

More than Bach and beer in Bethlehem: 112th Bach Festival adds concerts, events, venues

Tuesday, May 7, 2019 by **Paul Willistein** pwillistein@tnonline.com in **Focus**

Legendary journalist H.L. Mencken wrote of his attendance at the Bethlehem Bach Festival during Prohibition in terms of Bach and beer.

The 2019 Bach Festival of Bethlehem, in its 112th year, is much more than that.

In his 36th season, Bach Choir of Bethlehem Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld has added depth and dimension to the Bach Festival.

The festival is May 10, 11 and May 17, 18 in Bethlehem, principally on the Lehigh University campus, with some events at a southside Bethlehem church and on the downtown Moravian College campus.

“The Bach Choir has now outlived Bethlehem Steel. And I think it will keep going. The choir’s future is very bright,” says Funfgeld, longest-tenured leader in the choir’s history.

The all-volunteer, 85-member Bach Choir sings with professional musicians in the Bach Festival Orchestra and vocal soloists from around the world.

“We’ve been very fortunate. We have wonderful support. We have a visionary board. And people who are willing to roll up their sleeves and get to work,” Funfgeld says.

The 2019 Bach Festival includes the world premiere of a commissioned work, an artist-in-residence, the festival performance premiere of a Bach cantata, a free outdoor performance, a re-creation of a coffeehouse performance from Bach’s era, and a presentation about Bach’s Bible.

And, of course, there are the Saturday afternoon performances in Packer Memorial Church of the “Mass in B Minor” by Bach (1685-1750), hallmark of Baroque music, an advent of classical music, and regarded by many musicologists as the greatest piece of music ever written.

“That’s one of the privileges of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem,” Funfgeld says. “You get to come back to the ‘Mass’ every year.

“You get to live with this music. In unique ways, it inhabits your heart and your mind and your physical being.”

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, which was founded in 1898, is the oldest American Bach choir and gave the first complete American performances of Bach’s “Mass in B Minor” in 1900 in Bethlehem. This year, the Choir is noting its 121st year.

For 2019, two soloists are new to the festival. Mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabó is in her debut with the Choir. Tenor Isaiah Bell sang with the Choir but never at the festival.

Returning festival favorites are Rosa Lamoreaux, soprano; Kendra Colton, soprano; William Sharp, baritone, and David Newman, bass.

“It’s exciting to have new people sing at the festival. Last year, it was Cassandra Lemoine, and people were just bowled over by her. It’s inspiring to hear new interpretations, new musical ideas and wonderful and new voices.

“The singers that we’ve had here are very devoted to the Bach Choir and Bach in general. People come here and they find a spirit and kind of a family environment. They find that they can be the best artist they can be. They really enjoy coming here to sing and play.

“The people we work with are very busy. They’re singing all over the world, but they have a special place in their heart for Bethlehem.”

The festival is attuned to performance scholarship, mindful of the Bach oeuvre.

“On Friday afternoon, we’re doing the first festival performance of Cantata 111,” says Funfgeld.

Cantata 111, “Was Mein Gott will, das g’scheh allzeit” (“What my God wills always occurs”) is in the concerts, 4 p.m. Fridays, Incarnation of Our Lord Church, Bethlehem.

“This has been an important initiative, that we continue to perform Bach’s works that have not been heard here before. We’re excited about the opportunity to do a cantata that’s never been done before.”

Friday afternoons offer an alternative concert. Lutenist Ronn McFarlane returns to the festival, along with Mindy Rosenfeld, flute and recorders, to play Baroque, Renaissance and traditional Celtic music from the 18th century in the the Saal, Moravian Museum, Bethlehem.

The 2019 festival artist-in-residence is Anthony Cecere, French horn, performing Haydn’s “Second Concerto for Horn in D major” for the Friday evening concerts.

Cecere, Principal Horn, Bach Festival Orchestra, for more than 20 years, performs with orchestras and opera companies in the United States and abroad.

Says Funfgeld, “Every year in the ‘Mass in B Minor,’ he plays one of the greatest solos in the literature for French horn.

“It’s one of the moments in the ‘Mass’ that people wait for and look forward to. The word I use is sovereign. He plays it so well and has lived his whole life with that piece.

“I called him up more than a year ago. I said said that he could pick a concerto, any that he wanted. Haydn was a great admirer of Bach. Tony called me up and said he’d like to do the ‘Second in D major.’ It’s an utterly charming piece of music.”

The Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concert Saturday mornings in Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts Center, is the setting for the world premiere of a work commissioned by the Bach Choir, “The Day Is Done,” by composer Gwyneth Walker, with text by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, performed by Bel Canto Youth Chorus and members of The Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra, and directed by Joy Hirokawa, Bel Canto founder and artistic director.

The work commemorates the merger of the Bel Canto Youth Chorus with the Bach Choir and Bel Canto’s 25th anniversary.

A real treat at the Ifor Jones concert is Funfgeld, Thomas Goeman, Kerry Heimann and Charlotte Mattax Moersch performing Bach's rarely-heard "Concerti for Three and Four Harpsichords," BWV 1064-1065.

"Bach Outdoors," begun at the 2018 Bach Festival, on Payrow Plaza, City Hall, Bethlehem, features a performance by Paul Miller, Principal Viola, Bach Festival Orchestra.

Says Funfgeld, "We were thinking about how to engage a different audience, a different group of people. We have a new principal viola player, Paul Miller. Paul has done a great deal of these street concerts, or outdoor events.

