

# Review: Bach Choir Family Concert reaches high-water mark with ‘Noah’s Flood’

By Steve Siegel

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Jill Dunn Jones (left, artistic director of the Pennsylvania Youth Theater) and Greg Funfgeld (right, artistic director and conductor of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem) pose with Noah's sons and their wives who took part in the Bach Choir's Family Concert "Noah's Flood" at Packer Memorial Church in Bethlehem last weekend. (Contributed photo)

Those who experienced the Bach Choir's presentation of Benjamin Britten's one-act opera "Noye's Fludde" (Noah's Flood) at Packer Memorial Church in

Bethlehem Saturday and Sunday might not have entered the church two-by-two, but they certainly left bonded by something even bigger: a real sense of community.

This charming production — sold out for each performance — was both a visual and aural affirmation of Britten’s vision of community involvement. The performance, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Bach Choir’s family concerts, was named in honor of Bach Choir conductor and artistic director Greg Funfgeld.

The event was a huge undertaking, with the Bach Choir and members of the Bach Festival Orchestra partnering with numerous local organizations, including the Bel Canto Youth Chorus, Pennsylvania Youth Theatre, members of the Young People’s Philharmonic, the Junior String Philharmonic, and the Lehigh University Philharmonic. All told, nearly 200 performers were involved.

“Noah’s Flood” is a telling of the familiar biblical story of Noah, his ark, and the flood sent by God to wash away the sins of the world. Featured soloists were mezzo-soprano Meg Bragle as Mrs. Noah, bass-baritone David Newman as Noah, and John Hare as The Voice of God. Noah’s sons and their wives, as well as various “gossips” in the community, were played by members of the Bach Choir and the Bel Canto Youth Chorus.

Britten loved composing pieces not just for children to enjoy but also to perform, and it was largely the kids’ involvement in the production that made it such a delight. Adding to the appeal were the nearly 50 members of the combined choruses of area school children, wearing masks they made themselves, who played the roles of the animals boarding the ark.

Community involvement began from the very first number, with the audience singing the hymn “Lord Jesus Think on Me.” Next we heard John Hare’s stentorian voice instructing Noah to build the ark. Being the Voice of God, his was the only voice that gained the benefit of amplification and was the most clearly heard.

Packer’s acoustics are not on par with a musical theater’s, and unfortunately most of the other voices, in spite of some very talented singers, were difficult to understand, at least on the Sunday performance I attended. But this was of little consequence, due to the excellent libretto, colorful costumes, and quite a clever staging which made the action very easy to follow, even for the large number of kids in the audience.

Most impressive in the performance was how Packer’s vast imposing space was so magically integrated into the fabric of the story. A railing surrounding the altar became part of the ark itself, a simple ladder was transformed into the mast, and the dome above the chancel was bathed with a multicolor light show wonderfully evoking a starry sky or a terrifying rainstorm.

When the storm came, it was indeed rendered with drama. An enormous battery of musical instruments was involved in the production, including a wind machine, Chinese blocks, timpani, gongs, whips, cymbals, tambourines, lots of drums, and even a row of cups struck with a wooden spoon to give the sound of the first raindrops. Once again the audience was brought into the drama, with everyone singing “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” in the midst of the orchestra’s gnashing chords.

Packer’s aisles were brought into the action too, as the kids dressed as animals marched two-by-two down them and up into the ark. Their homemade masks were colorful and surprisingly elaborate, representing everything from lions and bears to birds and mice (but what, no unicorns?!) Especially charming

were two young girls as a raven and a dove, the later who “flew” back to the ark with an olive branch in her mouth. Kudos to the voice of the dove represented by recorder virtuoso Tricia van Oers and some amazing flutter-tonguing.

The return of the dove marked the end of the storm and a rainbow flag unfurled from the mast. With the stage bathed in multicolor lights, all sang the hymn “The Spacious Firmament,” and this charming production came to an end. Well, not exactly — seeing the “animals” run outside the church into the sunlight after the performance, their masks waving proudly in hand, was the real happy ending.

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