

# Allentown to get its own taste of ‘The Crown’ at Bach Choir Gala

By Steve Siegel

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Countertenor Daniel Taylor, artistic director of the Toronto-based Theatre of early Music.  
(Contributed photo/Emily Ding)

Imagine the excitement at Downton Abbey when the Crawley family learns that King George V and Queen Mary are coming to visit! And then there’s all the drama faced by a young Princess Elizabeth in juggling her personal life and politics when she marries Prince Philip to become Queen Elizabeth II! Fans of “Downton Abbey,” “The Crown,” and lovers of all things British are in for a royal experience of their very own on Saturday, Oct. 26 at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Allentown, when the Toronto-based Theatre of Early Music presents “The Coronation of King George II.” This majestic production,

lying somewhere between choral extravaganza and Baroque theater piece, promises to give a true sense of occasion as the audience itself becomes part of the rousing ceremony.

“The Coronation of King George II,” the Bach Choir of Bethlehem’s 2019 Gala Concert and Fundraiser, is the creation of Daniel Taylor, founder, conductor, and artistic director of the Theatre of Early Music. Taylor, a world-renowned countertenor and frequent Bach Choir soloist, will bring his own company of musicians, soloists, and choir to the performance, which will receive its American premiere at St. John’s, followed by a second performance at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City on Sunday.

This might be the first time a Bach Choir Gala is being held outside of Bethlehem, but there’s a good reason for it. “We thought the environment at St. John’s would just be perfect for an event like this,” says Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld. “It’s like a miniature Westminster Abbey in a way. It’s visually stunning, with magnificent stained glass windows, marvelous acoustics, and a tremendous pipe organ up in the front gallery. It will really seem like being at an actual coronation.”

In creating “Coronation,” Taylor and his troupe have conceived a spectacle that features trumpet fanfares, marvelous instrumentals, exuberant choral singing, and a procession that includes the king himself in full royal regalia along with a robed Archbishop of Canterbury, played by Touchstone’s Bill George.

In another departure from recent Bach Choir galas, 20 singers from the choir, in addition to Bach Festival Orchestra concertmaster Elizabeth Field, will be joining Taylor’s mix of Canadian and American singers and musicians in the performance.

It's hard to imagine how Taylor, a Sony Classical recording artist and one of the most sought-after countertenors in the world, finds the time to direct and perform in a group such as the Early Music Theatre. In addition to that, he tours six months a year as a soloist, and when back at home serves as professor of voice and opera and head of Historical Performance at the University of Toronto.

Taylor appears on more than 100 recordings, including one with Jeremy Irons, which won a Grammy. He has appeared in prestigious concert halls and opera houses throughout the world, and in fact, it was at his 1999 Met Opera debut in Handel's "Julius Caesar" where Funfgeld heard him for the first time. "That began a musical and spiritual friendship that has carried now for 20 years," Taylor says.

The formation of the Early Music Theatre has been a labor of love. In the late 1990s Taylor had been touring with Sir John Eliot Gardiner, the acclaimed English conductor particularly known for his performances of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach.

"At the same time I was being approached by various orchestras to do recitals. But what I found limiting was that it sometimes felt too much like a business — there was something missing in the process," Taylor says. "Often it just would seem to be thrown together. I was interested in developing a wider performance repertoire, something that would draw the audience into it." The opportunity came when he was asked to put a program together based on Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" for the Ottawa Chamber Music Festival. "It was really a remarkable offer. I could choose whom I'd work with and what pieces to include. Due to the reviews I received I was getting requests nationally asking me to bring my group — which at the time didn't even have a name," says Taylor, who founded the Theatre of Early Music in 2001.

Contrary to what you might think, the popular Netflix TV series “The Crown” was not Taylor’s inspiration for the coronation project.

“I had been working with a number of British and European groups that would capture an audience’s attention in a different way. Around 1990 Paul McCreech had done a recording of a Venetian coronation which mixed a lot of Gabrieli with chant. The attempt was to recreate this event in an audience’s mind in a recording,” he says. “So in working with such conductors, I started to imagine music being presented in a different way in a live concert.”



