

# Classical Music: Bach Choir to present Handel's 'Messiah' (Part 1) for first time in its history

By Steve Siegel, Special to The Morning Call  
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Comfort ye! The Messiah has finally come to Bethlehem!

No, not *that* Messiah, but Handel's beloved oratorio. The Bach Choir of Bethlehem will perform "Messiah" Part 1 for the first time in its 121-year history Saturday, Dec. 7 at the First Presbyterian Church of Allentown and Sunday, Dec. 8 at the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem as part of its 2019 Christmas Concerts.

Handel's masterpiece, one of the best-known and most frequently performed choral works in Western music, will be paired with J.S. Bach's "Magnificat" in D Major, BWV 243, itself one of the most glorious works celebrating the Christmas holiday.

Joining the Bach Choir and the Bach Festival Orchestra are soloists Agnes Zsigovics, soprano; Daniel Taylor, countertenor; Isaiah Bell, tenor, and David Newman, bass-baritone. All are under the direction of Bach Choir artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld.

Bach's "Magnificat" was first performed in Bethlehem by the Bach Choir in 1903 and has become a tradition ever since, yet it might seem odd that the Choir has never done the mighty "Messiah" before.

"For a long time, people have asked me why don't you do Handel's 'Messiah,' especially at Christmas time. I just didn't feel it was the right time or the right occasion," says Funfgeld. "One of the problems is that when you do the entire 'Messiah' it ends up being a very long program."

In recent years, Funfgeld had been thinking about what he'd like to perform over his last two years with the choir, and the possibility of doing the "Messiah" returned to him.

"I had the idea of doing the three parts of the 'Messiah' in three different programs, pairing each with a work by Bach," he says. "So pairing Part 1, the Christmas story, with the 'Magnificat' sounded like a good idea."

Part 2 of the "Messiah," the Lenten part, which leads to the "Hallelujah" chorus, will be paired with Bach's Easter Oratorio for the Bach Choir's 2020 Spring Concert, and Part 3 will be performed at the 2021 Spring Concert

paired with a to-be-determined work of Bach. The entire scheme fits in perfectly with the Choir's practice, which goes back to 2000, of pairing works by Bach with those of other composers who influenced him or were influenced by him.

“It's very interesting to hear Bach and Handel side-by-side – they have an amazing complementary way of setting these texts and text-painting,” says Funfgeld. “Handel was primarily a man of the theater and Bach, a man of the church, but there's lots of overlapping. Bach gets into an almost operatic style in ‘Magnificat’ and Handel becomes very devotional in pieces like ‘Comfort ye’ and ‘Come unto Him.’”

As well-known as the “Messiah” is, Funfgeld says nearly half the choir has never sung it before. “That means we can try to approach it as if for the first time, so it will sound fresh, vibrant, and have a wonderful sense of discovery,” he says. Being so often-performed, it might be easy to conclude that the piece offers few challenges, yet that's far from the truth.

“The ‘Messiah,’ for all its popularity, is a challenging, formidable piece of music. There are a great many challenges in singing it well. In many ways, we've taken the music and deconstructed it. In the long, melismatic passages, where a single syllable of text is sung carried through many notes, we've taken it down to what I would call the melodic skeleton and reconstruct it from the ground up,” Funfgeld says.

The intent, Funfgeld explains, is to achieve a clarity and lightness of texture and not make the piece sound ponderous or heavy. “So even though we're a large choir of 85 singers, we're trying to approach it as a chamber choir would, with a lot of careful attention to phrasing and a kind of lifting between the notes, a space in the sound,” he says.

Handel's orchestration is a marvelous melding of the restrained with the dramatic. The soothing opening tenor recitative "Comfort ye," accompanied by just the strings, leads into the dramatic and virtuosic "Every valley." The aria "Rejoice greatly," a soprano tour de force, is soon followed by the comforting and reflective "He shall feed his flock." "It's a banquet of incredible melody and rhythm," Funfgeld says.

The same can be said for the "Magnificat," which draws from Mary's Song in Luke 1:46-55, where she expresses her faith in words that begin "My soul doth magnify the Lord." Some of the best of Bach's musical metaphor appears in its twelve compact, gem-like movements. The five-part choruses, for example, in "Sicut locutus est" and "Omnes generations" incorporate a fugal, overlapping vocal technique called stretto, which lends a sense of vastness or infinity.

It's a sad thing that in the majority of Christmas carols, shepherds, the wise men, and angels are the frequent flyers, while Mary might be mentioned, if at all, with a mere allusion to the "virgin," "mother," or even just "woman." Yet Mary's song is truly a universal testament of belief which can be shared by all faiths.

"I think Mary is an under-appreciated figure, at least outside the Catholic Church," says Funfgeld. "I think Mary really has something to teach all of us. Luther loved the Magnificat and wrote extensively on it. Bach would have known Luther's comments, and expanded on them in this beautiful way." As is traditional with all of the choir's Christmas Concerts, Funfgeld will invite the audience to join the choir in singing several well-known carols at the conclusion of the program.

**Bach Choir of Bethlehem Christmas Concerts**, 8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 7, First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, 3231 Tilghman Street, Allentown; 4 p.m. Dec. 8, First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, 2344 Center St., Bethlehem. Tickets: \$38 general admission, \$9 students. City of Bethlehem Amusement Tax will be added to Bethlehem concert ticket prices. 610-866-4382, [www.bach.org](http://www.bach.org)