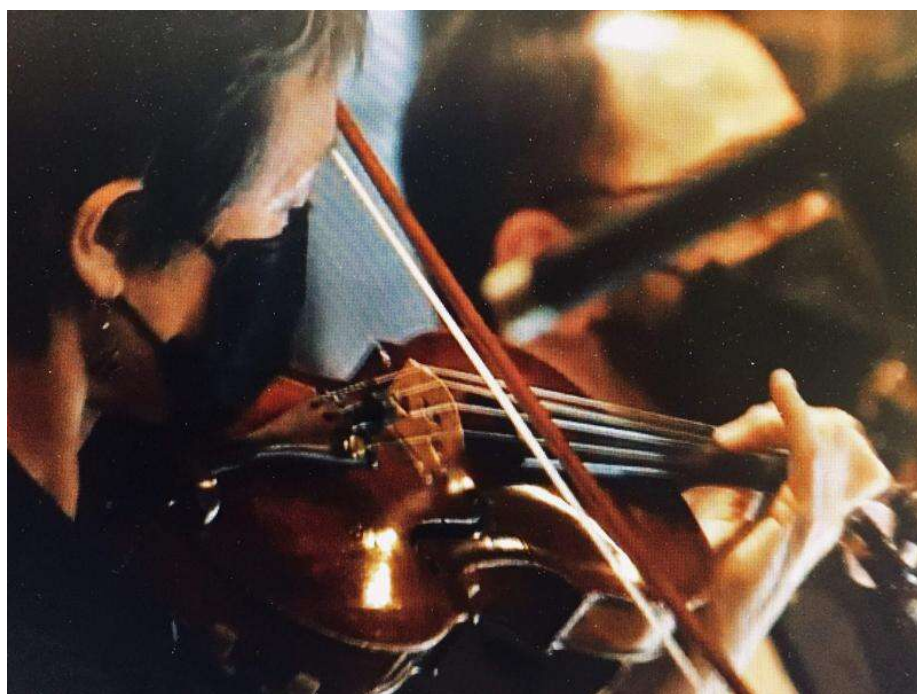


# Review: 113th Bach Festival a triumph by any measure



Claire Bright, principal, second violin, Bach Festival Orchestra



Dashon Burton, baritone, soloist, Bach Festival



Greg Funfgeld, Bach Choir Artistic Director and Conductor



Sherezade Panthaki, soprano; Lawrence Jones, tenor, soloists, Bach Festival



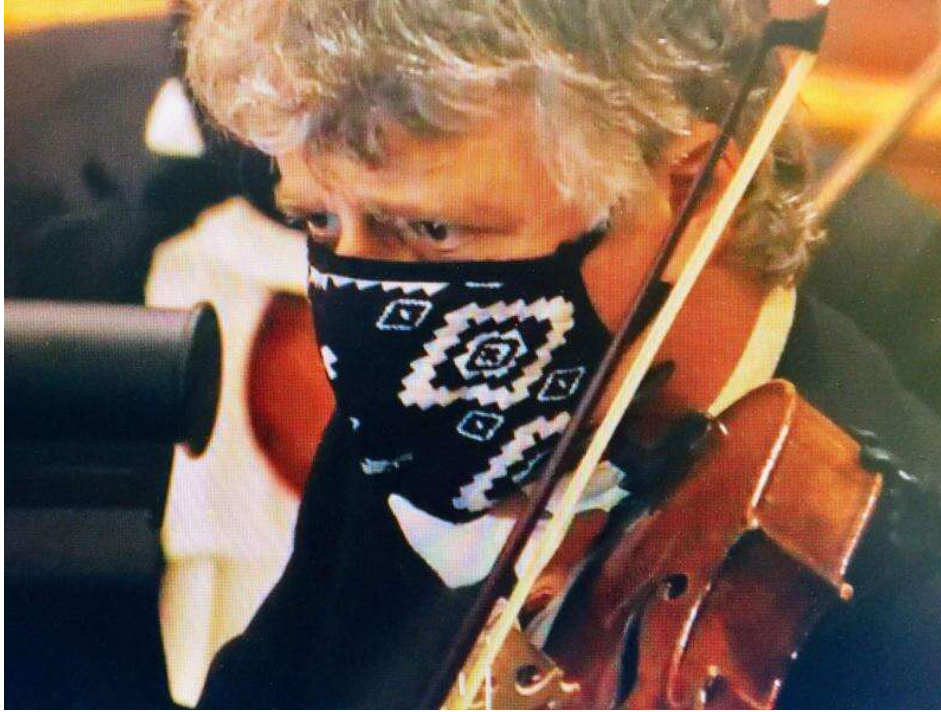
Meg Bragle, mezzo-soprano, soloist, Bach Festival



Katherine Kaiser, soprano II, Bach Choir



Charles Holderman, principal, bassoon, Bach Festival Orchestra



Uri Wassertzug, viola, Bach Festival Orchestra

## LIVE: Virtual 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival

May 15, 2021 Updated 26 min ago



PRESS PHOTOS BY PAUL WILLISTEIN OF WFMZ LIVE-STREAM

The 113th Bach Festival was live-streamed on WFMZ.com and is available on the Bach Choir YouTube channel.

# Live Virtual 113<sup>th</sup> Bethlehem Bach Festival

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It was meant to be.

It had to be.

Despite coronavirus (COVID 19) pandemic concerns, The Bach Choir of Bethlehem prevailed, culminating in a magnificent concert May 15 for the 113th Bethlehem Bach Festival.

