

Classical: Creatures (and performers) great and small to present Britten's '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 will take part in the Bach Choir's Family Concert 'Noah's Flood' Saturday, Feb. 29 and Sunday, March 1 at Packer Memorial Church in Bethlehem. (Contributed photo)

If composers who write works for children had a patron saint, it would surely be Benjamin Britten.

That British composer loved writing works not just for children to enjoy, but also to perform. Such a work is his “Noye’s Fludde” (Noah’s Flood), a 60-minute opera based on a 14th-century mystery play specifically designed for amateurs, children and communities.

First performed in 1958 at Orford Church in Suffolk, England, “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. Britten wanted to recreate that crucial element of communal involvement by ordinary people, so only a handful of its many performers are professional, adult artists.

True to Britten’s vision of community involvement and artistic collaboration, the Bach Choir of Bethlehem and the Bach Festival Orchestra, under the director of artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld, will partner with numerous local organizations to present “Noah’s Flood” as the Greg Funfgeld Family Concert Saturday, Feb. 29 and Sunday, March 1 at Packer Memorial Church in Bethlehem.

The production is a huge undertaking, celebrating as it does the 20th anniversary of the Bach Choir’s Family Concerts and appropriately named in Funfgeld’s honor. Partnering with the Choir in this joyous production are the Bel Canto Youth Chorus, Pennsylvania Youth Theatre, members of the Young People’s Philharmonic, the Junior String Philharmonic, and the Lehigh University Philharmonic.

PYT artistic director Jill Dunn Jones is the stage director of the production, which features nearly two hundred performers that include singers, actors, instrumentalists, and a large youth chorus wearing colorful hand-made costumes, created under the guidance of Doug Royston of Mock Turtle Marionette Theatre. The combined choruses of area school children will play

the roles of the animals boarding the ark, and will be prepared by Bel Canto Artistic Director Joy Hirokawa.

Featured soloists are mezzo-soprano Meg Bragle as Mrs. Noah and bass-baritone David Newman as Noah. John Hare, former Bach Choir member, plays The Voice of God. Noah's sons and their wives, as well as various "gossips" in the community, are played by members of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem and the Bel Canto Youth Chorus.

"The whole idea of community spirit is behind Britten's concept. I always wanted to revisit it — it's such a magical piece," says Funfgeld, who last presented "Noah's Flood" back in 1991 in a collaboration with PYT founding artistic director Madeleine Ramsey at Packer Church. "The idea of using mostly ordinary people and just a few professionals goes back to the mediaeval mystery plays of 14th century Chester."

Bach Choir's family concerts are traditionally presented on a stage such as at the Zoellner Arts Center, but Britten intended this work to be performed in a place of worship.

"The whole concept was to stage it in an ecclesiastical space," says Funfgeld. "We're building a stage in Packer with the orchestra on either side. That should allow enough room for the actors and animals, and of course we will have the whole chancel area to represent the ark." The nearly 50 kids as the animals will proceed down the aisles two-by-two — everything from mice and birds to lions and tigers and bears — oh my!

"Because I've been working with PYT for so long, I'm used to non-traditional staging," says Dunn Jones. "This to me is my favorite way of working, where I have to dig deep and use my own imagination to see this story in this space.

For instance, the railing at the foot of the altar I saw as part of the ark that we could build into our set — it's just magical how it all works.”

Stage props such as a ladder for the ark's mast and a rainbow flag that will unfurl from it after the deluge have been carefully chosen. “I'm being really particular about the props because in a show this large those details can take away from the story itself if we add too much,” Dunn Jones says. “The headpieces the kids made themselves are so elaborate and stunning that that alone is a backdrop. They're so colorful and some are so large on these tiny human beings it reminds me of a pop-up storybook in a way.”

In addition to dramatic staging and special effects lighting to be provided by City Entertainment, sound effects will be of epic proportions in this production. An enormous battery of musical instruments is involved, including a wind machine, Chinese blocks, timpani, gongs, whips, cymbals, tambourines, lots of drums, sandpaper, and even a row of cups, called “slung mugs” which are struck with a wooden spoon give the sound of the first raindrops.

Also in the musical mix will be six hand bell players from the First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, percussionists from West Chester University, and four trumpeters. Performing on piano four hands will be Bach Choir assistant conductor Tom Goeman and Bach Choir tenor Bryan Holten, and on organ, Stephen Williams of the Cathedral Church of the Nativity. Joining all the community members and school students from throughout the Lehigh Valley will be members of the Bach Choir who will sing the role of Noah's sons, their wives, and the colorful, tipsy “gossips” — friends of Mrs. Noah, who mock the project and are left behind. Recorder virtuoso Tricia van Oers, who delighted Bach Choir audiences as the voice of a nightingale a few

years back, returns as the voice of the dove. Also on tap will be a group of recorder players from Larry Lipkis' Moravian College Early Music Ensemble. The mix of professional and nonprofessional performers creates challenges of its own. The children from PYT in the production, for instance, range from second-graders to high school seniors. "The kids as the animals, Noah's family members and the gossips — all are of different ages and different abilities," says Dunn Jones. "And for some of the kids in the show, this is totally outside what their comfort is. My students, for example, are not used to singing in choirs, and the other students don't necessarily have a background in character development."

Yet in spite of these challenges, something magical happens during an actual performance. "I find that in working with both my students and adults, there's an element of holding back during rehearsals until there's an audience in front of them. Then a light bulb turns on and it becomes completely magical — they just transform on stage. The audience is imperative for that to happen," Dunn Jones says.

Indeed, the audience is essential to the drama, especially in the midst of a terrifying storm where the orchestra bursts into gnashing chords and all sing "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," the hymn traditionally associated with seafarers. In fact, Britten has borrowed a page out of Bach here — a composer he greatly admired. "The entire storm scene is based on a giant passacaglia. Britten's sense of drama is in many ways not unlike Bach's passions, as is the whole idea of casting religious music as a drama," Funfgeld says.

Even with choral writing so accessible to children, Britten doesn't "write down" to his young cast. This is subtle, sophisticated, challenging music that requires much dedicated practice and hard work to bring off. "Britten has such an amazing way of tapping into children's imagination. The kids just respond

so beautifully to his music and ideas,” Funfgeld says. “There’s also a clear message of a new beginning, a chance to make a new world and a new life. There’s a tremendous sense of hope that comes through this.”

“Noah’s Flood,” Bach Choir of Bethlehem Family Concert, 3 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 29 and Sunday, March 1, Packer Memorial Church, Lehigh University, Bethlehem. Tickets: \$18 adults, \$9 students up to age 22. 610-866-4382, www.bach.org