

Reviews: Bethlehem Bach Festival concerts: A masterly musical offering

By Steve Siegel

| THE MORNING CALL |

MAY 13, 2019 | 7:05 PM



Lutenist Ronn McFarlane performed at the Saal of the Moravian Museum. (Contributed photo)

The first weekend of the 112th Bethlehem Bach Festival got off to a rousing start Friday, May 10 despite some initially soggy weather that chased the Bach Outdoors program indoors. But the rain affected neither the quality nor the spirit of the indoor programs I heard, starting with lutenist Ronn McFarlane in a richly varied recital at the Saal of the Moravian Museum.

McFarlane opened the program with a set of sweet/melancholy songs by John Dowland. The charming tunes ran the gamut of sad to spirited, with such quaint names as “My Lady Hunsdon’s Puff” and “Mrs. Winter’s Jump,” the latter a bouncy tune with an abrupt ending — perhaps Mrs. W. really did jump off a cliff! Readily apparent throughout them all was McFarlane’s delicate touch and effortless grace.

Most interesting of the program on the whole was how McFarlane, who brought two lutes to the concert — a Renaissance instrument and a modern one — could completely change the character of sound by either playing with the soft tips of the fingers or the nails. I had wrongly associated the lute with the harpsichord in its limited colorations, yet I was quite surprised to hear such sonic

variety, from Dowland's softly stroked "Melancholy Galliard," to the sharp staccato of Alessandro Piccinini's Passacaglia.

Sylvius Leopold Weiss' Suite in D Minor, Op. 34 did share many of the long, complex musical lines one finds in harpsichord pieces, and was reminiscent of one of J.S. Bach's French Suites. Weiss, it turns out, was a contemporary and close friend of Bach's, so it's no surprise that their music might share similar styles.

A piece by Bach himself was on the program — or, more accurately, his Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, re-arranged in C Major by McFarlane for the lute. It carried itself beautifully in its new format, with a prelude that sounded as if it were conceived on the spot, and sections of the courant and sarabande having an air of folk music about them. The lively gigue sounded like it could have been written for the lute in the first place.

Ending the program was another set, this time composed of 17th- and 18th-century Scottish and Irish tunes. "The Battle of Harlaw" was a reverential, mournful tune in an amalgam of Scottish and European Baroque styles. One could really sense the vocal origin of the exceedingly lyrical Irish tune "Cliffs of Moher." McFarlane played with inherent sensitivity, even when those fingers were flying through such toe-tappers as "Hey my Nanny" and "Banish Misfortune."



Charlotte Mattax Moersch accompanied Krisztina Szabó in Bach's 'Ich will nach dem Himmel zu' at Packer Memorial Church. (Contributed photo)

Bach at 8 at Packer Memorial Church

Bach at 8 on Friday evening at Packer Memorial Church opened with Cantata 146, featuring the Bach Choir, members of the Bach Festival Orchestra, and soloists all under the direction of Greg Funfgeld. Hearing its thundering sinfonia, an adaptation of Bach's D Minor Harpsichord Concerto,

was like getting two concerts for the price of one. Organist Thomas Goeman played the dramatic piece magnificently, leading the accompanying strings through one glorious ritornello after another. Mezzo Krisztina Szabó, in her Bach Festival debut, was in lovely voice in “Ich will nach dem Himmel zu,” accompanied by Charlotte Mattax Moersch on the portativ organ. Its flutelike voice was perfect a complement to Szabó’s rich, creamy tone. The exuberant, rousing duet “Wie will ich mich freuen” was sung with delightful gusto by tenor Isiah Bell, also in his Festival debut, and baritone William Sharp. The Bach Choir was especially moving in its heartfelt delivery of the closing chorale.



Haydn’s jaunty Horn Concerto No. 2 in D major featured Bach Festival Orchestra principal horn Anthony Cecere in a performance that was certainly one of the highlights of the evening. The rich, velvety tone of Cecere’s horn carried wonderfully in Packer’s lofty space, especially all that low register work the piece calls for. The first movement cadenza was a tour de force of beautifully articulated trills and marvelous ornamentation, and the closing cadenza in the rondo was a jaw-dropping exercise in “how low can you go,” with Cecere sounding the lowest note on his instrument. Cantata 149 opened with a celebratory fanfare of chorus, timpani, and trumpets – or, to be perfectly accurate, trumpets and coronet, since I saw at least one of the trumpet’s near-twin on stage. Bass David Newman demonstrated just how to sing “Kraft und Stärke”: you do it just as the German says, with strength and might! His was a truly powerful, commanding performance.

