



With the impending retirement of its artistic director, the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, the oldest such ensemble in the United States, looks forward to the next chapter in its rich story

VENERABLE AND

Ask Daniel Taylor about his favorite places to perform and you might expect the esteemed Canadian countertenor to cite the big, prestigious venues where he has appeared, including New York's Metropolitan Opera. Instead, he points to the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, a Pennsylvania group that some classical fans may never have even heard of. "I've been to a lot of famous places to sing, and those don't necessarily feed the soul," he said. "Bach feeds the soul, and so does (artistic director and conductor) Greg Funfgeld."



Countertenor Daniel Taylor and Greg Funfgeld in concert.

If the Bach Choir can't match the name recognition of some of its larger, better-funded musical counterparts, early-music insiders here and abroad nonetheless know it well. Indeed, the group might be the most respected American classical-music institution in any city with a population of less than 100,000. Perhaps even more impressive is its 123-year history, which includes the first complete performances in the United States of Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B minor (1898, during its first season) and *Christmas Oratorio* (1901). It is the oldest Bach choir in the country.

In addition to the ensemble's superlative artistry, people associated

with the group—from soloists of the caliber of Taylor to everyday audience members—cite the family atmosphere that surrounds everything it does. And they give much of the credit for that warm spirit to Funfgeld, who became the choir's artistic lodestar in 1983. "He's a remarkable musician, but he's also a remarkable human," said Taylor, who has performed at least one concert with the Bach Choir every season since 2000, "and I think that is also what has kept this choir together and what will be very missed."

And, indeed, the Bach Choir finds itself at a challenging crossroads, because Funfgeld is retiring in June. He was supposed to leave earlier this year but



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Vibrant

By **KYLE MACMILLAN**

Charlotte Moersch has long served as the Bach Choir's harpsichordist and manager.

agreed to stay on a bit longer because of delays in securing his replacement prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Big questions loom. Can the organization find a successor who can measure up musically? Can it find someone who can perpetuate the unusually supportive work environment that has set this group apart?

"Those are *huge* shoes to fill," said soprano Sherezade Panthaki, who first appeared with the group in 2019, joining a distinguished list of past and present soloists like soprano Arleen Auger, mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani, and baritone William Sharp.

To understand the rise of the Bach Choir, it is important to know something of the history of the Moravian Church in North America. The first Moravian missionaries arrived in the New World in 1735 from what is the present-day German state of Saxony, and they planted some of their most successful settlements in Pennsylvania, with Bethlehem emerging as one of the main centers. Music was important to



The Bach Choir's headquarters in an 1810 structure that was the former home of John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary.

the Moravians, who brought scores and instruments to their American outposts. A published score of the Bach cantata *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, BWV 80, in the Moravian Archives has authenticated markings that indicate the work was performed in 1823 at the Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem—the earliest known presentation of the composer's work in the United States.

The Bach Choir traces its roots to

those Moravian immigrants and their musical pursuits. Funfgeld was serving as the director of music at Bethlehem's First Presbyterian Church when he was hired as the group's part-time artistic leader—the sixth in its history. (He became full time in 2016.) At that time, the volunteer choir had 196 singers, and there had been no auditions for decades. Although he wanted to reduce the size of the choir, he instituted no changes at first. Instead, he made a point of meeting and getting acquainted with every singer during 15-minute interviews. "I decided this was an incredible tradition in American musical history," he said, "and you don't just come in and run roughshod over that."

Only afterward did he put an audition policy in place and cut some members of the choir, eventually shrinking it to its current size of 85 voices. The singers remain unpaid, but Funfgeld believes they are amateurs in the best sense of the word, many possessing advanced musical degrees and some serving as professional musicians in schools and other settings.



Members of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem in concert.

Supplementing the mainstay choir is the Bach Festival Orchestra, with musicians primarily from across the Northeast, most of whom have played in the ensemble for years. Concertmaster Elizabeth Field, for example, lives in Washington, D.C., and principal cellist, Loretta O'Sullivan, travels from outside New York. Charlotte Moersch, a highly regarded professor at the University of Illinois, serves as the group's harpsichordist and manager. She joined in 1984, when she lived closer to Bethlehem, and continues to make the long commute because she admires Funfgeld and values the collegial atmosphere he has inspired. While the members perform on modern instruments, Moersch said, they bring a historically informed approach to their playing.

