

Bach Choir of Bethlehem brings community on board for ‘Noah’s Flood’

Friday, February 28, 2020 by KATHY LAUER-WILLIAMS Special to The Press in Focus

A seldom-performed Benjamin Britten one-act opera based on the Biblical story of Noah is the Bach Choir of Bethlehem’s inaugural “Greg Funfgeld Family Concert.”

In collaboration with Pennsylvania Youth Theatre, the Bach Choir presents “Noah’s Flood,” 3 p.m. Feb. 29 and March 1, Packer Memorial Chapel, 18 University Drive, Lehigh University, Bethlehem.

“I’ve always loved ‘Noah’s Flood,’” says Bach Choir of Bethlehem Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld. “It is such an amazing piece.

“Benjamin Britten is unique in the way he connects with children and their imagination. There is such a sense of fantasy and wonder, and kids are drawn to it in a very powerful way.”

Funfgeld says he was last involved with a production of the opera more than 25 years ago with Pennsylvania Youth Theatre (PYT). He’s excited that PYT and PYT Artistic Director Jill Dunn are co-producing the “Greg Funfgeld Family Concert.”

He says, now that the Bach Choir has Bel Canto Youth Chorus under its umbrella, it’s a perfect opportunity to feature the chorus.

In addition to PYT and Bel Canto, the Junior Strings Philharmonic, Young People’s Philharmonic, Mock Turtle Marionettes, students from St. Ann School, Emmaus, Lehigh University ensembles and members of the community are participating in the “Greg Funfgeld Family Concert.”

“It has been quite a huge undertaking,” says Funfgeld. “We’ve been working on it since fall and it has been an enormous collaborative effort. I’m really looking forward to it.”

Britten premiered “Noah’s Flood” in 1958 at the Aldeburgh Festival in England.

The text is taken from the 14th century and 15th century medieval mystery play, “Noye’s Fludde” (“Noah’s Flood”) from the English town of Chester. The play was written for ordinary people in English, rather than the liturgical Latin spoken in church.

The play added humorous moments to Biblical stories, including Mrs. Noah’s refusal to enter the ark, as comic relief and a foil to the faithful Noah as way to engage the community.

Britten’s score incorporates adults and children, school groups and professionals. The audience even gets involved as the performance opens with the audience playing the role of the earth’s inhabitants singing a hymn to God, pleading for redemption against a thundering depiction of the Biblical storm.

Traditionally staged in churches, Britten’s opera is presented in Packer Memorial Church rather than Zoellner Arts Center where previous family concerts have been held.

The animals are played by children. Doug Roysdon, Artistic Director of Mock Turtle Marionette Theater, has been working with the children in their making of masks for them to wear during the performance.

Funfgeld calls the colorful and creative menagerie “a delight.”

“They come down the aisles two by two and it is really quite extraordinary,” he says.

Noah is played by David Newman, bass baritone, who has sung with the Bach Choir.

“David is a wonderful singer,” Funfgeld says.

Newman says he is looking forward to working with the children in the cast and feels it will be “very special for children in the audience to not only see the fantasies of this well-known story enacted, but to see their peers helping bring it to life.”

Meg Bragle, mezzo-soprano, a winner of Bach Choir’s Young American Singer competition, returns to play Mrs. Noah.

John Hare is the narrator and voice of God.

Singers from the Bach Choir play Noah’s sons and the Gossips, who hang out with Mrs. Noah.

Funfgeld lauds Britten’s “brilliant orchestration,” which makes extensive use of an “enormous battery of percussion instruments” to create aural color.

Timpani, as well as gongs, herald the voice of God. A wind machine creates the storm. Chinese blocks and sandpaper highlight the building of the ark building. A whip suggests the ship’s flapping rigging.

A bugle announces the march of each group of animals. Hand bells provide the sound of the rainbow. A raven is given the voice of a cello. A recorder evokes the wind and doves.

Also incorporated are tambourines, chimes and tea cups.

Funfgeld says that Britten is “so clever and engaging” in his use of instrumentation.

“Everybody’s really excited and loving it,” Funfgeld says. “I have great expectations.”

He says Britten was hugely influenced by Bach, and many of Bach’s most oft-used compositional practices were updated by Britten in his choral works such as “Noah’s Flood.”

This is the first Bach Choir “Family Concert” under its new name, “Greg Funfgeld Family Concert.”

Funfgeld, who plans to retire in 2021, says it came about as an endowment gift for the concert series from local philanthropist Beall Fowler.

“He wanted it to be named in my honor,” says Funfgeld. “I kind of resisted but I love the family concert and have worked very hard on it. It was so kind and generous [of Fowler] and means a great deal to me.”

Tickets: Bach Choir office, 440 Heckewelder Place, Bethlehem; office@bach.org; <https://bach.org/>; 610-866-4382, ext. 110, 115