

## **BW BachFest celebrates their namesake composer with “Suites and Motets” combination (Apr. 11)**

by Stephanie Manning



**BACHANDEL**  
THE 2025 BACH FESTIVAL  
PRESENTED BY THE KULAS FOUNDATION

It's early days, but the 2025 music festival season is starting to kick into gear. A harbinger of that trend here in Northeast Ohio is the Baldwin Wallace Bach Festival, which just celebrated its 94th year.

The second and final day of the event swapped J.S. Bach for George Frideric Handel, presenting the composer's *Messiah* for the first time in festival history. But the previous evening's presentation tread more familiar

ground. On April 11, Dirk Garner led BWV: Cleveland's Bach Choir in a spirited concert of Bach suites and motets.

Joining the 17-piece choir on the Gamble Auditorium stage was a high-quality group of freelance instrumentalists. Their role in the Bach motets almost exclusively consists of doubling vocal parts or supplementing continuo lines — so singers will sometimes forgo this instrumental doubling altogether. But here, the strings, woodwinds, and harpsichord were a welcome support to the small but mighty vocal ensemble.

The surviving eight or nine of Bach's motets require skilled singers with a high level of technique, splitting the four standard vocal ranges into a total of eight parts. BWV smoothly rose to that challenge, with its core group of professionals supplemented with a few select BW students. Their collective sound worked nicely in this music, which prioritizes an overall effect rather than solo moments.

The intricate fugues and polished endings of the opener, *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, set good expectations for the things to come. The soprano section particularly enjoyed *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*, and their lovely tone gently settled on the upper layer of the harmonies. *Komm, Jesu, Komm* featured some sparkling trills from the sopranos and altos — but the stars of this piece were really the rich-sounding bass section, who often presented the first appearance of any repeated line.

*O Jesu Christ, meins Lebens Licht* stood out for its unusual scoring that put the spotlight on first violinist Steve Koh and the oboe section (who played the lines originally assigned to cornetto and a pair of *litui* — ancient wind instruments). *Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden* also distinguished itself by reducing the individual vocal parts from eight to four. This doubled the number of singers in each section, an effect that added particular prominence to the altos.

As the motets went on, their similarities began to blend together. *Fürchte dich nicht, ich bin bei dir*, didn't add much interest that hadn't already been explored. But the focus on the vocal works was often broken up by solo cellist Khari Joyner, who interspersed movements from some of Bach's cello suites throughout the evening. Although the earlier selections from *Suite No. 2* took some time to settle, all featured his lovely deep tone.

Not all of Joyner's later selections were listed in the program, but he used them to build momentum, making his best performance his last. He capped things off with a polished and tasteful rendition of probably the most famous selection of them all: the "Prelude" from *Suite No. 1*.

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