In 1983, when Funfgeld took over, the choir only presented its two-weekend May festival, an anchor event that returns in 2022 for its 114th edition, and a Christmas vigil service. "It was like having a racehorse," he said, "and just running it around in the pasture once in a while. I thought the choir was more than ready to take on greater challenges and more responsibility."

His opportunity came two years later on the 300th anniversary of Bach's birth. The conductor assembled a yearlong celebration that included Christmas concerts in December, a concert by French organist Marie-Claire Alain, a spring performance of *St. John Passion* (which the Bethlehem Choral Union, a Bach Choir predecessor, debuted in America in 1888), and British guest conductor David Willcocks leading the Mass in B minor during the May festival. "People really enjoyed it, and there was a new sense of energy and purpose," Funfgeld said.

Choir leaders evaluated the season and decided to make the two Christmas concerts permanent and to rotate performances of Bach's Passions in the spring. In 2000, it was decided to expand the spring offerings, which had begun to feel too limited, to include works by composers who influenced Bach or who were influenced by him. That led to programs such as one in 2005 pairing Bach's cantata *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, BWV 106, with Johannes Brahms's *A German Requiem*, a line-up of motets by Bach, Brahms, and Mendelssohn in 2001, and, even more radical, a concert version of Leonard Bernstein's Mass

(1971) in 2017. Besides more modern composers, the choir has also performed works by such Baroque composers as Dieterich Buxtehude, Samuel Scheidt, Heinrich Schütz, and Antonio Vivaldi.

In 2004, inspired by a series of explanatory concerts led by his teacher, the noted German choral conductor Helmuth Rilling, Funfgeld came up with the idea of Bach at Noon. During each of these 10 free monthly concerts every year, he discusses and dissects a musical work and then the Bach Choir performs it. The night before the first offering the following January, the conductor was up all night fretting that nobody would show up. He needn't have worried: People were lined up down the street. Since then, the seven concerts in Bethlehem typically draw 800-1,000 people, and the three in a smaller church in Allentown top out at slightly more than 600. Some audience members travel from New Jersey. Once, when Funfgeld was visiting the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia, a woman came up to him and said, "Aren't you Mr. Funfgeld? Well, we drive up for Bach at Noon every month." The choir presented its 115th Bach at Noon concert last September.

The choir has added other programs as well, including family concerts, which often involve collaborations with area groups like Bethlehem's Mock Turtle Marionette Theater, and eight Bach to School concerts. For the latter, 25-30 choir members and 14 orchestra members perform each year for all the third graders



Bach Choir of Bethlehem executive director Leela Breithaupt.

in Bethlehem and Easton and all the fifth graders in Allentown—some 5,000 children total. In all, the Bach Choir presents more than 30 concerts each season in a range of locations and formats.

Besides the performances in their home venues, the Bach Choir and its orchestra have gone on the road twice during Funfgeld's tenure. In 1995, they traveled to Germany for a series of concerts, including a packed performance of the B Minor Mass at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig where Bach served as music director from 1723 until his death in 1750. The composer is buried in the sanctuary of the church, and after the concert, the singers and players gathered at his grave for a moment of reflection, what Funfgeld called a "powerful, emotional experience."

In addition, the group ventured to Great Britain in 2003, including a concert in Cambridge University's King's College Chapel, which was built in the 15th and 16th centuries. "You're surrounded by the echoes of great music-making and of a history and devotion to sacred music, which is incredibly moving," Taylor said of the stop there. The group also presented a performance for the BBC Proms in London's Royal Albert Hall, a concert that featured the world premiere of American composer Libby Larsen's cantata, *I It Am – The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, which was co-commissioned by the summer series. The group's other major commission was Stephen Paulus's *A Dream of Time*, which marked Funfgeld's 25th anniversary as artistic director. "Looking back, I wish we had done more commissioning," the conductor said.

Besides the group's touring, the Bach Choir's artistry has been celebrated in other ways, including 14 recordings on the Dorian and Analekta labels, the latest of which contains Bach's cantata *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, BWV 21, and Handel's *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*. The choir won an award from the J.S. Bach Foundation in Switzerland in 2012 for its outreach programs, and it was featured on *CBS Sunday Morning* on Dec. 20, 1998.

