

Concert Review: 112th Bach Festival of Bethlehem has many memorable moments

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

They come for the “Mass,” but they stay for the cantatas, world premieres, instrumental works and events.

The 112th Bach Festival of Bethlehem, which continues May 17 and 18, ran the gamut of emotions, from somber reflection, to fascinating scholarship, to wonderful new works, to exciting soloists and instrumentalists to, yes, the grandeur of J.S. Bach’s “Mass in B Minor.”

There’s so much to take in at the Bach Festival, that a review cannot truly do it justice. Even so, there are moments to remember from the May 10 and 11 performances and events.

You knew you were in for something special at the 2019 Bach Festival from the moment Krisztina Szabó, mezzao-soprano, in her Bach Festival debut, sang the opening words of the alto Recitative of Cantata 111 in its Bach Festival premiere. The startling clarity of Szabó was breathtaking in the “Bach at 4” program in the Incarnation of Our Lord Church, Bethlehem.

Szabó’s voice was well-matched with that of Isaiah Bell, tenor, in his Bach Festival debut, for a particularly intense and joyful alto and tenor Aria in Cantata 111.

Other Cantata 111 standouts included David Newman, bass, in the bass Aria; Kendra Colton, soprano, in the soprano Recitative; Loretta O’Sullivan, cello; Charlotte Mattax Moersch, portativ organ; the choir’s bright opening Chorale and reassuring closing Chorale, and Bach Choir Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld’s brisk tempo.

Telemann’s “Sonata for Oboe in C Minor” was a whimsical delight with Funfgeld, harpsichord; Nobuo Kitagawa, oboe, and Charles Holdeman, bassoon.

The May 10 afternoon program’s opening work, Telemann’s “Funeral Cantata,” with its deceptively simple and notably contemporary sound, included a rich bass Recitative by William Sharp, baritone; an absolutely pure soprano Recitative by Rosa Lamoreaux, soprano; rhapsodic passages by Mollie Glazer and John Mark Rozendaal, violas da gamba, and Stephen Groat, string bass, and a lullaby-like concluding Chorus by the choir (for the “Bach at 4,” some 14 singers).

The alternative program, also at 4 p.m. May 10 and 17, is “Chamber Music in the Saal,” with Ronn McFarlane, lutes, and (for May 17), Mindy Rosenfeld, flute, fife and bagpipe.

The May 10 lecture (also May 17), “The Significance of Bach’s Calov Bible,” by Dr. Michael Marissen, in Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University, was intriguing.

Utilizing recordings of Bach’s music, slides of pages from a Bible notated by J.S. Bach, and quotations from the Bible, Marissen provided fascinating observations.

“The relationships between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament ... that’s something he [Bach] was especially interested in,” said Marissen.

“That’s how important music was to Bach. It’s not just entertainment,” Marissen said.

“It’s not just fancy church music. It’s theologically mesmerizing,” said Marissen.

The Bach scholarship continued during a dinner lecture by Dr. Larry Lipkis at Zoellner Arts Center.

In a talk punctuated by his natural wit and well-researched performance practice, Lipkis, illustrating his remarks by playing notes on an electric keyboard, plus recordings of Bach’s works, presented an overview of the “Bach at 8” May 10 concert.

The “Bach at 8” concert in Packer opened with the tradition of the Bach Choir singing a cappella the “World Farewell” chorale, a tribute to choir members, officials, supporters and friends who have died.

Cantata 146, opening with Thomas Goeman, organ, and its descending and ascending figures, provided edge-of-your-seat dramatics. Highlights included Szabó, stunning in the alto Aria, with lovely accompaniment by Moersch, portativ organ; Lamoreaux, soaring on the soprano Recitative and Aria; Bell, so expressive on the tenor Recitative, and Bell and Sharp, wonderfully paired on the tenor and bass Aria.

Haydn’s “Second Concerto for Horn in D Major” proved an amazing showcase for Anthony Cecere, French horn. The work is at once distant and intimate. Cecere’s sustained notes, alacrity and subtle playing was absolutely through the Packer roof.

Cantata 149 opened with the Bach Choir’s exhilarating chorus, announced by tympani, resoundingly played by Sean Rode.

Highlights included Newman, with a strong bass Aria; Szabó, so full on the alto Recitative; Colton, with a warm soprano Aria; Bell, a sensitive tenor Recitative; Szabó and Bell, in an exquisite alto and tenor Aria, accompanied by Holdeman, bassoon, and the huge sound of the choir’s concluding Chorale.

