

Bach at Noon features cellist Loretta O'Sullivan



Bach Festival Orchestra principal cellist Loretta O'Sullivan solos in Bach's Second Suite for Cello in D Minor Jan. 8 at the Bach Choir's Bach at Noon concert in Bethlehem.
(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

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Bach's instrumental output encompasses a wide spectrum, but none as intimate as his six suites for solo cello, arguably among the most legendary works in the classical genre.

These have inspired not only cellists and audiences but also filmmakers, choreographers and especially musicians, who have transcribed them for a dizzying variety of instruments, including the marimba, tuba and ukulele.

Tuesday's Bach at Noon concert at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem, the first Bach at Noon of the year, features Bach Festival Orchestra principal cellist Loretta O'Sullivan in Bach's Second Suite for Cello in D Minor, BWV 1008 as the program's instrumental work.

Following the familiar format of an instrumental work and a choral work, the 50-minute program also includes Cantata 129, "Gelobet sei der Herr, mein Gott" (Praised be the Lord, My God). Joining members of the Bach Festival Orchestra, under the direction of Greg Funfgeld, are solo vocalists Julie Bosworth, soprano; Janna Critz, mezzo-soprano, and Christopheren Nomura, baritone.

It has always been a pleasure to hear one of O'Sullivan's gorgeous cello obbligatos in a Bach cantata or other choral piece, so it is a special treat to hear her in a less-frequent solo role,

especially one that allows such personal freedom for interpretation. Bach gives no tempo marks for any of the suite's six movements, leaving it up to the performer to choose a suitable pulse.

"The prelude is pretty free-form, and there is even complete silence in a few places. It is also quite improvisatory, which is what Bach wanted, I think," O'Sullivan says. "Also, it sort of sets up the language for the rest of the suite. I try to find a tempo that doesn't feel too rushed or too slow for whatever the mood for each movement."

The suite is one of two among the six in a minor key, and evokes an almost Beethovenian mixture of tragedy and defiance.

"There's a lot of dissonance throughout the piece — a sort of uncomfortable rubbing against something, maybe some painful moments," O'Sullivan says.

"The first minuet is in D minor. I think of it as a kind of chunky piece, with a lot of chords. The second minuet is in D major and just sort of flows — it seems to me like this is a wonderful unraveling of some of the work's angst, like a breadth of fresh air."

Even the dance movements in the suite are immersed in a dark, D minor world. The sarabande is the work's emotional centerpiece, evoking much of the sadness of the prelude.

"I think all cellists love this piece because of the sarabande. It's the most gorgeous thing — so moving and beautiful yet in a way so stark," O'Sullivan says. "The final gigue has all these big interval jumps and a lot of double-stopping going on that end in dissonance. I like to think of these giges as the group dance at the end, where more than one person is dancing."

O'Sullivan will be performing on a Baroque cello, tuned to the lower pitch of A 415. "The Baroque bow helps with some of the gestures, and gives a little more resonance. There is also a minimal use of vibrato, although there is some used as sort of an ornament — a wider vibrato like a trill, carried over from gamba practice," she says.

More Bach at Noon concerts are scheduled for Feb. 12, March 12 and April 9, at Central Moravian Church. The Bach at Noon Summer Series will be presented June 11, July 9 and Aug. 13 at St. John's Lutheran Church in Allentown.

Bach at Noon, 12:10 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 8, Central Moravian Church, 73 W. Church St., Bethlehem. Free-will offering. 610-866-4382, bach.org.