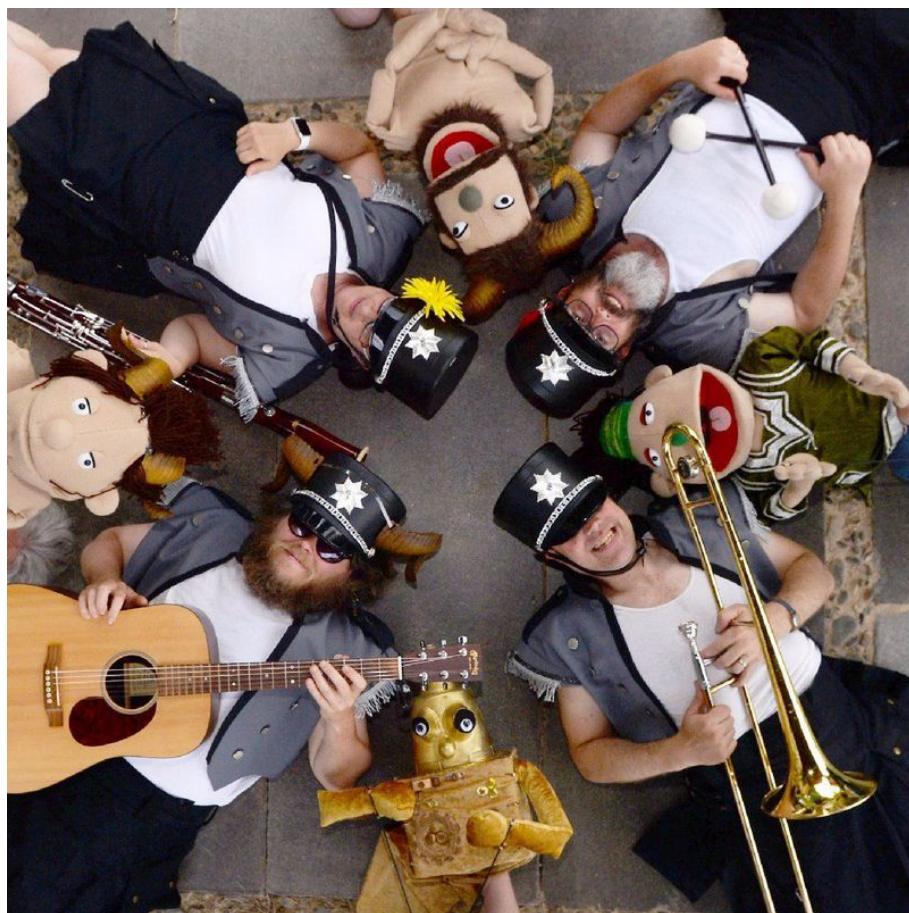


Bach Choir makes ‘A Joyful Noise’ with Touchstone Theatre

By STEVE SIEGEL
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Bach Choir makes “A Joyful Noise” with Touchstone Theatre and Jakopa's Punch Processional (Morning Call file photo)

If sharing, promoting, and performing the music of J.S. Bach is first and foremost the mission of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, certainly its engagement

in the local community for encouraging the spiritual value of not only Bach's music, but the choral arts in general, runs a close second.

For years, the choir has reached out to Lehigh Valley audiences and beyond in collaborations with numerous local partners, which include youth choirs, instrumentalists, theater groups, dancers, and visual artists. Taken together, that makes quite a joyful noise.

On Sunday, Oct. 6 at the Zoellner Arts Center on the Lehigh University campus in Bethlehem, the Choir will once again make a joyful noise in a unique collaboration with Touchstone Theatre as part of Touchstone's ambitious 10-day Festival UnBound. Featuring the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, Bel Canto Youth Chorus, Shiloh Baptist Choir, Nazareth High School Chorale, and the Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts, "A Joyful Noise" explores how the collective act of music making can bring people together and make the world a smaller place.

This choral mega-event is the product of a joint effort between Touchstone Theatre artistic director Jp Jordan and Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Fufgeld, who will direct a wealth of community choruses and renowned soloists joined by performing artists from a variety of genres.

Featured vocalists include soprano Sherezade Panthaki, baritone Dashon Burton, and singers Camille Armstrong and Ysaye Barnwell. Instrumental soloists include Susan Charlton, flute; Nobuo Kitagawa, oboe; Loretta O'Sullivan, cello; Thomas Goeman, piano, and Christopher Hanning, percussion. Also participating is Big Easy Easton Brass, juggler Aaron Finkle, and Touchstone's house band, Jakopa's Punch.

The program features everything from traditional choral works such as the duet from Bach's Cantata 140 and Stephen Paulus' "A Dream of Time" — commissioned in 2008 for Funfgeld's 25th anniversary as artistic director and conductor and premiered in 2009 — to gospel, New Orleans jazz, spirituals, and a host of cross-genre fun.

The event is certainly not the only time the Bach Choir has undertaken a major collaboration. One might recall "Mr. Bach Comes to Call," Canadian author Susan Hammond's Classical Kid's CD so wonderfully adapted to the stage by Bill George of Touchstone Theater in 2005. Another collaboration that comes to mind is "The Nightingale," performed at the Choir's 2017 Family Concert, the first collaboration of the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra with Bethlehem's Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre.

