

Review: Bach Choir of Bethlehem Spring Concert an emotional tour de force

By Steve Siegel
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Members of the Bach Choir and musicians of the Lehigh University Philharmonic at the conclusion of a performance of Mozart's Requiem at the Zoellner Arts Center in Bethlehem. (Contributed photo)

Talk about an emotional roller coaster ride! When the Bach Choir of Bethlehem teamed up with the Lehigh University Philharmonic April 12 and 13 at the Zoellner Arts Center in Bethlehem, it took its audience from the celebratory pomp of Walton's "Te Deum," to the emotional high spirits of Mozart's joyous Piano Concerto No. 21, down into the solemn depths of Mozart's Requiem.

Joining the 85 singers of the Bach Choir in the Requiem were an additional 40 voices of the Lehigh Valley Charter Arts High School Touring Choir, along with renowned soloists Kendra Colton, soprano; Laura Atkinson, mezzo-soprano; Benjamin Butterfield, tenor; and Dashon Burton, bass-baritone. Joining members of the LU Philharmonic were a handful of musicians from the Bach Choir Festival Orchestra.

LU Philharmonic music director Eugene Albulescu, on sabbatical for the semester, was the piano soloist in the Mozart concerto. All were under the direction of Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld.

The LU Philharmonic's performance of Walton's "Te Deum," composed in 1952 for the coronation of Elizabeth II, was certainly befitting of royalty, what with its resounding trumpets, and thundering organ and percussion. Dramatic cymbal crashes added to the revelry, shaped by some very solid

playing by the strings — an absolute necessity to achieve that unique British orchestral sound. All came to an end with an impressive, room-rattling low C on the organ.

Letting Albulescu loose on the Mozart C Major piano concerto, with its cadenzas and much of the slow movement improvised at the keyboard, was like uncorking a bottle of champagne. What bubbly fun it was on the Saturday evening performance I attended to hear Albulescu's wonderfully shaped trills, crisp arpeggios, and delightful sense of spontaneity in his reading of this highly operatic-sounding piece.

The lovely "Elvira Madigan" theme of the andante was tenderly played and tastefully embellished, but most fun of all was the effervescent allegro vivace, with playful runs up and down the keyboard, and even a Hungarian dance or two thrown in for good measure.

Albulescu and Funfgeld were clearly on the same page throughout the entire piece, following each other with wonderful chemistry.

Of course, the opening funereal measures of the Requiem had a sobering effect, but even here, Mozart did not neglect the element of theatricality. Dashon Burton's thundering basso in "Tuba mirum" was a stunner, followed by Butterworth's clarion tenor, Atkinson's silky mezzo, and Colton's sweet and airy soprano — in fact an entire progression of the vocal range.

The chorus was especially powerful in the dramatic, stabbing staccatos of the "Dies Irae" and also the "Rex tremendae," the later notable for some marvelous ensemble work by the four soloists evoking a quartet from a grand opera. The dialogue between the soprano voices of the choir and the full ensemble in the "Confutatis" was quite moving.

Colton's solo in "Lux Aeterna" was certainly a high point, so ethereal and transparent was her lovely voice. That Mozart's pupil Franz Xaver Süssmayr had to finish this section after Mozart's death seemed to make no difference whatever — it's a safe bet even Mozart himself would have approved of a performance so solid and convincingly heartfelt.