butterfield [another festival soloist],” Funfgeld says.

Other returning soloists are baritone William Sharp and bass David Newman.

The music of Bach is dear to Wu, who will perform the Cello Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009 in an adaptation for marimba. “His music speaks to me on many different levels,” she says. “First, as a musician, the harmonic progressions and forms are so amazing that I find it difficult to believe a person could actually write those notes. Then, as a player, if you play the three cello suites in one concert you get into this weird mode, like an out-of-body experience, where you can almost see yourself playing it and you’re just floating from one sequence to the next.”

This year’s Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concerts, 10:30 a.m. Saturdays at Zoellner Arts Center, are truly a musical feast, featuring Eric Ewazen’s Concerto for Marimba and Strings, Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, BWV 1050, and the Orchestral Suite No. 3, BWV 1068.

Although the fifth Brandenburg is scored for flute, solo violin, obbligato harpsichord and strings, the harpsichord is the star. The work is the only one of the six Brandenburgs to have any solo material for the keyboard, which is merely part of the continuo throughout the other works, filling out the harmonies. The opening movement is especially entertaining in the way the solo instruments seem to compete with the strings for attention. Featured soloists include Funfgeld, harpsichord; Elizabeth Field, violin, and Robin Kani, flute.



“I’ve played it in my first year as associate conductor, and I just thought it would be good to revisit some of the pieces that have been core works in the repertoire,” Funfgeld says. “I thought of it as a gift of appreciation to the audience for 35 years of music-making with the choir.”

Ewazen’s “Concerto for Marimba and Strings” is one of the most popular contemporary works for marimba. Ewazen composed the work for Wu, who premiered it in 1999 in her native Taiwan with the Moment Musicale Orchestra.

There’s good reason for the work’s popularity. “The first movement is in a form of a Mozart Horn Concerto. Eric is a theory teacher, so he’s very into form. He wanted to write something really classical for the first part of the piece,” Wu says. “The second movement, which we’re not playing, is very lush. The third movement is really over the top — jazzy, rhythmical, and exciting. In the end it brings back the theme from the first movement. It’s crazy!”

A festival highlight is Zimmermann's Coffee House, a cafe-style event modeled on Zimmermann's Coffee House of Bach's time in Leipzig, Germany (7-9:30 p.m. Saturdays, Peter Hall, Moravian College). Listen to Baroque chamber music performed by young musicians from area high schools and colleges and purchase German fare, wine and beer. Larry Lipkis' Moravian College Baroque Ensemble will also perform, and Fungfeld plans to make appearances.

"I have to say that every year we do Zimmermann's Coffee House, the talent level of these high school and college students just gets higher and higher," Fungfeld says. "It's so gratifying to see the excitement of these kids with Baroque music, especially with Bach in particular. They really work hard to understand and master this music. It's a part of our educational outreach we're really proud of."

Concluding the festival is a biennial event — the Young American Singer Competition co-sponsored by the Bach Choir and the American Bach Society. The event's final round is at 1 p.m. May 20 in Peter Hall. Finalists chosen from around the country in a blind audition will each sing two arias. The winner will get a career development grant of \$3,000. Bach Choir soprano Shannon Aloise, a graduate of Westminster Choir College, is one of the finalists. The concert is free and no tickets are required.

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## **DETAILS**

### Bethlehem Bach Festival

**What:** 111th annual event presented by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem includes concerts and talks at venues in north and south Bethlehem

**When:** Friday and Saturday; May 18-20

**Where:** Payrow Plaza next to Bethlehem Public Library; Packer Memorial Church and Zoellner Arts Center at Lehigh University; Incarnation of Our Lord Church, Thomas and Buchanan streets; Peter Hall, Moravian College; Saal of the Moravian Museum.

**How much:** \$22-\$58; \$9-\$20, students