Szabó delivered the recitative “Ich fürchte mich” with crisp enunciation and some deliciously rolled r’s, and soprano Kendra Colton dazzled in “Gottes Engel weichen nie” with a voice radiant yet with surprising depth. Szabó returned with Bell for the charming duet “Seid wachsam,” with bassoon obbligato by Charles Holdeman. Here was yet another concert highlight, with the bassoon’s jocular voice turning the duet into a whimsical trio.

Church cantatas don’t get much more entertaining than that, unless you include the wonderful closing chorale, where the trumpets and timpani return for the final seven notes as if the gates of heaven were opening before us.

The Saturday morning **for Jones Chamber Music Concert** at the Zoellner Arts Center featured the Bel Canto Youth Chorus with members of The Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra in the world premiere of Gwyneth Walker's "The Day is Done" in addition to "Jump Right In," from Walker's song cycle "I've Known Rivers."

Also on the program was the duet from J.S. Bach's Cantata 93, Will Todd's "Ave Verum," Elizabeth Alexander's "Faith is the Bird that Feels the Light," the Partita No. 4 in D Major, BWV 828 for solo harpsichord, and concertos for three and four harpsichords and strings, BWV 1064-1065.

To see multiple harpsichords on the same stage at the same time (and all in tune) was a real treat. But most surprising of all was the fact that three – or even four – harpsichords played at the same time really don't sound any louder than one. What is magnified is not the volume, but the instruments' shimmering, almost brittle texture.

Bach's Concerto for Three Harpsichords, BWV 1064, offered something of an equal playing field for the soloists, in this case Thomas Goeman, Kerry Heimann, and Charlotte Mattax-Moersch. No room for a prima donna here: all three seemed to play as a single musical unit, even sharing the bass line. Still, there were separate cadenzas for everyone, allowing the true soloist in each to shine in this virtuosic, musical ménage à trois.

In the right hands even a single harpsichord might sound like multiple instruments. Such was the case with Mattax-Moersch's performance of the brilliant D Major partita, truly a marathon feast of variety. The opening overture was beautifully paced, slow and dramatic at first, then turning faster as it progressed. The following allemande, just as lengthy, was a soothing interlude before the lively and jovial courante. Following a jaunty aria, the numerous register changes during the minuet were great fun to observe – unlike the piano, the harpsichord wears its mechanism on its sleeve, so to speak.



Bethlehem Bach Choir artistic director Greg Funfgeld took part in the Concerto for Four Harpsichords, BWV 1065. (Contributed photo)

Bach Choir director Greg Funfgeld joined the threesome for the Concerto for Four Harpsichords, BWV 1065. An adaptation of Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Violins, it is Bach's only harpsichord concerto not adapted from his own material. Unlike the three harpsichord piece, this one had each soloist playing differently-articulated musical lines in a truly virtuosic showpiece. Funfgeld even managed to conduct the complex work from the keyboard.

Accompanying the youth chorus and members of the choir in Walker's "Day is Done" was a light orchestral mix of strings and gentle percussion, with Robin Kani on flute. This was a charming piece, based on the poem of the same name by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and delightful in its utter simplicity and honesty. The adult choir and Bel Canto singers sounded lovely together, and perfectly balanced with uplifting orchestral tutti sections that never overwhelmed the voices. The overall evocation – at least for me – was of gentle summer twilight, with the silky flute wafting like a soft, evening breeze.

Walker's "Jump Right in," with strings and percussion, was a rollicking, fun piece with a spunky, African-American vibe. The kids and adults alike had obvious fun with this one, judging by the smiles on all the singer's faces. The Bel Canto chorus was on their own in the lovely duet from Bach's Cantata 93. Originally for soprano and alto soloists, it was a perfect match for these young voices, as was Will Todd's reverential "Ave Verum," lovingly accompanied by pianist Andrea Bernsten. Elizabeth Alexander's "Faith is the Bird that Feels the Light" was another charmer, with some complex multiple part passages and varied choral textures. A pair of blues-inflected solos was especially moving, the first by Laura Dunham, and the second by Cassidy Williams. The work's overall affirmative tone was highlighted by a dazzling final chord.

Steve Siegel is a freelance writer