

Westminster alumnus named artistic director and conductor of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem

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Dr. Christopher Jackson '11 now leads
America's oldest Bach choir

by Adam Grybowski

Dr. Christopher Jackson '11, who received a Master of Music in Choral Conducting from [Westminster Choir College](#), is the new artistic director and conductor of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem.



He is only the seventh person to hold the position in the 125-year history of the organization, which is the oldest Bach choir in the country. Following an international search, he succeeds another Westminster graduate, Greg Funfgeld '76, who led the choir for 39 seasons.

“I’ve always been looking for this special combination of musical excellence and creative opportunities, entwined with being part of a community,” Jackson says. “That’s when life feels most fulfilling.”

To that end, he’s found a match with the Bach Choir. Its activities include a year-round season of 40 concerts and educational programs, including the renowned Bethlehem Bach Festival, which will celebrate its 115th iteration in 2023. Annually, the choir reaches an audience of 22,000-plus.

“We are here to help audiences discover and appreciate the music of Bach as well as music that inspired him or was inspired by him,” Jackson says.

As inspired by the latter as he is the former, he's looking forward to choosing new music for the choir and its audience. "My job is much like that of a museum curator. I get to pick what goes next to Bach so that each piece of music is in dialogue with the other. It is our duty to program new music because it keeps our art alive and growing, and it's my job to pick exceptionally well so that audiences are captured by music, both old and new."

In his own life, music has often served as a light leading the way forward. By the time Jackson was searching for graduate programs in music, he knew exactly what he wanted. Drawn to Westminster's renowned faculty and unique performing opportunities, he didn't bother applying to any other program.

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Music's central place in his life wasn't always so. Jackson grew up singing in choirs, but nothing signaled to him that he was headed for a career in music. That all changed in high school, when back-to-back deaths in the family left him despondent and adrift.

The only place he found solace was the world of classical music. He had first connected to it as a child during long car rides with his father, who filled the time by playing a Beethoven cassette on repeat. Looking for solace, Jackson purchased more of Beethoven's music, and as he dug deeper into the composer's body of work, his destiny shifted course.

"I recognized in that music someone who knew what I was thinking and feeling," he says. "Then I started feeding myself more music."

Still a teenager, he signed up for a Time-Life great composer series of recordings, which were delivered on CD through the mail. Most composers were afforded one disc,

but Bach, he says, was given four. “I started consuming them voraciously,” Jackson says.

When it came time to choose a major as an undergraduate at Oklahoma State University, he chose to give music a shot. That notion of choice is important to Jackson. He points out that no one ever forced him to play an instrument or shoehorned him into honing a particular style or form. “Classical music became a strong choice on my end,” he says, “and the reason I wanted to do it was that that music saved me.”

Jackson went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts in Voice Performance from Oklahoma before enrolling at Westminster, and he would later add a doctorate in choral conducting from the University of North Texas.

He now has 15 years of experience as conductor, educator, singer and scholar under his belt. Before starting at the Bach Choir in July, he was the director of choral activities and head of voice at Muhlenberg College. Jackson has also taught at Lycoming College, where he co-founded the Lycoming Baroque Choir and Orchestra. He’s toured the country, as well as Canada and China, with his ensembles and has recorded multiple albums and regularly sings with GRAMMY-nominated Skylark Vocal Ensemble while also serving as its director of education.

Three months into his new role, Jackson is still discovering new traditions, quirks and nuances within the organization, but one of his strong initial impressions of the Bach Choir has held true.

“The Bach Choir is a remarkable community that has a unique feeling about it,” he says. “It was founded on generation after generation of giving and volunteerism, and that spirit pervades nearly every part of the organization.”