"I spent a lot of time thinking creatively with Paul about what we could do out of doors as part of the festival. We came up with 'Bach Outdoors' on Fridays at noon. Paul has an important role in how that concert is conceived and presented.

"This year, Paul is playing the electric violin. And he's being joined by the Main Street Brass."

The Main Street Brass, for its first festival, performs as the Festival Brass Choir and also accompanies the festival's "Chorale Sing."

Bach devotees will be especially interested in the "Distinguished Scholar Lecture: The Significance of Bach's Calov Bible," by Dr. Michael Marissen, Daniel Underhill Professor Emeritus, Swarthmore College, 2 p.m. Fridays, Room 145, Zoellner Arts Center.

The three-volume Bible was discovered in the 1930s in the house of a German immigrant family. The Bible is extensively marked in Bach's own hand, providing insights into his compositions and his views of God and religion.

"Michael Morrison is one of the top Bach scholars in the world. We're delighted to have him back. He will have the Calov Bible with him." The copy of the Bible was a commemorative gift to Funfgeld by the Bach Choir board.

Keeping in the spirit of Bach and his times, young musicians, chosen by audition, are again showcased in "Zimmermann's Coffee House," Saturday evenings, Peter Hall, Moravian College. German food, wine and beer are served during a concert of Baroque chamber music performed by students, friends and Funfgeld.

The event echoes the pilgrimage of Mencken to the Bach Festival during Prohibition when he sought out south side speakeasies, then known as "seafood restaurants."

The Bach Festival is much more than Bach and beer in Bethlehem. It's more than a festival in name alone. It has become a true festival, with a panoply of concerts and activities.

Says Funfgeld, "I think that with the initiatives we have, with all these different events, with the lectures, with trying to engage people from all constituencies, and bringing young musicians into the heart of the festival, it really has become a very significant festival."

That significance continues to transport fans of J.S. Bach to Bethlehem and beyond.

On April 13, 2019, Yo Yo Ma played Bach's "Suite No. 1 for Unaccompanied Cello" in a park in Laredo, Tex., at the Juarez-Lincoln International Bridge on the border of the United States and Mexico. The performance was one stop on Ma's "international Bach Project" of 36 performances during two years and on six continents.

Ma performed Bach's "Unaccompanied Cello Suites" in 1998 in Central Moravian Church, Bethlehem, for the 100th anniversary of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

"I think there are more wonderful performances of Bach in the world than there have ever been," says Funfgeld. "I think there's an ever deepening reverence, respect and gratitude for the music of Bach in our lives.

"People are thinking about it in new and exciting ways. I think Bach would be delighted."

Tickets: Bach Choir office, 440 Heckewelder Place, Bethlehem; bach.org; office@bach.org8018; 610-866-4382

The 112th Bethlehem Bach Festival. Tickets: bach.org; 610-866-4382

Directions, parking: bach.org/directions-parking/

Friday, May 10, 17

LOCATION UPDATE! THE OLD CHAPEL 412 Heckewelder Place **Bach Outdoors:** Festival Brass Choir, Bach Festival Orchestra principal violist Paul Miller, electric violin, noon, Payrow Plaza, Bethlehem City Hall, 10 E. Church St., Bethlehem. Free

Distinguished Scholar Lecture: Dr. Michael Marissen: "Significance of Calov Bible," 2 p.m., Zoellner Arts Center, 420 E. Packer Avenue, Lehigh University, Bethlehem. Free.

Chamber Music in the Saal: Ronn McFarlane, lute, 4 p.m., Second floor, Moravian Museum, 66 W. Church St., Bethlehem. Not handicapped accessible.

Bach at 4: Cantata 111 "Was Mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit"; Georg Philipp Telemann: "Sonata for Oboe," Mary Watt, Bach Festival Orchestra principal oboe; Funeral Cantata: "Du aber, Daniel, gehe hin," 4 p.m., Incarnation of Our Lord Church, 617 Pierce St., Bethlehem. Pre-concert chorale sing-a-long.

Bach at 8 concert preview, dinner, discussion, Moravian College Professor of Music and Composer-in-Residence Larry Lipkis. 5:45 p.m., Butz Lobby, Zoellner Arts Center, 420 E. Packer Avenue

Bach at 8: Bach Cantatas: 146 "Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal in das Reich Gottes eingehen," 149 "Man Singet mit Freuden vom sieg," 8 p.m., Packer Memorial Church, 18 University Drive, Lehigh University

Saturday, May 11, 18

Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concert: "The Day Is Done" by Gwyneth Walker; Bach: Duet from Cantata 93; Alexander: "Faith is the Bird That Feels the Light"; Todd: "Ave Verum"; Walker: "I've Known Rivers - Jump Right In," Bel Canto Youth Chorus; Bach's Concerti for Three and Four Harpsichords

BWV 1064 and 1065, Funfgeld, Goeman, Heimann and Moersch, 10:30 a.m., Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts Center, 420 E. Packer Avenue

Festival Luncheon, remarks from composer Gwyneth Walker, 12:30 p.m., Butz Lobby, Zoellner Arts Center, 420 E. Packer Avenue.

The Mass in B Minor, Part 1: 2:30 p.m. Part 2: 4:30 p.m., Packer Church.

Zimmermann's Coffee House: German fare, wine and beer for purchase; Baroque chamber music by youth musicians, Greg Funfgeld and friends. 7:30 p.m., Peter Hall, 348 Main St., Hurd Campus, Moravian College