The 2019 Ifor Jones Memorial Chamber Music Concerts May 11 (also, May 18) in Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts Center, provide a lighter contrast, a festival within the Bach Festival, with many gems to be discovered, not the least of which is the world premiere of Gwyneth Walker’s “The Day Is Done,” a work commissioned for the 25th anniversary of The Bel Canto Youth Chorus of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

Joy Hirokawa, Bel Canto Youth Chorus Artistic Director and Conductor, led the youth chorus and members of the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra in “The Day Is Done,” a major new work. Walker sensitively and seamlessly wove music to a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with amazing results. “The Day Is Done” is soothing, satisfying and, in its modest way, magnificent. It needs to be heard again and recorded.

Walker’s pixieish “Jump Right In!,” Bach’s “Duet from Cantata 93,” Elizabeth Alexander’s “Faith Is the Bird That Feels the Light” and Will Todd’s “Ave Verum” filled out the portion of the program by the Bel Canto Youth Chorus.

And, why have a performance by one harpsichord, when you can have a performance by three, or even four? Three works on the May 11 morning program featured harpsichord.

Moersch performed a flawless Bach “Partita IV in D Major.” The music-box effect of the piece is delightful.

Moersch, Goeman and Kerry Heimann performed Bach’s “Concerto for Three Harpsichords.” The delicacy, with each having a solo, and the unison playing was wonderful.

Funfgeld joined Moersch, Goeman and Heimann for Bach’s “Concerto for Four Harpsichords.” When all four played simultaneously, the volume was significant.

Walker was featured speaker at the May 11 luncheon in Zoellner, which included remarks by Harold G. Black, Bach Choir President, and Bridget George, Bach Choir Executive Director.

“We’ve come to think of this [the luncheon] as a family reunion because it allows us to get together with family and friends far-flung,” said Black.

Walker, saying, “I have been making music all my life,” emphasized, “I don’t write music for myself.”

Prior to the May 11 “Mass in B Minor,” Funfgeld gathered Bach Choir members and audience outdoors for the “Bach Chorale Sing,” accompanied by the Festival Brass Choir, aka Main Street Brass. “Please come closer. Let’s sing together,” Funfgeld said. “What a glorious day to sing chorales.”

It was also a glorious afternoon for the “Mass in B Minor,” the festival’s main event where the Bach Choir, accompanied by the Bach Festival Orchestra, really gets to sing.

Like a greeting from an old friend, the “Kyrie” opens this mass of mercy, with the strings weaving and flowing, an insistent string bass line and the choir’s voices floating on top.

The “Christe” sopranos I and II Duet by Lamoreaux and Colton heightens the heaven-sent feeling with the choir’s concluding “Kyrie” the height of vocal majesty.

The choir’s “Gloria” triumphant entrance, urged along by Funfgeld, led to Lamoreaux’s amazing “Laudamus” soprano Aria, accompanied by a vigorous and splendid Elizabeth Field, violin, orchestra concertmaster.

The swift transition to the choir’s “Gratias” Chorus and the “Domine Deus” soprano and tenor Duet by Colton and Bell, accompanied by the dancing flute of Robin Kani, was phenomenal.

Szabó sang a gentle and effective “Qui sedes” alto Aria, accompanied by Kitagawa, oboe d’amore. Newman rendered a delicate “Quoniam tu” bass Aria, with Cecere solid on French horn.

Funfgeld led choir and orchestra in a powerful “Credo” to open the second session of the “Mass.” The voices of Colton and Szabó were as one in the “Et in unum” soprano and alto Duet. The choir’s gentle “Et incarnatus” Chorus, prayerful “Crucifixus” Chorus and roaringly powerful “Et resurrexit” Chorus was an example of Funfgeld’s commanding conducting.

Sharp showed measured restraint in the “Et in Spiritum” bass Aria, accompanied by Kitagawa and Lynne Cohen, oboes d’amore,- and Holdeman, bassoon.

The choir's "Sanctus" Chorus was thrilling. Bell's "Benedictus" tenor Aria and Szabó's "Agnus Dei" alto Aria beautifully led to the choir and orchestra's "Dona nobis" concluding Chorus.

Those who have experienced the Bach Festival of Bethlehem know that words are insufficient to describe it. Those who haven't experienced the Bach Festival, should definitely put in on their bucket list. Guaranteed, they will want to return to fill that bucket again and again.