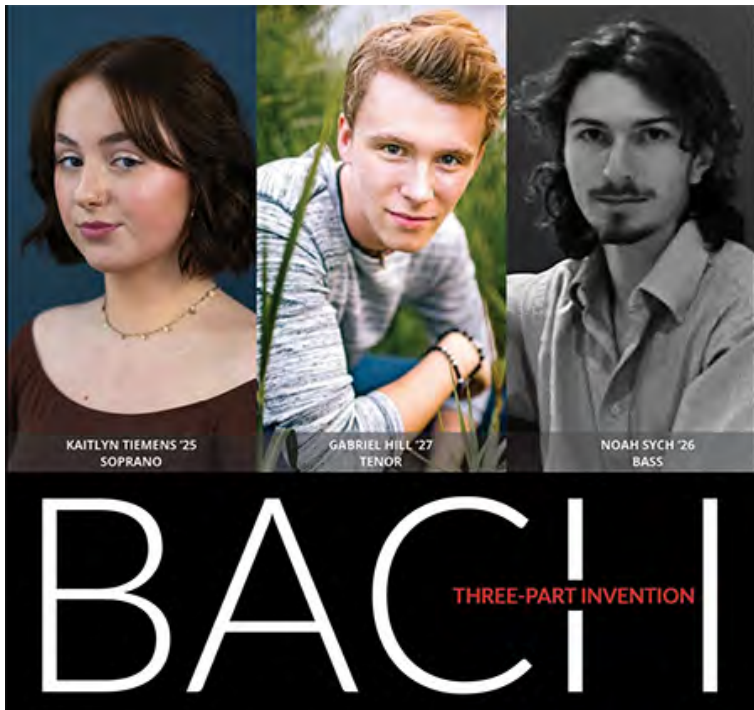


**BW Bach Festival:
Featuring JSB's Music from 1724 (Apr. 13)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Coming between a performance by the Baroque string band ACRONYM on Friday evening and the *St. John Passion* on Sunday afternoon, the Baldwin Wallace Bach Festival concert on Saturday evening, April 13 featured a selection of works that the composer wrote in 1724, his second year as Cantor in Leipzig.

That was the year he completed and premiered the first version of the *St. John Passion*, and launched the ambitious and ultimately uncompleted long-term project of composing a

five-year cycle of cantatas for nearly every Sunday and major festival in the church year..

For this occasion, festival director Dirk Garner drew on BWV: Cleveland's Bach Choir, a small but mighty ensemble of fifteen voices. Close to the dozen vocalists Bach requested in a famous memo to the town council, the group incorporated some current students (pictured above), and was joined by a professional orchestra that included BW faculty, members of ACRONYM, and local freelancers.

Built around two cantatas that had somehow never been performed in the previous 88 years of the Bach Festival, and centered with a commissioned work by BW composer-in-residence Clint Needham, the program was introduced by the Overture from the Orchestra Suite in C, rounded out by the Motet *Lobet den Herrn*, and interleaved with the French Suite No. 5, played by harpsichordist Elliot Figg.

In the opening Overture, oboists Martin Neubert and Sarah Bates-Kennard and bassoonist Thomas English joined the strings in a bright celebration of the key of C Major that would later be echoed in the motet that closed the concert.

Based on Martin Luther's version of the *Magnificat* (the song Mary spontaneously sang when she was told that she would give birth to Jesus), *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren*, BWV 10 was written for the Feast of the Visitation and first performed on July 2, 1724.

The chorus made a strong impression at the outset, and soloists Madeline Apple Healey, Nathan Hodgson, Joseph Hubbard, and Dianna Grabowski brought lovely musicality to recitatives and arias. Bassoonist Thomas English was flawless and indefatigable on the continuo line in Hubbard's aria.

After intermission came the debut of Clint Needham's new piece, simply titled *Cantata*. Needham chose eight anti-war quotations by Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell, Plato, Rumi, and others for the first of its three movements, set excerpts from the writings of such poets as Langston Hughes, Louisa May Alcott, and W.B. Yeats for the second, and turned to his own personal versions of timeless questions for the third. ("Will we get this right before it's too late...Before our time runs out?")

Needham's haunting text settings and expressive writing for soloists and strings sustained interest throughout the piece, which deserves to receive many more hearings.

Bach's cantata *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ*, BWV 91 was obviously a favorite of the composer's — after performing it on Christmas Day of 1724, he revised it twice in the 1730s and 1740s. It's unusual as one of only four cantatas he scored for a pair of horns (that play only in the opening movement and final chorale), in addition to three oboes, timpani, and strings.

Kent Laramie and Stan Matras turned in valiant and flawless performances of the festive horn lines, and vocal soloists Aine Hakamatsuka, Steven Soph, Dominic Aragon, and Dianna Grabowski distinguished themselves in a series of Bach's expressive recitatives and arias — Aragon's a standout for the composer's absolutely hair-raising harmonic sequence on the words "vale of sorrow."

Having elegantly played the first three movements of the Fifth French Suite earlier, Elliot Figg performed the rest of the piece while the BW stage crew noiselessly reset the stage for the Motet, BWV 230 that ended the evening with long lines of

contrapuntal splendor and a festive “Alleluia” coda. Bach had quite a year exactly three hundred years ago.

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