

# REVIEW: Magnificent performance of 'The Passion' by Bach Choir keeps tradition alive



Bethlehem Bach Choir in file photo (Contributed photo by Hub Wilson/Courtesy of Bethlehem Bach Choir)

**By: Dave Howell**  
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It has been 331 years since J.S. Bach's birthday, and 292 years since the first performance of his "The Passion According to Saint John," conductor Greg Funfgeld noted in his lecture before Bethlehem Bach Choir performed Palm Sunday at First Presbyterian Church in Bethlehem.

Funfgeld also proudly said the work was first performed in the United States 128 years ago by Bethlehem Choral Union, the Bach Choir's predecessor. The choir, with about 80 members, the Bach Festival Orchestra, with more than 20, and seven guest vocal soloists kept up the tradition with a magnificent performance of the work.

The Passion is a complex work that connects the listener emotionally with the Crucifixion. Fortunately, the program made it easy to follow the narrative, with English translations side by side with the original German.

It began with the full chorus, pleading “Lord, our master ... show us through your passion that you, the very son of God ... have become magnified,” accompanied by swirling strings using short runs of notes that built an immediate tension. The story began with Jesus being arrested after his betrayal.

Singing in the production, which ran slightly more than two hours, alternated between the full sound of the entire choir and the intimate acting of the Passion by the soloists (seven guests, with three members of the Bach Choir taking smaller parts). Their arias often were accompanied by one or two instruments, including organ, oboes, flutes, cello, English horn, violas d’amore, and viola da gamba.

The vocalists, as you would expect from a Bach Choir presentation, all were excellent. Leading them was tenor Thomas Cooley as the Evangelist, notably using perfect German pronunciation. Though he acted as narrator, Cooley was the most dramatic of the singers, facially as well as vocally expressive as the story consumed him with increasing rage and disbelief.

Baritone William Sharp as Jesus was more reserved, remaining detached from his fate. Bass David Newman as Pilate was sometimes accusatory, but more often diffident and anxious to be rid of his involvement.

The choir took various parts, sometimes giving commentary, and at others taking the part of the crowd calling for Barabbas and mocking Christ. The other four soloists had arias that commented on the action, such as one that began, “Ah, my soul, where would you go at last, where shall I quicken my spirits?”

They were quite emotional, even though the singers did not portray characters in the Passion story.

The whole choir ended the work majestically, from “Rest well, you holy limbs and body,” to “Lord Jesus Christ hear me, I would praise you eternally!”

It is difficult to think of a better way to celebrate Palm Sunday.

*Dave Howell is a freelance writer.*