The Theatre of Early Music will perform 'The Coronation of George II' Saturday, Oct. 26 at St. John's Lutheran Church in Allentown. (Contributed photo)

“The Coronation of King George II” was first performed in a chapel near the University of Toronto in 2014, and has since been performed — “staged” might be the better word — at various early music festivals throughout Canada. Taylor’s musical repertoire for the piece, which runs about 80 minutes without intermission, reaches from the Renaissance to the Baroque to present-day compositions.

Although the actual coronation of King George II and Queen Caroline took place on Oct. 11, 1727, Taylor has taken some creative liberties. “I didn’t want to simply recreate one coronation concert. I researched other composers who wrote for the various coronations, including the British composer John Joubert, who died in January. And [Sir Charles Hubert Hastings] Parry’s piece, ‘I was glad,’ wasn’t even written at the time of King George II,” Taylor says. “I wanted to modernize it. Yet I thought Joubert should be recognized, and his hymn, ‘Oh Lord, the Maker of All Things’ fits perfectly with the prayerful part of the service.”

The program begins with a trumpet fanfare and drum processional, as the King (played by a friend of Taylor’s) appears in white face makeup, robes, and wig, followed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. “We begin with an *a capella* piece, then Parry’s ‘I was glad,’ an incredible choral piece performed quite often at weddings and coronations,” Taylor says.

But it won’t just be Taylor’s own 20-member choir who will be singing. “I wanted the community to be involved. I’ve found in my travels throughout the world that in Bethlehem there is a sense of community that doesn’t exist anywhere else,” he says. “So I asked Greg if it would be possible if some of the Bach Choir members join us. They’re joining us for the Parry and again along with the audience in two beautiful hymns that would have been sung at the various coronations.”

One of those hymns, Parry’s “Jerusalem,” became famous from its use in the 1981 film “Chariots of Fire.” It was recently voted the most popular hymn in England.

Every British coronation since King George II has included Handel’s “Zadok the Priest,” one of four coronation anthems Handel composed as his first commission as a newly naturalized British subject. The text of “Zadok the

Priest” is derived from the biblical account of the anointing of Solomon by Zadok and Nathan, and the people’s rejoicing at this event. Imagine the drama as we witness the king’s anointing during Handel’s lofty anthem at St. John’s church, and then his crowning during another of Handel’s coronation anthems, “The King Shall Rejoice,” to the resounding cheers of “God Save the King” from one and all in the audience.

Other selections in the coronation include John Tavener’s “Hymn to the Mother of God” (actually composed hundreds of year after the 1727 event), Henry Purcell’s “Remember Not, Lord and Hear my Prayer, Oh Lord,” Orlando Gibbons’ “Drop, drop slow tears,” and Giovanni Palestrina’s “Jesu, Rex Admirabilis.”

But what, no Bach?! “Well, it just wouldn’t have been done during a coronation,” says Taylor. “But I would have included some if Greg had asked.” Yet Funfgeld thought it best to leave well-enough alone.

“I just think it’s going to be a wonder as it is,” he says. “You know, Bach himself was always interested in what other people were doing — the new trends, the new styles, new musical forms. I think he would have come to this event and reveled in it. It would have been right up his alley.”

## The Coronation of King George II

**The Bach Choir of Bethlehem presents Canada’s Theatre of Early Music in a performance recreating the splendor and ceremony of the Coronation of King George II**

**When:** 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26

**Where:** St. John’s Lutheran Church, 37 S 5th St, Allentown

**Tickets:** \$40, \$30; \$9 students

**Info:** 610-866-4382, ext. 113 or 110; [www.bach.org](http://www.bach.org)

**What else:** 5 p.m. Fundraiser includes cocktails, dinner, and auction at The Lehigh Country Club, 2319 S. Cedar Crest Blvd, Allentown. Benefactor tickets at \$250 (\$100 is tax-deductible) include reserved premium concert seating in addition to fundraiser events. Call 610-866-4382 Ext. 113 or 115 for information.