

On the road to Bethlehem for the Bach Festival in May

[Wednesday, May 15, 2019](#) by [Paul Willistein pwillistein@tnonline.com](mailto:pwillistein@tnonline.com) in [Focus](#)

“Another May. Another ‘Mass.’”

So observed David R. Umla, of Allentown, who has sung J. S. Bach’s “Mass In B Minor” in the Bass I section of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem for two decades since the 1998-1999 season.

“It’s like coming home,” said Umla, standing outside Packer Memorial Church on the Lehigh University campus in Bethlehem between sessions of the “Mass,” presented in two parts on the afternoon of May 11 for the 112th Bach Festival.

“It never gets old,” continued Umla. “I could sing it every weekend.”

Umla and the some 82 members of the Bach Choir will do just that when the Bach Festival resumes for its second weekend, May 17 and 18, in venues at Lehigh, as well as on Bethlehem’s south side, and on the Moravian College campus in downtown Bethlehem.

The Bach Choir, founded in 1898 and the oldest Bach Choir in the United States, gave the first complete American performance of the “Mass” in 1900 in Bethlehem.

This year, more than 500 attended the May 11 performance of the “Mass.” Similar numbers of attendees were at the other concerts at the Festival.

Among the attendees at the 2019 festival were members of Road Scholar, the not-for-profit educational travel organization founded in 1975, which offers 6,500 educational tours in 50 states and 150 countries.

Donald and Kathy Lawrence, a married couple from Pen Yan, N.Y., were among the 25 members of Road Scholar at the May 10 and 11 festival performances. The group included travelers from across the U.S., including California.

It was the first time at the Bach Festival for the Lawrences. Each Road Scholar provided his or her own transportation to Bethlehem where they arrived May 9 and departed May 12. The visit included a lecture and tour at SteelStacks.

Paul Watkins, 66, was at his second Bach Festival, with his father George Watkins, 95.

George Watkins, a retired Lehigh University professor of physics who lives in Richmond, Va., estimates he’s attended the Bach Festival 40-plus years.

“I was a chaperone for last year,” said Paul Watkins, a professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. “I was not sure I’d enjoy it.

“I was tremendously pleased. I was blown away by the power of the performers,” Paul Watkins continued. “And now I intend to come back until I’m 95.”

Janet Koller of Shillington, Berks County, sang in the Soprano II section of the Bach Choir 1956-1957 and 1961-1962. Her brother brought her to her first Bach Festival when she was 12. This year, she was attending the festival with her daughter, Jean Roberts of Kalamazoo, Mich.

“We love it,” Roberts said. “It’s just the choir’s voices and the reaction of the audience. And then you’ve got Bach.

“So, the whole thing is more than a concert. It’s an experience,” said Roberts.

H. Ellis Finger, retired director of the Williams Arts Center at Lafayette College, said after the May 11 conclusion of the “Mass”: “It gets better every year.

“Having sung in the choir for so many years, you can hear things you didn’t hear because you were singing,” said Finger, who translated the cantatas sung at 2019 festival from German into English.

“It’s kind of like when you’re in the forest, you can’t see the trees,” said Finger.

Phyllis Gibson of Tannersville, Monroe County, who, as a guarantor helps fund the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, was attending her first Bach Festival.

“I really think the performance was special,” Gibson said after the May 11 performance of the “Mass.”

Added Gibson, “From the vocal soloists, to the choir, to the instrumentalists, the ensemble was just a delight.”

“Another May. Another ‘Mass.’”

No doubt, for years to come.