This was a virtual festival. Performances were live-streamed on the WFMZ-TV website, including a lecture by Dr. Peter Wollny from Leipzig, Germany, and a performance by the Paul Taylor Dance Company in Zoellner Arts Center, Lehigh University, Bethlehem.

Centerpiece of the festival were two concert programs, “Bach at 4 Chamber Music” and “Blessings & Benedictions,” both May 15, St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Allentown.

It was a world-wide experience of a world-class event.

The performances and lecture are available as of May 19 for repeat, or, if you missed the live-stream, first-time, viewing via the Bach Choir YouTube channel.

A computer problem prevented me from seeing and hearing the full “Bach at 4” concert. I was able to experience the extraordinary Paul Miller, viola, playing J.S. Bach’s “Second Suite for Unaccompanied Cello,” BWV 1008. This was a stunning performance, and one I will certainly want to enjoy again.

Handel’s “Sonata in A Major, Opus 1, No. 3,” with Miller, viola, and Bach Choir Artistic Director and Conductor Greg Funfgeld, harpsichord, was heard for the “Andante” before the computer shut down. It certainly started out promising. I will return to this and Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” when these are available.

The evening program was intact thanks to utilizing a different computer. From the opening “World Farewell” in memoriam to the closing Bach “Cantata 191,” the program was truly a “Blessing.” Quite frankly, the performance had me in tears of joy for most of it, making it difficult to write this article, most of which I did during the concert. (The concert may have been virtual. Articles and deadlines are not.)

The sound and visuals were extraordinary, no doubt because of the excellent acoustics of St. John’s, noted for its “Arts at St. John’s” programs, touted as “Great Music in A Great Space.”

There was an additional reason: the excellent camera work of WFMZ, which brought the viewer at home, or at the office, up close and personal, as it’s said, with vocal soloists, choir members and musicians. One could enjoy the solo vocalists’ expressions, the musicians’ dexterity, Funfgeld’s conducting, and the overall interplay of performance forces.

It must have been a field day for the WFMZ crew. The camera use was impressive with crane camera tilts from the sanctuary columns down to singers and musicians; slow, gliding camera pans across the singers; dissolves utilizing an overhead shot (apparently from the church balcony), and close-ups of singers, musicians and conductor. The editing, or camera-switching, was often rhythmic as if the master control in the production room was following along with the score. Ladies and gentlemen, this is an award-winning telecast.

Then again, you can’t top the singing of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, with masks on, no less, and singing from the rows of church pews. Their voices filled the St. John’s sanctuary splendidly. Even in front of an office computer, where I viewed and listened to the May 15 concert, the effect of the soaring voices and exultant musicians was breathtaking.

The musicians, including the strings, were also wearing face masks. The wind musicians, shielded from each other by Plexiglas panels, held forth. Even though the orchestra was not as large as the usual Bach Festival Orchestra, the musicians played splendidly and sounded wonderful.

This is not a knock at Packer Church, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, “home” of the annual Bach Festival in May, but St. John’s Church, of which I am admittedly biased as member, Arts at St. John’s participant and former church council president, gives Packer some healthy competition. I am not an acoustician, but the choir, which also was not at its usual Festival numbers,

sounded extraordinarily beautiful, perhaps because it was situated in the center of the sanctuary.

Presenting the 113th Festival was a brave and bold move by Funfgeld, Bach Choir Executive Director Bridget George, Bach Choir President Harold G. Black and the entire Bach Choir organization.

And there was an intriguing aspect to the May 15 live-stream. With black dresses, black face masks and pearls for the women and black face masks and tuxedos for the men in the Choir amidst the neo-Gothic architecture of St. John's, there were times when the proceedings reminded one of the masked ball scene in "The Phantom of the Opera."

Ordinarily, Bach's "Mass in B Minor" is the Festival's Saturday program, presented in two parts. The evening program May 15 was "Bach's greatest hits" of cantatas, which Bach incorporated into The Mass.

Mary Watt and Nobuo Kitagawa, oboes, set the pace for "Cantata 120," leading to the beautiful musical setting played by Elizabeth Field, violin.

"Cantata 171" opened with a robust chorus by the Choir and concluded with a soaring chorale by the Choir.

"Cantata 12" had numerous outstanding collaborations, including Mary Watt, oboe, and Charles Holdeman, bassoon, and Field and Claire Bright, violins.

The Choir and soloists, including Meg Bragle, alto aria; Dashon Burton, bass aria, and Lawrence Jones, tenor aria, beautifully foreshadowed passages that were to become among the most treasured of the Mass.

The Aria, with Burton and soprano chorale, from "Cantata 80," augmented by Kitagawa, oboe, was particularly pleasing,

"Cantata 191," with the well-known "Gloria in excelsis Deo," had a propulsive core that was compelling and thrilling. The duet of Sherezade Panthaki, soprano, and Jones, tenor, was at once soothing and soaring.

It wasn't the Mass, but "Blessings & Benedictions" was the next best thing.

It's J.S. Bach, after all.

And the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.



As only Bach can be done.

And, in the end, at the May 15 evening concert's conclusion in St. John's, there was applause. No, not from the audience. There was none. The choir applauded the soloists, the soloists applauded the musicians, and the musicians applauded the choir.

Kudos to all, indeed.

The 113th Bach Festival was a triumphant return for the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, virtual or otherwise.

And I can't wait for next year, for the in-person 114th Bach Festival, which will be all the more valued and appreciated by all.