

Bach Choir presents cantatas by Bach and a work by Italian composer Ottorino Respighi for its Christmas concerts

The Bach Choir will perform present Ottorino Respighi's Laud to the Nativity and J.S. Bach's festive Cantata 63 and Cantata 36 at its Christmas concerts Dec. 8 and 9.



Contributed Photo: Don Schroder

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Sometimes music is most moving when it evokes the past. Familiar works that engage listeners in emotional time-travel include Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis" and much of the music of Arvo Part.

Ottorino Respighi is another whose music is frequently steeped in the vivid imagery of the Italian Renaissance and Middle Ages. That's especially true of his "Lauda per la Nativita del Signore" (Laud to the Nativity), his sole sacred choral piece.

Respighi's richly beautiful yet rarely heard work, and J.S. Bach's festive Cantata 63, "Christen, atzet diesen Tag" (Christians all, this happy day) and Cantata 36, "Schwingt freudig euch empor" (Soar joyfully aloft) are the featured works in this year's Bach Choir of Bethlehem Christmas Concerts.



Bach Choir director Greg Funfgeld will lead the Bach Choir and Festival Orchestra in its Christmas concerts on Nov. 8 and 9.

The programs are Saturday at the First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, repeated Sunday at the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem.

The Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra will be led by Bach Choir artistic director Greg Funfgeld and joined by soprano soloists Ellen McAteer and Fiona Gillespie, countertenor Daniel Taylor, tenor Charles Blady and baritone Christopheren Nomura. All are familiar voices to Bach Choir audiences, although this will be Gillespie's first Christmas concert with the choir.

Composed in 1930, "Lauda per la Nativita del Signore" sets a medieval Italian pastoral text written by Jacopone da Todi, a 13th-century Franciscan poet. It is a song of praise for the miracle of Christmas, told with majestic choral passages that alternate with the solo voices of Maria, the Angel and the Shepherd, accompanied by the sound of pastoral instruments. Scoring is for winds and four-hand piano.

Respighi's music is richly varied, with stylistic elements ranging from the late Romantic to neo Baroque, as well as echoes of Gregorian chant. Since no one knows what music actually sounded like at the time of the Nativity, Respighi went far back as he could to adopt musical idioms that capture the feeling of Italy's distant past. One striking example is when the male voices in the chorus sing unaccompanied passages that mimic Roman Catholic plainchant of the Middle Ages.



The Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra will be joined by soprano soloist Fiona Gillespie. It's her first time participating in a Bach Choir Christmas concert. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Not quite as ancient-sounding is a section in which the full chorus sings a highly syncopated melody, “Contenti ne andremo,” greatly influenced by madrigals of the Renaissance. A more modern touch lies in the work’s length, its dramatic narrative style and its alternation between solo and ensemble forces — all bearing strong resemblance to mid-17th century Italian oratorio.

Curiously, Bach’s joyous cantata might just seem more “modern” to our ears than Respighi’s less-familiar piece. Trumpets and timpani abound in this festive work, a church cantata composed for the first day of Christmas, possibly in 1714 or 1715. One can almost imagine this rousing cantata being performed outdoors, much like Handel’s “Royal Fireworks” music.

Unlike Respighi’s “Lauda,” Bach’s choice of text makes no mention of the shepherds, the angels or the wise men so commonly associated with the Biblical versions of the Christmas story. Another interesting difference between this work and Respighi’s is the fact that missing from the cantata are solo arias — the soloists instead are featured in recitatives or duets.

The work begins with an energetic orchestral flourish, as befits the season. An alto recitative follows, leading into a delightful duet between soprano and bass introduced by a sinuous oboe line. Another recitative leads to a second duet, this time between alto and tenor. The orchestral strings provide Bach’s usual attractive accompaniment, after which the full orchestra is roused again for the concluding high octane chorus, featuring no less than four trumpets.

As in previous Christmas concerts, the program will conclude with the audience joining the choir in familiar carols, including the warm and evocative “Silent Night,” sung in German and English.

Bach Choir Christmas Concerts, 8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 8, First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, 3231 Tilghman St., 4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 9, First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, 2344 Center St. Tickets: \$38; \$9, students up to age 22. 610-866-4382, Bach.org.

