

# Bethlehem Bach Festival preview: After a year away, a virtual broadcast returns live from Germany, Bethlehem, and Allentown

By STEVE SIEGEL

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Artistic director Greg Funfgeld will conduct the Bethlehem Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra at the 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival. (Contributed photo)

After a year of absence, Bach comes back to Bethlehem with the 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival May 14 and 15.

Brought to us by the technological magic of live streaming, this free virtual event will be broadcast live from Germany, the Zoellner Arts Center in Bethlehem, and St. John's Lutheran Church in Allentown. The live-streamed performances will also be available on-demand after the Festival dates. No audience will be in attendance for any of the performances.

Technology has always served Bach very well, and invention has always been a central part of his genius. After all, it was the advent of high fidelity recording technology in the late 1940's that brought about an unprecedented Baroque revival and made the name J.S. Bach a best-seller. Technology comes to his aid once again for the 2021 Bethlehem Bach Festival, making it the first ever to be live-streamed worldwide.

Despite being unable to present concerts to an in-person audience due to COVID-19 restrictions, Bach Choir conductor Greg Funfgeld has put together a modified program that still reaches deep into the heart of Bach's music, and hopefully into our own hearts as well. "We've really had to adapt ourselves to the challenges and opportunities of the past year. Our listeners have always found comfort and hope in Bach's music, especially at a time when everything we hold dear is called into question," he says.

The Festival program opens (4 p.m. Friday, May 14) with a lecture by Distinguished Bach scholar Peter Wollny, director of the Bach Archiv in Leipzig, Germany, who will present "Bach in challenging circumstances — Some thoughts on Life and Creativity." "Peter will talk about Bach's response to challenging times in his own life. To hear how Bach dealt with some of his personal hardships will be a very positive thing. I have to say I think the profoundly spiritual nature of Bach's music uniquely helps us in these times," Funfgeld says.



Bach Festival: This year's Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concert features the Paul Taylor Dance Company, which will present Taylor's "Brandenburgs" and "Esplanade," performed live from Zoellner with recorded music. (Contributed photo)

This year's Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concert (7:30 p.m. Friday, May 14) features the Paul Taylor Dance Company, which will present Taylor's "Brandenburgs" and "Esplanade," performed live from Zoellner with recorded music. Nine dancers at a time will be performing on stage. That will be followed by Bach's Flute Sonata in E Flat Major performed by Robin Kani, Flute, and Greg Funfgeld, keyboard.

Chamber music performances continue (4 p.m. Saturday, May 15) with music by Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi, including Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" featuring concertmaster Elizabeth Field as soloist with one instrument to a part. Additional soloists include Loretta O'Sullivan, cello, Charlotte Mattax Moersch, harpsichord, and Paul Miller, viola.

Unfortunately, Bach's treasured B Minor Mass, the historical cornerstone of the Festival, cannot be presented this year due to its vast scale and COVID-19 restrictions. However, Funfgeld will at least give us its basic building blocks —

call it a “virtual” B Minor Mass — in the form of four cantatas Bach drew from to create his choral masterpiece.



Dashon Burton

“The idea was that Bach would show everything that he had learned in his life about music, composition, polyphony, and fugal textures,” Funfgeld says. “I thought if we did these cantatas it would give our listeners seven or eight movements from the Mass that they can recognize and get to hear in a slightly different context.”

Rest assured these are full-scale productions, with a 65-voice choir, four soloists, and 26 musicians in the Bach Festival Orchestra. “Rehearsing with just ten singers for an hour at a time, all wearing masks and socially distanced created a whole new set of challenges,” says Funfgeld. “We’ll be just under 100 people all together at St. John’s. But with its excellent ventilation, safe distancing between the performers, the choir and string players wearing masks, and the woodwinds and brass behind Plexiglas shields, we’ll make it work.”

Of all performing artists that have been impacted by the pandemic, choirs have probably suffered the most. So to see and hear a full chorus singing together after over a year is bound to be an historical highlight of this year's Festival, surely to be talked about for years to come.



Sherezade Panthaki

At 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 15 the choir and orchestra will be joined by soloists Sherezade Panthaki, soprano; Meg Bragle, mezzo-soprano; Lawrence Jones, tenor; and Dashon Burton, bass-baritone. Featured will be Cantata 12, “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen,” “Cantata 120, “Gott, man lobet dich in der Stille,” Cantata 171, “Gott, wie dein Name, so ist auch dein Ruhm,” and Cantata 191, “Gloria in excelsis Deo”

### **How to watch/listen**

**Performances of** the 2021 Bethlehem Bach Festival are made available through the Choir's live-streaming partner, [WFMZ.com](https://www.wfmz.com).

**Free registration** for the All-Festival Pass to the live-streamed events is available online at [bach.org/tickets](https://bach.org/tickets).

**Festival information** may be found at [bach.org/2021-virtual-bethlehem-bach-festival](https://bach.org/2021-virtual-bethlehem-bach-festival)

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