

# Bethlehem Bach Festival has lots to offer for 112th year

By Steve Siegel

| THE MORNING CALL |

APR 29, 2019 | 12:23 PM



The Bach Choir of Bethlehem will present its 112th Bethlehem Bach Festival Fridays May 10 and 17, and Saturdays May 11, 18 at venues in and around the Lehigh University Campus in Bethlehem. (Contributed photo)

Last year's Bethlehem Bach Festival was a special one, capping off the Bach Choir's 120th anniversary year, artistic director Greg Funfgeld's 35th season with the choir, and a debut concert at the State Theatre in Easton. So what to do for an encore?

Well, plenty, with the Main Street Brass making its festival debut, a world premiere of a commissioned work by renowned American composer Gwyneth Walker, Bach's rarely heard concertos for three and four harpsichords, the return of lutenist Ronn McFarlane with flutist Mindy Rosenfeld, and lots more of what's made the fest so special for the thousands who attend from across the country and around the world.

The 112th Bethlehem Bach Festival takes place Fridays, May 10 and 17, and Saturdays, May 11 and 18 in venues on and near the Lehigh University campus in Bethlehem. Performing in the two-weekend event will be the Bach Choir, the Bach Festival Orchestra, the Bel Canto Youth Chorus, and an impressive array distinguished soloists, all under the direction of Funfgeld.



Mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabó makes her festival debut at this year's Bach Festival. (Contributed photo)



Tenor Isaiah Bell makes his festival debut at this year's Bach Festival. (Contributed photo)

Vocal soloists include sopranos Kendra Colton and Rosa Lamoreaux, mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabó (in her Bach Festival debut), tenor Isaiah Bell (also in his Bach Festival debut), baritone William Sharp, and bass David Newman.

The fest gets off to a grand start at noon on Fridays when the choir takes the music of Bach outdoors into Payrow Plaza, adjacent to City Hall in downtown Bethlehem. Led by Bach Festival Orchestra principal violist Paul Miller, this casual free concert presents arrangements of classic pieces using electric violin, and also features music performed by the Main Street Brass, acting as this year's Festival Brass Choir.

This year, the Distinguished Scholar Lecture will be given by Dr. Michael Marissen, Daniel Underhill Professor Emeritus at Swarthmore College. In his talk "The Significance of Bach's Calov Bible," Marissen will explore the significance of the three-volume Bible, discovered in the 1930s in the home of a German immigrant family, which is extensively marked in Bach's own hand. It offers insight into his many compositions and his views of God and religion. (2 p.m. Fridays, Room 145, Zoellner Arts Center).

#### Choices of concerts

At 4 p.m. on Fridays, there's a choice of two "Bach at 4" concerts. The concerts in the Saal of the Moravian Museum (Church Street., Bethlehem) feature lutenist Ronn McFarlane on May 10, and both McFarlane and Mindy Rosenfeld, flute and recorder, on May 17 for a program of Baroque, Renaissance, and traditional Celtic music from the 18th century. Included are works by Bach, Alessandro Piccinini, John Dowland, William Byrd, and S.L. Weiss.

The intimate environment of the Incarnation of Our Lord Church (Thomas and Buchanan Streets, Bethlehem), will play host to members of the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra in the festival premiere of Cantata 111, "Was Mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit" (What my God wills always occurs), Telemann's Sonata for Oboe, featuring soloist Nobuo Kitagawa, and Telemann's "Du aber, Daniel, gehe hin" (But you, Daniel, go there) for soprano, bass, choir, flute, oboe, violin, two gambas and basso continuo.

"Cantata 111 shows the influence of Vivaldi and has a beautiful duet for alto and tenor, in addition to a wonderful bass aria," says Funfgeld. "Telemann's funeral cantata is very much in the spirit of Bach's Cantata 106, which we did last year. It's very lyrical, pensive, and profound. It's just one of the most exquisite works, yet not often done, so I'm thrilled to bring it to our audiences."

