

## The Bach Choir of Bethlehem: new CD



*The Bach Choir's new two-CD recording features Bach's Cantata 21, Handel's 'Ode for St. Cecilia's Day' and arias from Cantatas 120 and 76. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)*

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem also rings in 2019 with a new CD, its seventh on the Canadian Analekta label, in celebration of both the choir's 120th birthday and the 35th anniversary of its artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld.

The two-CD set features Bach's Cantata BWV 21, "Ich hatte viel Bekummernis" (I had much sorrow), Handel's "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day" and arias from Cantatas 120 and 76.

Recorded at the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, it features the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra, under the direction of Funfgeld. Vocal soloists include sopranos Rosa Lamoreaux and Cassandra LeMoine, tenor Benjamin Butterfield, countertenor Daniel Taylor and baritone William Sharp.

Disc 1 opens with the aria "Heil und Segen" from Cantata 120, sung by Lamoreaux, whose bright, buoyant voice is a perfect match for this bouncy, light-hearted and airy aria.

In stark contrast is the almost funereal opening sinfonia of Bach's Cantata 21. One can't get more solemn than this in one of Bach's most passionate works, yet the sheer beauty of the

musicianship and vocal artistry seem to transcend any lasting grief, an attribute first hinted at with Mary Watt's lovely oboe solo in the sinfonia.

LeMoine casts her spell early on in the sublimely tearful "Seufer, Tranen, Kummer, Not," affectionately accompanied by Watt and cellist Loretta O'Sullivan.

Lemoine's beautiful voice has just a hint of earthiness yet bears such angelic purity that it can mitigate suffering. Butterfield follows in a stormy aria rocked by waves of anguish. Passionately delivered, his voice actually quivers with grief.

In "Komm, mein Jesu," Lemoine is joined by Sharp, providing a wonderful melding of contrasting vocal colors — hers light sparkling with optimism, his rich and dark with gloom. That dichotomy of opposites is cleverly carried over into the subsequent chorus, a delightful dialogue between the sopranos and tenors.

Butterfield returns in "Erfreue dich, Seele," this time to express sheer joy with the same conviction he previously expressed sorrow. The work closes on a resounding note of affirmation, the buoyant voices of the choir accompanied, for the first time, by lofty brass and timpani.

Closing the first disc is the aria "Liebt, ihr Christen, in der Tat," an intimate love song from Cantata 76. Featured is countertenor Taylor backed by Nobuo Kitagawa, oboe d'amore, and Mollie Glazer, viola da gamba and continuo.

Disc 2 is entirely devoted to Handel's colorful and uplifting "Ode for Saint Cecilia." What better way to celebrate the choir's 120th anniversary than with an ode to honor the patron saint of music?

Handel's score is for soprano and tenor soloists, chorus and orchestra comprising strings, continuo, flute, double reeds, trumpets and timpani. The choir and Festival Orchestra have lots of fun with this one on the recording, especially the dramatic grand finale.

Butterfield's expressive tenor can even make a recitative sing, as he does in "When nature underneath." Lemoine brings us back into the clouds with "What passion cannot music raise," backed again by O'Sullivan's lovely cello. Her delicately rolled r's and impressive coloratura are simply captivating.

It is hard to resist such charming musical alliterations as the "double, double, double beat of the thund'ring drum," sung with gusto by Butterfield, and accompanied by the clarion sound of Lawrence Wright's trumpet and the mighty timpani of Christopher Hanning, both of whom are at the top of their game throughout the entire work.

Lemoine sings softly of the "soft complaining flute," and there are certainly no complaints either with the tenderness of her voice or with Robin Kani's soft, uncomplaining flute work. The power of the massed choir voices combine with trumpets and timpani in a truly resounding, lofty finale.

The choral work sounds especially grand on both discs of this open, spacious recording. Of special note is the multipart “Was Bertubst du dich” in Cantata 21, with its complex closing fugal structure, and the final chorus in Handel’s “Ode,” in which the composer displays his contrapuntal wizardry in a stunning double fugue.

Individual voices can be picked out easily, especially if one listens with headphones, and the balance between soloists and orchestra is superb.

The two-CD set (AN 2 9542-3) is \$30 and available through the Bach Choir office or at [www.bach.org/shop](http://www.bach.org/shop). Each of the recordings also are available as single CDs, in physical or digital format on Analekta, Amazon, Spotify and Apple Music. Price is \$17 per CD if purchased from the Bach Choir. Info: 610-866-4382, ext. 110.