Yet in terms of sheer number of performers, "A Joyful Noise" might just top them all.

"For this one we're close to 220 singers. It's certainly an ambitious project. We've been working on this with Touchstone for a couple of years. I think it was a great vision the people at Touchstone had about really celebrating the community in the Lehigh Valley," says Funfgeld.

Stephen Paulus' "A Dream of Time" is based on Carl Sandburg's poignant 1936 poem, "Hope is a Tattered Flag." The piece lists simple pleasures to replace the fallen dreams of a world in the discord of war. Sandburg's tender verse is accompanied by a lush, lyrical, and melodic musical language.

"I found this poem years ago by sheer luck," says Funfgeld. "I noticed the line 'And Bach being broadcast from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania' which amazed me.

We had to go through all the rigors of permission and copyright protection to use that poem.”

Funfgeld asked Paulus to incorporate the Dona Nobis Pacem theme that ends Bach’s B Minor Mass. “It’s just so powerful when that comes up,” he says. Featured soloists Panthaki and Burton both have international reputations and are well-known to Bach Choir audiences, and members of the Bach Choir and Bach Festival orchestra. They will be joined by the voices of the Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts Touring Choir.

What makes “A Joyful Noise” truly a joyful, unique event is its lively, cross-cultural, cross-genre vibe.

“The idea was that each choral ensemble in the program would find a different collaborating artist from an entirely different discipline to work with,” says Funfgeld. “It really is a collaboration of so many disciplines and styles.”

For instance, there’s Nazareth High School Cantus performing Anders Edenroth’s “Words,” joined by body percussionist Armstrong, a first generation American-Jamaican born and raised in New York City, is herself a multi-talented artist — singer, front woman, composer, arranger, lyricist, dancer, choreographer, rhythm and percussionist, actress, director, and teaching artist.

Then there’s the Greater Shiloh Church Choir performing with the Big Easy Easton Brass in Pharrell Williams’ “Happy;” the Bel Canto Youth Chorus working with Jakopa’s Punch, Touchstone Theatre’s funky house band, in the band’s theme song; and the Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts Touring Choir with juggler Aaron Finkle in Greg Japerse’s “Voice Dance.”

Adding a mega-dose of community spirit, Barnwell, formerly director of Sweet Honey in the Rock, will lead an audience sing-along. Sweet Honey in the Rock is an all-woman, African American *a cappella* ensemble nominated three times for a Grammy. A native New Yorker now living in Washington, D.C., Barnwell appears as a vocalist and/or instrumentalist on more than thirty recordings with Sweet Honey in the Rock, which she joined in 1979. For the past 30 years, she has spent much of her time off stage working as a master teacher and choral clinician in African American cultural performance.

Of special note are two works by composer Paul Halley, best known as being a member of and composer for the Paul Winter Consort. His “Freedom Trilogy” takes a 16th century Gregorian chant and juxtaposes it with a contemporary African folk song and words from the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace.” “With piano, bass guitar and percussion, and with Dashon singing ‘Amazing Grace,’ this will really be a tour de force,” says Funfgeld.

Ending the program in grand style will be another Halley favorite, “The Rain is Over and Gone,” with text from the Song of Solomon and additional words by Halley himself. Funfgeld will conduct the massed choirs for this dramatic, closing work.

“A Joyful Noise,” 4 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 6, Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts center, Lehigh University, Bethlehem. Tickets: \$15 adults, \$10 children. 610-758-2787 ext. 0, www.festivalunbound.com

Bach at Noon brings back ‘Joyful Noise’ vocal soloists

For those who might have missed the performances of Panthaki and Burton in "A Joyful Noise," have no fear. The duo will be back for the Tuesday, Oct. 8 Bach at Noon at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem.

Panthaki and Burton are the soloists in Bach's Cantata 57, "Selig ist der Mann" (Blessed is the man), in a program that also includes Bach's Trio Sonata from The Musical Offering, BWV 1079, as the concert's instrumental work.

Featured in the sonata are Elizabeth Field, violin, Loretta O'Sullivan, cello, and Bach Choir director and conductor Funfgeld on harpsichord. Cantata 57 was written for the second day of Christmas, but don't expect it to bring that holiday's joyful festivities early this year. This is a rather solemn cantata, with no ebullient choruses, and no festive trumpets and timpani. In fact, the choir makes its only appearance in the closing chorale, and three of the four arias are in a minor key.

Having said all that, it still is a lovely work, with the oboes doubling the strings to create a contemplative mood in the outer movements. There are no solo parts for tenor or alto, only bass and soprano — the cantata was conceived as a dialogue between Jesus and the Soul, and marked as such in the score by Bach himself.

As always, Funfgeld will present an informative introduction to each piece. The Bach at Noon programs in Bethlehem are presented on the second Tuesday of the month in September, October, November, January, February, March and April.

Bach at Noon, 12:10 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 8, Central Moravian Church, 73 W. Church St., Bethlehem. Admission: free; free-will offering. 610-866-4382, www.bach.org