Come early to the "Bach at 4" concert at the Incarnation of Our Lord Church and experience an opportunity to sing Bach chorales with Bach Choir director Funfgeld for 20 minutes before the program. On 2 p.m. Saturdays prior to the performance of the first part of the B Minor Mass, festival goers will have another opportunity to sing Bach chorales, this time accompanied by the Festival Brass Choir in addition to members of the Bach Choir.

This year's "Bach at 8" concerts feature two Bach cantatas and a Haydn horn concerto (8 p.m. Fridays, Packer Memorial Church). Cantata 146, "Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal in das Reich Gottes eingehen" (Through great tribulation we enter the kingdom of God), has not been performed at the Festival since 1942. That will be paired with Cantata 149, "Man singet mit Freuden vom sieg" (Let songs of rejoicing be raised).



Bethlehem Bach Choir artistic director Greg Funfgeld will conduct the Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra at the 112th Bethlehem Bach Festival. (Contributed photo)

Cantata 146, in addition to an especially lovely alto aria, features some wonderful organ work. “Bach uses his D Minor harpsichord concerto and changes the harpsichord into the organ. There’s this wonderful organ obbligato with full orchestra in the sinfonia, then another in the opening chorus. In the third movement, there’s a third organ obbligato in an alto aria,” Funfgeld says. The first two solos will be played by Thomas Goeman on the large organ, and the third by Charlotte Mattax Moersch on the portativ organ.

Cantata 149 is one of a handful of cantatas Bach wrote for the Feast of Saint Michael. “Those cantatas are always very festive pieces, with trumpets and timpani,” says Funfgeld. “It’s one of those pieces where everybody smiles. In the last seven notes of the chorale at the end, Bach adds fanfares for trumpet and timpani, as if the gates of heaven are opening.”

#### A man with a French horn

Haydn’s Horn Concerto No. 2 in D major features Bach Festival Orchestra principal horn Anthony Cecere, this year’s Festival Artist-in-Residence. Cecere has been a member of the renowned Philadelphia Brass Quintet for 15 years, and has been performing with the Bach Festival Orchestra for over 23 years. In between, he manages to work in gigs with the likes of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Opera Philadelphia, the New York Philharmonic, and the Boston Pops.



Bach Festival Orchestra principal horn Anthony Cecere is featured soloist in Haydn's Horn Concerto No. 2 May 10 and 17 at Packer Memorial Church on the Lehigh University campus in Bethlehem. (Contributed photo)

By an odd twist of fate, both Cecere and Funfgeld hail from Hicksville, N.Y. — something they share with pop star Billy Joel. In fact, Joel and Cecere attended the same high school, and had the same piano teacher — Morton Estrin, highly revered in the classical music world.

"I was probably his worst student, for which I'm very grateful, since I wouldn't have played the French horn otherwise," says Cecere. "Billy Joel was obviously more successful at the piano."

Certainly Bach Fest audiences will be grateful when they hear Cecere perform Haydn's rarely heard Horn Concerto No. 2 in D Major. Two horn concertos are attributed to Franz Joseph Haydn, although the actual authorship of the second is in dispute — many claim it was penned by Haydn's brother, Michael. But Cecere feels otherwise.

"I've always believed, as do most horn players, that both concertos are by Franz Joseph Haydn," Cecere says. "His so-called first concerto did not in fact come chronologically first. It was written for the first horn; that is, the person who played the high horn parts. What is called concerto number two was for the second horn player. In Haydn's time, horn players were considered to be either high players or low players."

For Cecere at least, the second concerto rings true of Franz Joseph. "I think it's absolutely charming. To me, it feels like Joseph Haydn in terms of its humor, melodic material, and the whole spirit of it. The best way to describe it is jaunty, and full of good feeling. The last movement is in triple time and in a very light-hearted vein. There are echoes of hunting music, but it's not overtly a hunting piece," he says.



