

Rosa Lamoreaux, Soprano Bach Choir of Bethlehem CD Review

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by Julie Amacher, Minnesota Public Radio

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St. Paul, Minn. — As I listen to The Bach Choir of Bethlehem with Greg Funfgeld conducting on their latest recording, I find it hard to believe this is an all-volunteer choir, but it's true. The oldest Bach choir in America was founded in 1898 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It's made up of 110 volunteers who are joined on this recording by a professional orchestra and world-renowned soloists as they present three festive works written for Advent and Christmas: Bach's "Magnificat," a Bach cantata, and Vivaldi's Gloria.

The Magnificat is the most popular and the best-known of all the Gospel canticles. For centuries it's been a part of Vespers services. The Magnificat is also known as the "Song of Mary." The text comes directly from the Gospel of Luke, where the Virgin Mary sings the "Magnificat," after learning she'll give birth to Christ.

During the time of Johann Sebastian Bach, Vespers occurred most often on Sunday afternoons. Bach's Magnificat, was written for the Advent season of 1723 in Leipzig. It underwent several revisions before he settled on the bright key of D major which gives this work a very celebratory tone. The opening chorus is magnificent. For thirty measures the full orchestra plays alone, weaving one texture into another with trumpets, timpani, oboes, and flutes, setting the stage for this glorious hymn of praise.

Two soprano arias follow the opening chorus. Rosa Lamoreaux is known for her rich timbre, and she demonstrates her vocal dexterity as she soars through ornamental trills in the joyful aria "Et exultavit spiritus meus." Julia Doyle is an English soprano who's quickly becoming a sought-after Baroque specialist. She captivates the listener with her pure tone, and her lyrical phrasing in the prayerful third movement. Following Mary's prayer, the chorus immediately confirms that Mary will indeed be "called blessed by all generations." What's most interesting in this chorus is how Bach has each of the five vocal parts singing "omnes, omnes generationes," (all generations), over and over again. For more than 23 measures, the five parts are completely independent of one other, finally coming together in the final measures.

Bach was in good humor when he wrote the bass aria in the fifth movement. A small ensemble featuring a buoyant bassoon and organ accompanies one of the finest oratorio singers around, Canadian bass-baritone Daniel Lichti.

This performance also features a countertenor on the parts written for alto. Daniel Taylor is known as Canada's star countertenor. As an early music specialist, Taylor uses little vibrato. His pure tone blends beautifully with Canadian tenor Benjamin Butterfield in the duet "Et Misericordia."



Artist Management

Bach's Christmas Cantata, "Gloria in excelsis Deo," which closes out this new release, is unusual in that it's the composer's only cantata written to a Latin rather than a German text. This cantata was written especially for Christmas day in 1745. My favorite part is the charming soprano-tenor duet which is sandwiched between the two choruses. A gentle flute and soft strings create an idyllic atmosphere as the soloists sing "Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto" (Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit).

The 110 volunteers of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem carry on the dedication and the enthusiasm of The Bach Choir a century ago. Their performance on this recording features a well-polished vocal ensemble, and a true level of musicianship and understanding of the choral music of Bach and Vivaldi. This is a recording you can enjoy during the holidays, and year-round.