

**Review****Baldwin Wallace Bach Festival:  
Four concerts in two days (April 19-20)**

by Daniel Hathaway



For the eighty-first time, Baldwin Wallace (formerly College, now University and no longer hyphenized) honored the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and some of his forebears and contemporaries with four main concerts on its campus in Berea on April 19 and 20 — plus a lecture, a Bach Institute open house, a master class, ancillary events held in area churches and a reunion of former Bach Festival participants. The Cantor of Leipzig would have been proud.

**CONCERT ONE**

The opening concert was an organ recital of music by Bach and music that inspired Bach given by Hungarian-born, Oberlin-trained organist Bálint Karosi, who now lives and works in Boston. Playing the 1974 Rudolf Janke organ in Berea Methodist Church, Karosi presented music by Nicolaus Bruhns, Dietrich Buxtehude and Bach, as well as music by others — Johann Friedrich Fasch, Prince Johann Ernst and François Couperin — that Bach had arranged for the organ. Additionally, Karosi improvised on a chorale theme given to him on the spot.

Karosi is a fluent and highly accurate player, well versed in historically informed performance, who brings thoughtful articulation and lavish but tasteful ornamentation to his interpretations. His registrational preferences obviously run a bit counter to the neo-baroque ethos of the Janke instrument: he played most of his program on low-pitched principal stops or *plena*, venturing into some of the instrument's other colors only in the five excerpts he selected from *Art of Fugue* in the second half. A high point in the recital was the final work, Bach's *Toccata, Adagio and Fugue*, which Karosi dashed off with spirit and flair.

Karosi is pursuing a doctorate at Yale with a dissertation on the art of improvisation in all its forms, and demonstrated one approach by masterfully improvising several variations and a fugue on the chorale, *Wachet auf!*, which would come up prominently again in the evening.

## CONCERT TWO

Friday evening's concert by the BW Motet Choir and Festival Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Dwight Oltman and Dirk Garner, brought together two of Bach's more than two hundred extant cantatas, one of the earliest (*Aus der Tiefe*, BWV 131 from 1707-1708) and one of the latest (*Wachet auf*, BWV 140, from 1731), together with a Handel *Concerto Grosso* for strings.

Bach's earliest group of cantatas give a significant role to the chorus, which makes them perfect for college situations. Garner drew focused, powerful tone from his singers in *Aus der Tiefen*, who also handled complicated melismas and fugal textures with confidence and great clarity. Student soloists Andre Brown, tenor, and Travis Mussel, bass were impressive in some tricky arias and oboist Martin Neubert played expressively and indefatigably.

Probably the most beloved of Bach's cantata output, *Wachet auf*, also inspired the BW Motet Choir to excellent work in the opening chorale fantasia. Dwight Oltman, who took the podium for BWV 140, created light and festive textures at the opening and adroitly lined up all the complicated dotted and syncopated rhythms that need to interlock. Among the professional guest soloists, Sherezade Panthaki stood out for her pure, strong tone and oboist Dana Sundet was lissome yet rich in the *Mein Freund ist mein* duet. The tenor section came through boldly in the famous *Zion hört* aria and the Motet Choir handily brought the piece home with the wonderful four-voice chorale *Gloria sei dir gesungen*, studded with Philipp Nicolai's rich metaphors and references, including the old (pagan!) Greek wedding cry, *Io! Io!*.

The concert opened with a surprisingly somber reading of Handel's *Concerto Grosso*, op. 6, no. 6, though the brilliance of Wei-Shu Co's fourth movement violin solo suddenly shot a dose of energy into the proceedings.

## CONCERTS THREE AND FOUR

Every four years the Bach Festival rotates Bach's two Passions, the b-minor Mass and the Christmas Oratorio, in order to give students a crack at each of them during their college career. It was Christmas in Berea this April (and looked like it as snow flurries came and went and the chill of the weather chased the festival brass indoors).

Programming in one day the six cantatas Bach wrote to be performed between Christmas Day and Epiphany in 1734-1735 presents a logistical problem — they're too long for a single concert, but they're on the short side to fill two concerts. BW wisely chose the second option, which allowed subscribers to bring fresh ears to the evening performance.

Dwight Oltman was on the podium for both performances, now presiding over the Baldwin Wallace Festival Choir and Festival Orchestra (a mix of faculty, guests and students),

and guest soloists Sherezade Panthaki, Meg Bragle, Thomas Cooley and Christòphen Nomura.

The six cantatas are an intriguing mix of movements Bach adapted from earlier, one-off secular cantatas and newly composed material. You can find almost every Baroque musical form here and the cycle provides rich material for chorus, orchestra and vocal and instrumental solos alike. Oltmann kept the proceedings moving along nicely and skillfully coordinated his forces throughout the afternoon and evening.

Like the BW Motet Choir on Friday, the larger BW Festival Choir sang with well-blended, focused tone, fine diction and impressive vocal strength, and its singers were fun to watch as they moved like a wheat field in the wind to the inner rhythms of Bach's music. The chorus was particularly fine in the opening chorus of Part Five, *Ehre sei dir, Gott, gesungen*.

The four soloists had much to do and dispatched most of their complicated tasks with aplomb (once again, Panthaki was a standout). The fine “Obbligatists” included violinists Julian Ross and Wei-Shu Co, flutist Sean Gabriel, oboe d'amore players Danna Sundet and Ian Woodworth, hornists Heechan Jung and Josiah Bullach (who initially struggled but ultimately prevailed in the challenging opening of Part Four) and the splendid and flawless piccolo trumpet player Charles Berginc, who got a singular ovation at the end.

The foregoing sang and played intermittently, but “Continuists” Regina Mushabac, cello, George Sakakeeney, bassoon, bassist Sue Yelanjian and organist Nicole Keller played — as the designation implies — constantly, lending expressive and reliable support to the bass line from which all Baroque music springs.

The 120-page BW Bach Festival Annotated Program may tell a modern audience more about the background and theological underpinnings of the music than they think they need to know, but the running commentary reminds the listener that Bach worked for a strongly Pietist Lutheran congregation and town council in Leipzig, and expected those who heard his cantatas to resonate with the words and concepts he set to music.

The program book is also fascinating for the repertory lists at the end — to see what works the Bach Festival has favored with frequent performances and which ones it's never gotten around to in eight decades. Wish lists, anyone?

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