As the Bach Choir's artistic ambitions have grown, so has its annual budget,



The Bach Choir of Bethlehem comprises 85 singers, down from 196 singers in the early 1980s.

which is \$1.8 million in 2021-22, according to Leela Breithaupt, who took over as executive director in July. She replaced Bridget George, who held the position for 24 years and was a crucial part of the choir's evolution. Its administrative staff has grown from one when George began to seven today, and it is housed in an 1810 structure that was the former home of John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary. A state historical marker stands nearby. The group is funded by foundation, government, and corporate grants, as well as loyal private funders, including its 500 or so "guarantors." The guarantor program was begun by Charles Schwab, who took over as leader of Bethlehem Steel in 1903 and served as the choir's first president. In addition, it has built an endowment of more than \$8 million.

While others have played key roles in the Bach Choir's success, the linchpin has been Funfgeld, who has constantly pushed the choir to new heights while maintaining a sense of conviviality and humanity. Moersch praised him as a "people person" and caring. "You want to work for Greg," she said. Panthaki has developed what she called a "deep respect and admiration" for the conductor, citing his humility, warmth, and kindness. "Greg is an American treasure," she said.

Funfgeld first heard Taylor sing in April 1999, when he attended a production of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* at the Met with mezzo-soprano Jennifer Larmore in the title role and soprano Sylvia McNair as Cleopatra. The two met for an audition in 2000 in a small studio in New York,

and with Funfgeld serving as keyboardist, they ran through all kinds of music. An invitation for the countertenor to come to Bethlehem arrived soon thereafter. "I felt included from the moment I joined in the first rehearsal," Taylor said. "I felt welcomed by the artists around me, and I felt included in the conversation, and that was the music-making. It wasn't business as usual."

But after 38 years at the artistic helm, Funfgeld is ready to take his leave. "I just feel like it's the right time for all the right reasons," he said. "I am eager to pass the baton to somebody, and I want to be cheering that person on."

A committee assembled in 2019 identified five finalists for the position before the COVID-19 outbreak and then was forced to put the search on hold. "They range in age and gender," said bass David Ruhf, one of two choir members on the committee. "It's really interesting. We have one candidate who reminds us of a young Greg, a more mature candidate, and the gamut in between." Each is enthusiastic, he said, and has a solid understanding of Bach and the orchestra's heritage. "It's exciting," he said. Perhaps telling of how desirable this position is, all five candidates have remained in the running despite the year's delay. Each is expected to travel in the next several months to Bethlehem to meet with the choir, board, and staff.

What qualities should the Bach Choir look for in a new leader? Ruhf, a church cantor who first attended one of the group's concerts when he was in eighth



Greg Funfgeld leading the Bach Choir of Bethlehem at an outdoor event.

grade and has served as a choir member for 20 years, has a list. Among them are an “absolute devotion to Bach’s music,” exemplary skills as a choral and instrumental leader, and “stellar interpersonal skills.”

“Greg has set the bar very, very high there,” Ruhf said.

Funfgeld has no say in the selection, but he hopes it will be someone who puts down roots in the community and is willing to nurture and support the choir’s amateur singers and think creatively. While the group wants many of the qualities Funfgeld has brought to the job, Ruhf said, it is also seeking someone with his or her own vision and direction. “One

of the things we’re working really hard to do is not to replace Greg with another Greg,” he said.

Taylor hopes the choir does not fall victim to trendiness in its selection. He wants the group to pick the person who will serve the music best and be a good listener. “I think it’s a complex decision,” he said, “but it’s also such a wonderful opportunity for the person who comes into that, because the community around them is so loving, and that is rare.”

What does the future hold for the Bach Choir? For one thing, Breithaupt, who formerly served as president and chief executive officer of IndyBaroque in

Indianapolis, would like to establish a period-instrument chamber series, which she thinks would nicely complement everything else the organization is doing. The series would engage primarily musicians who are members of the group’s orchestra and also perform on period instruments, but also some guest artists.

Whatever direction the group takes will obviously be shaped by its new artistic director and conductor, whom the choir hopes to announce in Spring 2022. “I’m the sixth conductor of the Bach Choir,” Funfgeld said, “and I can’t wait to see who the seventh will be.”

Kyle MacMillan served as the classical music critic for The Denver Post from 2000 through 2011. He is now a freelance journalist in Chicago, where he contributes regularly to the Chicago Sun-Times and Modern Luxury and writes for such national publications as the Wall Street Journal, Opera News, Chamber Music, and Early Music America.
