

# Bach Choir Festival director Greg Funfgeld set to take final bow



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On May 21, Greg Funfgeld takes his final bow.

The longtime Bach Choir of Bethlehem conductor and artistic director announced his planned retirement before the coronavirus pandemic changed the world in early 2020 – as a result he stayed.

Funfgeld extended his tenure to help America’s oldest Bach Choir carry on through the worst public health crisis in more than a century.

“What I’ll miss the most about Greg is he is a world-class human being,” said Dashon Burton, a guest soloist and international bass-baritone performing artist.

Burton is scheduled to perform during the 114th Bethlehem Bach Festival. The Bach Festival includes concerts, guest soloists and artists, and distinguished scholar lectures on May 13, 14, 20 and 21 on the campus of Lehigh University.

“[Greg] has a heart for people, for music and for community that helps everything align at the nexus – which is the music of Bach – and we get to celebrate it,” Burton said.

Reinvention is nothing new for the nearly 125-year-old organization. During COVID-19’s peak, the choir implemented Zoom and online opportunities to rehearse, engage audiences and use 21st century technology to share Bach’s music.

“In the midst of a pandemic that shut down in-person live performances, the Bach Choir was able to entirely reinvent our community engagement by pivoting seamlessly to virtual performances, which increased our audience base and impact,” said Leela Breithaupt, Bach Choir executive director.

Burton, whose relationship began as a youth competition participant in 2008, said the Bach Choir “...in general, has been expertly set up to run itself in many ways.”

These include a committed organization and audience base, financial support and exceptional professional musicians, performing artists and volunteers.

“Coming into Bethlehem as a visitor and knowing you’re in town for Bach Bethlehem, that’s a great gift for a performer who gets to travel all around, but feels they are at home in a community like Bethlehem,” Burton said.

Among Funfgeld’s many gifts include his ability to relate to children and audiences and offer the music of Bach, an 18th century German composer and innovator, as an accessible gift.

“It’s something I’ll miss greatly [as well as his] interacting with audiences. I couldn’t be more proud or grateful to be at that final performance,” Burton said.

After 39 seasons, Funfgeld’s last day with the choir is June 30.

During the pandemic, he led the choir, soloists and performed himself, offering virtual Moments of Comfort Series and Bach at Noon programs.

Small groups of choir members rehearsed virtually in response to bans on large group contact during the initial stages of the pandemic, which were driven by contact limitations, shutdowns and social distancing protocols.

“I feel like we’ve strived to keep everyone going and keep peoples’ spirits [going],” Funfgeld said.

While live performances have resumed, Funfgeld said virtual platforms for some programs will continue to reach new audiences, and serve those unable to attend in person.

At the heart of Funfgeld’s tenure and career has been the music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750), a German composer and church organist, whose work profoundly impacted western music.

From recordings and concert tours in the U.S. and abroad, including London, England and Leipzig, Germany, Funfgeld said Bach’s music has been a constant companion.

Keeping the history of the Bach Choir alive, as well as its traditions and innovations, has been another facet of Funfgeld’s tenure.

Under his leadership, the Bach Choir has created new educational programs such as Bach to School, Bach at Noon, Family Concert collaborations with choreographers, painters, theater, visual artists, children’s groups, the Mock Turtle Marionette Theater, The Lehigh Valley Charter School for the Arts and high school choirs throughout the Lehigh Valley.

“Giving this music to children and young people...[and sharing] what you value and keep alive, hopefully will stimulate people [to support it] for the next hundred years,” Funfgeld said.

If you go:

The 114th Bethlehem Bach Festival featuring concerts, guest soloists and distinguished scholar lectures will be held May 13-14 and May 20-21 on the campus of Lehigh University. For information and tickets visit [bach.org](http://bach.org).