

# Mostly Mozart: Bach Choir and Lehigh University Philharmonic to perform Mozart's most solemn work

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Lehigh University Philharmonic musicians will perform under the baton of guest conductor Greg Funfgeld at Zoellner Arts Center in a program featuring Mozart's Requiem in D Minor. (Contributed photo: Carl Blew)

It's an amazing fact that even on his deathbed, Mozart remained the consummate showman.

Rare is a composition of his lacking in the drama or spectacle of the stage. At the keyboard, he amazed audiences with stunning improvisations bordering on the theatrical, and even his final musical testament, the Requiem in D Minor, is as emotionally stirring and powerful as any grand opera.

In his requiem, Mozart enjoyed the dubious distinction of being able to knowingly leave behind a last testament. He was convinced he was writing his own funeral mass, a work that, even though left unfinished, stands today as one of the greatest artistic expressions of faith.

On Friday and Saturday (April 12 and 13), the Bach Choir of Bethlehem teams up with members of the Lehigh University Philharmonic for its spring concert to perform Mozart's lofty work at the Zoellner Arts Center in Bethlehem.

Also on the program is Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21, with soloist Eugene Albulescu, and Walton's "Te Deum," composed in 1952 for the coronation of Elizabeth II.

Joining the 85 singers of the Bach Choir will be an additional 40 or so 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. All are under the direction of Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld.

This is not the first collaboration between Lehigh and the Bach Choir. The two collaborated in a big way in celebration of Lehigh's 150th anniversary in 2015, when the Lehigh University Philharmonic joined the Bach Choir in a concert featuring Handel's "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day."

This time, with LU Philharmonic music director Albulescu on sabbatical for the semester and Greg Funfgeld filling in as visiting professor of music, it seems the stars were perfectly aligned to tackle two of Mozart's most memorable works.

Surprisingly, this is the first time the Bach Choir will be singing the Mozart Requiem. "As experienced as our singers are, I had assumed that almost all of them would have sung it before," says Funfgeld. "But interestingly, most have not. The Mozart Requiem has been on my own short list for the Bach Choir for some time. I've done it with the choir at the First Presbyterian Church, but never with the Bach Choir."

At the time of his death, Mozart had scored almost all of the first two movements and left the other seven only in sketch form. His widow, Constanze, turned to Franz Xavier Süssmayr, one of Mozart's students, to complete the work. Süssmayr finished it by melodically filling in Mozart's harmonies and composing the final three sections. This version is the one considered to be "standard," and is the one that will be performed.

"It is based on the traditional mass for the dead. But Mozart wrote so beautifully for the stage, and opera inspired so much of what he did, that I think it's true of the Requiem as well. The beauty of this music, the soulfulness and the longing for peace – I think this comes from his sense of the stage and drama. It's operatic in every way," Funfgeld says.

Mozart's joyous Piano Concerto No. 21, the emotional polar opposite of the Requiem, is equally theatrical. The final movement is an allegro vivace assai, its evocation of the world of opera buffo typical of many of Mozart's finales.

"To me, the whole thing is like an opera buffa," says Albulescu. "The slow movement is like an aria, and even the first movement begins like an overture to an opera – when the oboe comes in it's like the curtain going up. The whole thing is very operatic."

Those of a certain age might recall that nearly every LP featuring this work would refer to it as the "Elvira Madigan" concerto, referring to the theme of the second movement that was featured in the 1967 Swedish film, "Elvira Madigan."

Albulescu, on the other hand, is a bit more realistic. "Don't even mention the movie – nobody even knows that anymore," he says. "It wasn't even such a great movie to begin with."

But what does very much interest Albuiescu are historical references to the posters advertising the work's 1785 premiere, which announced that the composer would improvise and perform his new concerto on a pedal piano. "What interests me is the word 'improvise,'" he says. "It gave Mozart ample possibilities for extemporizing in the cadenzas as well as many other sections of the work, especially the slow ones." he says.

Mozart wrote no cadenzas for this piece – he would literally improvise them on the spot, much as a jazz musician would do today. Normally, Albuiescu would conduct such a piece himself from the keyboard, but this performance is something special.

"I'm so excited about Greg conducting this work this time around because I'm planning to concentrate on improvising all the cadenzas – that's part of what I've been preparing during my sabbatical," Albuiescu says.

The problem, according to Albuiescu, is how to approach such a formidable task. "It's an interesting question. How much do you want to stick to the inherent style of the piece, or how much will it sound like the imprint of the soloist – which is just as valid," he says. "There are all these incredible cadenzas out there. Probably the most outrageous is Alfred Schnittke's cadenzas to the Beethoven Violin Concerto, which have become common practice."

Albuiescu's improvisations will also pose a challenge for the orchestra. "They've got to know how and when you plan to come out of the improvised sections, and recognize a potential exit point so they'll know when to come back in," Albuiescu says.

"It's exactly like a jazz piece in which the musicians know when to come back to the head. Although I'm practicing improvisations right now, I have no idea how it will come out during the actual performance. It will be like being baked fresh on the spot."

Those 1785 concert announcements also referred to the fact that Mozart would be playing on a pedal piano, an instrument built for him that same year by the famous Viennese piano maker Anton Walter.

Albuiescu will be playing on an equally prestigious instrument, a Steinway on loan from Jacobs Music. "Lehigh's piano is on its last legs with no immediate plans for replacement, so I'm very grateful to Jacobs Music for bringing in a Steinway as part of my being a Steinway Artist," he says.

"We had such a good time doing the earlier collaborations that we started kicking around the idea of doing something again. With Eugene's sabbatical, this seemed like a perfect opportunity," says Funfgeld, who has been conducting the rehearsals and meeting with the Lehigh musicians. "The Bach Choir has collaborated with other college ensembles, but we really enjoy working with all student ensembles, be they choral, dance or theater groups. Young musicians bring their own passion and enthusiasm to a performance – that's a very contagious thing."



Bach Choir of Bethlehem artistic director Greg Funfgeld will guest-conduct the Lehigh University Philharmonic in a program featuring Mozart's Requiem in D Minor. (Bach Choir of Bethlehem)



Eugene Albulescu is soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21. (Contributed photo/Simon Woolf)