

Bach Choir Starts 123rd Season Virtually

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BETHLEHEM, Pa. (WLVT) - The [Bach Choir of Bethlehem](#) typically draws hundreds of people to Central Moravian Church season after season, but COVID-19 forced the choir to re-imagine what that looks like during a pandemic. The choir is kicking off what it calls “A Season of Grace,” sharing music and hope with the community.

"This is something that is part of the fabric of the community," said artistic director and conductor Greg Funfgeld. "It's part of the air we breathe, in a way."

For the first time in 123 seasons, the choir will start virtually -- no sold-out crowds or large ensembles, but plenty of positive energy.

"It requires a lot of imagination, determination and optimism to structure alternative plans, to pivot creatively [and] to fundraise in a very challenging environment," said executive director Bridget George.

Funfgeld said he never imagined his final season as artistic director and conductor would start like this. Last summer, [PBS39 reported](#) that he's retiring after 38 years with the choir.

Last season started strong, Funfgeld said, with big turnouts at performances, including the free "Bach at Noon" concerts during certain months of the year. He said the choir had sold-out two events in late February and early March.

"And then, 10 days later, we did our March 'Bach at Noon' on March 8, the second Tuesday of the month -- and the next day, everything was done," Funfgeld said.

The pandemic forced the choir to cancel its annual spring concert and Bethlehem Bach Festival, but COVID-19 also inspired new ways to perform. Funfgeld has been working with musicians locally and across the country to share what the choir calls "A Moment of Comfort," a virtual musical performance every week that is reaching a new audience.

"All of a sudden, you have listeners in California and in Florida and Virginia," Funfgeld said. "We started getting feedback from people. So, you get this reach that you don't have when you're doing it locally."

"I think we did a wonderful job of adapting and keeping the spirit of the music going," said George, who is also retiring from her position after this season after 24 years.

The "Bach at Noon" concerts have also gone virtual. Some are previously recorded performances, while others are filmed live. The July 2020 concert was recorded at [St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church](#) in Allentown.

"The musicians were so happy to actually have the opportunity to be together and play live in the same space," George said.

"You don't have the audience there. You don't get that kind of energy coming back, but we all imagine the audience there," Funfgeld added, "and we know that people will be listening and listening very carefully and very thoughtfully."

Funfgeld said he misses engaging with the audience in person, but he's still interacting with people through the virtual performances.

"People have called me or written to me and said, 'You know, I have really needed these moments of comfort. I've lost someone. I've felt very much alone. I've felt hopeless,'" he said. "Someone says, 'If I have music, I can get through it,' so, the music touches people at a deep level, and music can express things that that often words don't do."

As the choir starts the new season, it's unclear when it can perform in front of people again, but supporters are still buying tickets for the 2021 Spring Concert and Bach Festival.

"Even with the uncertainty, they want to show that this means so much to them," George said.

The choir has always prepared a Christmas concert, and this year will combine prerecorded elements. About 65 singers will spread out across a hill in Nazareth to perform four songs, including "Ave Maria" and "Go Tell It on the Mountain."

"I think there's a kind of poetic inspiration in the idea that we're bringing the music from Nazareth to Bethlehem at Christmastime," George said.

The concert will also include socially-distant pieces by soloists and musicians from inside Central Moravian Church, the historic home of this Bethlehem tradition.

"I also want people to come away feeling, 'That felt like Christmas to me. That gave me a warm feeling. It made me feel good. It felt like Christmas,'" Funfgeld said, "and so, that's our goal."

To learn more about the choir's upcoming season, click [HERE](#).

To listen to the weekly performances of "A Moment of Comfort," click [HERE](#).