

Coronavirus impact: 113th Bach Festival canceled in Bethlehem

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Special to The Press in Focus

The 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival will not take place in May 2020 because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Bach Choir of Bethlehem officials announced the decision to cancel the internationally-recognized May 8, 9 and May 15, 16 festival, described as “The Heart of Our Season,” in an email to patrons, on its website and in an April 3 press release to the media.

“With an immeasurable amount of sadness, but an abundance of caution, we announce that The 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival, a tradition that has continued largely uninterrupted since 1898, will not take place this year,” the press release and choir website announcement stated.

“Although our season was disrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak,” continues the press release, “we are re-scheduling some of our canceled concerts and adding them to our next season, including:

- Handel’s “Messiah,” Part Two, and additional repertoire, “Spring Concert,” March 21, 2021
- The “Chaconne Project,” featuring the music of young composers based on Bach’s “Chaconne,” with 2020 Artist-in-Residence, Eliot Fisk, guitar, to be scheduled as a “Bach at Noon” concert
- “Young American Singers Competition Finals,” date to be announced

Ticket-buyers may choose to donate the value of their Bach Festival ticket(s) as a tax-deductible contribution, a portion of which will help the Choir give some support to members of the Bach Festival Orchestra for their loss of income. Ticket-buyers may also request a voucher good toward future Bach Choir concerts through the upcoming season.

Bach Choir of Bethlehem Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld, in his 37th season with the Choir, is the longest-tenured leader in the Choir’s history. With his retirement to come at the end of next season, the 2021 Festival will cap off his career with the Choir, and celebrate his contributions to the Lehigh Valley, the cultural landscape and the world of choral music.

Highlights of Funfgeld’s final Festival in 2021 will include:

- Friday concerts: 4 p.m., 8 p.m., Bach’s “The Saint Matthew Passion” in Two Parts, last performed at the Festival for the 100th Festival in 2007
- Saturday morning concerts: two selections by Taylor 2 Dance Company with Bach Festival Orchestra, and orchestra works with Funfgeld, harpsichord
- Bach’s “Mass in B Minor,” by the Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra

Concerning the cancelation, Funfgeld stated in the press release:

“Preparation for this Festival has been going on for a couple of years. While it is incredibly sad to cancel these much-anticipated concerts, the safety of all our musicians and devoted audience members is our primary concern.

“How blessed we have been over so many years to share such glorious music and to enjoy the incredible community of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem and its world-wide extended family. This is a temporary interruption, and ‘Bach at Noon’ and all of our concerts will resume as soon as it is wise to do so.

“Our thoughts and prayers go out to the members of the medical profession who are on the front lines in this pandemic, to first-responders, and to all those who have lost loved ones. May God bless and keep you all.”

The Choir canceled its “Spring Concert,” March 29; its rehearsals at First Presbyterian Church, Bethlehem, and the April 14 “Bach at Noon.”

Bel Canto, the children’s choir under the umbrella of the Bach Choir, canceled its rehearsals and its May 2 concert.

With its concerts for the season canceled, the internationally-renowned Choir is hoping to keep spirits up with music in whatever way it can.

“It’s very hard for the arts,” says Bridget George, Bach Choir of Bethlehem Executive Director. “We’re struggling. We know how healing the arts can be and are and how much we want to share out music. So when we can’t share in live ways, we were finding other ways to share.”

The Choir’s performances are posted online as “Moments of Comfort” at www.bach.org/a-moment-of-comfort.

Included are “Gloria Patri” from Bach’s “Magnificat”; “Comfort Ye” and “Ev’ry Valley” from Part One of Handel’s “Messiah.” Recorded performances will be added.

Videos are posted on the YouTube channel, The Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

“We have a lovely edited video of the January ‘Bach at Noon’ and a two-camera video of ‘Noah’s Flood’ presented in February,” George says. “They are joyful things to share with people with an uplifting message.”

Part Two of Handel’s “Messiah,” planned for the “Spring Concert,” is now planned as the Choir’s 2021 “Spring Concert.”

“The Choir has worked really hard on this music,” she says. “We really want to do this concert.”

The Bach Choir performed Part One of Handel’s “Messiah,” paired with Bach’s “Magnificat,” at the Bach Choir’s Christmas concerts in December.

It was the first time in the Choir’s history that it had performed part of Handel’s three-part oratorio about the life of Christ.

“The Choir has loved working on this music,” says Funfgeld. “I admire the commitment of the Choir.”

He paired “The Messiah” with “Easter Oratorio” because both are “wonderful dramatic theatrical pieces.

“The side-by-side view of Bach and Handel will show how similar they are and how different,” Funfgeld says. “The music in both is Baroque counterpoint and brilliant chorale writing.

“Handel writes in a more vocal style and Bach is more instrumental, so there is a different kind of technical demand.”

“Messiah” begins in Part I with prophecies by Isaiah and others, and moves to the annunciation to the shepherds. In Part II, Handel concentrates on the Passion and ends with the “Hallelujah” chorus. In Part III, Handel covers the resurrection of the dead and Christ’s glorification in heaven.

The “Chaconne Project” is an educational project planned to be presented at the Bach Festival. A chaconne is a set of melodic variations that occurs over a repeating chord progression. Bach wrote a famous chaconne as the final movement of his “Partita in D minor.”

For the “Chaconne Project,” one dozen students were chosen by audition to compose and perform a variation on a chaconne with the Bach Festival Orchestra.

Conceived and directed by Moravian College composer-in-residence Dr. Larry Lipkis, the “Chaconne Project” debuted at the Choir’s 2013 “Family Concert.”

Although the student musicians were to rehearse in person with Lipkis, they have been rehearsing once a week online with Lipkis.

“We have a wonderful group of students,” George says.

“This has been an incredible year for The Bach Choir of Bethlehem with great concerts, incredible audiences and amazing colleagues,” Funfgeld says.

“We have much for which to be thankful, including one another and the privilege we have of making this glorious music together.

“I believe there is a gift given to us in all of this, a chance to spend some time with people we love, perhaps to read, study our scores, rest, be restored.”

The Choir has been working on planning the 2020-2021 season, which will feature an Oct. 16 concert by internationally-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, in celebration of the Choir’s final season under the baton of Funfgeld.

Organizers hope Yo-Yo Ma’s presentation, “Truth, trust and service: How culture connects us,” will be a catalyst for an ongoing Lehigh Valley-wide conversation about how culture unites us.

In the program, Yo-Yo Ma will explore the role culture can play in helping one to imagine and build a better future, drawing on examples from his own life as a musician and citizen.

His presentation is rooted in the belief that at a moment when the world is challenged by the pace of change and the divisions it can create, the values that culture promotes, such as truth, trust, and service, are essential to human survival.

“To welcome Yo-Yo Ma back to the Lehigh Valley is a rare privilege and precious opportunity,” Funfgeld says.

“Yo-Yo Ma’s artistry is recognized and admired around the world. From ‘Sesame Street’ to great concert halls everywhere, he has touched lives and inspired countless souls.

“Beyond his status as one of the world’s greatest artists, Yo-Yo is a profoundly deep thinker. His life, music-making, collaborations with outstanding artists in every discipline, and his interaction with people in every corner of the globe have given him extraordinary insight and wisdom, all of which he will share with us in this incredible program.”

George and Funfgeld are striving to remain positive and continue to look toward the future.

“I can’t wait until we can make music together again,” Funfgeld says. “Think how glorious that will be.”

Questions about ticket donations or to request vouchers, contact: Renée James, Bach Choir Marketing Director, renee@bach.org; 610-866-4382, ext. 115. Information: www.belcantochildren.com; www.bach.org.