

Bicycling to Bach: Bethlehem Bach Choir pivots for ‘Bach, Bikes & Basketball’



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY BILL GEORGE Bach Choir of Bethlehem Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld at Allentown's St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church organ, a Reuter Organ Company, Opus 2163, 1993, which he plays in the educational film, "Bach, Bikes & Basketball."

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SPECIAL TO THE PRESS

What does riding a bicycle and playing basketball have to do with Bach?

More than you might think.

It all comes together in a surprising and delightful way in the new educational film, "Bach, Bikes & Basketball," created by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

The Bach Choir has been presenting its award-winning "Bach to School" program for students in area schools since 1993. This year, the Choir was forced to cancel the in-schools program because of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

Instead, inspired by the success of the Choir's virtual Christmas concert, which was seen by more than 8,000 online, the Choir made a film that could be distributed online to schools and available for viewing online.

“Bach, Bikes & Basketball” premieres, 3 p.m. April 11, on the Bach Choir’s YouTube channel, for which the Choir will host a watch party. Viewers can register for free on the Bach Choir’s website: www.bach.org

The film opens with two boys on bicycles riding through the snowy streets of Allentown as Bach’s “Tocatta in D minor” is heard on the soundtrack. They are on their way to hear members of the Bach Choir perform in St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Allentown.

Bach Choir of Bethlehem Executive Director Bridget George says that students from Community Bike Works in Allentown would bike to the church to attend “Bach at Noon,” June, July and August. The students were invited to be in the audience for a performance in the church for the film.

“Unfortunately, there was snow on ground the day we recorded so only a couple came,” George says. “But in a way, it’s touching. And it’s very intriguing seeing the kids bringing their bikes into the church.”

As the boys enter the church they see Bach Choir of Bethlehem Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld playing the majestic organ in St. John’s Church.

“Bach to School” typically featured 30 singers from the Bach Choir and 15 instrumentalists from the Bach Festival Orchestra, conducted by Funfgeld. The ensemble performed at local schools in a program that has become part of the curriculum for third grade in Bethlehem and Easton and fifth grade in Allentown. The program typically reached 5,000 students each year.

“We wanted to preserve the spirit of that and combine it with something we can share more widely,” George says.

The first part the film is an introduction to the life of J.S. Bach, focusing on his boyhood and initial music education.

The second part discusses Bach’s choral music and the choral tradition of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.

The third part focuses on how dance is inspired by Bach’s music.

The fourth part explores ways that Bach’s music has inspired creativity in others.

The video, narrated by Funfgeld, includes commentary by soloists and instrumentalists, and interaction with the students, who share their insights about Bach’s music.

“It’s been fun,” George says. “We want everyone to see what we’re doing with education. I think it’s turned out really well and is very imaginative.”

The film combines new footage with archival footage from the Choir’s “Family Concerts.”

Of particular delight for George is the inclusion of a jig inspired by basketball from the 2003 Bach “Family Concert,” “Dancing With Bach.”

“The ‘Basketball Gigue’ was choreographed by the wonderful Barbara Pearson,” George says. Five male dancers from Repertory Dance Theatre pass around a basketball as they dance to the gigue from Bach’s “Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major.”

New segments include original compositions by students in the “Bach Chaconne Project.”

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

A chaconne is a set of melodic variations that occurs over a repeating chord progression. Bach wrote a chaconne as the final movement of his “Partita in D minor.”

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

Also new is a performance by Bel Canto Youth Chorus. And Bach Choir soloist Dashon Burton sings part of a Bach aria and talks to the children about singing Bach.

In conjunction with the film, schools receive a printed bilingual booklet containing activities. The booklet can be printed out from the Choir’s website.

The film, which was shot and edited by Bill George, was created by the choir’s Educational Outreach Committee, including Joy Hirokawa, Artistic Director of the Bel Canto Youth Chorus of The Bach Choir, and teachers from area school districts and college professors, many of whom are singers in the Bach Choir.

“It turned out to be very much what we wanted it to be,” says George.

Information:

<https://bach.org/event/bach-bikes-basketball/>