

# Concert Review: Bach ‘Youth Choirs Festival’ glorious at Zoellner

**Monday, March 18, 2019** by **KATHY LAUER-WILLIAMS Special to The Press in Focus**

More than 200 voices young and old rang out with glorious music during the Bach Choir of Bethlehem’s “Youth Choirs Festival” at Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University, Bethlehem.

Four youth choirs with more than 140 talented young singers joined members of Bach Choir of Bethlehem in a delightful concert of music by Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn and contemporary composers.

The Bach Choir and members of The Bach Festival Orchestra, under the direction of Artistic Director Greg Funfgeld, were joined by Bel Canto Youth Chorus, directed by Joy Hirokawa; Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts Touring Choir, directed by David Macbeth; Emmaus High School Chorale, directed by Rita Cortez, and Parkland High School Chorale, directed by Frank Anonia.

The Feb. 24 concert opened on a sublime note as the combined choirs filled the aisles of Baker Hall to sing the gospel song “Unclouded Day” with words and music by Rev. J.K. Alwood and arranged by Shawn Kirchner. Thrilling harmonies enveloped the audience for an amazing effect.

Next, the spotlight was on the youngest singers of Bel Canto who took center stage for a lovely Duet from “Cantata 93” by Bach. The piece from the Schübler Chorales collection of chorale preludes for organ gorgeously showcased the youths’ soprano and alto voices.

The Bel Canto singers then joined the other youth choir members and the Bach Choir for a magnificent rendition of George Frideric Handel’s “Zadok the Priest.”

The piece, written for the coronation of George II in 1727, starts with a lengthy orchestral introduction that built until the choirs burst into song, filling the hall with majestic sound.

The Emmaus High School Chorale performed a beautiful and technically outstanding “Sivivt Anima Mea” by contemporary choral composer Richard Burchard. The lyrics are the Latin text from the Psalms.

Eight students from each choir were chosen to sing in a smaller ensemble of voices with members of the Bach Choir on Bach’s “Sanctus in D Minor,” featuring difficult passages and soaring notes.

Parkland High School Chorale’s “For He Shall Give His Angels,” from Felix Mendelssohn’s 19th century oratorio “Elijah” about the life of the Biblical prophet, began appropriately with angelic-sounding voices that blended together with precision.

Changing pace was Lehigh Valley Charter Arts Touring Choir, which sang the stark contemporary chorale piece “Hymn of Axciom” by singer-songwriter Vienna Teng. The Orwellian lyrics deal with the collection of personal information for marketing databases. The music features slightly creepy chords effectively sung by the choir. Adding to the performance was the choir member’s use of cellphones as props, using the phones’ blank white screens to create an eerie visual effect and to cast ominous shadows on the singers’ faces. It was a highly-dramatic and memorable moment.

The concert concluded on a joyous note with the powerful “Dona Nobis Pacem” from Bach’s “Mass in B Minor,” which Funfgeld says is the Bach Choir’s “signature piece.”

The piece, which translates as “Give Us Peace,” is the final movement in the Mass, which was one of Bach’s last compositions, completed in 1749.

The combined choirs effectively used a stretto effect in which voice parts overlap as each starts a phrase before another has finished for a lush and breathtaking waterfall of sound bringing the exquisitely enjoyable concert to a climatic finish.

