

BETHLEHEM PRESS

Command performance: Theatre of Early Music ‘Coronation’ fit for a king at Bach Choir annual gala

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Anyone who loves the television shows, “Downton Abbey” (and now the movie) and “The Crown,” or follows the British Royal Family, won’t want to miss the American premiere of “The Coronation of King George II,” a theatrical and musical recreation of the crowning of the British king in 1727 in London’s Westminster Abbey.

The 3 p.m. Oct. 26 event, the Bach Choir of Bethlehem’s Gala Concert, is presented by Canada’s Theatre of Early Music, in St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in center city Allentown.

The concert is followed by a fundraiser gala that includes cocktails, a silent auction and gourmet dinner at 5 p.m. at Lehigh Country Club, Allentown.

The Theatre of Early Music performs “The Coronation of King George II” Oct. 27, the day after the Allentown concert, in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

For Anglophiles or those who simply enjoy great music, ‘The Coronation of King George II’ promises to be an afternoon of pomp and pageantry, complete with the robed Archbishop of Canterbury and the costumed king-in-waiting, inside the beautiful and historic sanctuary of the neo-gothic St. John’s Church.

“For anyone who enjoys Britain, this is a real feast,” says Greg Funfgeld, artistic director and conductor of The Bach Choir.

“It is a wonderful experience of music, acting and oratory. This coronation is the one for which Handel wrote the famous coronation anthem, ‘Zadok the Priest,’ which has been performed at every coronation since. It really is a thrilling program,” Funfgeld says.

The Theatre of Early Music is led by Daniel Taylor, frequent Bach Festival soloist and internationally-recognized countertenor. He’s artistic director of the choir and orchestra of the Theatre of Early Music.

Taylor says he was inspired to put together the program because of the historical importance of royalty in composers’ lives and works.

“Courts were very influential for many early composers,” Taylor says.

Traveling in England to perform, it was easy to get “get caught up” in British traditions, says Taylor.

“I was curious what it would have felt like to be there at such an important time in history,” he says.

Taylor says he used a traditional coronation service as the model and added plenty of spectacle, including the tolling of bells, a trumpet fanfare, a cappella chorale singing and a drum procession.

He says the first time the Theatre of Early Music performed the program in Toronto, Canada, it sold out.

The performance includes preparation, procession, litany, anointing, crowning and recession.

Taylor has included music from the Renaissance to Baroque to present-day, such as John Tavener's "O Lord, the Maker of All Things."

"I didn't want it to feel too much like a religious ceremony, but yet there is something sacred in this event," he says.

Taylor says participation of the audience is "very important."

Audience members will be expected to call out "God save the King!" and sing along with hymns, including Charles Hubert Hastings Parry's "Jerusalem," considered Parry's unofficial anthem of England.

"'Jerusalem' was voted the most popular hymn in the world and is a great tune," Taylor says.

There is Lehigh Valley arts community involvement with 20 members of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem joining in the singing and Touchstone Theatre co-founder Bill George portraying the archbishop.

Also to be performed: Parry's "I Was Glad," Henry Purcell's "Remember Not, Lord" and "Hear my Prayer, Oh Lord," Orlando Gibbons' "Drop, Drop Slow Tears," Giovanni Palestrina's "Jesu, Rex Admirabilis" and Handel's "The King Shall Rejoice."

Taylor says, ultimately, the performance is very moving and meaningful as the archbishop puts the crown on George II's head.

"You feel so lifted," Taylor says. "it's an involving experience. I'm very excited to bring this to the Lehigh Valley."

The Theatre of Early Music presents "The Coronation of King George II," 3 p.m. Oct. 26, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 37 S. Fifth St., Allentown. Concert tickets and gala tickets information: bach.org; 610-866-4382, ext. 113 or 110.