Composer Gwyneth Walker, whose choral work 'The Day is Done' will premiere at the 112th Bethlehem Bach Festival. (Contributed photo)

Premiere of 'The Day is Done'

This year's Ifor Jones Chamber Music Concerts feature the Bel Canto Youth Chorus with members of The Bach Choir and Bach Festival Orchestra in the world premiere of Gwyneth Walker's "The Day is Done" in addition to "Jump Right In," from Walker's song cycle "I've Known Rivers."

Also on the program is the duet from J.S. Bach's Cantata 93, Will Todd's "Ave Verum," Elizabeth Alexander's "Faith is the Bird that Feels the Light," and concertos for three and four harpsichords by Bach, BWV 1064-1065. Soloists are Greg Funfgeld, Thomas Goeman, Kerry Heimann, and Charlotte Mattax-Moersch. (10:30 a.m. Saturdays, Baker Hall, Zoellner Arts Center).

Widely performed throughout the country, the music of American composer Gwyneth Walker is beloved by performers and audiences alike for its energy, beauty, reverence, drama, and humor. Her catalog includes over 350 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo voice. For nearly 30 years, Walker lived on a dairy farm in Braintree, in Vermont. She now divides her time between her childhood hometown of New Canaan, Conn. and the musical community of Randolph, also in Vermont. That's quite a solid New England background, and an important factor in informing her music.

"There are certain values in New England — a simplicity of style, a modesty of character one also associates with New England poets," Walker says. "I do take to New England poets such as Longfellow, Thoreau, and Dickinson."

"The Day is Done" is based on the poem of that title by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Walker had been asked by Bel Canto Youth Chorus artistic director Joy Hirokawa to write a piece to be sung by both members of the Bach Choir and the youth chorus.

“She sent me recordings of the young chorus singing some of my music, and that did it. They were so good I said yes, of course!” Walker says. “My problem was finding text. Many great poems simply don’t speak to children, and yet that’s mostly the poetry I like.

“The main groups I write for are college choirs, community groups, and professional choruses. But from what I heard from Joy, her youth chorus is similar in performance skill to a treble women’s chorus, so I said go for it,” Walker says. “And I think this text really worked — I thought it would have an uplifting message. We don’t need complicated words to move us. A simple message from soothing words and music is enough. That’s why I thought it would work well with kids.”

The second work on the program by Walker is “Jump Right In,” from the four-song set “I’ve Known Rivers” based on text by the African-American poet Langston Hughes. Originally scored for SATB chorus and piano in 2017, we’ll actually be hearing the premiere of a new version with string orchestration.

“I had been thinking of working with some kind of orchestration, so I thought the strings would work well with the theme of flowing rivers,” Walker says. “Joy found a way to give some of the soprano lines to the kids.”

“Just to have four harpsichords on stage at one time, all perfectly tuned is in itself a feat,” says Funfgeld about the harpsichord concertos on the program. “These are pieces that you hardly ever get to hear live. And the concerto for four harpsichords — I listen to that music and I feel I’m in outer space, just floating among the stars, it’s so transcendental and ethereal.”

#### Annual events

- The annual performance of Bach’s Mass in B Minor has been a glorious tradition treasured by thousands of people from throughout the United States and beyond ever since its American premiere at the first Bethlehem Bach Festival in 1900 (2:30 p.m. Part 1; 4:30 p.m. Part 2; Packer Memorial Church).
- Back for its fifth year is Zimmermann’s Coffee House, a popular café-style event modeled after Zimmermann’s Coffee House of Bach’s time in Leipzig, Germany (7 – 9:30 p.m. Saturdays, Peter Hall, Moravian College). Listen to Baroque chamber music performed by brilliant young musicians from area high schools and colleges in a festive atmosphere where wine, beer, and German fare will be available for purchase.

**112th Bethlehem Bach Festival**, May 10, 11 and 17, 18; various venues around Lehigh University.

Tickets: Adults \$20-\$58, Students \$9-\$20. 610-866-4382, [www.bach.org](http://www.bach.org)

*Steve Siegel is a freelance writer.*