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Longtime Artistic and Executive Directors of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem announce their retirement, following the 112th Bach Festival.

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Greg Funfgeld and Bridget George at Work

When I was first invited to attend the Bach Choir of Bethlehem's Christmas Concert in Advent 2014, I had no idea that that and the Bach Festival in May would become annual traditions. I believe that I have missed only one year since then, and now my wife has become as attached to these events as I am. From the gusto with which the people of Bethlehem celebrate the Christmas season, the liturgy celebrated in the local Moravian Church—which includes a prayer for the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II—and the spirit of the Bach Festival, now in its 112th year, one can readily grasp the vitality of tradition in this originally German city—and it's infectious, I can attest.

One substantial musical benefit became clear to me just last year: that one acquires a unique understanding of Bach's incomparably varied and complex Mass in B Minor, the centerpiece of each festival, from repeatedly hearing an outstanding live performance of the work, intentionally consistent from year to year. In this spirit Greg Funfgeld has been building up to what we have been hearing these past five years over his 38-year artistic directorship of the Bach Choir. (If I can claim familiarity with Mr. Funfgeld's and the Bach Choir's work over five years, there are others who have been loyally attending since before his arrival.) The roughly 100 volunteer singers in the Choir and the professional soloists use some vibrato, although discreetly. The musicians in the orchestra play mostly modern instruments. Although HIP is by no means in the forefront of these performances, some of the most important "regulars" in the group are experts in historical performance and are highly regarded as such nationally and internationally, like concertmaster Elizabeth Field and counter-tenor Daniel Taylor. Still, you will not find Mr. Funfgeld experimenting with Joshua Rifkin's lean concept of the Mass as a chamber piece with a choir of one singer per part, each doubling as soloist. On a musical level, a choir of 85 strikes a happy balance between richness and clarity for a listener sitting towards the front of the Packer Memorial Church at Lehigh University, where the Mass is performed. But the size of the chorus conveys a symbolic meaning as well, with chamber forces implying a limited, select audience, and larger forces more inclusive assemblies, extending out even to include all of humanity. This is essentially a Romantic artifact which flourished in the 1890s, when the Bach Choir was founded, but appears as early as a performance of *Messiah* not long after Handel's death. A recording survives, made in 1888, of an excerpt from Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, performed at the Crystal Palace 500 musicians and a choir of over 4,000 voices, in front of an audience of 23,722 people.

The Mass was never performed in its entirety during Bach's lifetime, and its difficulty and length almost preclude it from any normal liturgy, whether Lutheran or Roman Catholic, but the greatness of the music, whether measured in analytical detail or by its general effect on a common listener, seems to summon multitudes, whether real or imagined. Before Mr. Funfgeld's tenure, the Bach Choir was even as large as double its present size, with a core group of professionals handling the more difficult sections. His reduction of the Choir to its present size has improved the quality of the voices and musicianship without losing that Romantic sense of scale.

But back to my own experience in hearing the Mass for these few years in Bethlehem. My revelation manifested itself in the choral fugues, the *Gratias agimus* (No. 7), the *Qui tollis* (No. 9), the *Patrem omnipotentem* (No. 14), and the *Confiteor unum baptisma* (No. 20). Maestro Funfgeld approaches these steadily, with few dynamic changes, as if they were being performed on a harpsichord or a single register of an organ. The focus is on the interplay of the voices and the structure of these brief movements. You would be surprised to hear the expressive dynamic range of both “Romantic” performances like, perhaps, Rilling’s and the Rifkinesque treatments in comparison. In listening, I’ve focused on the choral voices and their counterpoint, and year after year, more emerges. Would my experience be the equivalent, if I listened to similar recorded performances repeatedly, or played the piano reduction? Of course not. Music is in the moment, and recordings cannot fully reproduce the acoustic effect of a live performance in a familiar space, and playing from the score is a valuable, but different approach to the music.

In Bethlehem variety comes in the soloists who appear each year. There is a solid group of singers who return often, but not always, and there are always newcomers. I have not yet been to a festival when Rosa Lamoreaux did not lend her resplendent, precisely flexible voice to one of the soprano parts. Countertenor Daniel Taylor often sings the alto parts with deeply committed feeling, stylistic expertise, and expressive tone. Benjamin Butterfield provides his brilliant, but robustly founded tenor, along with energetic, but elegant phrasing. William Sharp’s handsome baritone also shows taste and expertise in phrasing, as well as an enthusiastic commitment to the text. All sing with perfect diction, always essential to the Lutheran devotion to the Word. Last year (2018), they were joined by an especially impressive newcomer, Cassandra Lemoine of Edmonton and a pupil of Benjamin Butterfield. She is based in Copenhagen and sings a wide repertoire ranging from the Baroque to American musicals. Her brilliant, but richly colored soprano was one of the special delights of the 2018 Festival. This year only Mme. Lamoreaux, Mr. Sharp, and bass David Newman returned from the former Group. Mezzo-Soprano Krisztina Szabó stood out with her sumptuous vocal tones, expressive phrasing, and clear diction, showing a true commitment to bringing the text across, and Isaiah Bell, who impressed me at previous Bethlehem concerts, excelled for the same reasons. Soprano Kendra Colton also deserved special praise.

My comments on the singers include their contributions to the ongoing series of cantata performances, which take us through the familiar and the rare in Bach’s enormous output. In these, clarity of diction is all-important in communicating the texts written for performance during the services in Leipzig. At the back of the Festival program every year you can look at a section at the back of the program book to gape with amazement at what the Bethlehem Bach Choir has covered among the cantatas.

There is also a Saturday morning concert which veers partially towards the instrumental. This year we heard the concertos for three and four harpsichords, which I haven't heard apart from the ancient Vox recording under Karl Ristenpart. In its time this popular recording won over many people to Baroque music and Bach with what they perceived as something rather jazzy. Today this tubby performance is hard to listen to, unlike the light, crystalline treatment it received from Maestro Funfgeld and the Festival Orchestra.

I think this gives you some idea of the present state of things in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as it has evolved under Greg Funfgeld's 38 seasons, and Executive Director Bridget George's 24. Both had brought not only exceptional abilities and understanding which surpass the immediate tasks of their offices, but also a commitment to an invaluable cultural tradition to which they have remained loyal over many years. Before they leave, however, the Bach Choir of Bethlehem will sing at the Bachfest Leipzig in 2020, as well as other Central European venues.

We can only hope that musicians and administrators of this caliber will come forward to take on a long-term commitment to a tradition which has served a loyal audience for so many years. Whoever applies should consider it an honor to follow in the footsteps of such gifted, intelligent, and devoted people.